PLANTATION WORKERS IN INDIA

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

Edited by

AMIT BHOWMICK

Contributors include

AMIT BHOWMICK
BIKASH NATH
ENAMUL KABIR PASA
J. ANTONY RAJAM
J. MARIA PREMA
JEYA SUDHA
KAPIL KUMAR JOSHI
LALIT TIRKEY
M.B DEKA
M.D DAS
NABARUN PURKAYASTHA
NAYANMONI SAIKIA
PALASH CHANDRA MODAK
PARESH BORAH
POMPI SAIKIA
PRATIMA CHAMLING RAI
PURNENDU KUMAR
RASHMI REKHA KALITA
RUPEN LAMA
SANGITA YADAV
SNEHA DAS
SOMA DATTA
SONARAM KALITA
SOUMYAJIT HALDER
SUPAM BISWAS
TAHITI SARKAR
VINAY SHARMA

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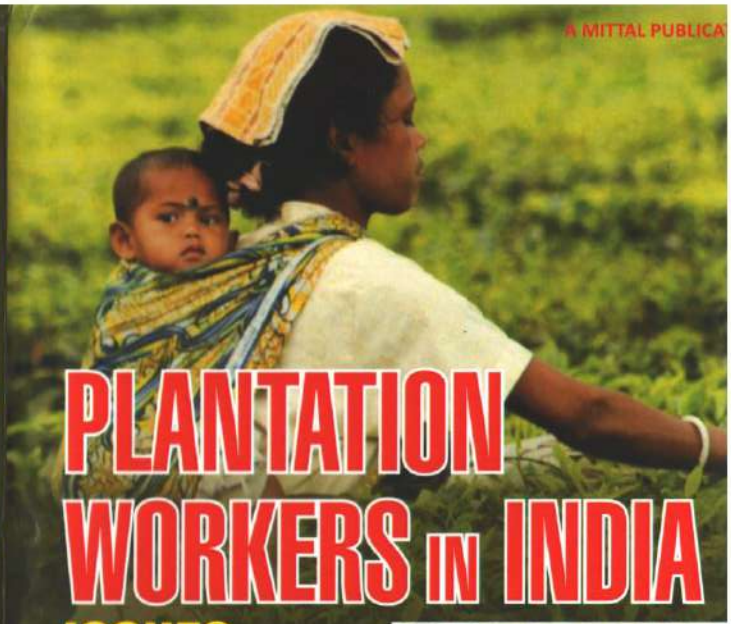

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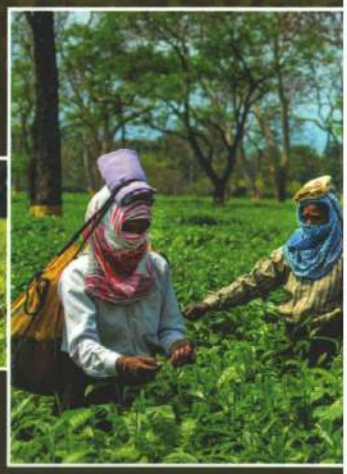

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ISSUES AND CHALLENGES OF RUBBER PLANTERS IN KANYAKUMARI DISTRICT

A. JEYA SUDHA

Introduction

Rubber (Hevea brasiliensis), a native tree species of Amazon forests, has been successfully introduced as a cash crop in many developing countries, especially in Southeast Asia to produce natural rubber (Nath et al., 2010). China will help the growth of the global natural rubber industry. One of the prominent plantation crops of our country is rubber and has considerable significance to the Indian economy. India is the fourth largest producer as well as consumer of natural rubber and the trend analysis of production shows that there has been an increase in the area and production of rubber during the years between 1996-2010. In India, the hinterland southwest coastal region is recognized as 'traditional rubber belt'. Rubber is a Brazil native crop introduced in India by the British; however cultivation in commercial scale were initiated as early as 1873. In 1895 the first rubber plantations were set up on the hill slopes of Kerala. In 1902 the first commercial Hevea plantations were established at Thattekadu, Ernakulum District, Kerala. In India rubber plantations are spread over 5.97 lakh hectares cultivated in 16 states. It has been traditionally confined to Kerala and Kanyakumari District of

rubber plantation in Kanyakumari District is 27407 hectares, which is more compared to food grains- 1242 hectares, oil seeds- 24232 hectares, and fruits and vegetables 957- hectares of land. The district produced 85117200 Kg (approx) and an average yield of 4200 Kg/ha of rubber during the year 2013-2014.

The district has the unique advantage of having rubber plantations in reserved forests in 4280 hectares under the control of Arasu Rubber Corporation. But the public sector's contribution to rubber production and processing is low when we compared it to the small holdings and estates under private sector. This shows the impact of privatization and globalization on rubber plantation in Kanyakumari district. The prospect of getting high income drives the farmers to plant rubber in all kinds of land from the mountain areas to the forest and from the forest area to inland. Anyhow, rubber cultivation has moved towards the areas of other crops and gradually replacing crops like coconut, paddy, banana and tapioca.

Issues on Rubber Plantation in Kanyakumari District

'Rubber Plantations in Kanyakumari are Private Forest' is the biggest issue on rubber plantation in kanyakumari district. Hearing writ petitions filed by Kanyakumari District Planters Association & other plantation owners wherein the common issue raised was the validity of the notification issued by the District Collector, Kanyakumari, declaring the lands owned by the appellants/ petitioners as "Private Forests" under the provisions of the Tamil Nadu Preservation of Private Forests Act, 1949, the division bench comprising S.K Kaul C.J. and Sivagnanam J. dismissed the writ petitions while holding that the District Collector is the competent person to issue a declaration for the purposes of declaring a land as Private Forest. The Court further emphasized that the provision of the 1949 Act should be strictly enforced in Kanyakumari District to preserve the environment and maintain the ecological balance.

The anchor of the arguments made by the appellants was that the lands being patta lands cannot be declared as forests as they are rubber plantations which are man made and are not spontaneous. The appellants represented by T.R. Rajagopal further contended that the district collector was not empowered to notify lands as private forests but should be declared by the committee. While the respondents argued that there were many private estates situated in the midst of forests as patta had been

granted to private individuals inside the forest, which had led to encroachment on the forest land. They further contended that if private rubber plantation, estates and private forests inclusive of estate, are excluded from the purview of the 1949 Act, it may result in uncontrolled commercial exploitation leading to destruction of the entire biodiversity and eco-system of the forest and a setback for the object of the National Forest Policy.

The Court observed that the 1949 Act was enacted to prevent the indiscriminate destruction of private forest and referred to T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad v. Union of India, (1997) 2 SCC 267, wherein it was held that the term 'forest land' will not only include forest as understood in the dictionary sense, but also any area recorded as forest in the Government record irrespective of the ownership and classification. The Court further held that patta lands could not be declared as Forest without any notice to the landowners, as it is clear that the Act would apply to private forests having a contiguous area exceeding two hectares, which may be declared by the Committee to be Forest. Also any kind of intervention with the impugned notifications would result in expansion of plantation areas, which are otherwise Forest and could lead to deforestation. [Kanyakumari District Planters Association v. State of Tamil Nadu, 2016 SCC Online Mad 1548 decided on 10/03/2016]

Challenges of Rubber Planters in Kanyakumari District

1. Traditional Form of Processing: With the liberalized trade policies, the challenge on rubber plantation has been increasing from imports of processed rubber. Small rubber growers in the district market 98 percent of their produce in the traditional form of Ribbed Smoked Sheets (RSS). In the globalised era, in rubber, there is a need for bringing in changes in the pattern of processing.

2. Lack of Manpower: The district which is crowned with the highest literacy level, is growing in service sector at a faster pace. Manpower for top and middle management is fairly sufficient but there is dearth of skilled manpower at the shop floor work or farm. Non- availability of trained and efficient tappers to maintain the lead position in the rubber yield over the world is a threat because inefficient tappers could bring down yield up to 50 percent

3. Intensive Tapping: With the high price for NR in recent times, some growers have put off replanting and have taken advantage of high price by prolonging tapping with frequency.

The standard tapping frequency is twice a week but in the district daily tapping is done nearly in 65 percent of the plantations. It has a negative impact on the economic life span of the trees and augment the shortage of rubber in future.

4. Conflict in Wage Settlements: Improvement in price level is not giving much solace to the plantation sector on account of conflict in wage settlements. In fixing or revising wages, the ability of the plantations to pay the particular wage need to be given due consideration. If not, it is then in the long run, the sector where large numbers of people are depending on will not be able to survive.

5. Limited Scope for Expansion : The scope for expansion of NR in the district is limited. Even though the price for NR is at peak, there is growing pressure to spare the area covering rubber for real estate. It is evident that 63 percentage of the holdings are completely inherited. It shows that there is limited scope for utilizing fresh land for rubber cultivation.

6. Uneconomic Size Holdings: The Planning Commission norm of poverty line in rural areas shows that a farmer having less than 0.64 hectare area would be under poverty. Since the average size of small holdings in the district is 0.45 hectare, the work force has involved in non-farm activities too for generating adequate income and sustaining livelihood. In the district, the small holdings are becoming smaller due to partition and disposal.

7. Incessant Rains: The growers are not able to reap the advantage of rising prices due to the adverse impact on climate. Untimely heavy rains are disrupting tapping operations. In 2009–10 an average 27 tapping days were lapsed by rains in the district because less than 7 percent of the small holdings use rain guards. It is almost like experiencing poverty in the midst of plenty.

8. Poor Resource among Growers: In the district, 70 percent of the growers are small holders. Only 10 percent of them are having their own rollers and not even one percent is having smoke house or store house. Others are deprived of any resource. Due to poor resource, the growers are forced to sell their produce as raw latex without value addition or as ungraded sheets.

9. Attitude of the Growers: A crucial problem in the attitude of the growers towards adoption of conventional manual practices in all stages of cultivation & production processes in spite of the strenuous efforts forwarded by the officials of Rubber Board.

Moreover, the maximum number of trees prescribed per hectare is 500, but the actual practice planting in the district is 750- 1000 trees. The growers fail to understand that when the number of trees increases, the production cost increases but yield decreases.

10. Absentee Owners: In the district, 20 percent of the plantation owners are absentee owners as they have migrated towards urban areas. They have entrusted the hired laborers to decide and execute the decisions on planting, replanting, upkeeping, tapping, processing, storing and disposing. The laborers take advantage of the owners absence weakening the plantations for undue gain in the short run by way of intensive tapping without maintaining the plantation properly.

11. Rubber Producers Societies: In Tamil Nadu, Rubber Producers Societies (RPS) are registered under the Societies Act. Accordingly, the societies have to submit annual audited accounts within a year. Defaulters are not permitted to prolong. But in Kerala, RPS are registered under the 204 Charitable Institutions Act and a nominal amount is imposed as fine for delay in submission of accounts. The net effect is that number of RPS is increasing in Kerala but decreasing in TamilNadu. In Kanyakumari district, only 35 RPS are functioning and nearly 25 RPS have been forced to close down due to rigid formalities. Some relaxation is needed to reap the fruits of organizational structure in rubber plantation which is dominated by small holdings. These weaknesses can be either removed or reduced to some extent by active participation of Rubber Board officials through the networking of Rubber Producers Societies and with the willing co-operation of the growers.

Rubber Plantations Losing Ground in Kanniya kumari after 'Ockhi'

Plantation trees are susceptible to wind damage and rubber is no exception. The fate of Kanniyakumari, the state's only rubber-growing district, which bore the brunt of cyclone Ockhi at the end of November 2017, is uncertain as rubber growers have been left in a quandary. The cyclone damaged several rubber trees that are shallow rooted. Among around 22,000 hectares of rubber plantations owned by private patta holders, mostly in parts of Kalkulam, Vilavancode and Thovalai taluks, one-third was affected by the cyclone and were yet to recover from the loss, according to C Balachandran Nair, secretary, Kanyakumari District Rubber

Farmers Association. Apparently, there was no cooperation from the Forest Department as there were bottlenecks in obtaining permission from the District Forest Committee for replanting. In the year 2012, more than 30,000 hectares of rubber plantations owned by patta holders were notified as Private Forest Land under the Tamil Nadu Preservation of Private Forest Act in the district.

The rubber tree grows to a height of about 30 metres and starts yielding latex after seven years. After this gestation period, the trees are ready to tap. The Rubber Research Institute of India (RRII) developed 'RRII -105', a high-yielding clone used in the plantation. Rubber deals in four different forms and raw material such as 'ribbed smoke sheet', 'estate brown crepe', 'centrifuged latex' and 'skim crepe'. Further, rubber is imported from countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia and Vietnam.

The volume of rubber production touched 8.75 lakh ton in Kerala, which constitutes about 80 per cent of production in India, three years ago, but in the aftermath of the floods that devastated the neighbouring state, its production is projected to fall drastically this fiscal year. About 60 per cent of rubber production caters to the needs of the tyre manufacturing sector. Nearly three years ago, rubber trees fetched considerable income when a kilogram of rubber was marketed at prices ranging from Rs 230 to Rs 240, but it has come down drastically to Rs 110 now. Though the cost of production was high, it fetched fewer prices than its production cost. To motivate small-scale rubber farmers, who owns less than five acres land, subsidy was provided to them in Kerala. However, the Tamil Nadu government extends no such help to lift our spirits, Nair said.

According to G Austin, proprietor of a rubber plantation, rubber trees were the worst hit in cyclone Ockhi, and several plantation sites have been converted to coconut farms, which were not affected much then. Normally, synthetic rubber price would increase whenever petroleum price rose, but it seemingly contradicts that now, Austin said. With around two lakh farmers relying on rubber manufacturing in Kanniyakumari, the sector has been ignored by the government, said M Valsa Kumar, district general secretary, Estate Workers Union, CITU. Most of the plantation workers, who were unorganised, were forced to take up menial jobs. Since the Private Forest Act was implemented in Kanniyakumari in 2010, several parts of rubber plantations have come under the watch of the Forest personnel. Moreover,

the plantation workers were worried as they were exposed to wild animals such as tiger, samba deer, monkey and snake. The rubber sector took a beating as many major sea-ports across the country had been witnessing a considerable volume of rubber imports. Before 2006, the state government announced the setting up of a 'rubber park' in Kanniyakumari, but it still remains a dream as no headway seems to have been made, he said. As far as Arasu Rubber Corporation, which holds around 10,000-acre land in Kanniyakumari, was concerned, rubber produced in the region has less magnesium and volatile fatty acid (VFA) content and contributes primarily to the production of surgical gloves, which were exported largely to Germany. A rubber tree could yield up to a period of 28 years, sources said. Kanniyakumari Collector Prashant M Wadnere told DT Next that assistance was extended to all banana and clove growers, who suffered damages in the wake of cyclone Ockhi, under the state government's 'special livelihood rehabilitation package'. Such assistance was not provided to rubber growers as many of them had not been willing to take up replantation.

According to a senior official, rubber was the most affected crop among all horticultural crops. Under the National Mission for Sustainable Agriculture (NMSA) - Rainfed Area Development (RAD), funds of Rs 352 lakh were sanctioned for replanting rubber. Besides, Rs 822.4 lakh was sanctioned under the National Horticulture Mission for bee keeping to support affected rubber farmers. State Disaster Relief Fund input assistance of Rs 18,000 per hectare was disbursed to 12,692 affected rubber farmers. Under the replanting programme, Rs 25,000 per hectare was provided as back-end subsidy, he said.

Conclusion

Since Kanayakumari district in Tamil Nadu is the traditional area of rubber cultivation accounting for more than 98 percent of the rubber production in the State, it has to face the challenges of globalization in a pragmatic way. The Rubber Board has to move towards empowering the small holders with modern knowledge, rehabilitating the old rubber plantations, providing common collection and processing centre at all villages, organizing the growers under Rubber Producers Societies to enhance productivity and to promote agro processing. In conclusion, globalization is laying stress on competition. Therefore it is essential to reduce the cost of production and promote exports. Rubber plantations have

to concentrate on modernization and value addition to raw rubber. Since the majority of rubber growers in the district are small holders, the government has to take the initiative to convert the raw material into finished products in order to explore the global markets in the globalised era.

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