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# Tripura on the threshold of rubber revolution

Tripura, traditionally a tribal State, is on the path of rubber revolution

**T**ripura is on the threshold of a rubber revolution and it may bring prosperity to this traditionally tribal state. It will also give permanent employment and regular income to the poor people giving them an economic status. With the abundant resource of gas and the vital raw material, rubber, available in the state, an industrial revolution may not be far off.

Tripura is not an ideal place for rubber cultivation where the conditions are far from normal due to various reasons. The poor tribal people have nothing to invest and they are least interested in the cultivation of rubber. But the determined efforts of the Rubber Board and the Tripura Government made it possible to introduce rubber plantation in the state. As a result of the combined efforts of both the Rubber Board and the Tripura Government, about 18250 hectares is under rubber cultivation and 20000 tribals are employed in it. There is a plan to invest Rs. 40 crores

during 1994-98 in the plantation industry and most of it will be in the tribal sector.

Over the years, Tripura has undergone many social and political changes. Though there are 19 listed scheduled tribes, the tribal population has shrunk to about 30 per cent. The demographic profile has taken a serious turn with the exodus of refugees from the erstwhile East Pakistan during the partition and wars. The population explosion coupled with inherent infirmities of communication have been creating many serious problems for the authorities.

## Shifting cultivation

The state has been facing problems

on the economic and ecological fronts too. The tribals are nomads and never wanted to settle for cultivation and preferred shifting cultivation. This attitude did not do any serious damage to ecology when the tribal population was sparse in the state where land and natural resources are abundant. But the population explosion reversed the trend and put more pressure on the land and other resources.

The shifting cultivation has been progressing, on an average, at the rate of 25000 hectares per year in the state with a land area of one million hectares. This trend can do irreversible damage to forest resources. Alarmed by this, the state government tried to implement various schemes for settling the

tribals but these did not prove very effective. Most of the schemes offered were land-based and the land allotted was barren and fallow causing not only ecological damage but also making the tribals poorer. The assistance from the government was meagre, irregular and became less and less in course of time.

It is in this background Rubber Board officials visited a sleepy village,



Rubber Board officers in a Tripura rubber plantation : Looking for expansion

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Laxmandepha, 50 km from Agartala, capital of Tripura, with the intention of introducing rubber plantation in the state. In the village there were about 60 families belonging to the tribe 'Halam' and sub sect 'Marshum'. The total number of 'Marshum' sub tribe, which is on the verge of extinction, may not be more than 4000. This tribe was one of the groups, which received some assistance from the government and now left with nothing but resorting to shifting cultivation.

### Barren land

When Rubber Board officials visited them in November 1991, they

officers to suggest rubber plantation though they very well knew that the tribals had nothing to invest and they were against this sort of permanent cultivation.

### Financial help

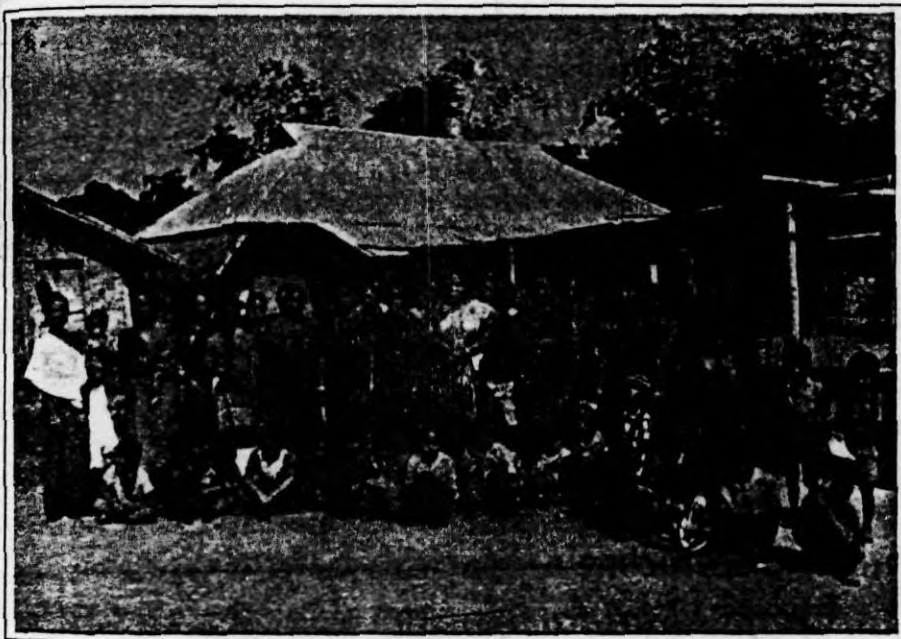
Financial assistance from the Government was necessary for implementing the rubber plantation scheme. A resourceful department is there in Tripura for the development of tribal 'Jhumias'. The head of the department admitted flaws in the implementation of various schemes and readily accepted the suggestion for the need to have a long term project for the settle-

ment. It was very difficult to change the lethargic attitude of men who were contended with smoking hookas and drinking 'Raksu'. But the Board won their confidence and trust by the inclusion of non-rubber components and income generating activities such as health coverage, nutrition programme and help at the most crucial moment. These factors are generally ignored in most of the government sponsored activities in our country and that is why they are ineffective. The Board helped to amortise the loan of a teen-aged widow, provided continuous help to a new born child, whose mother died immediately after the delivery, etc. All these gestures did cost much but it created good response and goodwill among the people. The project is considered one of the best examples of implementing tribal development schemes and many visited the area to have a first hand knowledge. The visitors included World Bank Officials, Ministers, Members of the Planning Commission from Delhi and all were impressed by the project.

### Economic status

The rubber plantation has provided permanent employment and regular income to the tribals giving them an economic status. It has also ensured the recuperation of an area which has almost been damaged beyond recovery.

On an average, one family is having 1.5 hectares and the plantations being raised with high yielding clones can generate a gross income of Rs 75,000 a year at the present cost of rubber. This will definitely transfer the sleepy village of Laxmandepha into big business township in the years to come. There is no doubt that the future of Tripura is bright as these people are working in an organised manner under the expert guidance of an agency dedicated to the uplift of the poor making them self-supporting. Tripura has abundance of gas and the vital raw material rubber is available at its doorstep. With this, Tripura is on the path of an industrial revolution and it may not be a distant reality. □



*Marshum tribals : Waiting for opportunities*

were in bad shape and struggling to have one square meal a day. There were reports of starvation deaths though the state government denied it. The first thing that struck the officers was the stretches of barren land. Though the Marshums were huddled in bamboo huts with the men engaged in smoking hookas, they had a vast expanse of 'tilla' land in front of them lying practically barren. Each of them had around 1.5 hectares on an average. The only purpose of this land was to hunt for wild yam and tubers and for the grazing of some cattle from the neighbouring villages. Sight of the barren land prompted the Rubber Board

ment of the tribals. The tribals needed financial, social and cultural support. The Rubber Board took these points into consideration. A joint project was evolved by the Board and the Tripura Government adopting an integrated approach with the rubber as the major component aimed at the economic settlement of the tribals.

Another serious problem faced by the Rubber Board was how to tackle the tribal people who are totally casual towards life and not amenable to the discipline demanded by the Board. Notwithstanding some skirmishes, the project took off amidst the fear of insurgent groups appearing at any