

# GROWTH AND EXPANSION

## The Coconut Consumption Habit

Coconuts did not hold the same important place in consumer diet throughout history. It became increasingly important by a gradual process beginning with the collapse of the Rajarata Civilisation and the drift of the population to the South Western part of the country. References to coconut are found in the Mahavamsa and other ancient literature from at least the time of King Dutugemunu (first century B.C.). According to the Mahavamsa, Dutugemunu served those engaged in the construction of the Ruwanvelisaya (Dagoba) with king coconut and young coconut water. Similar scanty references to coconut are found for later periods in various historical chronicles. From these references, it cannot be concluded that coconuts played an important place in the diet of the people in these early days. The dry zone, where the ancient civilisation flourished, was not climatically suitable for the cultivation of coconut, except as a home garden crop.

With the collapse of the Ancient Civilisation and the drift to the South - West (beginning 13th Century), coconuts began to assume a greater importance in the dietary pattern of the population. References to the use of coconut oil and existence of coconut lands are found more frequently than earlier in the chronicles and literary works. King Parakramabahu II (13th century), for example, having restored the Kelaniya temple, donated a large coconut plantation to the temple for the purpose of obtaining oil for the lamps. Moreover, this king is also referred to as having encouraged planting of coconut between Kalutara and Bentota. By the time the Portuguese arrived, the Western coastal belt of the country was extensively cultivated with coconut and they, in fact, imposed a tax of one fannam for every ten trees in bearing. The Dutch paid more attention to coconut cultivation, and even used force labour to plant coconut on the Western coastal belt south of Colombo. Coconut growing, at this time, was not confined to the maritime areas but had expanded to the interior of the country held by the Kandyan Kingdom. Robert Knox (1660-1679) built his first house in a coconut garden at Bandara Koswatta and he mentions that the coconut scraper was a common utility item

in the Kandyan households. In 1812, the Kandyan king ordered all items of common use to be sold at fixed low prices and the price at which a coconut was sold was fixed at one Chaliya.

The final phase in the substitution of the milk base of the diet with coconut came with the decline of cattle farming under the colonial rule. Cattle were killed to feed foreign troops engaged in warfare with the Kandyan kingdom. The loss of common pasture lands with the introduction of the plantations under the British led to a further

## Expansion of the Coconut Industry

The tea and coconut industries which, together with rubber, form the base of the export sector of the Ceylon economy today were established within a comparatively short period of about two decades beginning with the decline of the coffee industry in the eighteen eighties. During this period there was a rapid expansion in acreages under cultivation, in quantities exported and in the value of exports in each of these commodities.

The effects of the coffee disaster were partly modified by the substitution of tea and cinchona as remunerative crops on the coffee plantations. The emergence of cinchona as an important commodity in the Ceylon economy was short lived but timely. The possibilities of tea as a substitute made cinchona cultivation relatively unremunerative and after 1884 "tea increasingly supplanted cinchona and over a wide expanse young plants of the latter were pulled out as weeds".

The origins of the coconut industry in Ceylon are older than those of tea. The palm itself had for long been flourishing along the coastal regions of Ceylon and in village gardens. The great variety of uses to which its products could be applied made it a key factor in the economic life of the village. In the early 19th century, Ceylon was exporting some of the products of the coconut palm like fresh nuts, copra, jaggery and oil to India and neighbouring countries. In 1820 the first cargo of coconut oil was shipped to England. The first attempts at systematic cultivation were in the years 1840-50 when a few European plantations were established but there was no significant expansion until 1860 when cultiva-

tion spread inland in the western and north-western provinces. In 1860, 250,000 acres were under coconut; in 1893, acreage had increased to 650,000. The Blue Book for 1903 gives 712,000 acres as the area of cultivation for that year, but Ferguson revises this to 650,000 acres. Of this latter area only 200,000 acres or roughly 30 percent was estimated to be the regular and large coconut plantations, while the balance 70 percent was in the hands of small-holders. From the beginning there was Ceylonese participation in the development of the industry. The relatively low capital costs of opening up plantations as well as reduced labour requirements when compared to tea and coffee, were important factors which assisted investment by Ceylonese. Ferguson estimated that all but 30,000 of a total acreage of 500,000 in 1887 were owned by Ceylonese.

Source: "An Economic Study of the Coconut Industry in Sri Lanka" A People's Bank Publication, March 1981.

The growing importance of the coconut industry in the Ceylon economy can be readily judged from changes in the proportionate value of its exports when compared to total exports:

1870	4
1880	9
1890	15
1900	15
1910	17
1920	27

Source: Mills

Like the tea industry, the coconut industry did not substantially expand its cultivated acreage in the 20th century. As the Coconut Commission of 1949 remarked: "A good proportion of the lands now under coconuts must obviously be over 60 years of age".

Source: "The instability of an Export Economy" Gamani Corea, 1975.