

# **Cottage Industries of Malabar**

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To a casual observer, Malabar appears to be a land of lotus-eaters, peculiarly rich in every way with a copious rainfall, abundant and luxurious vegetation and in fact with all blessings which nature can bestow on a people living on this earth. But a careful study of the economic conditions prevailing in the district will dispel all such exaggerated notions. Almost all the land in Malabar is the private property of a few landlords. The density of population in the Presidency reaches its maximum in the Malabar district. While the number of persons per square mile of the total area in the presidency is 297, it is 535 in Malabar. Taking the area under cultivation alone, it is 1498 in Malabar while it is 780 in the presidency. Considering only the agricultural population of the area under cultivation, the density is 901 in Malabar and 558 in the presidency. These figures are according to the Census Report and Tables of 1921. It may be safely asserted that the Tables of 1931 will tell a worse tale as the population of Malabar has increased without adequate increase in the area of cultivation. There is not much scope for extension of cultivation as much of the uncultivated land consists of hilly places and jungles. Besides there are certain other economic and social factors peculiar to Malabar which render the problem of employment in agriculture much more difficult of solution than elsewhere. Under such conditions the importance of cottage industries not only for subsidiary occupations but also as the sole means of employment can hardly be exaggerated.

In dealing with the subject of Cottage Industries it will be beyond the scope of this paper to deal with organised industries such as tile manufacture. In view of the fact that most of the garden lands are devoted to the cultivation of cocoanuts, coconut fibre industry is an important cottage industry engaging a fairly large number of people in the district. It is also a subsidiary occupation to those engaged in agriculture during the off-season

especially to women workers. Owing to the introduction of the dry system of cultivation which saves considerable trouble and expense and also the demand for cocoanuts which brought good price till recently, coconut planting has taken place extensively and even paddy lands have been converted into coconut gardens. The Malabar Tenants' Compensation Act also encourages extension of coconut plantation. So coconut fibre industry is one of the most expanding industries of the district, providing profitable employment to a large number of people, if properly organised. There are various processes through which the coconut husk has to pass before it is converted into coir useful for making ropes, door mats, etc. The process of extracting fibre by soaking the husk in salt water is considered to be the best as the fibre obtained is better in colour, fineness and strength than that obtained by the 'dry' process practised in areas where there are no backwaters or shallow pools. There is a good deal of loose thinking on the quality of soaked and unsoaked yarn which needs careful investigation by the Department of Industries. There is also great need to investigate and suggest better and easier methods for the conversion of husk into yarn and then into ropes, etc., so that large quantities of coir exported to foreign countries may be utilised here to prepare finished articles for sale. The question of eliminating the middle men in the various processes through which the husk passes before it is converted into coir and then into finished products, is a problem that can be tackled by co-operative effort alone. A few co-operative societies for coir workers have not been successful mainly due to the fact that the co-operative societies have not been successful in eliminating the middle men in all the processes through which the husk passes and also due to lack of facilities for marketing. Any effort made in this direction by the Government and non-officials interested in co-operative production and sale, will prove a great boon to the large number of coir workers and will ultimately place this growing industry on a sound and stable basis. The need for improving the shape, size and colour of the coconut and also the yield of coconut trees by adopting improved methods of cultivation, by the use of manures, etc., is great; and the Agricultural Department can with benefit redouble their efforts that are already being made in regard to this.

The industry next in importance is handloom weaving. Unlike other communities the Chaliyans of Malabar live and carry on their occupation in *theruvus*. To most of them weaving is the main occupation. The Chaliyans of Malabar are peculiar in many ways. They are very conservative and will not take advantage of up-to-date appliances even though they are aware that the use of such appliances would greatly improve their economic condition. They are also slow to adapt themselves to satisfy the changes in fashion, style, etc., of the consumers. On the slightest pretext such as a festival they take a holiday. Owing to their poor economic condition the weavers are generally in the clutches of middle men from whom they receive yarn and return the finished products receiving such wages as the merchants may be pleased to give them. The hold of these yarn merchants on these weavers is so strong that any movement started to better their condition will not thrive unless these middle men are also benefitted. In some cases the yarn merchants hold some important places in their caste guilds. From the experience gained in the working of two weavers' co-operative societies conducted by the "Devadhar Malabar Reconstruction Trust," I feel the problem of weavers resolves itself into these propositions:—

(a) How to tackle the question of prior indebtedness so that freed from their present shackles the weavers may be free to take advantage of the facilities offered by any movement started for their benefit such as the joint purchase and sale societies ;

(b) How to provide adequate facilities for joint purchase of yarn and sale of finished products ;

(c) How to increase their capacity for more production ;

(d) How to improve the moral condition by weaning them from the habit of excessive drinking, avoidance of unnecessary expenses on festivals, etc., which results in debts and to save them from disease due to unhealthy and insanitary conditions of living.

The problem almost baffles solution, in view of the fact that sufficient finance is not available to relieve the weavers from their prior debts and also to make joint purchase of yarn necessary for their work. To increase their earning capacity fly shuttle, slay, warping mills, etc., should be introduced. This means large outlay of capital. When these improved appliances are introduced,

the quantity of goods produced will be larger and so ready market must be found for their finished products. So loans on easy terms are required, firstly, for clearing prior debts, secondly, for purchasing fly shuttle slays, warping mills, etc., thirdly, for keeping sufficient capital to keep the looms busy, and lastly for organising marketing of goods. The state should give these loans, if weaving as a cottage industry is to exist at all. Otherwise the prospects of weaving as a cottage industry are gloomy. There are also other conditions that sometimes make one feel that weaving cannot be successful as a cottage industry in Malabar. At the instance of dealers and middle men the weavers have adopted all kinds of devices in weaving which in good business will be put down as dishonest. In spite of the best efforts made by the Devadhar Malabar Reconstruction Trust in the two societies mentioned already, it has been found difficult to wean the weavers from these ways. Often the finished products are not equal in weight to the yarn given and also of the particular texture and kind required and of samples approved. The skill of weavers in weaving differs from one another. But the consuming public naturally demand the same variety of cloth in texture and kind. If no careful watch is kept the weavers have become so demoralised often owing to circumstances beyond their control, that either the finished products or the yarn itself is sold in the bazaar instead of returning the goods to the societies and receiving wages. A system of watch and ward has to be maintained which means lot of trouble and expense. At the same time such a system demoralises the workers. So an alternative method for carrying on weaving as an industry though not in the strict sense as a cottage industry I venture to place for consideration.

The method suggested is to run a Co-operative Weaving Factory where workmen who are all members of the society can come and work. The workers will get wages for the work turned out and at the same time bonuses. There are no evils of the sweating system, nor of the capitalistic system. All the profits go to the society and each member is paid wages according to his capacity. There will be an expert weaving master who will supervise the work and who can be paid by the society. The work will then be conducted on proper and businesslike methods. The quality of cloth produced will be better and uniform and the

quantity will be commensurate with the wages paid. The weavers are not then subject to the attention of the middle-men for they have no cloth to offer for sale. The middle men cannot grasp the finished products to the detriment of the workers. The workers also will not be able to sell finished goods for any price they get to meet their daily requirements and this one cause of their impoverishment is removed. Moreover at present weavers do not work regularly and often do not work as many hours as they ought to, not even six hours a day. They have formed indolent habits. But if they are to live at all as weavers, they should be made to work longer hours and that too regularly. A factory alone can inculcate in them all these habits.

I venture to suggest that the method suggested for weaving may, with such modifications as may be deemed necessary, be applied to coir and other industries as well, for the evils mentioned with regard to weaving are seen in a greater or lesser degree in their case also.

Another cottage industry which can be developed is the mat industry. Its success depends on the availability of raw material. This industry is specially confined to Palghat Taluk though there are other places in the district where mats are prepared out of palmyrah leaves. If a regular supply of raw material is provided and the industry is organised on a co-operative basis with facilities for marketing the industry is sure to expand. It is gratifying to learn that the Government have undertaken to organise this industry on a co-operative basis. Better methods of weaving mats by means of improved looms etc., may also be introduced to increase the output and thus better the economic condition of the workers. The Forest Department should be approached to permit free cutting of the raw material required from the neighbouring forests.

Bell-metal and bronze industry is another industry that needs encouragement. Dining dishes which are generally prepared out of bell-metal at one time found good sales outside the district. The introduction of enamel and porcelain ware has affected this industry greatly. But the utility and durability of the bell-metal wares should be impressed by means of propaganda undertaken by Government. Most of the workers engaged in

this industry are indebted to the merchants and are obliged to work for them. Organisation of this industry on a co-operative basis at least in places where the workers are sufficiently large in number is a necessity.

Besides the cottage industries already mentioned, there are cabinet making, umbrella making, soap making, fish oil manufacture, fish curing, rattan work, manufacture of knives and locks, etc., which are practised in one or other places in the district. If these industries have to thrive as they must have thriven in the past, they should all be organised on a co-operative basis. Marketing facilities should be provided by bringing to the notice of the consumer where the articles manufactured can be had by opening a Depot in a central place like Calicut or Palghat for selling the goods manufactured. Adequate finance and supervision to run these societies should be provided either by Government or the District Co-operative Banks.

At the beginning of this paper I have pointed out the special importance of cottage industries in a district like Malabar. I have tried to understand if the existing cottage industries will suffice to provide employment to all the workers whom agriculture alone cannot support. If the chronic poverty and the consequent physical deterioration is to be stopped, more cottage industries which do not involve large outlay but which will at the same time provide employment to the large number of the unemployed, should be started. Goat-rearing and poultry-farming are two cottage industries which may be usefully introduced in the district even on a large scale. Improvement in the diet of the population which has become absolutely necessary, is possible only by the use of milk and eggs as articles of food. The two cottage industries suggested will provide the necessary supply to meet the demand created by any propaganda undertaken for the improvement of diet. While the coastal towns and villages are supplied with fish, the interior places in Malabar need such articles of food as eggs and milk to take the place of fish.

In conclusion permit me to impress again the importance of cottage industries in Malabar if the growing population is to live at all under improved conditions of living. As agriculture can no longer provide occupation for all the workers, unless cottage

industries are well organised and run on proper lines, ~~the~~ economic future of Malabar is bound to be gloomy and no one interested in Malabar can ponder over it with equanimity realising what economic discontent would lead to elsewhere and more so in Malabar.