

PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH THE ESTABLISHING OF A LOCAL TEA CHEST INDUSTRY

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FOR two particular reasons, namely the value of doing what we can to build up local industries, and, the need to insure supplies of reliable packages in which to export our product, the interest now being taken in this subject is a timely one.

It might be claimed with some justice that methods of distributing and connected advertising have failed to keep pace with increasing production, and the tuning up that is going on over estate detail. In this connection the suitability or otherwise of the containers in which our tea travels is a matter of more than passing interest.

I take it that it will not be disputed that three-ply chests stand alone from the point of view of security, compared to these I class *momis* as only justified because of the special need of economy under existing conditions and locally made chests as undesirable in spite of their possible cheapness.

Superintendents of godowns in Colombo and those who are in touch with warehousing at the other end could perhaps give valuable information—comparing the various packages used, but they may not view the question of damage in the same light as we do. Loss of contents and taints there may be but it is doubted if the distributor's knowledge of the subject enables him to realize how much the good work attempted on the estate can be discounted by damage in transit.

A bus man's holiday appeals to the planters just as much as it does to any other worker, and in travelling I have found two things of particular interest—one being to observe how our product is treated in transit, the other to study the way it is advertised. My last trip was via Africa in 1930, and in the many ports touched at I never failed to come across tea. I made a special point of examining packages whilst being unloaded, in the dock warehouses and in dealers' godowns and if my memory serves me aright found that three-ply containers stood up to their job very well, but ranging from chests sprung at the cornering to badly smashed ones, I saw no straight wood packages free from damage.

To deal more directly with the possibility of building up a local Chest Industry.

From the latest Directory I have I see that in 1929 we imported 4,757,127 of what are classed as "Tea Chests and Shooks" their value being Rs. 6,284,901/-.

We are studying the problem of local chest production from varied points of view, but the bigger and more attractive aspect of this question concerns likely afforestation and the future. Whether we can find a suitable timber for the purpose and turn out satisfactory ply-wood packages is a matter of some doubt.

As far as straight wood chests are concerned, we have a number of suitable woods, which if properly seasoned and made would compare well with *momis*.

In discussions, borer attacks are referred to as a serious problem, but at the same time it has been clearly indicated that this is mainly due to faulty seasoning. I have in my office a considerable collection of tea chest wood samples—these have purposely been kept without precautions against borers and the damage done is much less than one would expect, I have had these specimens over 12 years.

I have at various times used "country chests" and records show that in 1917-18 when the imported article was poor in quality and prohibitive in price, I used 16,000 locally made packages, made from selected trees in the neighbourhood, of these I class as excellent chest woods:

Doona congestiflora, S. Tinniya, this is a very large tree, partly gregarious, weight seasoned 36 lb. per cubic foot. Could this wood be worked up with proper wood working machinery it would be on a par with *momi*.

Mangifera Zeylanica.—(Wild Mango) S. Etamba, is another good wood for the purpose. This is also a very big tree, a solitary grower and probably commoner than Tinniya, weight 44 lb. per cubic feet, requires seasoning.

There are numbers of equally suitable trees and in quantities such as *Myristica laurifolia*, S. Malaboda, that are good provided they are especially seasoned.

Special handicaps under which locally made chests labour are faulty seasoning and bad manufacture. If chests are to be hand made, they would be more attractive and also stronger if planing were done with a straight faced plane and not with the curved shaped blade beloved of the village carpenter—Again locally made chests are weakened by the way cornering is done—the cost of proper cornering machinery is prohibitive and hand

cutting is a definite cause of weakening, this is accentuated by the rough and abrupt faced chisel and the equally rough and irregular toothed saw with which the work is done.

In so far as existing timber trees are concerned, outlay on sawing, planing and cornering machinery can be ruled out as prohibitive; as such expenditure would only be justified if it were possible for unlimited quantities of suitable logs to be economically transported to the saw mills.

Looking back I see that the use of local chests coincided with difficulty over obtaining imported chests. *Momis* were poor in quality and cost up to Rs. 2.55 in Colombo. It is significant that the use of locally made packages was discontinued as soon as the imported article was up to more normal standards and prices. *Momi* chests for some time now have been costing between 75-cents and 80 cents in Colombo and are good. Can we compete with these? Consideration must also be given to the fact that certain makes of three-ply chests run *momis* close, gauged by their cost per lb. of tea, and that while the supply of *momis* may not be reliable there need never be any difficulty over obtaining three-plys. Bearing this in mind unless careful estimating indicates that they can profitably plant up blocks as a source of supply in competition with outside supplies, the "Powers-that-be" will take a grave responsibility on their shoulders, if they involve the Island in any extensive scheme of reforestation with the supplying of chest timber as its objective.

The outcome of examination of the question of developing a local chest industry appears to indicate that this is of a major importance only as it relates to the future, namely, the planting up of large blocks of forest with suitable trees and with such that are reasonably rapid growers. These blocks must be located so that transport of the logs to where mills can be sited will be economical.

Our entomologists will, before anything can be done, have to decide what species, if any, can be brought together in this way without undue risk of borer and termite damage.

The position is essentially a business one and as it takes a cubic foot of wood to make a chest, it will be appreciated that afforestation will have to be on a big scale, if the scheme is to play an appreciable part in the business of coping with requirements.

Only if it is possible to produce the article at a figure, which will insure ability to sell in competition with imported chests can the supplying of chests for packing purposes come into consideration in connection with afforestation and we must look to forestry and business experts to advise us upon this problem.