

## CHAPTER III

NATURE OF WORK, CATEGORIES OF WORKERS, AND WAGEFIXATION IN THE RUBBER PLANTATIONS

An analysis of the Wage Structure in the Rubber Plantations provides the proper insights for the understanding of a rational wage structure. But, for a proper understanding itself, the nature of different types of work, the categories and the number of workers employed and the methods of wage determination in the rubber plantations have to be fully understood. Hence this Chapter.

3.1 Nature of Work and Categories of Workers

Maintenance work and the output are almost continuous throughout the year. The bulk of the work in a rubber plantation consists of (i) preparing the land, (ii) planting, (iii) maintaining the planted area, (iv) gathering the crop and (v) processing at the factory. Though the workers are broadly divided as field and factory workers, the nature of different types of work involves three categories, namely, Field workers, Tappers and Factory workers.

3.1.1 Preparing the Land

This involves the selection of the suitable land for planting, clearing the forests, erecting contour bunds, digging silt pits, raising terraces and providing proper

drainage, approach roads and foot paths for easy access to all areas in a plantation. These jobs can be done by unskilled workers. Normally, contract workers are engaged.

### 3.1.2 Planting

Productivity of rubber depends on the quality of the planting materials and their adaptability to improved agro-techniques. Hence, proper choice of planting materials should be made.

### 3.1.3 Maintaining the Planted Area

It comprises operations like establishment of cover crops, inter-cropping, weeding, pruning, mulching, induction of branching and tinning, and maintaining of fire-belts. All these operations aim at reducing the immature period.<sup>1</sup>

#### Cover Crops

Leguminous cover crops enhance the growth as well as yield of rubber and prevent soil erosion. All the large private sector estates in Kanyakumari District have cover crops. Raising of annual food crops or cash crops with rubber during the immature years is practised in many small

<sup>1</sup>A rubber tree normally takes from six to seven years for tapping.

holdings in the district on economic considerations.<sup>2</sup> It fetches some return during the immature period and also reduces the cost of weeding.

### Weeding and Mulching

Weeding is the most important labour intensive operation. As soon as the land is cleared for planting, vigorous growth of weeds dominates the area, which results in suppressed growth of rubber plants. During summer, weeds may dry out and create fire hazards. Hence efficient weed control measures are adopted and repeated regularly. While weeding is done, there is a possibility of soil degradation around the plants. So, a protective layer of mulch materials is provided to keep the soil cooler and more moist during summer months.

### Pruning and Induction

Immediately after planting, sprouts may start coming up from the stock and they should be removed by weekly inspection. It is not desirable to have branches upto about 2.5 metres from the ground level and side shoots are pruned.

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<sup>2</sup>The small holders in Kanyakumari District grow 'Tapioca' as inter-crop, the advantage being, it is easy to cultivate and is in high demand as a food crop.

For proper girth the rubber plants should produce branches from about 2.5 to 3 metres from the ground level. In trees with high branching the rate of girth is less. The principle behind induction of branches is to influence development of lateral buds.<sup>3</sup>

### Fire belts

Just before the commencement of summer, fire belts are made by clearing a strip of about three metres width all along the boundary of the plantations. Dry leaves falling on fire belts and estate roads are swept away at frequent intervals during the summer months.

As the rubber tree is a source of all the wealth in a plantation, the above mentioned operations are absolutely necessary. Hence the job of a field worker is continuous. Usually, men and women are engaged for field work. As these field operations are of a seasonal nature, workers are liable for transfer from one operation to another. It only means that skill differentials have not much scope and are not given importance.

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<sup>3</sup>S.N.Potti, R.K.Raman and J.Matthew, Hand Book of Natural Rubber Production in India (Rubber Board, Kottayam, 1980) p.154.

### 3.1.4 Gathering the Crop

The next and the most important work in a rubber plantation is gathering the crop-latex which is known as "Tapping". Tapping means "the cutting of a very thin slice of the bark of the tree; collecting the latex that oozes out along the edge of the cut mark slowly into the cups; collecting the latex from the tree and around it on the ground and carrying the latex and scrap to the weighing spots."<sup>4</sup> It is a process of controlled wounding of the bark to extract latex by making a sloping cut with a special knife.

#### (a) The Tapping Knives

The 'Miche Gollenge knife' commonly used in India is well adopted for very efficient tapping and low rate of bark consumption. Another knife known as the 'Jebong knife' is also being used in some estates. This knife is more suited for tapping at higher levels. This bidirectional knife facilitates ease of tapping and can either be used as a draw or as a push knife on cuts tapped upwards.

The latest invention is a mechanised tapping knife.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>International Labour Organisation, Plantation Workers (International Labour Office, Geneva, 1966) p.69.

<sup>5</sup>Rubber Board, "Motorised Tapping Knife" Rubber Board Bulletin, October-December 1983, p.18.

The knife pack includes a motor operated tapping knife, battery and battery charger. The knife ensures controlled tapping and does not wound the bark. This knife can be used continuously for four hours before the battery needs recharging.

(b) SPOUT

A 'V' shaped metal piece made out of tin is used as spout. The spout is driven to the bark to guide the latex to the collection cup.<sup>6</sup> Fixing of the spout should be done carefully to ensure that the cambium is not injured.

(c) TAPPING

Tapping commences early in the mornings; the earlier the better because the flow of latex will be more and its collection brisk. Rubber trees tend to yield 15-20 percent more latex if tapped before day break as transpiration is arrested when sun sets in. Hence, if the trees are tapped before the day dawns, there will be accelerated flow of latex. But this is not being done as tapping cannot be done in the dark.

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<sup>6</sup> Coconut shells are mostly used as collection cups as they are cheaper and readily available. The cups are attached with cup hangers made from wire and are tied to the trees with the help of coir or string.

To tide over the situation, a battery operated headlight like a hunter's light has been developed.<sup>7</sup> The headlight can be fixed to the forehead of the tapper with the help of an elastic tap and the battery wrapped in a rexin bag to hang to his shoulder.

### Ladder Tapping

While customarily the tapping mark is at a height within the convenient reach of the tappers there is another system under which tapping is done from the top of a ladder at a height of over 100 metres. This is known as ladder tapping. The task will usually be 45 percent of the number of trees of the normal tapping task. Ladder tapping is resorted to when tapping of renewed bark on base panels becomes uneconomic and new cuts have to be opened at higher levels.

### Upward Tapping

The tapping cut progresses in an upward direction during subsequent tappings. The panel will be below the cut and the bark to be tapped above the cut. Upward tapping eliminates the creation of bark islands which are not

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<sup>7</sup> B. Sivaram. Ed. "New Headlight for Rubber Tapping" The Planter's Chronicle, May-June 1984, p.209.

desirable because of their low production. Upward tapping allows the tapping of high panels without the use of ladders even above 300 centimetres from the ground. The technique is considered as the best economic exploitation system of the high panels.<sup>8</sup>

But upward tapping requires special skills. Simultaneous pushing of the knife over the cut and shaving of the bark with a pole requires great skill. Tapping of acutely angled grooves is quite difficult. Correct placement of knife to avoid acutely angled grooves is difficult since thickness of bark varies from tree to tree.

#### Puncture Tapping

In puncture tapping, a vertical strip of bark about 2.5 centimetres wide and 62.5-112.5 centimetres long is first scrapped. Every day or every other day, four to six punctures are randomly made. After a month, a new vertical strip can be made 2.5 centimetres to a side. With puncture tapping, trees can be tapped 12 to 18 months earlier than usual. Puncture tapping is practised only when there is a shortage of labour.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> H.G.J Van Brandt and Lukman, "Increased yield by Upward Tapping", Rubber Board Bulletin, September 1975, p.89.

<sup>9</sup> A.A.Ravooof, "Puncture Tapping", The Planters' Chronicle, December 1979, p.381.

### Assisted Collection Tapping

It is the duty of the tappers not only to tap the trees and collect the latex, but also to carry it to the weighing centres. Carrying of latex is not a problem when the tapping blocks are near the weighing centre or the quantity of latex is relatively small.

Tapping is a skilled job while carrying the latex is an unskilled one. The time of a skilled worker can be saved by giving assistance of unskilled workers or transport. Arrangements are made under which the tappers have to deliver the latex at a place very near their blocks. It is either weighed there or transported to the weighing centre by either unskilled workers or by vehicles. The task size of tappers is made as large as practicable so that the trees in an estate are tapped by the minimum number of tappers.

#### (d) Rainguarding

Any device which is fixed on to the rubber tree to prevent rain water falling on the collection cup and wetting the bark below the tapping cut is termed a rainguard.<sup>10</sup> By fixing a polythene rainguard to the trunk of the tree above the tapping panel, even during rainy seasons, tapping can be

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<sup>10</sup>P.K.Marayanan, "Rainguarding", Rubber Board Bulletin, December 1980, p.26.

carried out. About 35 to 40 additional tappings per annum can be obtained by rainguarding the trees.

Usually a number of tapping days are lost due to rains. This results in a period of low production from May to August. Without rainguards, the yield during these four months contributes only less than 25 percent of the annual yield. With rainguards, however, the yield during these four months can be increased to 35 percent of the annual yield.

#### (e) Weighing of Latex

The quantity of rubber present in the latex is calculated from the dry rubber content (DRC) by the factory workers. The quantity of rubber in grams present in 100 grams of latex is called the dry rubber content. The DRC of latex falls in the range of 30-40. Generally, a DRC of 35 is taken as an average figure for field latex. Correct determination of the DRC is important as the wages paid to tappers are linked to the quantity of DRC brought by them.

#### 3.1.5 Processing at the Factory

Latex collected from the field is liable to contamination and generally varies in its properties. To remove impurities if any, it is necessary to bulk all the lattices

in a bulking tank. After taking the latex from the bulking tank, water is added to it and then a little acid to help coagulation. The mixture is taken in coagulating aluminium pans and kept on racks for one night. It takes only a few hours for the latex to coagulate and form itself into a thick flabby jelly. This is taken out the next morning and passed through roller presses and finally pressed by grooved rollers to squeeze out water and make them into thinner sheets.

The sheets thus made are then dried up on the lofts by blowing hot air. Then they are sent to the smoke houses for further drying. Usually large estates use smoke houses but small holdings adopt sun drying. Drying the rubber sheets in a smoke house has definite advantages. It is quicker than sun drying and does not cause oxidation by ultra-violet radiation.

Sheets coming out from smoke houses on the fourth day are examined. Then they are sorted into different grades on the basis of colour, translucency, presence of mould, oxidised spots, blisters, bubbles, dirt, sand and other foreign matter as per the international standards of quality and packing for natural rubber. In India, these sheets are

designated as Rubber Manufacturers' Association (RMA) sheets. Scrap rubber is put into crepe machines after removing the impurities with the help of the scrap washing machines for manufacturing crepe rubber, which after drying, is sorted out and graded according to colour.

Factory workers are employed for the processing and making the latex into rubber sheets and keeping them ready for marketing. Work in a factory requires considerable skill and experience. Hence highly skilled and experienced persons well trained in processing and sorting are employed. Factory workers are normally employed on a permanent basis.

### 3.2 Methods of Wage Fixation

Workers are employed in rubber plantations on daily wages. Wage payments are made both on time rates and piece rates. Though the workers are employed on daily wages, the practice is to give them weekly advances and then at the end of the month the account is settled.

Field workers are employed on a time rate basis. The day's work is fixed in terms of a rough idea of the task to be performed. The task is to some extent adjusted to capacity. The rule regarding the task is not very rigid. The type of work in a plantation varies with the nature of the soil, climatic conditions and the general layout of the plantations.

hence the task varies from field to field in the same plantation and from plantation to plantation. So it is neither possible nor practicable to fix a standard task which can be uniformly applied to all the plantations in the same district. Though the task varies from place to place, the daily rates of wages are kept uniform throughout the district. For the field workers, work commences from 7.30 A.M. and continues for eight hours with a noon break of an hour.

Tappers in rubber estates are paid on piece rates depending on the quantity of latex and scrap collected by them. The practice is that the tapper is required to tap about 250-300 trees and is expected to bring a certain minimum quantity of latex in order to earn the minimum piece rate wage for the day. The minimum amount of latex which the tapper has to bring is fixed according to the yield of rubber per estate. This minimum quantity of latex is known as the 'standard output'. If the tapper brings latex above the standard output he is paid more wages. This payment is known as 'overkilo payment' or 'rate for overkilo'. For bringing scrap rubber also the tappers are paid separately. If the yield falls below the standard output continuously,

the tapping block is inspected and if tapping is careless, the tapper is fined.

On non-tapping days if the tappers are engaged in other field works, they are paid at time rate wages and they have to work for eight hours. If there is no work on a day, they have to be given a minimum guaranteed rate<sup>12</sup> which is known as fall back wage. Fall back wages are usually paid during the months of February and March every year when the rubber trees shed leaves and there is no tapping for nearly 40 days during the leaf-fall season.

Factory workers are engaged on time rate basis. They are paid higher wages than the field workers. Higher wages are paid for the special skills involved in factory processing. For the factory workers wages are calculated daily, but wage settlement is on monthly basis. Overtime work is common in rubber factories and hence there is the possibility for the factory workers to earn more wages.

Uniform wage rates are paid to the field workers, tappers and factory workers in the plantations which are under the coverage of the Act. In all other big and small

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<sup>12</sup>The minimum guaranteed rate is also known as Guaranteed Line Rate (G.L.R.)

holdings, wage rates are lower for all categories of workers and vary considerably among themselves.

In the Government Plantations in the District, apart from tappers, some field workers are trained in tapping and kept ready. They are known as Relief Tappers. They usually perform the field work. But whenever a tapper is absent from a day's tapping work, the relief tapper is engaged. This arrangement is for tapping the trees without interruption. In the large private estates which are under the purview of the Plantations Labour Act, the tappers are known as Garden Labourers. In some of the big Holdings which are outside the coverage of the Act and also in small Holdings, field workers are known as Outside Labourers.

The existing system of wage fixation was evolved over a long period of time through the influence of important wage institutions like the Minimum Wage Fixation, Wage Board Award and Collective Bargaining. So the study passes on to the analysis of these wage institutions one by one, in order to have a proper understanding of the evolution of the wage structure.