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Shortage of skilled tappers hits smallholdings

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Tapping in a scientific way

RUBBER tapping is a skilled job. A properly trained person can cut open the latex vessels within the bark situated very close to the cambium, without wounding the cambium and guide the latex drip down the sloppy tapping cut to the collection cup.

Currently there is an acute shortage of skilled rubber tappers in the country. Many plantations of small growers in Kerala, the largest natural rubber producing State, are newly opened for tapping by unskilled workers in the absence of skilled tappers. The smallholdings account for 85 per cent of the total rubber area in the country.

But large estates are generally immune from this predicament. They have a system of keeping their workers trained in tapping. Estates replant old rubber areas in a phased manner. As the old trees earmarked for replanting are cut down, tappers move on to fresh bearing areas in the estate. Skilled tappers have to train youngsters in the tapping job. Women workers have turned out to be good tappers. This practice ensures availability of sufficient skilled tappers for the large plantations.

Better standard

But the story is different in smallholdings. Small farmers owning rubber area of half a hectare and below generally tap the trees themselves or get the tapping done with hired labour at a piece rate. Standard of tapping where the owner himself taps the trees is better, though majority of them have not undergone any prescribed course of training in scientific tapping. If these small owners get training in scientific tapping, they would turn out to be experts. Village level organisations of the small growers, the Rubber Producers' Societies, can perhaps organise training camps for them in scientific tapping, enlisting help of the experts from the Rubber Board.

Smallholdings of two hectares and above are able to engage full-time tappers as there would be at least two tapping blocks for alternate daily tapping. Such holdings generally get the service of good tappers. But holdings of less than two hectares are not capable of engaging tappers permanently. Their number comes to 8,63,000 out of the total 8,85,000 small rubber holdings in India. Most often the engagement is for piece rated tapping. The rate varies from 20 to 25 ps. per tree a day. Though this is not a notified rate, it prevails all through the country side.

Better extraction

The tapping task in our plantations is 250 to 300 trees a day and the daily wage of a tapper at piece rate would range from Rs. 50 to Rs. 75. If he is able to tap more trees, he may get a better wage. But the tapping has to be completed before 7 a.m. Early morning tapping results in

better crop extraction. The turgour pressure in the tree brought about by the absence of transpiration loss of water at night keeps the latex vessels filled and pressurised in the early morning. On cutting open the vessels latex flows out spontaneously. But as the sun rises water loss from the tree through transpiration takes place, the turgour pressure eases and the latex flow slows down.

Tapping by unskilled workers generally affects the health of the rubber trees. There is high consumption of bark and damage to the cambium apart from failure to extract optimum latex from the tree. In the attempt to cut open latex vessels situated close to the cambium to extract maximum crop, the unskilled tapper wounds the cambium. The wound would cause malformation of the tissues and small woody burrs would emerge on the cambium. Normally bark regeneration would take place in 8 to 10 years time in a tree where the tapping is good. The renewed bark will function as good as the virgin bark. But bark regeneration on damaged tapping panel would take long years.

Indiscriminate tapping

This is the case of deep and indiscriminate tapping where the tapper tries to cut as much latex vessels as possible. There is also the case of shallow tapping where the tapper, afraid of wounding the cambium, fails to cut maximum number of latex vessels. Consequently the latex flow would be low. In this case the tree is not damaged, but as majority of the latex vessels remain uncut, the crop taken out is low.

At an average of one tapper for two hectares, the industry should have additional 10,000 skilled tappers every year. But there is no arrangement in the country to train so much persons annually. In the absence of skilled tappers the job is done by the unskilled. Many plantations have to content themselves either with low crop or face the prospect of damaged trees in the absence of sufficient skilled tappers. Standard of tapping has also its role in improving production of rubber.

Crop loss due to defective tapping is roughly estimated at 5 to 7 per cent of the annual output in our country. If 6 per cent is reckoned as the average, India has already failed to recover more than 30,000 tonnes of NR during 1995-96 on a production of 5,06,910 tonnes. The country is estimated to produce 5,47,000 tonnes of NR during 1996-97 when the possible loss due to defective tapping may come to 32,000 tonnes.

The Rubber Board has started a new training programme in tapping with the active participation of the Rubber Producers' Societies. The target is to train 5400 people per year. This is inadequate. The number should get doubled. Refresher courses of shorter duration for the tappers now working in plantations have also to be arranged to help improve their tapping skill and ability to extract optimum crop. ❐