

# Alleppey Coir - The Geographical Indicator

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## Introduction

Alleppey, the ancient town in the State of Kerala is the cradle of coir industry in India. It was in Alleppey presently known as "Alappuzha", the manufacturing sector of the coir industry originated way back in the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century. Coir yarn have been produced from time immemorial through out the coastal belt of Kerala. It is reported that ancient travelers like Megasthenes have taken many valuable gifts including coir rope produced in Malabar coast to King Solomon.

Manufacture of value added products out of 2 ply coir yarn produced through out the coastal belt of Kerala was commenced at Alleppey in the year 1859 by one Irish born American known as Mr. James Darragh. He established a factory under the name and style "Darragh Smail and Co." where the coir mats and mattings were first produced in the history of coir industry in India. Initially, the Company started producing coir door mats like fibre mats, creel mats etc. and later on slowly introduced other type of coir products like coir mattings, mourzouk carpets etc.

Following Darragh Smail and Co., many other Europeans also ventured into coir manufacturing units in the Alleppey town. There were big names like Aspinwall & Co., William Goodacre & Sons, Pears Leslie & Co., Volkar Brothers etc having coir division established in the small port town of Alleppey. All these manufacturing units were producing nearly the entire quantity of coir products required for supplying to their principals in U.K. or other European countries. They used to procure coir yarn from local dealers who will bring yarn from different coir producing centres of Kerala to the terminal market at Alleppey and manufacture wide range of coir products engaging thousands of workers. Each unit was having their own standards for producing coir products.

Coir Board as part of standardisation of coir products brought out quality specification for different types of coir and coir products during the Sixties and subsequently got it approved by the Bureau of Indian Standards which were also notified for the information of the public.

There were unrest among the workers engaged by the European factories on the labour wages. There were disparity in wages between the firms for producing the same quality of coir

products and the workers started demanding unification of wages with a slogan that "same wage for same work". They organised themselves into a trade union under the name and style "Travancore Coir Factory Workers Union" which was the first trade union in the coir industry and perhaps in the whole country after the trade union movement started in the textile mills in Bombay.

The workers through the trade union started demanding unification of wages and other welfare measures. The labour unrest and the independence movement in India prompted the Europeans to leave their coir activities in India and migrate to their home lands. After India became independent in the year 1947, the process was hastened and the entire Europeans left India by handing over the ownership of the factories to their Indian counter parts. The Indian counter parts took over the



management of the factories from the Europeans and sensing the difficulties in running the units having thousands of workers, they retrenched the workers by paying their legitimate benefits by way of looms and equipments. The retrenched workers took looms and equipments to the suburbs of Alleppey town and established household, cottage, tiny units adjoining to their households. Thus the coir industry which was in the centralised form in the pre-independence era became a totally disintegrated

industry and as of now there are nearly 10,000 small scale coir manufacturers engaged in the production of coir products supplying to nearly 250 exporters for the purpose of export.

These small scale manufacturers have the skill to produce different varieties of coir products on heavy structured handlooms installed in their units. They colour the coir yarn in their own households by adopting the traditional technology and weave the coir products as per the orders placed by the exporters. The manufacturers have the traditional knowledge on weaving coir products as well as other processing like Sorting, Dyeing, Bleaching etc. Only 2 taluks in Alleppey district viz. Ambalapuzha and Cherthala are having these small scale coir units. Thus the Alleppey coir cluster is confined to Ambalapuzha and Cherthala taluks of Alleppey district.

The Coir Board is a statutory body established by the Govt. of India under the Coir Industry Act 1953 for the over all

development of coir industry in India. The major functions of the Coir Board includes Research and Development, Export and Domestic Market Promotion etc. The functions of the Coir Board also include ensuring remunerative returns to the small scale producers and workers engaged in the coir industry. Coir Board has been evolving plan schemes for the welfare of the workers of coir industry. Recently, the Board has introduced a scheme for Inplant Inspection of Coir and Coir products under which the quality supervisors engaged by the Coir Board will be visiting the small scale coir manufacturing units on a routine and inspect the products being produced by the manufacturers. They will also bring to the notice of the manufacturers the defects noticed by them during the inspection process and will suggest remedial measures for rectifying the defects.

Coir industry in the Alleppey cluster is having a lot of players like exporters, small scale manufacturers, coir co-operative societies, public sector undertakings, trade unions, NGOs etc. The Coir Board acts as a facilitator for providing technical support and guidance to the industry. The Board has also constituted a Coir Relation Committee comprising of the representatives of the exporters/small scale manufacturers/trade unions etc. for resolving issues arising in the industry and maintaining a harmonious relation between the players of the sector.

#### Alleppey Coir - the G.I.

Alleppey Coir is being manufactured since 1859 in the Ambalapuzha and Cherthala Taluks of Alleppey District of Kerala State. The wide range of coir products generally known as Alleppey Coir is manufactured out of coir yarn spun from coir fibre extracted from the outer cover of coconuts also known as "*Cocosnucifera*" grown widely in the costal regions of the country. The coir fibre is extracted in the state of Kerala by a biological process known as "retting", which involves immersing of well matured husks of coconut in saline back waters for months together (i.e. 6 to 10 months) and extracting fibre by beating the retted husk with wooden mallets by women workers. Retted fibre will be fluffy having golden yellow colour is pliable for spinning coir yarn. The fibre extracted will be dried under sun and spun into finer varieties of 2 ply coir yarn using a traditional charka mostly in the costal belt of Kerala starting from Thiruvananthapuram District in the southern part of Kerala to Kozhikode in the northern Kerala. The coir yarns spun in each area have separate geographical indications synonymous to the place of origin of the yarn like Anjengo, Aratory, Vycome etc.

Even though coir yarn is spun from time immemorial in the costal belt of Kerala, the manufacture of value added products like coir doormats, mattings, carpets etc. was first commenced

in the Alleppey town only in the year 1859. It has been reported that <sup>1</sup> "The coir mats and mattings industry was introduced in Travancore in the year 1859-60 by late Mr. James Darragh, the founder of M/s. Darragh Smail & Company Ltd. of Alleppey. He opened a small factory on the beach in Alleppey where mats and mattings were first manufactured on boards and looms with the assistance of a few trained weavers from Bengal".

Subsequently there has been a spurt of mats and mattings manufacturing units in the Ambalapuzha and Cherthala Taluks of Alleppey District established by the Europeans. These factories were producing coir mats, mattings carpets, rugs and geo-textiles in their own units in bigger looms by engaging local workers. Such products were not being manufactured anywhere else in the country and world over.

During those periods there were nearly 25 export houses mostly run by the Europeans under name and style Darragh Smail

& Co., Pears Lesley & Co., Volcart Brothers, William Goodacre and Sons, Aspinwall & Co., Bombay Co., Kerala Coir Manufacturing Co. etc. These manufacturing units were producing the entire quantity of coir products required by the company for the purpose of export by engaging thousands of workers. In the post independence era the Europeans, who were running major coir manufacturing units started migrating to their homelands leaving the enterprises to their Indian



counterparts. However, the Indian counterparts were not able to run the manufacturing units in a bigger scale and started retrenching the workers by paying the retrenchment benefits in the form of looms and equipments. The workers who were retrenched by the European firms have taken the looms and equipments to their suburbs of Alleppey town and established small scale coir manufacturing units adjoining to their dwelling houses. Thus the industry which was in a centralized form during the pre-independence era has become a totally decentralized industry in the post independence period and as of now there a

nearly ten thousand small scale manufacturers registered with Coir Board who are engaged in the manufacture of different varieties of coir mats, mattings, carpets, rugs and geo-textiles and supplying to the exporters for the purpose of export as well as domestic requirements.

It has been reported that <sup>2</sup> "Coconut was no more considered just an agricultural commodity in India but also the raw material of much larger industry, the coir industry, that offered livelihood to millions of people and attached to the daily lives of many more millions ..... thanks to that natural edge and skilled work force in the country (particularly in the Ambalapuzha and

Cherthala taluks of Alleppey District of Kerala)". Indian coir caught global attention for its colour and texture earns for it a premium price in the international market.

"Alleppey coir" is produced in the Ambalappuzha and Cherthala taluks of Alleppey district in the State of Kerala since the year 1859 when the first coir factory was established by late Mr. James Darragh an Irish born American. As of now there are more than 250 exporters of coir and coir products and nearly 10,000 small scale coir manufacturers registered with the Coir Board engaged in the production of Alleppey Coir which encompasses a wide range of coir products. Ambalappuzha and Cherthala taluks of Alleppey District situated in the western coast of Kerala State with the Arabian sea in the western side and Vembanad lake in the eastern side. The area is inhabited by traditional coir workers predominantly women numbering over 80,000.

#### Description of goods

"Alleppey coir" is a geographical indication used for the coir mats and mattings and carpets produced out of handloom by the traditional coir workers in the Ambalappuzha, Cherthala taluks of Alleppey district. These products are exported traditionally to more than 80 countries around the world.

"Alleppey coir" is unique due to its exclusive weaving technique and processes adopted by the small scale manufactures. It is hand made products manufactured by the traditional workmen on handlooms in the cottage units attached with the house holds in the suburbs of Alleppey and Cherthala towns. The raw material for the manufacture of Alleppey Coir is brought from the entire coastal belt of Kerala starting from Trivandrum district to Calicut.

There are different varieties of coir yarn produced in these regions which are also having geographical indication due to its uniqueness in the skill of workers, spinning wheels and also the raw material. These yarns produced are known by the GIs as "Anjengo coir", "Aratory coir", "Vycome coir" etc. Even though 2 ply coir yarns are being produced throughout the coastal belt of Kerala, conversion of coir yarn into wide range of products known as "Alleppey coir" is being done only in the Ambalappuzha and Cherthala taluks of Alleppey districts since the artisans in the region are only conversant with the weaving process and are having the skill for producing coir products having unique characteristics. At present there are around 25,000 handlooms installed in the cluster which are used for the manufacture of "Alleppey coir" which provides means of livelihood for more than 80,000 workers within the vicinity. It also provides livelihood for more than 3 lakhs workers in the primary sector throughout the coastal belt of Kerala as "Alleppey coir" is produced from the coir yarn spun by the traditional

workers in these regions.

The traditional coir industry has been making rapid strides in the export business as well as domestic market for nearly 1 ½ centuries. The total turnover of coir industry in the cluster is estimated at Rs.850 crores out of which nearly Rs.500 crores is from exports. Coir industry in the cluster is decentralised having major players like exporters, State owned Public Sector Undertakings, Research Institute of the Coir Board, Cooperative societies and a large number of small scale cottage manufacturers. The small scale manufacturers produce "Alleppey coir" and supply to the exporters in a semi-finished form against their requirements of export/domestic market. The exporters process

these semi-finished mats/mattings/carpets/other sorts by shearing, stenciling, passing etc and pack it in hessian cloth for export market and domestic market. While the primary process of weaving is carried out in the small scale manufacturers units the finishing operations like shearing, stenciling, smoking, packing etc. are carried out in the exporters' premises. The flow chart of the entire activity in the cluster is given in the Annexure - 1.

The wide range of products like Coir Mats, Mattings, Carpets produced in the Ambalappuzha, Cherthala

taluks of Alleppey district as detailed below are covered by "Alleppey Coir".

#### I Coir Mats

1. Fibre mat
2. Creel mat
3. Rod mat
4. Corridor mat
5. Sinnet mat
6. Mesh mat
7. Bit mat
8. Gymnasia mat
9. Rope mat (Lovers' knot mats)

#### II Coir Mattings

1. Two shaft mattings
2. Two shaft basket mattings
3. Three shaft mattings
4. Four shaft mattings
5. Coir geotextiles
6. Multi shaft mattings
7. Ribbed mattings
8. Coir Mourzouks
9. Cricket Pitch mattings



### III Coir other Sorts

#### 1. Coir Fender

Coir fender is commonly made in spherical or cylindrical shape. The inner material for the Fender is made in the required shape from coir yarn, rope or fibre tied together tightly. Coir rope is then knotted to form the outer shell by applying suitable knotting technique.

#### Uniqueness

The uniqueness of 'Alleppey Coir' is the skill and craftsmanship of the workers in the small cottage tiny units attached to their households. The entire family members take part in the production activities. The skill of artisans engaged in the production of 'Alleppey Coir' is unique by which the quality of wide range of coir products are maintained as per the BIS specifications. The design for weaving of coir products is also unique in nature for floor covering.

The coir industry is also a labour intensive industry. It is estimated that more than 80,000 workers are involved in this industry in the Alleppey cluster out of which majority is women. There is enough scope for increasing the employment potential

in the industry. As of now, the industry is utilising only nearly 50% of the installed capacity of the looms and equipments scattered over 10,000 small scale manufacturing units.

The coir industry is an export oriented industry and the industry earned an export turn over of Rs.508 crores during the year 2005-06 out of which nearly 85% has been exported from the export oriented production centres of Alleppey district.



#### Inspection body

Coir Board, a statutory body established by the Govt. of India under the Coir Industry Act 1953 shall be the inspection body as envisaged under the G.I. Act. The Board has got adequate infrastructure facilities for testing and inspection of 'Alleppey Coir' in the cluster to carry out inspection as and when required.

The Coir Board having its head office at Coir House, M.G. Road, Cochin - 682 016 represents the interest of the producers, co-operative societies, exporters and workers of the said goods to which the geographical indication (Alleppey Coir) relates and which is in continuous use since in respect of the said goods.