



The importance accorded to the coconut tree in "Hortus Malabaricus"

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Hortus Malabaricus the most comprehensive work on the immeasurable natural vegetative wealth of Kerala is still unknown to the Malayalees. This treatise was completed between 1673 and 1677 by the then Dutch Governor of Cochin Hendrik Adriaan Van Rheede. This exhaustive and illustrated work describes in detail the trees, plants and shrubs of the land of erstwhile Malabar which included 'Karapuram' (the coastal land stretching from North Kerala). The work describes plants with multiple uses as well as medicinal properties. It includes modes of preparation and application based on pre-ayurvedic knowledge of the ancient traditional physicians of Malabar. Itty Achuthan, a renowned physician of that time, provided the ethno-medical information.

It was in 1678 that the first volume of Hortus Malabaricus was published in Amsterdam the Capital of Holland. The final volume was published in 1703 and this work received instant accolades which hailed it as shining star in the scientific firmament.

More than 740 plants native to Malabar are described and illustrated

in this extraordinary work. Since printing technology was unavailable in India Van Rheede took the manuscript to Amsterdam for engraving and printing. Van Rheede had the foresight to publish the book in the classical language of Latin which made the work well appreciated in the then scientific world. By describing the rich foliage of Kerala the Hortus was also instrumental in making known to the west the natural beauty and wealth of this region.

The noted physician Itty Achuthan dictated the work in Malayalam which was scrutinized by three Konkani priest-physicians-Ranga Bhat, Vinayaka Pandit and Appu Bhat. Their contributions are mentioned in the first volume itself. The final draft was translated into Portuguese by the official Company interpreter Emmanuel Carnarov and from Portuguese to Dutch and then to Latin by Company Secretary Hermann Van Suche. There are more than 800 illustrations in this 12 volume treatise which was done by the Italian illustrator and clergyman Fr. Mathews.

Van Rheede was not just a gallant soldier and able administrator but

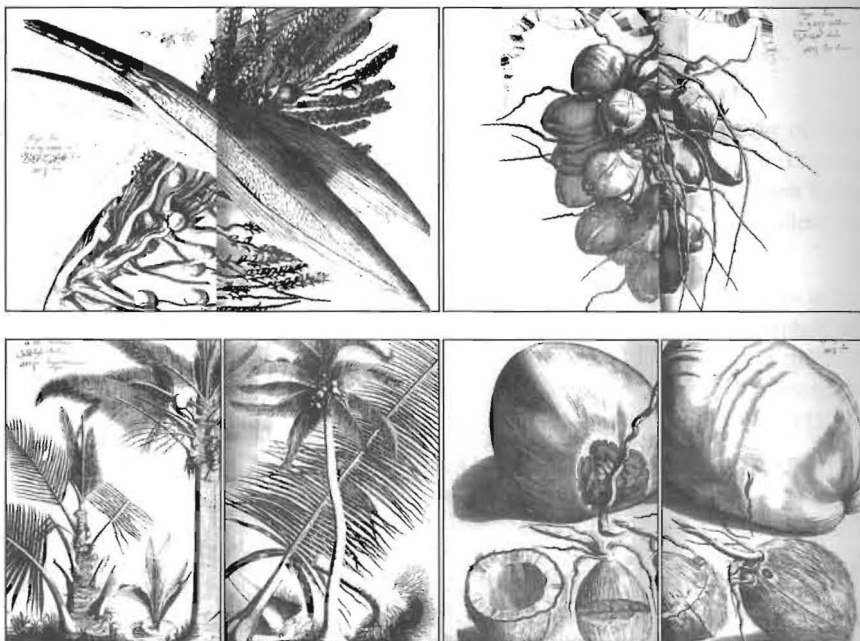
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Hortus Malabaricus was the first book to have printed the illustration of coconut tree for the first time in history. The Coconut tree finds mention in the first page of the first volume of this 12 volume treatise proving the immense value and importance accorded to this "Kalpakavriksham" even 350 years ago.



unlike other colonial army commanders took keen interest in the amazingly rich flora of Malabar. The aim of the treatise was to familiarize the western scientific world with the natural wealth of this region. To quote from the book "This book contains all the plants of the region of Malabar. Their names are mentioned in Latin, Malayalam, Arabic and Konkani in their respective scripts. Included are their flowers, fruits, seeds and saplings which are illustrated to exact scale by expert illustrators. Also given are their colour, smell, taste and medicinal use in detail."

Coming to the importance accorded to the Coconut tree, Hortus Malabaricus was also the first book to have printed the illustration of this tree for the first time in history. The Coconut tree finds mention in the first page of the first volume of this 12 volume treatise proving the immense value and importance accorded to this "Kalpakavriksham" even 350 years ago. The Coconut tree, its inflorescence, the nut and palm leaf have been illustrated in exquisite detail. Interestingly there is also an illustration of the sap being collected from the cut flower of the tree with a container fastened to the flower stump to collect the toddy. There is also mention of coconut trees afflicted by fungus disease which is a major problem today. In fact the descriptions and illustrations can serve as a textbook reference for the modern day agricultural scientist. Great attention has been paid to describe the plant in great detail. To quote from the treatise "Six months after flowering the inflorescence is



Pictures of coconut trees and its various parts published in the Hortus Malabaricus

filled with nectar. Later this turns into a liquid that fills the nut which is not just sweet but also sharp and slightly salty to taste."

Interestingly it is described in detail on the method of manufacturing "Suri" or sweet toddy from the coconut tree which is used to make "chakkare" or molasses, to ferment household rice batter and even make vinegar. This voluminous treatise has made mention of the much varied and multifarious uses of the coconut tree that it is an eye-opener to all.

"Hortus" also serves to help in the scientific research of coconut cultivation as keen observation has been made regarding the optimum conditions for its cultivation. It is mentioned in the book that the saline soil prevalent in coastal areas of Malabar is most suitable for coconut cultivation and that the sweetness of the tender coconut water and nut

production is much reduced when it is cultivated in hilly areas. These observations point to the deep knowledge and understanding of this "kalpakavriksham".

"Hortus Malabaricus" in Latin means Garden of Malabar. This exhaustive and voluminous work was translated into Malayalam and later to English by the renowned botanist and taxonomist Dr. K.S. Manilal. Though great strides have been made in the field of education in Kerala it is a matter of great shame that no other work on "Hortus Malabaricus" has yet been published other than that by Dr. K.S. Manilal. The westerners who later colonized our land came here in search of black gold or pepper and other fragrant spices and yet one among them gifted to the world an incomparable treasure that is the "Hortus Malabaricus".