

# ARECANUTS IN MALAYA

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## SECTION-I. GENERAL.

### 1. Introduction.

Arecanut (betelnut) is an article of universal consumption in India, and also, to some extent, in other countries of the South and South East Asia. It is perhaps the only luxury that the poor in India ever enjoy. The important role of the crop in the economy of the country can be gauged from the fact that normally about 30 crores of rupees worth of arecanuts are consumed in a year. Though the cultivation of arecanut is localised in places where the climatic and soil conditions are favourable for its growth, it is used all over India and therefore the demand for it is great. The high rainfall regions, especially in the southern half of the West Coast, the plateau of Coorg and Mysore, and Assam and Bengal are the chief arecanut tracts in India. The area under the crop is computed at about 2.65 lakhs of acres and the normal production at about 22 lakhs of maunds per year.

In addition to being used for chewing, it is also used at all religious and social functions. To the rich and to the poor alike, chewing of betelnut is indispensable after a meal. The working classes consider it as a stimulant and they take 'pan supari' at frequent intervals while at work. To them it is as important as their daily food. But as the production in the country is insuffi-

cient to meet the local requirements, large quantities were being imported at cheap rates from foreign countries particularly from the Federation of Malaya, Singapore and Ceylon. The imported nuts therefore competed with the indigenous nuts and the local growers, unable to face the competition, sought protection from the Government of India. A protective duty varying from year to year was therefore imposed on imported nuts in 1946 and it now stands at 9½ annas per pound. Further, a monetary ceiling round about three crores of rupees was also fixed. The protection so afforded gave the cultivators an impetus for better and efficient cultivation and the local production has therefore showed a tendency to rise. Before protection was granted to the industry, arecanut cultivation was very uneconomic and the industry was passing through a crisis. Large sums of money had to be expended on manuring, irrigation and on protection from pests and diseases and the cost of production was hence very high. But in foreign countries it was reported to be very low. The Indian growers were wondering how the foreign growers could sell their nuts at such a cheap rate. Perhaps arecanut was growing in those countries in a wild state and no expenditure was incurred by way of manuring, irrigation and protection

from the usual pests and diseases. It, therefore, became necessary to investigate the practices prevalent in those countries as also to assess the exact state of the industry, so that those methods, if suitable, could be adopted here in order to minimise the cost of production. The Indian Central Arecanut Committee therefore decided to depute its Secretary (the author of this note) to study the condition of arecanut industry in Malaya, and it sought financial assistance from the Colombo Plan through the Government of India. The executives in charge of the Colombo Plan sanctioned a study tour of the Federation of Malaya and the Colony of Singapore, and the author undertook a study tour of those states beginning early in August and lasting for a period of one month. Though a similar study tour of Ceylon was also in the approved programme, the Government of Ceylon pleaded their inability to provide the required facilities and that part of the programme had therefore to be given up. The expenditure in connection with the tour in Malaya was borne by the United Kingdom Government.

### 2. Geographical and Political.

Malaya, situated in the southern extremity of the Asian Continent, lies between latitudes 6°50' N and 1°12' N and longitudes 100°5' E and 104°20' E. It is bounded by

Thailand on the north on the east by the Chinese Sea. on the west by the Straits of Malacca and on the south by the Island of Singapore.

The Federation of Malaya has an approximate area of 50,600 sq. miles. In size, it is little less than England without Wales and a little over twice the size of Ceylon. In the middle of the country from north to south, there runs a spinal range of mountains dividing the country into two unequal halves, the East and West Coastal plains, the larger being in the East Coast with a region of low lying land in the south. Nearly 80% of the country is still undeveloped and covered with thick forests, mountains or marshes. About 14% of the land is under rubber, 2.4% under paddy, 2.1% under coconuts and oil palms and the rest under arecanuts, fruit trees and other crops.

There are a few big rivers and numerous small ones in Malaya. The most important rivers on the West Coast are the Perak, the Selangor and the Muar rivers. On the East Coast there are the Pahang, Kelantan and Trengganu rivers. Mangrove swamps are a common feature of the West Coast but on the East Coast the sea shore is generally sandy.

What was known as Malaya before the Second World War comprised of the Strait Settlements, i. e., Singapore and Penang Islands, the Province Wellesley and Malacca; the Federated Malay States of Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan and Pahang and the unfederated Malay States of Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan, Trengganu and Johore. After the liberation of the country from the Japanese occupation and the reoccupation by the British,

certain changes were made in the grouping of these States and Settlements. At present, what is known as the Federation of Malaya consists of all the States (Johore, Kedah, Kelantan, Negri, Sembilan, Pahang, Perak, Perlis, Selangor, Trengganu) the island of Penang, Malacca, Province Wellesley and the neighbouring islands excluding Singapore. The island of Singapore still remains a British Crown Colony. It is situated in the southern extremity of Malaya and is connected with the Federation of Malaya by means of a causeway over which runs a road and railway. The Christmas Island and the Cocos Keeling Islands in the Indian Ocean are under the administrative control of the Colony of Singapore.

### 3. Climate.

The climate of Malaya is equatorial, characterised by uniform temperature, copious rainfall and high humidity which arises mainly out of the country's maritime exposure. There are no well defined seasonal variations like summer and winter, as in the other parts of the tropics. Rainfall is received every month, and almost every week throughout the year, the wettest month being December. The average rainfall per year is about 100 inches along the coast and about 150 inches at the foot hills, though the intensity varies from place to place ranging from 65 to 191 inches a year. There are wide variations in the West Coast, about the region of Malacca, the rainfall is heavy during the North East Monsoon period, the maximum fall being in December. But near about Malacca, the South West Monsoon rains are more copious. The driest months are February, May, June and September with

about 6-7 inches of rain a month. The temperature ranges between 70 and 90° F. throughout the year and high temperature is never experienced. Owing to high humidity the days are rather oppressive all through the year, but nights are pleasant. There is nothing like a severe summer as in India. The crops therefore do not suffer any set back as in other regions of tropics, and irrigation therefore does not seem to be quite essential.

### 4. Soil.

The rocks in Malaya are igneous and stratified. The mountain ranges are largely covered with outcrops of granite. Limestone is also found in several parts of the hills.

The soil in Malaya is generally formed from granite and triassic rocks which are considered to be poor in plant food. The following are the main kinds of soil met with in Malaya.

(1) *Granite soils*. These soils are porous and so capable of good drainage. They have about an equal proportion of sand and clay.

(2) *Quartzite*. These are generally found on the hills and the valleys of hills. The proportion of sand, silt and clay vary widely in the soils of hills. The soil in the valleys is generally very poor rather tending to be carbonaceous.

(3) *Laterite soils* are also commonly met with and they are, as usual, red in colour.

(4) *Alluvial soils*. They are clayey and peaty and are met with along the coasts and are considered to be very fertile though drainage is a little difficult in these soils.

### 5. Limestone and calcereous soils.

Soils in Malaya are generally deemed to be acidic with a Ph value below 6 (7.5 is neutral; anything below 7.5 is acidic and above

it is said to be alkaline). Though these soils are not rich, they are generally found to support good crops presumably because of the optimum temperature prevailing and the uniform distribution of rainfall throughout the year.

Though most of the crops in Malaya grow in all kinds of soils, they are found at their best in the peaty soils having adequate drainage.

#### 6 People.

For a correct appreciation of the general agricultural condition of the country, it is necessary to know something about the local people. The country has a mixed population of Malays, Chinese, Indians, Europeans, Eurasians, Sinhalese and Indonesians totalling about 67 lakhs. It was only after the Second World War that some attempt was made to build up the idea of a Malayan nationality. The following shows the latest composition of the population of the Peninsula inclusive of Singapore:—

Malaysians.	29.00 lakhs
Chinese.	29.68 "
Indians & Pakistanis.	7.24 "
Europeans.	0.30 "
Eurasians.	0.23 "
Others.	0.66 "
Total.	<u>67.11 lakhs</u>

Malays are predominantly agricultural in their pursuit, engaged mainly in the cultivation of paddy, arecanuts, coconuts, rubber and other fruit crops in small holdings. They are generally averse to trade, but of late, educated Malays are slowly taking to trade also. The urban population comprises mainly of Chinese who evince a keen interest in industry and commerce and invest large sums of money on industrial enterprises. They hold the key position

in tin and rubber industry and the trade of the country. Indian residents in Malaya are mainly from South India and they are employed in the railways and the public works department, and form the bulk of the labour force in estates.

The classical economist tends to assume that an economic man is one who has a profit motive in him. But the average Malayan peasant does not conform to this. He is generally unwilling to work for more money when his normal needs are met and he has sufficient cash to cover his taxes and to purchase his daily necessities.

#### 6. Agriculture.

Malaya is mainly an agricultural country. The flora and fauna of the country are more or less similar to those of the high rainfall regions of India, i. e., the South West Coast, Mysore, Assam and Bengal. The agriculturists of the country can be classified under two categories, the petty peasants, mostly Malays employing time-honoured methods evolved by experience and the large estate holders usually Europeans and Chinese, who adopt scientific methods of cultivation. The small holders usually take to mixed agriculture with rubber, rice, arecanuts, coconuts, fruit trees etc. and they are slow in adopting improved methods of agriculture, while the large estate owners have a sole crop mainly of rubber or oil palms and their estates are well maintained. Small holders usually pay little attention to cultivation and preparation of the produce for the markets.

Rubber is the main crop, and tin-mining, the main industry. The prosperity of the country depends upon the price of rubber and tin

and their quota under international arrangement. During the Japanese occupation, from December 1941 to September 1945, the agriculture of the country suffered considerably from neglect, particularly on account of inadequate drainage, of the entry of sea water into the coastal areas and of the panic prevailing in those anxious and uncertain times.

Next to rubber comes rice which is the staple food of the country. Only about 40% of the rice required for the country is produced locally. The Government of the Federation is alive to the needs; and measures are being taken to bring more areas under rice to cover at least a portion of the deficit.

Other major crops that are grown in the Peninsula are coconuts, oil palms, arecanuts, pineapple, tapioca, Derris, Gambier, tea, tobacco, bananas, vegetables, and fruits such as Durian, Rambhutan, Mangosteen, Dakus etc.

#### 7. Livestock.

The principal domesticated animals are buffaloes, oxen, goats, sheep and pigs. These have suffered considerably during the Japanese occupation as a very large number were slaughtered for food purposes. Since bullocks and buffaloes were largely used for paddy cultivation, it was imperative to increase the number and so slaughter of she-buffaloes and oxen was prohibited by legislation. The number of these animals therefore rapidly increased. Pigs outnumber all other classes of animals because pork is an important food article of the Chinese, who form a large proportion of the population in Malaya.

(to be continued).