

Participatory Approaches in Rubber Development Programmes - A Review

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In India, organised cultivation of rubber started in 1902 on a commercial scale by European planters and the plantation industry in the country is more than a century old. Though the cultivation of this tree crop was confined to the estate sector in the early stages, it came out of the bounds of estates into small holdings and at present 87% of the area and production are in small holdings with an average holding size of less than 0.5 ha.

India was exporting almost the entire quantity of rubber produced in the country up to 1950 and thereafter when planned development started it not only started consuming the entire rubber produced in the country but also achieved the status of a net importer till late 90's, except for brief periods when supply outstripped demand. The importance of production of Natural Rubber (NR), a strategic raw material which finds use in about 35,000 products and is forming the basic raw material for an industry with a turnover of more than Rs.15,000 crores, is that of import substitution. This is particularly important with the demand-supply gap projected to widen in the coming years.

The crop has significant socio economic relevance as about a million growers are involved in the production of this raw material

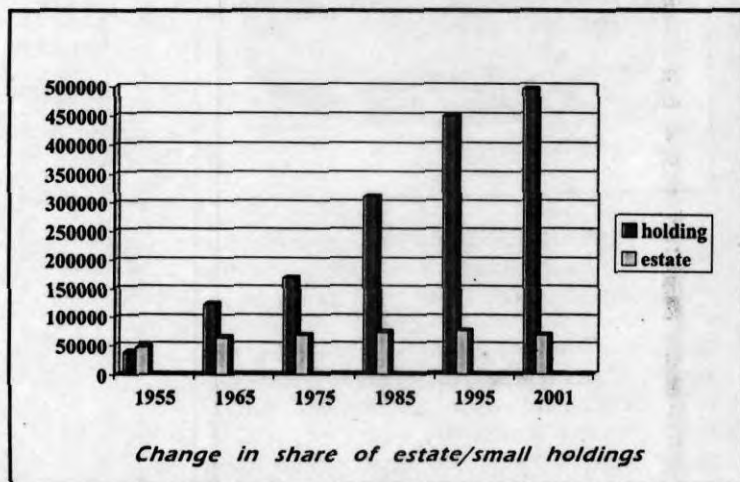
in India, besides providing about 350,000 jobs in the plantation sector and almost equal number in the industrial sector. The tree has all the attributes of a forest tree and considered as an excellent crop for eco-restoration by



Degraded lands in the North East India converted as rubber plantations

providing a luxuriant tree cover.

It also provides scope for ancillary activities such as api-culture, extraction of oil from rubber seeds and last but not the least the yielding timber which after processing is of matching quality with any other commercial wood. The fact that it has found great acceptance by the indigenous people

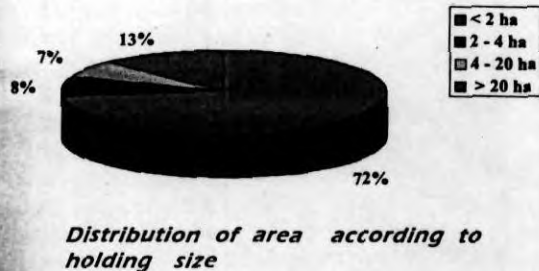


A tribal grower in her own plantation in Tripura

(tribals) in the rehabilitation programmes strengthens its socio economic credentials.

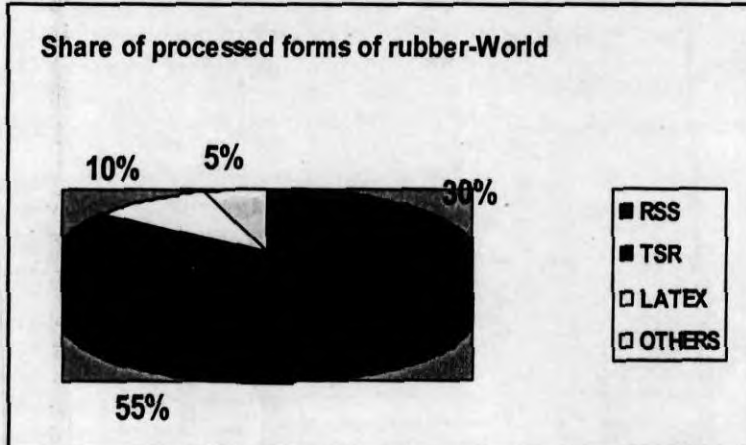
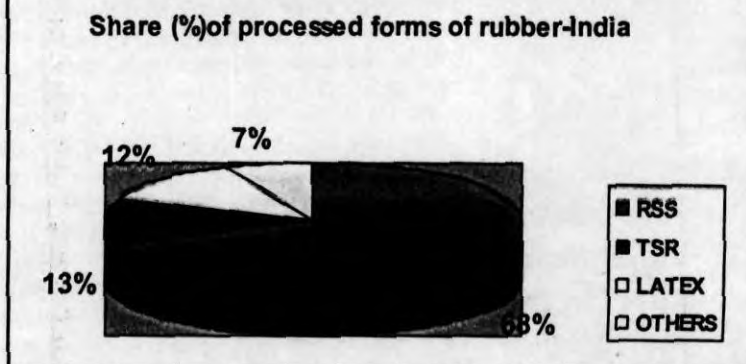
The preponderance of small and marginal holdings poses challenges to rubber development in the country which has a spectacular track record. The spectacular growth achieved in the rubber plantation sector has been as a result of the institutional support extended by the Rubber Board. Setting up of an exclusive institute for research on rubber and establishing an efficient extension network to provide service to growers at door step and providing the farming community with the facility of a single window service to meet their

1990s and also with the removal of Quantitative Restrictions with effect from 1st April 2001 the Indian rubber market has been opened up necessitating it to compete in the international market. The sector has to equip itself to withstand the impact of the changes which warrants attaining competitiveness in cost and quality. The sector being dominated with small and marginal farmers achieving this is an uphill task. In spite of very good achievement in productivity there is still scope for bridging the yield gap of around 30 -



requirements have gone a long way in contributing to the over all development. Extension and development strategies have been reoriented on a need based manner. While the initial task in 1950's was to replant unselected seedling plantations when the average yield was less than 300 kg per hectare, subsequent efforts were to change from seedling to bud grafted planting materials and then to polybag plants, besides promotion of planting of new clones including RR11 105, etc. Focus shifted to rapid expansion of area in the late 1970's/ early 1980's through supporting new planting under an integrated scheme namely Rubber Plantation Development Scheme. The scheme in it's objectives, approach and implementation modalities has been time tested and withstood the changes in extension and development approaches for more than two and a half decades and still undoubtedly is the best development programme in the agriculture sector in the country. During 1990's primary processing and marketing also has been focused with a view to enabling the small holding sector to keep pace with changes in processing standards and marketing.

The rubber sector in the country had been enjoying the benefit of several protectionist measures adopted by the Government and the price realized by the Indian rubber farmers had been significantly higher than their counter parts up to early 1990s. As a result of liberalization policies pursued by the Govt. of India from early



40%. The most important task the extension machinery has to address is bringing in a shift in the pattern of processing to be in tune with the international pattern. As the sector is dominated by small and marginal farmers a shift from tree centered extension to grower centered extension is warranted to ensure sustainable rubber development in the country.

The Board's extension delivery has been mostly on an inter personal basis up to 1980's. However, group meetings and seminars used to be conducted regularly as a result of which the reach could be spread further. The Board promoted Rubber Marketing Cooperative Societies in 1960's in a bid to promote group approach and to free

2160

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growers from middlemen. Though the cooperatives were emerging as an alternate marketing channel it could not function effectively as a grassroots level organization. To foster a truly participatory approach the Board promoted the formation of Rubber Producers Societies (RPS) in 1985.

RUBBER PRODUCERS' SOCIETIES (RPS)

RPS is voluntary associations of small growers, self help groups of rubber growers, registered under the Charitable Societies Act and it is envisaged to function as a non profit making institution imparting technical and scientific know how to the members for the general improvement of the area and in particular for the economic and social welfare of the small growers of rubber.

Structure of the RPS

Initially 7 small holders only are required to register an RPS and an entrance fee of Rs.50/- and an annual subscription fee of Rs.10/- has to be paid by the grower. The Board would accord approval to the RPS after an on the spot inspection by the Board's Field Officer. Generally Field Officer of the Board takes the initiatives in identifying the promoters and also assisting in formation of the RPS. Membership is open to rubber small growers owning less than 5 ha of rubber plantation and who agree to market the rubber latex and scrap produced in holdings situated in the area through the society. Funds of the Society shall be raised through admission fee, annual subscription, donation, loans and advance from members and non-members, subsidies and loans from other financial institutions including banks, co-operative societies, Rubber Board, Government etc. The ultimate authority of the Society vests in a general body. General body is expected to be held in a rubber holding of one of the members. The management of the society vests in the executive committee constituted of the President and 6 persons elected from the general body from its members and the Rubber Board will have the right to nominate one of its officers to the Committee and generally the Field Officer of the Rubber Board is nominated. The executive committee elects a Vice President and the services of the President and Vice President are gratuitous and the society is not authorised to appoint any person except a Latex Collection Agent, who can be given a commission.

Review of RPS activities

These RPS numbering about 2160 now have

made a significant impact in the modernisation process of the rubber holding sector. Besides community processing and marketing, it also distributes about 30-40 plantations requisites to the small growers at reasonable prices and also ensure adoption of critical agricultural operations. RPS also undertake agricultural operations such as prophylactic spraying and micron spraying for control of diseases, besides involvement of RPS in the generation of high yielding planting materials and helping in collection of statistics. A beginning also has been made where RPS have taken up the role of a service provider.

Rubber Processing and marketing involves high technology and investment. The RPS by themselves could not ensure such infrastructure development. To overcome this, Private Limited Companies as joint ventures of Rubber Producers' Societies and Rubber Board were formed during late 80s and early 90s aimed at setting up processing factories and taking up trading of latex, sheet rubber, field coagulum and agro inputs. The company with 98 % shares (49 share) contributed by RPSs and 2% shares (1 share) by the Board form regional level apex bodies of Rubber Producers Societies.

The sector needs far more support. Due to the increase in the number, the societies could not be supported by Rubber Board's Extension Officers to the extent it should have. Moreover, motivation among the officers themselves for the need for forming and supporting such organisations has not been very high. More importantly, awareness among the growers about the need for this set up also was found wanting pointing to the necessity of intervention

Assessment of the performance of the RPSs

In a study conducted in 29 villages in a predominant rubber growing tract by the Board it was observed that 33.14% of the growers are members of the RPS and on an average there are 3 RPS per village. 27% of the growers in the study reported that they have been getting technical information from the RPS. On an evaluation of the general performance of the RPS it was however noticed that only 30% of them are functioning satisfactorily. Extension strategy envisaged by the Board is devolution of extension functions by involving the RPS in extension and development activities of the Board in a phased manner. Therefore it is imperative that this grass roots level institution works more effectively.

An assessment of the performance of the RPS carried out jointly by the Indian Institute of Plantation Management and the Rubber Production Department of the Rubber Board with a view to identifying factors hampering the performance of the RPS, revealed that the RPS need more technical back up and programme for human resource development. For effective functioning, the study pointed out the need for increasing competence of the Board of Directors (BOD). Though many of them possess technical skill to manage their own plantations, the skill on managerial and human resource dimension was very limited. Factors bearing on the performance of the Board of Directors were identified as follows:

- Personal capacity building (skill in public speaking, community issues, interagency co-ordination).
- Popular participation and co-operation (ability co-operate well with members).
- Commitment for innovativeness, skill related to fund raising, grass root development process.
- Attention and skill in politics, selected issues and fund mobilisation.
- Knowledge on technical and organisational aspects.
- Level of education.
- Professional contacts in mobilising funds.

While analyzing the motivation for the smallholders becoming members of RPS, 47.8 percent of the members took membership with a view to gaining knowledge on production, whereas 36.7 percent became members for ready access to details of subsidies, schemes of Rubber Board etc. It has also been revealed that members of the RPS established better rapport with the extension officers of the Rubber Board in the field. Eighty percent of the respondents in good RPS contacted Field Officers for technical information, whereas only 60 percent of the respondents of the poor RPS reached extension officers. Further, 50% of the members of the poor RPS relied on private merchants for marketing, whereas only 18 percent of the members of good RPS approached private merchants for marketing their produce.

One of the striking results of the study has

been with regard to the impact of RPS to increase in production, improve quality of life and attention to general issues related to rubber sub sector. 70 percent of the members of good RPS achieved high production, whereas only 26.3 percent of the members in poor RPS could gain high productivity. About 56.7 percent of the members of the good RPS felt that the quality of life improved after becoming a member of the RPS, whereas only 10 percent of the members in poor RPS felt that their quality of life was improved. More than 80 percent of the members in the good RPS felt that the attention they paid to rubber related issues at village level had increased substantially, whereas this was only 15 percent for the poor RPS. Three factors were observed to be influencing members readiness in participation in RPS activities. The major factor was the ability of RPS in providing technical information on rubber production. A second factor was the felt need of the members to support RPS so that they exist and the third was for getting direct benefit; the weightage for the above three features were 46%, 35% & 28% respectively.

A member of the RPS is made the Collection Agent, and assigned with the job of attending to the day to day marketing operations and he/she provides a vital link in the RPS. Analysing the views of the Collection Agents, the study revealed that even in the good RPS selected, 67% of the Collection Agents were not satisfied with the job and the figure was 100% for the poorly managed RPS. The Collection Agents felt that better infrastructure for processing and marketing, if provided can sustain the RPSs. In poor RPS the Collection Agent had only a monthly income of Rs. 100 to 500, whereas in the good RPSs, the income level was more than Rs. 1,000/- per month. In some good RPS collection agents earn more than Rs. 12,000/- per month in peak seasons.

An analysis of the data on the perception of Field Officers indicated that they needed more training in the managerial aspects of grass roots institutional building and management, conflict management, morale and self confidence building and community development. Hitherto the thrust has been merely on the technical aspects of rubber production and a change is felt needed.

A profile of non-members of the RPSs from the service area of the RPS also was collected. 47% of the non-members selected at random had income between Rs 5,000 and 10,000.

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The reasons given for the farmers not taking membership in the RPSs include:

- Lack of awareness about the functions and benefits of RPS.
- RPSs not involved in rubber sheet trading.
- Advance payment is available from private dealers, whereas RPSs cannot provide advance payment.
- Delayed payment through RPS.
- Ineffectiveness of the BOD.

In yet another impact assessment study conducted by the MANAGE, role of RPS was observed to be significant in the development process. However, the study pointed out that participation of resource poor farmers in the various services provided by the RPSs was very little. One of the reasons identified by them contributing to poor performance of a good number of RPSs is lack of regular activities generating income such as processing or trading of latex. Lack of motivation among office bearers, predominance of poor rubber growers, nearness to urban areas resulting in farmer's preference in sale of rubber to dealers directly etc. contributed to retarding the growth of RPSs.

On an average, only 20% to 25% of the small growers are members of the RPSs. In yet another study conducted by the CMD (Centre for Management Development), Thiruvananthapuram the reasons for poor

- 50% of the sample responded that it is not worthwhile to take membership in the RPS.
- 21.25% mentioned that they are not aware of the RPS.
- 16.25% did not take membership as no RPS is functioning in their vicinity.
- 7.5% responded that existing RPS are not functioning effectively.
- Lack of fund was projected by 5% of the members.
- Only around 20% of the total small holders is estimated to be members of RPS.

membership has been summarised as follows:

The same study reveals that 4.86% of the total rubber produced only was channelised through RPS and 3.85% through cooperatives.

However, the RPS had a profound influence in ensuring adoption of technology. Of the samples studied by them, 46.92% adopted discriminatory fertilizer recommendation whereas the level was only 8% for non-members.

RPS as centre for technology transfer and training

To accelerate the process of empowering of RPSs and ensuring of devolution of extension functions to RPSs a selected few RPS were supported for gearing themselves up for technology transfer and processing of quality sheets. There were also supported to engage extension agents and tapping assistants to intensify extension activities. Of late a few RPS were supported to initiate computerisation. Apart from this, the Board facilitated formation of private limited companies adopting the concept of agri-business consortium. 35 Model RPSs functioning as centres for transfer of technology are proving to be very effective not



A model Rubber Producers Society with processing facilities.

only in processing highest quality sheets but also in imparting training on various technical topics as well as on group management and leadership to other RPS. Significant role has been played by the model RPSs in the revitalisation of poor / defunct RPS in the respective region. RPS with processing facilities have helped to process quality RSS in an ecofriendly manner (effluent from the processing plant is used for biogas generation which in turn is used for drying sheets) to meet international standards but also with the maneuverability of shifting from one form of

rubber to another, thus aids in a risk distribution. About 200 RPS are now provided with such facilities.

Farmer resource persons

In addition to the above efforts directed towards a farmer participatory extension system, the Board has already started using farmer resource persons in the campaigns and training programmes. These farmer resource persons are selected from among experienced farmers and they are first trained and later their services are utilised for training programmes of the Board.

Women and tribal development

Under the World Bank Project which was concluded during September 2000 emphasis was given on women and tribal development. Women self-help groups were formed and assistance was provided for income generation activities, hygiene and sanitation etc. and these groups were linked to RPSs. Women were supported for establishing handicrafts units and bio-gas plants which ensures environment-friendly processing of rubber, in Kerala as well as in Tripura.

Rubber has been found to be a very successful crop in the rehabilitation of tribal shifting cultivators and for such programmes a holistic integrated approach is adopted aiming at overall development with rubber as one of the major component. About 10,000 such families have been benefited mostly in the NE region and the success of this project is ensured through community participation and motivation of extension machinery.

Human Resource Development

As a part of upgradation of the extension skills, the extension officers are trained on extension and communication methodologies, farmer participatory extension management etc. in IARI, MANAGE, and Indian Institute of Plantation Management. Collaboration with Michigan State University also has helped in adoption of Participatory Extension Management in a most effective manner.

Linkage with other institutions

Board's extension machinery has been

utilizing the services of NGOs wherever possible. The tribal development programme in Tripura was implemented through NGOs under the overall supervision of the Board and the Govt. of Tripura. In women development programme in Kerala, NGOs as well as RPS were involved. In addition to the above under the People's Planning Programme local panchayats are also being involved through the RPS for creating infrastructure for processing and marketing in the small holding sector in Kerala. Similarly, Govt. of Tripura, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka also are supporting rubber based rural development programmes.

In a bid to impart the required skills to the farmers and involve them in the development process, growers have been provided with a variety of training and exposure visits. Regular programmes for growers from non traditional region to Kerala are being arranged and about 100 - 150 growers, mostly from North East visit Kerala and this is sponsored by the Rubber Board. Training of growers / growers' representatives is organized at various National Institutes besides Board's own Training Institute at Kottayam on topics such as capacity building, conflict management, etc. An exclusive diploma course on Natural Rubber Production was arranged in Kerala Agricultural University for 34 tribal students from Tripura. 77 growers were provided overseas training in major rubber producing countries. To encourage RPS participation an award for the best Rubber Producers Society with a prize money of Rs.2,00,000 has been instituted besides an award for the best small grower with a prize money of Rs.1,00,000/-.

To implement the participatory approach in a more intensive manner a campaign has been launched by the Board to form Self Help Groups of growers and to link the existing self help groups to the RPS with a focus on women. It is aimed at not only ensuring an effective and informed participation but also for encouraging appropriate investment and providing services to the growers at the grass roots level. As the socio economic profile of the small growers in Kerala, the traditional region, is fast changing, appropriate systems have to be evolved and put in place to meet the emerging needs of the growing community. Reaching out to the small and marginal resource poor farmers and bringing them under the RPS in truly participatory manner is also a thrust and this can be achieved only through such self help groups.

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