

# Growth, Structural Change and Plantation Crops: A Brief History of Rubber Cultivation in Travancore

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**Abstract:** Plantation crops are commodities worthy of serious attention because of the central and longstanding place it has held in the world economy and in the lives of millions of people. The introduction of it marked a distinct departure from the peasant agriculture of Travancore. Large scale mono-culture of these crops for the export market introduced certain new features of structure and pattern. In this chapter a product-oriented approach has been chosen and attention has been focused on a limited number of crops (Coffee, Tea, Rubber) which account for a major share in the plantation economy. One of the few holdovers from the era of the spice trade and colonialism, these crops had been a major traded commodity since the second half of the nineteenth century. Colonial plantations in Travancore had three phases. The first period started in the 1850s, and the first plantation crop was coffee. During the first thirty years after the planting of coffee, the principal form of ownership was proprietary. From the eighties, the ownership structure began to change and partnership firms became common. The main plantation crop of this period was Tea. The rise of rubber cultivation in 1900 introduced changes in the structure of ownership. Before going to the details it would be apt to discuss about the cultivation of these particular crops.

**Keywords:** Colonialism, monoculture, plantation.

## 1. Introduction

Natural rubber is known as tree gum, India rubber, and *caoutchouc*, which comes from the rubber tree in tropical regions. It is defined as nature's most versatile vegetable product. The tree which yields rubber latex is both a '*Kalpavriksha*' and '*Kamadenu*'. To those who grow rubber, it is really a *Kalpadnu*.<sup>1</sup> Every part of this tree is useful for mankind. It yields honey, oil, timber, besides latex.

In 1877 a few rubber plants were sent to the Elaya Raja of Travancore from the Royal Botanic Gardens, of Malaya and the first plantation of rubber in Travancore was made by His Highness Government on the banks of the Periyar river in the year 1899. In the initial stage it comprised of seven acres and later extended to 105 acres.<sup>2</sup> Thus the Government of His Highness showed that rubber could successfully grow in Travancore. In 1887, G. Anderson planted a small number of seedlings in Shaliacarai estate in South Travancore. A few years later a superior quality of Ceara rubber was planted in the estates of Chenakara and Wallaradi (Kottayam District, Kerala).<sup>3</sup> The rubber industry of Travancore flourished only in 1900.<sup>4</sup> In 1906 the rubber plantation industry in Travancore received a great impetus from the booming of rubber on the London Stock Exchange, and a large number of European Companies and individuals as well as Indian proprietors started cultivation. These plants were of the '*para*' variety but what happened to them no one seems to know. Rubber cultivation really started in Travancore in 1902 by some European planters. CMF Ross, J.J. Morphy, J.A. Hunter and K.E. Nicoll opened up Periyar estate at Thattakad near Aluva.<sup>5</sup> In 1902 Mr. R.S. Imray and Mr. H.D. Deane commenced rubber cultivation. Following this, plantation considerable acreage was opened in South Travancore. Large scale rubber cultivation was begun around Mundakkayam, a village west of Vandiperiyar and Peermad at the fort of the Western Ghat Messers. Murphy and Deans commenced planting rubber near Mundakkayam on Yendoar and El Dorado estates.<sup>6</sup> The growth of rubber cultivation was satisfactory both in the south and at Mundakkayam. Diseases and other maladies also created problems to the colonial planters during the initial years. In a report of the Mundakayam correspondent of the Malayala Manorama dated 21<sup>st</sup> December 1910, it was stated that a fungus disease and pink disease were common in Mundakayam and a

number of rubber trees were damaged by those diseases. The correspondent requested the help of the Director of Agriculture of Travancore for preventing the diseases.

**Table 1:** Estate in Mundakayam Districts<sup>7</sup>

Name of Estate	Area in acres	Actual area cultivate
El Dorado	600	500
Xendoar	60	350
Kutikal	700	400
Vallinadu	600	400
Kuppukayam estate	800	150
Grahams land	300	200

The world production of rubber in 1900 was about 45000 tonnes whereas consumption was 52500 tonnes; This difference could not continue for long without an alternative source of supply .The increased demand obviously raised the price of rubber. By 1900, a marked increase in the price began to be seen. The all time record was reached in 1910. Mundkkayam became the leading centre of rubber estates in India, with an acreage of 5,493 in 1907 and 9652 in 1910.<sup>8</sup> The average price in that year was U.S. Dollars 2267 per tonne (about rupees nineteen per kilogram) in the New York market. This excessive price led to a scramble for planting rubber in the West Coast of India.<sup>9</sup> These calculations are based on bringing an acre of rubber in to in to bearing in five years on a stand of 300 trees per acre, with the wage structure at 5 annas per male adult worker per day<sup>10</sup>. The Dewan of Travancore held a gloomy view about the rapid growth of rubber cultivation in Travancore.

There was a practice to send People to Ceylon for training in rubber cultivation. A person who had undergone such a training reported in an article published in the Malayala Manorama dated 27<sup>th</sup> April 1910 that rupees four hundred would be enough to meet the cultivation expenditure up to the fifth year and that two hundred and fifty trees could be planted in one acre of land. But according to P. John, Manager of Kaliar estate, four hundred and fifty rupees would be necessary for raising an acre of rubber up to the fifth year in European estates. He added that from his experience, three hundred rupees would be sufficient for Indian planters. According to him hundred and fifty rubber trees could be raised in one acre of land. <sup>11</sup>By 1910, the price of rubber had reached to nine rupees per pound (Rs.19.80 per kilogram).The planted area in Travancore increased, by 1911 twelve European Companies alone had planted the large area of 17000 acn a rubber districts .The greatest amount of planting took place in the Mundakkayam district, which from that time became essentially a rubber district. Formost among the the companies in Travancore were Malayalam Rubber and Produce Company Limited,the Central Travancore Rubber Company,the Mundakkayam Valley Rubber Company, the Rani Travancore /rubber Company,the Mundakkayam Valley Rubber Company.the Stagbrook Rubber and Tea estates Limited, the Teekoy Rubber Company and the Periyar Rubber Company.

Among the earlier Indian Companies the Malankara Rubber and Produce Company Limited,was perhaps the biggest and most flourishing in South India, with a well managed property of some 2,000acres.<sup>12</sup>In an advertisement soliciting the purchase of shares, the promoters of the Malankara Rubber & Produce Company acknowledged that even if the price of rubber were to decline to one rupee per pound, the company would be able to make a profit and declare dividend. However the price began to decline very much in the subsequent years and reached two rupees per pound (Rs.4.40 per kilogram) by 1913.

In the financing and fostering of the industry, the mercantile firms acted as agents for the plantations, amongst whom Messrs Darraagh, Snail Company Limited,Messers. Harrisons and Crossfield Limited,

Messers. Aspirinwall and Company Limited took a leading part.<sup>13</sup> It was largely through their help that plantations were enabled to continue operations, when the Great War broke out in 1914. But the lower price of rubber threatened the extinction of the industry. During this period several schemes were proposed with a view to ameliorate the distressful economic conditions of the industry. The planters and the Government of Malaya persuaded the Government of United Kingdom to find a solution for the low prices during the war period. Accordingly, a Committee headed by Sir James Stevenson was appointed by Winston Churchill. The Stevenson Committee issued two reports. According to the Committee, exports were to be limited to a prescribed percentage of the standard production of each-producing country. Towards the end of October, 1922, it was announced by the Imperial Government that the rubber Colonies and States would be recommended to adopt the scheme. A prohibitive scale of export duties was imposed on exports exceeding the percentage. The Stevenson restriction scheme was meant not to give a premium to bad judgment or inefficient to yield more than a fair return on their capital to most efficient producers.<sup>14</sup>

The recommendations of the Committee were applicable only to Ceylon and Malaya. Since India was not covered by the Stevenson Restriction Scheme, there took place an increase in the planted area and production between 1928 in Travancore. The increase in the area under small holdings had been a notable development during the period. The highly remunerative price prevailing at that time was the major reason for the growth. The beneficial results of the compulsory restriction scheme were speedily felt by producers. Prices of the best grades of rubber rose almost at once to about one rupee per lb.

The commendable increase in the production of natural rubber was the result of increase in area of cultivation by native planters. The lucrative nature of rubber inspired the Syrian Christians of Travancore to switch to rubber, which made them the earliest native planters of Kerala. They took advantage of the lead given by British planters and thus they continue to dominate the plantation economy. The cultivation of rubber made them affluent. They adopted the extravagant life style of British planters which made them the dominant group of natives in the state.

**Table 2:** Export of Rubber from 1926-1931<sup>15</sup>

year	quantity	value
1926	6,27,932	1,11,29,992
1927	76,56,306	90,70,631
1928	77,79,844	83,13,903
1929	92,91,799	58,34,344
1930	1,01,85,818	51,21,879
1931	96,65,452	34,94,453

The year's 1932 and 1933 saw the lowest quantity of export from Travancore. The Great Depression was the reason for this decline in the export. During the depression period rubber cultivators suffered heavy losses for many years. The financial situation of the Central Travancore Rubber Company deteriorated so badly that the pay-out of dividends on ordinary shares went into abeyance for eight years from 1929 till 1936.<sup>16</sup> There were a number of reasons for the price fall of rubber. The most important one was International Rubber Regulation Agreement which restricted the production and planting of Rubber.<sup>17</sup>

In order to avert further increase of production capacity, new planting was forbidden. Each country was allowed to plant for experimental purpose a total area not exceeding one quarter of one percent of its entire rubber area. Replanting was strictly limited. Under Article 3 of the Agreement; Local Committees were to be appointed for the enforcement of the Regulation. Accordingly a local committee was appointed in India on 26<sup>th</sup>

May 1934. The Committee consisted of five members; two were nominated by the Travancore Government, one by the Cochin Government, one by the Madras Government and one by the United Planters' Association. The Chairman of the Committee was H.J. Walmesley, the nominee of the Cochin Government in the Committee. The Committee called the Indian Rubber Licensing Committee had its headquarters at Kottayam in South India. The first meeting of the Committee was held on 28 May 1934. The Committee appointed P. Kurian John as the Rubber Controller. The Committee resolved that from 1 June 1934 no rubber could be exported from India without a license or accompanying a certificate of origin. The Indian Rubber Licensing Committee was constituted under the Indian Rubber Control Act 1934. During the first eight years of its inception, the Indian Rubber Licensing Committee was mainly concerned with restriction of export of rubber.<sup>18</sup>

This situation changed with the conquest of South East Asian countries by Japan (1941-4). To provide the allies with sufficient quantities of rubber, fixed minimum. This situation brought about a complete transformation in the prospect of rubber in Travancore. A Rubber Conference was held in New Delhi on 27<sup>th</sup> January 1942 to discuss the utilization of rubber for war-purposes. The meeting of the Indian Rubber Licensing Committee held on 27<sup>th</sup> February 1942 considered the practical working of the new scheme and a procedure was laid down for its smooth functioning. The Committee also recommended for adoption by the Government, prices for the various grades of rubber. This was the first official fixation of prices for natural rubber in India. In 1942, the State Government of Travancore, passed Rubber Control Orders in conformity with the Order of the Central Government. The meeting of the Indian Rubber Licensing Committee held on 19 September 1942 considered the Central Government's intention to hold the Second Rubber Conference on 28 September 1942.

The Government of India issued on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1942 the 'Indian Rubber Control and Production Order 1942' Section 34 of the Order cancelled the previous Rubber Stocks Control Order 1942, the Rubber Control Order 1942 and the notification of the Government of India dated 5 September 1942. The Government also appointed C.P. Liston as the Rubber Purchasing Officer at Cochin. The Governments of Travancore issued separate notification in conformity with the Government of India notification into carry out rubber control in their respective State. The name of the Licensing Committee was changed into 'Rubber Production Board'. The first meeting of the Rubber Production Board was held on 7 December 1942. Sir C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, the then Dewan of Travancore was the first Chairman of the Rubber Production Board. Under the Rubber Control and Production Order, all restrictions imposed on planting of rubber were removed and the rubber growers were encouraged to maximize production. On 30<sup>th</sup> September 1944, Rubber Control and Production Order expired. However the planters knew that, with the expiry of the Order, the assurance of a steady price and regulated growth would be affected their plantation. So they convened a conference at Coimbatore on 28 June 1946. The Conference recommended to the Government of India that when the Rubber Production and Control Order expired, a permanent organization should be set up to develop plantation industry in India on scientific lines. On the basis of the recommendation of the cultivators, the Government of India enacted the Rubber (Production and Marketing) Act 1947. The Bill received the assent of the Governor General on 18 April 1947 and became law in the same year.<sup>19</sup> The previous experience of rubber planting gained by some of the Europeans in Ceylon and Malaya was a greatly benefited the emergence and growth of the cultivation of rubber in Travancore.<sup>20</sup>

**Table 3: Acreage under Rubber and Tea**

Year	Rubber	Tea	Total
1925	37498 (43%)	50296 (57%)	
1934	49553 (39%)	76659 (61%)	
1948	110012 (58%)	78700 (42%)	

## 2. Changes in Plantation Development

The introduction of rubber influenced plantation development in many respects.

1. Extensive rubber cultivation led to opening up of two more planting districts. The Periyar estate at Thattekkad market the beginning of large scale cultivation in North Travancore. Mundakkayam also became the most important rubber district in South-West India with an acreage of 16,875 in 1925 and 23,068 in 1934.
2. The districts in South Travancore witnessed a revival because of the introduction of rubber. This area under rubber was ranked second.
3. The status of Central Travancore and Kannan Devan Hills diminished during the rubber period. The high altitude and cold climate here were not favourable to the large scale introduction of rubber.
4. The rise of rubber sector introduced a change in the pattern of ownership. Small holdings began to predominate the field. The small holdings were able to profit from the cultivation of rubber because no large investments were necessary to process the latex collected from the rubber trees.
5. Emergence of indigenous plantation sector.

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