

# THE COCONUT INDUSTRY OF CEYLON\*

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THE people of this country have just cause to be proud of their freedom and independence and of their place in world affairs.

I want you who are assembled here today to be equally as proud of the industry you serve, of its contribution to the food supplies of the world, and of the co-operative movement, which is now fast becoming the backbone of this great industry.

There are so many coconut palms and they appear to grow so easily and yield so prolifically that we are inclined to overlook or to underrate their importance, merely because they are so

common. The fact is the coconut palm is the most valuable tree in the world, and the production of coconuts and coconut products is the leading industry of Ceylon.

The Coconut Palm has been variously described as the "Tree of Life," the "Tree of Abundance" and the "Tree of Heaven" because from its sap, its leaves, its fruit, its stem and even from its roots, over a hundred products of domestic, commercial and industrial importance can be obtained or manufactured. Not only does it supply food, drink and shelter, it also provides the raw materials for a multitude of important industries in Ceylon and in countries overseas.

How many of you are as proud of the coconut industry as you should be and realise that it is Ceylon's first industry? There are in Ceylon over a million acres planted with coconuts,—an area far exceeding that of any other crop. The coconut industry produces a greater tonnage of products for export than does any other industry in Ceylon, and in addition an even greater quantity of products is consumed domestically by the people or is supplied to mills and factories, here in Ceylon.

It is obvious that the coconut industry is the greatest real wealth producer in Ceylon and that it is the most fundamental in its economy.

Why then do we always and invariably say: 'tea, rubber and coconuts'—in that order? Why are we always third best? I will tell you. It is because the other two industries are better managed and better organised and therefore more powerful and respected than is the coconut industry.

Today the coconut industry is at the cross-roads. Not only has it passed the peak of its productivity, but it is steadily breaking down into smaller and weaker units, partly by successive inheritance and partly by the sale or transfer of properties in smaller lots. As a result more people

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and more animals are living on the coconut lands, taking more and more from the soil and gradually reducing its fertility by overgrazing, and by the sale or burning of all available plant products without putting anything back.

Coconuts have sometimes been described as the lazy man's crop because with little attention it flourishes. There are, I am afraid, some who still believe that all that is necessary is to scoop a small hole in the ground, place therein any sort of coconut, leave it to grow up unaided and sit and wait for the nuts to ripen and fall.

This as most of you know is very far from the truth. A coconut palm is like a man; it needs to be nursed while it is growing up, nourished through its adolescence, properly fed and maintained during middle age, and replaced with new stock and a new generation during its declining years.

Much has to be done if your palms are to yield well, if your coconut garden is to be a pride and joy, and if your inheritance is to be passed on to your children's children still in a sound and flourishing condition.

If a grower gives little time or money to the cultivation of his coconuts, crops will decline and his income will fall; he will grow poorer and be able to do less and less until his property becomes practically worthless. Then he will be like the man mentioned in the Bible who had neglected his talent and from whom his Master took away all that he had and gave it unto others who could use it better.

I want now to refer briefly to the main business of the day—co-operation in relation to coconuts. I have already told you that the coconut industry is generally not so well organised or so well managed as tea and rubber. Co-operation, I consider, offers the only solution of this weakness. By combined operations through your Co-operative Societies, the Coconut Industry cannot fail to gain in strength and prestige. If you are a co-operator, you will be able to turn your crop into manufactured products and the profit will all be yours. You will be able to use your enhanced profits for the proper maintenance or for the rehabilitation of your gardens if that is necessary. You will be able to stock them with the finest selected seedlings, plant them in the right way, weed them and cultivate them and manure them regularly, according to the advice given to you by the Advisory Field Officers of the Coconut Research Institute.

In unity there is strength, if the bonds are sound and reliable. If coconut growers, both large and small will co-operate loyally and enthusiastically, it will bring them greater profit and will add to the wealth and prosperity of this country.

Let us then learn to be proud of this great industry and see to it that it is soundly and firmly secured on a basis of mutual aid and co-operation. So may it grow from strength to strength.