

## COLONIAL BOTANY AND PLANT TRANSFER: THE CASE OF NATURAL RUBBER (1850 to 1910)

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This paper is primarily concerned with decomposition of the major contributory factors for the transplantation of natural rubber from Brazil to the South-East Asian colonies of Europe during 1850 to 1910. The analysis is contextualized to capture and reconstruct the missing links in the debate on the process of transfer of rubber from its natural habitat in the Amazon basin to South-East Asia. The conventional wisdom on the theme has been focused on the three region-specific factors, viz. organization of rubber production, supply of labour and plant diseases. However, a centralized system of research and development support provided by the colonial powers of Europe through a network of Botanical Gardens had been pivotal in providing a sustainable platform for transplantation of rubber from the Amazon basin. The unrivalled role of colonial Botany evolved by the network of Botanical Gardens is underlined by the commercialization of plantation rubber within two decades of the Wickham rubber mission in contrast to the stagnation of the interlocked wild rubber extraction system for about a century. In sum, R and D inputs provided by the colonial powers had been the centripetal forces leading to the dynamic growth of a cost competitive Asian plantation rubber and gradual exit of the wild rubber from the world market.

**Key words:** Botanic gardens, Colonial botany, Natural rubber, Plant transfer

### INTRODUCTION

The genesis of plant transfer since the first voyage of Christopher Columbus in 1492 and the aftermath had been unprecedented for the contributory factors and the outcomes. Despite the polemics on the same, the event heralded an array of developments leading to the Columbian Exchange which ended the biological separation of the world. The Columbian Exchange (Crosby, 1972) refers to widespread exchange of flora and fauna between the Western and Eastern Hemispheres as well as voluntary and involuntary migration of

people to the Americas followed by the first voyage. Functionally, the Columbian Exchange had far reaching consequences on the prevailing agrarian systems of the world leading to the emergence of a new biological era marked by ecological imperialism (Mann, 2011). Broadly, the new biological era had been characterized by the evolution of three streams of agrarian systems with specific geographical and organizational features over time. Among the three, the first phase beginning from the last decade of fifteenth century was characterized by exchange of food staples between the new