



Mr. Joseph Alappat

Hailing from an aristocratic, affluent family of Karanchira, Trichur, Mr. Joseph Alappat is a banker by profession. But coconut has always been his first love. Having lost his father in his early childhood, Mr. Alappat grew up under the care of his mother and maternal grandfather. Now he possesses one of the very extensive coconut gardens in Kerala State with an annual harvest of more than two lakh nuts. Money and material comforts have not blinded him to the simple pleasures of Nature. And on sultry days he prefers the free balmy shade of a coconut palm to the hired, closed-in comfort of an air-conditioned room. Although a shrewd businessman practical to the fingertips, money never enters his thoughts while he looks at the full blown crown of a coconut palm. For, to him it is a green splendoured wonder, a part of Nature, trying to communicate with him. So every palm is an individual craving for love and care which he gives it unstintingly and in ample measure. That's the secret of his taking to coconut cultivation in a scientific way.

Once Mr. Alappat begins to talk about his palms a sort of tenderness creeps into his voice, and a merry twinkle glints his eyes which slowly spreads and lights up his countenance. You forget that he is a Director of the Catholic Syrian Bank, a prominent scheduled Bank of Kerala. You forget that he is the Vice-President of the Trichur Rubber Marketing Society. Everything about you fades and what stand out in sharp

A GREEN FINGERED BANKER

BY V. T. MARKOSE*

relief is the palm and its grower—the grower who is head over heels in love with his palm.

Mr. Alappat's garden is situated along the banks of a perennial, picturesque rivulet known as Karuvannur puzha alias Connolly canal.

It is a garden of over 1000 high yielding coconut palms in a single compact area of about 15 acres—indeed a rare sight in Kerala.

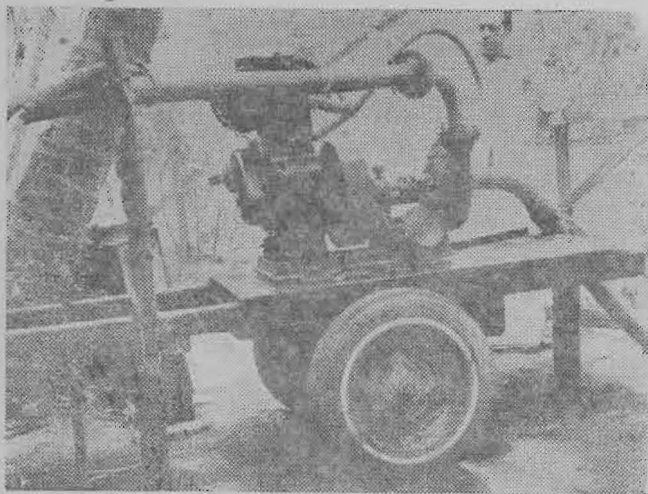
More than 99 per cent of the entire palm population are in the bearing stage.

I found the soil in his garden ideal for coconut culture. Besides, the garden is located in the root wilt disease free zone of the State.

Mr. Joseph Alappat took me to each nook and corner of his garden and started narrating his experience as a coconut grower. He explained to me in detail the management practices he followed. Compared to many a grower he was exceptionally articulate and communicative.

"I was not a very keen cocount grower till five years ago, though I inherited this garden from my father long back. At the time of my taking over almost 75 per cent of my palms were in the bearing stage and as such no extra effort on my part was felt necessary to improve the garden. The soil in my

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Pumpset lifting water for irrigation

garden is sandy loam, quite suitable for coconut culture. Moreover, my grandfather used to tend the palms well by judicious application of organic manures with the result that when the garden came under my control, I had only to drift with the tide, that is, to follow the same practices my grandparent used to do in his garden year after year."

I butted in to ask: "Are you following the same old practices even now?"

"No," he replied. He tried to recollect the changes he made in the management practices and said: "Five years back I drastically changed the management practices."

"Why?" I was trying to learn the real motive behind the switch-over.

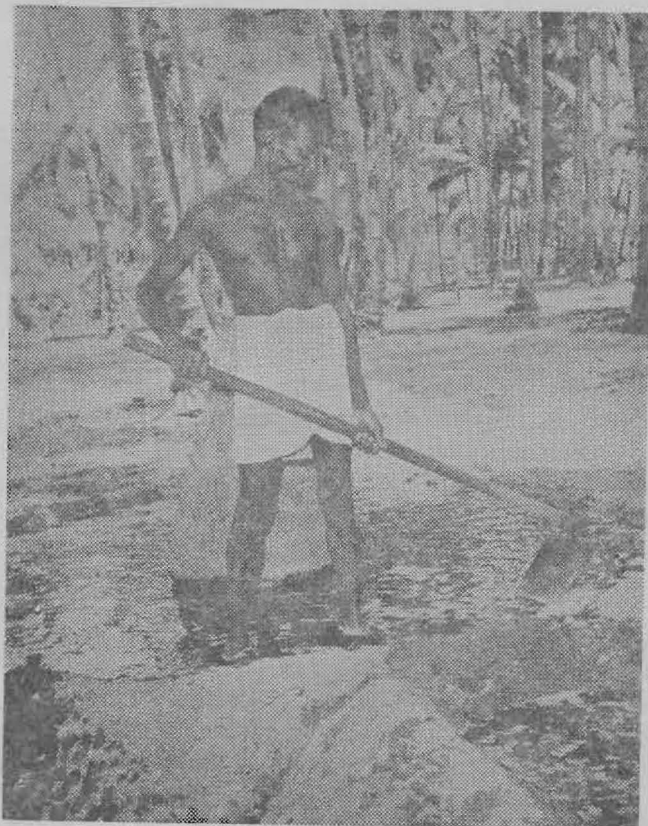
He explained: "For the last 4-5 years the coconut prices were moving up and I knew it was the right time to produce more. Moreover, I could also draw inspiration from an illustrious neighbour and close relative of mine. You might have heard of him—Mr. T. A. Joseph, the former general Manager of the Southern Railways and subsequently Chairman of F.A.C.T., Alwaye. He was the person who motivated me to start irrigation in my garden and also to take to better management practices. Indeed he is a *pucca* scientific grower who really loves his palms. Increase production by whatever means, was his advice. To be very frank with you, it was his advice that induced me to start irrigation in my garden. And it has brought me rich dividends. Though Karuvannur puzha is a perennial source which provides plentiful supply of water, the coconut growers along the banks of the rivulet are still averse to the idea of watering their palms. For the

water in the rivulet turns brackish in summer months and the growers in this area are afraid of using saline water for irrigation. They fear that the high salt content of the water might adversely affect the performance of the palms. To begin with, I was also a bit afraid about the outcome of such an uncertain practice. But Mr. T. A. Joseph was there to give me assurance and encouragement at every stage. So I went ahead and made arrangements to purchase necessary equipment to bring the whole area under irrigation. In 1970 three Krilloskar Diesel Engines mounted on trollies with necessary pumpsets were purchased."

Again I interrupted: "When electricity was readily available why diesel engines were preferred?"

"In those days electricity failures were very common in our area. Moreover, the initial investment in putting up necessary poles and other electrical installations to reach the entire length of my garden was estimated to be too high. So I thought it would be wiser to go in for diesel engines. Water channels were prepared and watering was started in the same year. I followed basin irrigation. If all the three engines are operated simultaneously I can water all my palms in two days."

"What is the interval of irrigation you allow?" I asked.



Flood irrigation in full swing



One of the many eye-filling crowns in the garden

"I irrigate my palms twice a week," he replied.

"You have been irrigating your garden for the last 5 years. Based on your experience, what is your opinion about the response of palms to irrigation?"

Mr. Alappat was all smiles. He replied with gusto: "To my great surprise the coconut yield just doubled in the third year after the start of irrigation. Even from the second year onwards visible improvement was noticed in the general health of the palms, in addition to marginal increases in the yield. This is the fifth year of irrigation."

"How is the response now?" I enquired.

"Even now the increased rate of production is maintained, of course with slight seasonal variations," he replied.

"Do you feel any disadvantage in using the saline water to irrigate coconut?"

"Certainly not," he emphasised,

My initial apprehensions were found to be baseless. Now I feel that a sturdy perennial crop like coconut can withstand salinity to a great extent. Not only that, I have a hunch that coconut likes salinity to a certain extent. I reminded him about the research findings of the Central Plantation Crops Research Institute, Kasaragod, on the effects of sea-water irrigation on coconuts. At the Institute it had been

found that in lighter types of soils there were no adverse effects in using sea water to irrigate adult palms.

"What is your annual cost on irrigation per acre?" I pressed for details.

"As I stated earlier, irrigation is given twice a week during March, April and May. For these three months the total cost can be worked out at Rs. 500 per acre. In return, on an average, I get more than 1000 nuts from an acre and so the net return at the present coconut prices due to irrigation alone can be worked out at Rs. 400 to Rs. 500 per acre."

"Irrigation is only one of the improved management practices recommended for coconut. I would like to know what you do about the other important aspects of management, especially manuring", I told him.

"To tell you the truth I have not yet started application of chemical fertilizers extensively. Only seedlings are given a dose of chemical fertilisers. There was a genuine reason for not applying chemical fertilizers to adult palms. Even though the majority of my palms are more than 50 years old the average annual yield per palm is very promising! So I have not so far felt the necessity of taking to chemical fertilizers. I strictly follow organic manuring every year without break."



A view of Mr. Alappat's garden

I was really a bit curious to know the details of the manuring practices he followed. So I plied him with questions on organic manuring.

He said: "I apply river silt at the rate of 150 - 200 kg. per year which cost me about Rs. 2 per tree. During April-May, river sand is spread in the entire interspaces of the garden. This operation cost about Rs. 250 per acre. In August, groundnut cake is applied to all the palms at the rate of 6 kg. per palm. In addition to this, cattle manure is also applied at the rate of 30-35 kg. to the trees standing around my house as and when it is available from my cattle shed. I have cattle manure enough to take care of about 250-300 palms every year. This has been the manuring practice I follow for the last many years."

Now came my turn to offer comments and give advice. He asked for my comments on the manuring practices he was following. I commented: "To be very critical on your manuring practice, I feel that the manure mixture you apply to your bearing palms lacks in optimum quantity of potash. You may correct it by adding one to 1.5 kg. muriate of potash per tree annually in addition to the organics. This might increase the production of quality nuts from your palms further. It is an established fact that sufficient quantity of potash is necessary for increased production of nuts with good kernel content."

He agreed to implement my suggestion from the current manuring season.

"What are the intercultural operations you adopt in your gardens?" I asked.

"One ploughing or piling up of mounds is done in September-October. The mounds are levelled up in December-January", he replied.

"Any other noteworthy experience worth mentioning?"

"As you can see, some of my palms are above 60 years old though they yield well even now. But I fear that senility may set in in another 4-5 years."

So he asked for my advice on a phased programme of rejuvenation. I suggested a planned underplanting programme with quality seedlings.

"Where can I get good seedlings, preferably some hybrid seedlings, for this programme?" he asked.

The inevitable question almost every or every other coconut grower asks which often finds the expert cornered, especially when it comes to hybrid seedlings. But I pointed out that his garden has enough potential to produce hybrid seedlings for his requirement. While going round his garden I had found about 10 Chowghat Orange dwarf palms growing scattered among the tall palms. They were all bearing adult palms. So I suggested to him to collect seednuts from the orange dwarf palms and raise a dwarf nursery. From his ten dwarf palms he could collect about 1000 seednuts during the seednut collection season. Out of these 1000 seednuts, he would get a minimum 200 D x T hybrids every year. After proper selection he could plant 150 hybrid seedlings every year for the replanting programme.

Now he wanted to know more about the nursery techniques and methods of identification of hybrid seedlings from the dwarf nursery. I explained the

whole procedure. He agreed to implement my suggestions during the current seednut procurement season itself.

"Button shedding is comparatively low in my garden, may be, because I never neglect summer irrigation. Regular search for pest and disease is also carried out with the help of an experienced labourer."

"As a prominent coconut grower of Kerala, have you any message for the growers in general?"

He flashed me another of his alluring smiles and was pensive for a while. "To the ordinary growers I have only one message: Never neglect irrigation during summer months, if water is available. It is definitely a paying proposition and by adopting it growers can increase their production by about 100 per cent. I have also certain suggestion to make to the Government authorities, both Central and State.

"(1) The ordinary millers and copra makers scattered throughout the country purchase coconuts from the ordinary cultivators. Many of these buyers work with limited financial resources. Consequently the cultivators very often do not get immediate cash payments for their produce. If these buyers are allowed to draw financial help through some institutional financing agencies, the cultivators will also be directly benefited by that. Therefore, the Reserve Bank of India may be moved to take a liberalised policy decision with regard to the grant of credit to coconut buyers.

"(2) Land ceiling has affected the incentive for increased coconut production, especially in the case of above-average coconut growers like me. It has also resulted in increasing the number of coconut growers. As in the case of other plantation crops like rubber, tea, cardamom etc. I feel that an all-India organisation or a State level organisation solely to look after the interests of coconut growers, industrialists and traders will be immensely useful for the thousands of people who

directly or indirectly depend on coconut culture in our country.

"(3) There is a great shortage of quality planting material, especially of high yielding coconut hybrids at present. To tide over the situation either the Government of India or the State Government must implement schemes to produce and supply enough number of hybrid planting materials to growers.

"(4) The current fall in prices of coconut is quite distressing. When I say this it is likely that people might misunderstand me. For, according to the existing standards, I am a comparatively big grower. But it must be remembered that coconut is a crop of the average farmer. So a falling trend in its price directly affects the common man. So unless the Government has a realistic approach in the matter and does what it can to maintain a steady economic price for coconut under all situations the ordinary grower will be doomed. In my opinion one rupee per nut is an economic price which may be found reasonable by all.

"(5) The Government of India should not under any circumstance encourage copra import.

"(6) As one who has closely watched the activities of the Rubber Board over the years, I feel that an all-India Coconut Board on the lines of the Rubber Board, will be quite useful for all coconut growers and various other agencies associated with coconut culture and industry."

It was indeed a treat to meet Mr. Joseph Alappat. Although his various other interests besides the coconut mark him out from the common run of coconut growers, I found him above all a farmer—at heart and in spirit. An enlightened farmer living in idyllic surroundings. His house nestling among shady coconut groves is an ideal retreat not only from the din and bustle of an urban life but also from the humdrum monotony of daily existence.

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get to know the techniques for increased coconut production

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