

The Skill of the Coirworker

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Flying into Sri Lanka one of the first things that strike you is the lush greenery of the island. Most beautiful of this greenery, is the coconut palm often pictured against a background of sea, waving gently in the island breeze. Coconut is also the island's third major agricultural export. From the coconut husk is derived coir of different varieties for different purposes. Sri Lanka provides the world with 80% of its brown fibre, and 20% of its white fibre requirements. The main areas under coconut cultivation in Sri Lanka are the South and West coasts and the Northern-Western regions. The total area under coconut cultivation in Sri Lanka is roughly 451,472 hectares nearly 40% of entire cultivated area in the island. Sri Lanka ranks 4th, in the world production of coconut with 64 trees to an acre, averaging 12-18 nuts per season. which is every two months. The coir fibre is a product derived from the coconut husk. Coir work is predominantly women's work, though certain stages of the production process also involve men. First the husk-pits are dug along the river bank in which the husks have to undergo a soaking and fermentation process. This involves planting peeled sticks, generally from the cinnamon plant, in the form of a square 91 2 ft by 91/2 ft. Then the river

bed is levelled within the square and the husk pits are then ready for the husks.

Traditionally women don't level the river beds as this would involve them having to dive completely below the surface of the water. Making the husk pits on the whole is considered a man's job. After this the pits are filled with husks, but not haphazardly. The husks are laid as many as 5000 husks in each pit, and covered with leaves, mud and stone or logs to keep the husks securely under water. This is a precise job as a badly filled husk pit could lead to waste of a large number of the husks that come into contact with the air and harden. If this happens these husks could only be used for brown fibre. This work is also a man's job. The husks are then left to ferment in the pits for varying lengths of time. To get the pure white fibre, the superior version, it is generally kept for nine months in the pits. The brown fibre extraction process does not require this length of time in water, and the period the husks are left for this, is only 3 to 4 months. In the production of white fibre the husks have to reach the fermentation pits within 2 to 3 weeks of dehusking, whereas in the case of the brown fibre extraction process it could take from a month to a year from the time of dehusking to the fermentation stage.

After the fermentation period is over the pit is emptied of its contents. This is a woman's job. It involves standing for long hours in near-shoulder high water, which smells foul due to the fermentation of the husks. Each husk is taken and thrown onto the river bank one by one. It generally takes 5 hours to empty a pit containing 5000 husks.

After this each husk is hammered by hand to extract the fibre strands. This is considered the core of the female domain in the production process. The fibre strands loosen and fall apart from the "Kohu Bath" of fibre dust. The husk is placed on a small flattened log and the women hammer each husk with the aid of a small wooden club. How long this process takes, depends on the length of time that the husks have been soaked. Usually a husk that has been soaked for 4 months takes a 20-30 blows while one that has been soaked for 9 months takes only 3-5 blows. The work is generally done in the early hours of the morning.

The next stage is the drying of the fibre, which is often riot considered work. Here the fibre is spread on the ground or over small A boy at a coir goods store displays a floor rug made of coir. shrubs in the vicinity to dry, and taken in if there is any sign of rain. It is generally done in the afternoon when the sun is hottest. After this the fibre is cleaned of the remaining fibre dust, and the strands

that are too hard to be blended into supple rope are removed.

The cleaned fibre is then rolled into neat bundles and stacked away for spinning later. Generally, this operation is done by hand, though sometimes a wooden fibre cleaning machine is used.

The bulk of the coir fibre is exported at this stage to the developed world. It goes to make the high quality bristol fibre and the lower quality mattress fibre, which goes to make the rubberized car seats of well known makes of cars in Europe & Japan, among other things. Although Sri Lanka provides 80% of the worlds supply of the lower quality fibre and 20 percent of the superior variety, only 30% of Sri Lanka's husk potential is utilised while the rest is left to rot or used by the villager as domestic fuel for cooking.

Three main coir fibres are manufactured in Sri Lanka the superior fibre yarn derived from the "white Fibre" and the bristol and mattress fibre derived from "brown fibre". Most of the white fibre is not exported as a raw material but further processed into ropes of various qualities.

Spinning rope by hand is the oldest method and is still done by the older women in the village. It is done by rubbing two strands of rope between the palms of the hands. Men no longer spin rope by hand except for the rope used' by fishermen, which is a high-quality thick, tightly spun white fibre rope.

In the 1920's-30's the migrants who came from Kerala in India brought the spinning set to Sri Lanka. They were skilled in the production of rope. This spinning contraption involves two simply constructed wooden sets. The rope is spun with the help of gauge and involves three persons to work it, one behind the wheel, and two walking behind the strands of rope which flow from their bundles of coir. The second wheel is used to twine the two strands of rope into one.

Children too, often help out in the process, in which whole families are involved. Though the production of coconut has dropped in recent times this has not affected the production of coir as, husk is in any event under-utilised. The Western and Southern coastal belts, and parts of the North-West of Sri Lanka have always been famous for coir products. from household utility items to many types of decorative items, made by skilled coir workers.

Any Sri Lankan household will use a large number of items made of coconut fibre.

The commonest is the household broom. Another item is the household rug found at the entrance to any house. Coir mats are produced which are often used as carpeting, and a modern development of this has been the coir carpeting, which has a rubber base, extending its life. The coir workers of Sri Lanka produce many types of brushes to suit a variety of needs and some workers with an artistic touch produce interesting wall hangings made of coir. In some instances the coir is dyed, mainly in red and green, and woven into mats, which are used for decorative purposes, or as good picnic mats on a Sunday family outing.

A drive to the South along Galle Road, will be all the more interesting if you can stop at some of the many coir goods shops on the way, and examine some of the fine examples of coir products that are on sale. Bargaining is not out of place at these shops. If you have the time, you will also be able to see both the patience and skill behind the products on display.



A boy at a coir goods store displays a floor rug made of coir.



A women coir worker beats the coconut husk to extract fibre.