

Programme 10: The spice trade

Summary:

The spice trade has been vital to the life and development of Kochi from ancient to modern times. This programme outlines this important industry, from the farming of the spices in such places as Vypin Island, to their processing in factories and storage in warehouses in Mattancherry to their eventual export from Kochi's port to their destinations around the world – including the UK.

Key questions:

- What spices are produced in the Kochi district?
- Where are they farmed, processed and exported from?
- Why is the area favoured for this production?
- Who is involved in the production of spices and who benefits?
- How does Kochi link to the rest of the world?

Learning objectives:

The programme aims for pupils to:

- recognise the main spices produced in the Kochi area
- know where the main crops are grown, processed and exported from
- understand the reasons for the continued success of this production
- identify who is involved and who benefits
- know the main destinations for the spice exports

Learning outcomes:

The pupils will have:

- understanding of the main elements of the spice trade
- awareness of how it influences lives
- knowledge of where it is located in Kochi
- some in-depth understanding of the trade in a single spice - pepper

Before the programme:

- Share the key questions and learning objectives for the lesson
- Introduce key vocabulary:
 - **Ginger, pepper, cinnamon, turmeric, coriander, cardamom, cloves** (all common spices sold through Kochi)
 - **Exports** (goods sold to people in another country)
 - **Container port** (modern form of transporting goods using identical large metal boxes that make easy packing and removal)
- Ask the children to listen carefully for any references to the spice trade

Programme support:

The tropical monsoon climate and fertile soils of the coastal plain favour spice farming in Kerala. Of the huge variety of plants in the natural forest ecosystem produced by such conditions, there are many that have leaves, fruit, bark and roots with distinctive aromas and flavours. A proportion of these provides wonderful tastes to foods and has been known to people in this part of the world for thousands of years. There are ancient records indicating that King Solomon valued spices from the area. There are also links with the Ancient Greek empire that can be found in the writings of their

time too. The Greeks evidently had a taste for spices in their cooking and the Greek historian, Heroditus, refers to the spice trade with Kerala in about 500 BC.

Kochi is a centre for the spice trade in Kerala. Although the spice farms spread across much of the state there is some production as close as Vypin Island where spice production occurs in small farms. The farmers themselves carry out the first stages in production, for example, cinnamon bark is stripped from trees and dried, packed and then sold via an agent before being sent to a factory for sorting and any further processing. In all likelihood the factory could be in Mattancherry, which is Kochi's ancient spice centre. After processing it may be stored in a warehouse in huge quantities. There are several routes from here via smaller warehouses and shops to the local people but some will be shipped to ports all round the world. The spices sold in your local supermarket and those added to your food in the local Indian restaurant may well have followed this route.

All kinds of people will have been involved in the trade from the farmer onwards. Apart from the agents, there will have been local labourers lifting, carrying, loading etc. Women tend to do the tedious job of sorting and grading. Other dealers ensure that goods are sold and then shippers carry the goods before another whole chain of people handle the spices in the receiving country before we finally consume them. Those at the beginning of the chain tend to receive very small amounts of money for their work and they often tend to suffer most if world prices fall.

Who makes the real money in the spice trade?

Indian spice farmer	1%
Indian agent	2%
Indian trader	4%
Indian exporter	7%
Shipper	40%
UK importer	10%
UK wholesaler	10%
Supermarket in the UK	26%

Ajay begins his investigation into spices at a local Keralan restaurant. Keralan food is famed not just for being spicy but for being 'hot'. Then Ajay heads to the Spices Board where Dr S S Thampi boldly attempts to name all the many spices from memory – and finds it's quite a challenge! A catalogue of spices provided by the Board can be found at this link: <http://www.indianspices.com/html/s0620cge.htm> (the BBC is not responsible for the content of external sites).

On a small spice farm just outside the city limit Ajay finds out about cultivating pepper vines and other spices. It is typical for many houses to grow a selection of spices in the garden, both for domestic use and for trade.

In Mattancherry Ajay witnesses spice processing in operation in Bazaar Road before meeting one of the main pepper exporters in the city. Pepper is exported all around the world from Mattancherry. Often high grade Indian pepper is blended with other grades of pepper from the other pepper producing countries. Then it may end up on your dining table.

Poem: *In the Old Spice Stall*

Turmeric and ginger, nutmeg, cinnamon
Tamarind and chilli, kokum cardamom.

In the old spice stall at the corner of the road
Checking all his spice jars, row after row,
The old man is standing, whispering his wares
The sweet and pungent smells hang in the air.

Turmeric and ginger, nutmeg, cinnamon
Tamarind and chilli, kokum cardamom.

A palette of bright colours, an artist's treat -
Spices red and yellow sizzling in the heat.
Dark brown, black, pale green and white,
A rainbow feast in the morning light!

Turmeric and ginger, nutmeg, cinnamon
Tamarind and chilli, kokum cardamom.

Eyes and nose tickled, recalling each strong taste,
The old man works slowly, no hint of haste,
In the old spice stall at the corner of the road
Checking all his spice jars, row after row.

Turmeric and ginger, nutmeg, cinnamon
Tamarind and chilli, kokum cardamom.

Ivan Jones

Activities:

Pause the programme when invited to do so to undertake the suggested activities, which include:

- Discuss spices. What actually is a spice? How many can the group name? Which are the most common? Which are the most popular. NB. There is a spice called 'Curry leaf' but 'curry' itself is a generic term for any cooking which is rich in spices.
- Working in pairs, draw a diagram to show each link of the spice production chain from initial small farm producer right through to consumer.

After the programme:

- This is clearly a chance to introduce the children to some of the many interesting spices we now have in abundance from such places as Kochi. Smelling games beckon! The pupils could also follow this up by researching a particular spice via the Internet. Provide them with a thread of enquiry questions to avoid the downloading of lots of undigested text and photographs.
- Ask the pupils to revisit the mind map or spider diagram that they drew before Programme 1. What can they now add? Ask them to redraw the mind map and to self evaluate their learning.