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Natural Rubber Sector in India : Evolving Trends

Shri S.M Desalphine

Chairman, Rubber Board, Kottayam, Kerala - 686 002

E.M : chairman@rubberboard.org.in

Natural Rubber (NR) cultivation was initiated in the country on a commercial scale in the year 1902. During the first century of its existence in the country, the sector has grown substantially, particularly in the second half with the establishment of the Rubber Board under the Rubber Act, 1947. The total production, which was around 15000 tonnes in 1950-51 has increased to over 6,50,000 tonnes in the year 2002-03. The yield per hectare, which was less than 300 kg during the early 1950s has grown up to nearly 1600 kg at present, which is the highest among the various rubber producing countries. Although initially the sector was dominated by estates, started by the British, it has become largely a smallholder crop with 88% of the area and production being accounted for by small holders.

There are nearly one million producers with an average holding size of less than 0.5 ha. The growth of the sector has been encouraged by the presence of a large manufacturing sector in the country, which consumes almost the entire quantity of NR produced here. This captive consumption along with the existence of a reasonably remunerative price provided the necessary impetus for the growth of the sector. Moreover, the rubber smallholders in the country are generally highly enterprising and innovative, whose contribution to the growth of the sector is very important. With the establishment of the Board, R&D and extension activities required for the growth of the sector were strengthened and the development of the high yielding varieties, appropriate cultural practices including efficient exploitation systems, which were transferred to the farmers' field through a well organized extension network have also contributed to the predominant position of the rubber production sector. Today, India is the third largest producer and the fourth largest consumer of NR.

However, further R&D and extension programmes are required to strengthen the sector further, particularly in view of the challenges from globalization. In spite of the highest productivity, our cost of production is very high mainly on account of the fact that the agroclimatic conditions prevailing in the country are less conducive to rubber cultivation compared to those prevailing in other major producing countries such as Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia. Therefore, one of the challenges ahead is to reduce the cost of production through further productivity enhancement. This is a difficult task considering the fact that the productivity is already high. Fortunately, the new high yielding varieties developed recently by the Rubber Research Institute of India (RRII) coupled with improved cultural practices and efficient exploitation systems, may help us to increase the productivity further and reduce cost of production.

Another salient feature of the production sector is the predominance of the sheet rubber, which accounts for about 70% of the total production. The preferred form of raw natural rubber world over is technically specified block rubber (TSR), whose production in the country at present is only 12%. Moreover, because of the use of field coagulum grades as raw materials, the quality of TSR needs further improvement through modernization of the crop collection and handling systems and processing operations including upgradation of the machinery / equipment. These efforts are aimed at improving the quality of rubber and to make it capable of competing effectively in the global market.

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S.K. Dey, D.B. Nair, A.S. Devakumar, R. Rajagopal

M.B. Mohammed Sathik, K.R. Vijayakumar and M.R. Selvaraj

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