

Role of NGOs in Developing Rural Economy through Rubber Plantation in Goalpara District in Assam

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ABSTRACT

Rubber plantation has been the most attractive and focal non-traditional economic activities today on Goalpara district. The demand for natural rubber is increasing day by day and it has been a good sources of income. Hence, social changes are visible in Goalpara district with the increase in wealth out of rubber revolution. One of the factors behind for growing ground of the revolution may be recognised as the NGOs, which are responsible for performing a variety of service and humanitarian functions, including alleviating rural poverty. In Goalpara, a few NGOs are working in the field of rubber promotional activities. Thus the NGOs have been playing a major role in developing rural economy through rubber pantation in Goalpara district.

Keywords: Rubber plantation, Goalpara, NGOs, rural economy, ASC, Agia.

INTRODUCTION

Creating success stories, the rubber plantation has been one of the prime interests of the farmers of the district of Goalpara. Rubber, an important raw material obtained from rubber tree (*hevea brasiliensis*), demand for which is

increasing day by day and it has been a good sources of income. 'Social changes are visible in Goalpara district of Assam with the increase in wealth. There are lots of success stories, all of them from the rubber plantations here' (Nath and Bezbaruah, 2002). Within the Northeast region, Tripura had stood first in rubber

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production as a significant economic activity. But in more recent times, it has been gaining grounds Goalpara districts, along with Cachar and KarbiAnglong in the State of Assam.

NGOs have some primary roles in advancing modern societies, i.e., to preserve a unique and essential space between the for-profit sector and government and finally, to enable experimentation and social change by taking on challenges that the public and private sectors and so on. NGOS and CSOs (Civil society organizations) are able to take risks that are economically unacceptable to business and politically unacceptable to government. There are some areas where government mechanism need NGO sector in preparing and implementing development plans and programmes in one side, and some areas need only NGOs to work on the other. The role of NGOs have increased to upgrade the economy by doing on their part in one side and assisting/collaborating the government's efforts in implementing various plans and programmes on the other. As a vast country, India often confronted by many socio-economic problems. More than a half of population in India lack basic amenities of life. So, NGOs are best suited and a viable options for a country like India and other third world countries. Extension of rubber plantation to non-traditional areas like the northeast region has contributed in no small measure in India securing a larger share in world production of natural rubber.

Objectives-

The paper intends -

- a) to find out the growth trends of rubber plantation and production in the district of Goalpara.
- b) to assess the contribution of rubber sector in developing rural economy in the district.
- b) to examine the role of the NGOs in the progress of rubber plantation and developing rural economy in the district of Goalpara.
- d) to find out the problems as well as to give suggestions for Govt, NGOs and the planters for their future course of action.

METHODOLOGY

Area of study:

The district of Goalpara, situated in the west part of the state and located in between latitude 25°59' N to 26°43' N longitude 90°46' E to 91°18'E. Total area is 1824 Sq Km. Total population is 8, 22,035 as per 2001 Census, A decadal growth of 23.03 percent during 1991-2001. The density of population 451 per sq. km (higher than the state average of 340 per sq. km)

Data source:

The study is basically analytical and descriptive. Moreover, it is prepared mostly with secondary data as well as primary data, and it is also depended on personal observation. The techniques of synthesis have been applied to analyze the data and as such, the findings and

suggestions have been sorted out.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Rubber (History):

The natural rubber plantation was said to be started in the year 1985-86 in Goalpara. So far as the information is concerned, Ramdas Rabha and Paramananda Rajbanshi was the pioneer of that. During late 80's, it got momentum for further advancement. According to a reliable source, during 1986 to 2011, the expanded area of rubber plantation has been reached to 7,045 hectares. Out of that more than 1,040 hectare area is found with matured rubber trees ready for tapping latex. The district has 12,000 small permit holders, which definitely means that over 12,000 families are dependent on rubber cultivation for their livelihood today.

producing only 2,500 MT of rubber and the number of families involved in the field is 3,784. At the same time, total area under rubber in the district at the end of 2006-07 was 3550 hectares, which constituted 6% of the rubber acreage of northeast India. Of the total rubber plantation of the district, 36% had attained maturity in which tapping of latex was done. The total production of rubber in the district in the year 2006-07 was 1814MT. As per an estimate, 87% of individual rubber holdings and 94% of group holdings have been set up on degraded forest or barren land. By the end of 2006-07, about 3160 hectares of barren land and degraded forest area were converted to rubber plantations in Goalpara district (Nath & Bezbaruah, 2010).

In the year 2004, India's average yield of natural rubber was 1,705 kg per hectare, which was the highest in the world.

Table 1. Areas, Pattern of Holdings, Numbers of families invoved and production of Rubber in Goalpara district

Sl. No.	Particulars	Years			
		2001-02	2006-07	2009-10	2010-11
1	Area of rubber plantation	2,640 Hec	3,550.38 Hec	2,900 Hec	7,045 Hec*
2	Nos of holdings	--	5,199	7,000	--
3	Families involved in rubber cultivation	3,784	--	--	12,000 **
4	Row rubber produced	2,500 MT	1,814 MT	--	--

* The O/o Ajagar Social Circle (NGO), Agia.

** Small permit holders (Rubber Board, W/Island, Kochi)

Source: Field Office of Rubber Board at Agia, Goalpara & O/o the Secretary, Ajagar Social Circle, Agia, Goalpara.

In the year 2001-02, 2,640 hectares of land was occupied by rubber plantation,

Thailand came second with 1,418 kg a hectare, while Vietnam followed with 1,412

kg (Nair 2005). So far as the productivity is concerned, upto 1,892 kg per hectare per day has been recorded to be tapped on experimental basis; which is proved to be more than the record of national average.

Another feature of the growers is that none of them is exclusively dependent on rubber production for their livelihood. Rubber growing has resulted in diversification and enhancement of their livelihood from their respective pre-existing occupations. Indeed it has transpired in the field investigation that having a side occupation has helped the growers in coping with the risk associated with a commercial activity like rubber production.

Developing Rural Economy:

It is already said that in more recent times, rubber plantation has been gaining grounds in Goalpara districts. It has been one of the prime interests of the farmers of the district. Rubber, an important raw material obtained from rubber tree (*hevea brasiliensis*), demand for which is increasing day by day and it has been a good source of income. Social changes are visible in Goalpara district of Assam with the increase in wealth.

These days, Goalpara has been credited to be the pioneer in this non-traditional productive plantation. So far as the productivity is concerned, upto 1,892 kg per hectare per day has been recorded to be tapped on experimental basis; which is proved to be more than the record of

national average.

But average holding of each rubber grower is not much big one; a few holdings are found in 500 hectares. The tribal people have been addicted much more than other communities of the district.

So far as the employment opportunity is concerned, it has vast prospects. It is already assessed that one hectare rubber plantation needs at least four person in two ways; firstly, as employed and secondly, as worker/labour. Accordingly within 4/5 years, it would need almost another 2,800 working rubber tappers in the industry in the district.

NGOs:

There is no unique definition for a non-governmental organization (NGO). However, the main characteristic is to be actors legally independent from the State, founded by private initiative (nongovernmental) and non-profit (defined by the non distribution constraint on profits); they are often considered to be public good providers. (Murdie and Davis, 2012).

Morris-Suzuki (2000: 68) notes that “NGOs may pursue change, but they can equally work to maintain existing social and political systems.” For Bebbington *et al.* (2008), the strength of development NGOs remains their potential role in constructing and demonstrating “alternatives” to the status quo, which remains a pressing need.

NGOs are useful actors because they can provide cost-effective services in

flexible ways, while for others they are campaigners fighting for change or generating new ideas and approaches to development problems.

Role of NGOs:

Tasks before NGOs are enumerable. The role of NGOs in developing rural economy through rubber plantation in Goalpara district has not been highlighted so far.

Initially, NGOs including CBOs are found active in case of plantation of rubber. But it seems lesser roles shall have to play by the NGOs today. It is due to the appearance of the Rubber Board by establishing its Field Office at Agia, Goalpara, which are advancing sufficient support to the rubber growers in the form of financial credit-cum-subsidy. It is also true that the Rubber Board has some limitations like field level activities, obviously due to its deficiency in staff.

The role of NGOs is generally noticed mainly in case of rubber processing. It is worth mentioning that it widely needs financial support once again and processing equipments (machanisation).

It may be noted here that an NGO movement has not been gaining ground in Lower Assam and especially in Goalpara. Among the active NGOs working properly in the region, the name of Agia (Goalpara) based NGO 'Ajagar Social Circle' appears first. So far as the rubber plantation and production is concerned, the only and one

NGO 'Ajagar Social Circle' is found inseparably involved. Here a little contribution may be noticed from a few purposefully formed Community-based Committees (CBCs).

In Goalpara, the NGOs are advancing credit facilities through Joint Liabilities Groups (JLGs) or User Groups of rubber growers in the district. Ajagar Social Circle has been providing training facilities for the rubber growers, tappers and other associates.

Table 2. Ajagar Social Circle's programme for rubber promotional interventions.

Years	Rubber Competition	Rubber Growers Workshop/Meet	Individuals/ Groups Felicitated
	Nos of competitors	Nos of participants	
2002-03	65	120	--
2003-04	60	--	--
2004-05	35	200	2 (Individuals)
20-5-06	45	--	3 (Individuals)
2006-07	--	350	4 (Groups)

Source: The O/o Ajagar Social Circle (NGO), Agia.

Ajagar Social Circle has implemented some important and successful programme for promotional interventions in the line of rubber plantation and production. ASC organized skill development trainings on natural rubber (latex) tapping and processing for the tappers and processors under Rural Entrepreneurship Development Programme (REDP) in assistance of NABARD. With the help of UCo Bank, some other training

had been organized under the aegis of Rural Self Employment Training Institute. Similarly, ASC with the help of Centre for Practical Livelihood for NEDFi organized some other training.

The rubber growers are still scattered as an unorganized sector. With a view to give a organizational shape, ASC had a noble endeavour to organize the Rubber Growers' Meet in 2002-03 and finally, a long-awaited 'Lower Assam Rubber Growers' Meet' in the year 2006-07. Of course, it has still an appeal creating environment for making it an organized sector. These are also similar to leadership training. Leadership is supposed to be important in its further development. That is why; the district has Goalpara District Rubber Growers' Association now.

They also organized a popular talk on the topic "Vision 2020: The Prospect of Rubber Plantation in Lower Assam." ASC imparted awareness-cum-trainings to more than 500 unemployed youths including women associated with rubber cultivation. For a promotional activity, ASC also organized Rubber Sheet Competition among the rubber tappers and growers. One of the important things done by ASC is its liaisoning among various stakeholders like Rubber Board, NABARD, NEDFi and intellectuals concerned.

NGOs have also their own rubber cultivation. ASC is also credited with that. Some CBOs or Village Committees have

also their rubber cultivation in their community reserve or grazing fields. Some of the prominent such groups are Ghengamari Rubber Growers' Society, Ghengamari, Janakalyan Rubber Growers' Society, Bhalukdubi; Lempara Rubber Growers' Society, Lempara; Lakhimi Mahila Samity, Bhoiskhuli and so on. Of course, this type of cultivated area is estimated to be 35 per cent of the total.

With a view to creating an environment and motivating the individual youngsters and the Group Rubber Plantation Approaches, Ajar Social Circle took up idea of felicitating the best individuals and groups involved in the rubber plantation and production activities. They felicitated 2 and 3 persons and 4 groups in the years 2004-05, 2005-06 and 2006-07 respectively (See the table 2).

For NGO, marketing has been one of the most attractive and thrust area. Rubber Board procured rubber sheets initially in a large scale. But in course of time, due to its laziness and clumsy work style, the growers are being slopping down towards NGOs and other business dealers for selling their products. In Goalpara it is reportedly practiced the procurement price maintained at Kattayam (Kerala). Due to which no intermediaries could dig their nails here in Goalpara district and by and large the real growers are getting legal prices.

As a bonafide license holder, ASC,

in the title of Ajar Rubber, Agia has been purchasing around a limit of 500 MT of rubber sheets; which is estimated to be 1/5th of the total production in the district. The other license holders as 05.07.2013 are M. Das, Agia, R. Kachari, Lela, and Sushma Rubbers House, Darangiri. The rubber sheet purchases are also done by other small business parties in the district.

ASC has been arranging nursery of rubber and quality saplings are being supplied to the both old and new growers at their doorstep. But it depends on growers demand as well as the collection of seeds. Till today, ASC could arrange more than 2 lakh quality saplings for supply.

NGOs have still command over the supply of various equipments to the rubber processors at their doorsteps at reasonable prices. The equipments are being imported from Kerala only.

Problems:

The rubber growing suit in Goalpara are facing some serious problems.

- a) First of all, a substantial part of the group plantations of rubber in the district have come up in some state owned and scheduled forest land. Both the department of forest and the planters are in the risk of holding and possession. There is an every chance for further encroachment of other government and forest land.
- b) Rubber plantation requires large amount of capital in the very initial stage. The new entrepreneurs find it very difficult in

generating the same. Institutional credit facility is a must for growing a new economic venture. But it is found to be very short in rubber sector here.

c) Gradation of rubber production is also one of the major problems here. But there is no systematic procedure of grading the rubber produced in Goalpara. Traders usually grade all the rubber produced in the district as RSS-5, which fetches the lowest price (Nath and Bezbaruah, 2010).

d) There is only a few NGOs, including rubber growers' groups are working in the field of natural rubber.

e) Percentage of growers belonging to Scheduled Tribe/Caste communities is almost 85 per cent. The other castes not coming forward is also recognized as a big problem. Because, in comparison to ST and SC, the number of other caste people are major in the district.

f) The sizes of the rubber holdings are too small to be fruitful both in economic and feasibility point of view. Average size of rubber plantation is found to be less than 2 hectares.

g) Rubber sector in the district are lacking more trainings for awareness generation, land preparation for plantation, selection and collection of quality saplings, breeding and rearing, use of fertilizers and pesticides, proper methods of latex collection and preservation, rubber sheet preparation, use of machines, technical knowhow, mechanization, marketing

management etc.

h) Rubber sector is still lagging behind in cases of technical knowhow and mechanization.

i) Marketing management of rubber production is still a farce in the district.

Policy Suggestions:

Suitable policy interventions are needed to address these regards.

As a serious issue, a timely and critical step on the part of the government is needed for settlement of the land used for plantations. For example, a process was initiated in case of waste land. So, as a solution, the land may be transferred to the planters on some conditions, like - offering the land on long term lease.

Rubber has already been a viable economic activity for a considerable portion of people of the district. So, there should be an initiative on the part of government to encourage financial institutions such as banks and micro finance institutions (MFIs) to come forward and offer credit to the rubber growers. In this regard, NGOs should be encouraged through the financial agencies in order to ensure availability of finance in rubber plantation and productions.

To serve better interest of the producers, it is necessary to establish the procedure for objective grading of rubber sheets (Nath and Bezbaruah, 2010).

There is a wide debate whether

environmental implications of rubber plantation are favourable. This issue should be treated as urgent matter and both in Govt and NGOs should come forward to take up studies and researches to have earlier results for having future course of action.

CONCLUSION

The robust growth trends in area and production of rubber in Goalpara implies that rubber production has steadily emerged as an important economic activity in the district. The yield attainment by farmers in the district is impressive by national and international comparison. A large majority of the growers being from the socio-economically disadvantaged sections of the population, this new activity has served the cause of economic empowerment at the grassroots. By and large, it may be said that the rubber sector in the district virtually has already received the trickledown effect.

Rubber production in Goalpara has been remained economically viable and sustainable for long. The plantations have come up mostly on degraded forests and barren land. Food production in the district is unlikely to be affected by rubber sector.

Driven by necessity, Citizens across the globe have developed organizations of civil society, NGOs to address a wide variety of social needs. So far as the role is concerned, NGOs have to enable experimentation and social change

by taking on challenges that the public and private sectors simply can't or won't be so. NGOs are able to take risks that are economically unacceptable to business and politically unacceptable to government.

NGOs are prominently engaged in the change of the socio-economic conditions of the society. Having some serious limitations, NGOs can be hoped that they continue playing the role of savior of society and lead the country to sustainable economic growth and development. From their grassroots experiences, the NGOs can complement the government efforts to improve the condition of the people.

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