Labour welfare is considered to be a very crucial concept specially for its proximity with the well being of a vast majority of toiling masses of the society. Although the concept has undergone radical changes in the wake of fast growing industrial society, yet it has not succeeded in achieving its desired goal of safeguarding and supplementing human values in our society. To many, the term 'Labour Welfare' is an ill-conceived term so far as it protects the interests of organised workers only.

India, being one of the signatory member of the International Labour Organisation, has been paying regards to the various standards of labour welfare ever since she opted for its membership in 1919. Although the I.L.O. conventions ratified by India appear to be low in numerical terms, yet the extent of implementation of International Labour Standards is considerably more than what is revealed by the formal ratifications. The Indian Constitution transparently contains provisions of labour welfare under the Directive Principles of State Policy. However, the policy of the Government in this regard is always preceded with a statutory outlook rather than economic considerations. Apart from the political philosophy which will justify or otherwise the legitimacy of such a policy, any programme on
labour welfare whether voluntary or involuntary, needs a self supporting and self sustaining base founded on cost benefit consideration. And to make them truly purposeful, they must fulfil the aspirations of the concerned communities with an objective orientedness which requires deviation from the hitherto adopted policy of legalistic imposition.

In view of the impact of World War II on labour in India, the Government of India accepted the principle of health insurance and passed the Employees' State Insurance Act in April 1948. The E.S.I. is the first health insurance scheme in the South East Asia. Although the scheme was initiated some four decades ago, yet the same has not reached an economically viable and socially acceptable standard in its bid to safeguard the interests of wider sections of people. As a result, a vast majority of the working population are being deprived of the minimum support which could otherwise have been effectively provided with the help of E.S.I. The alarming aspect of the problem is that in absence of any self supporting and self sustaining base of the programme, the coverage under the scheme is fast dwindling day by day particularly in the recent years. On the other hand, the employers, too seem to be indulging in manipulation of the various technical requirements needed for determining the status of their establishments under the scheme. It is worth admitting
that almost in all cases of marginal exclusion, the technical short falls are self designed and perpetuated by the employer with such contrivances not reached by official inspection.

The crux of the problem, however, does not end with increasing statutory control over a belligerent body of un-willing employers who fear impending loss of productivity due to inherent weaknesses in the scheme. The working community, too, have generated an indifferent attitude towards the positive aspects of the scheme and to many of them, it is merely a statutory imposition rather than a genuine programme of welfare.

It is in this context, a study of operational viability of the scheme was felt to be highly useful in order to provide impetus in its present operation and to diversify the same to various other fields of employments. In the present work, the researcher makes a sincere attempt to establish the operational viability of the E.S.I. scheme taking into account the practical difficulties inherent in its implementation. For this purpose, structured interviews have been conducted upon the employers and the beneficiaries of different age, sex, level of literacy, socio-economic background and job description.
The present work has been completed under the supervision of Dr. N.C. Das, Professor, Department of Commerce, Gauhati University. Without any exaggeration, I may submit that I was ably guided by him all through my work and have been inspired and enriched by his philosophy and thought.

I am particularly indebted to Dr. D. Bharali, Head of the Department of Commerce, Gauhati University, and Dr. B.K. Nath, D.D.P.I., Adult Education, Govt. of Assam for their encouragement and valuable suggestion.

I am also grateful to Prof (Dr.) Atul Sarma, Indian Statistical Institute, New Delhi, and Dr. Alakesh Barua of the Jawaharlal Nehru University for their help and co-operation.

I also owe a debt of gratitude to Captain R.S. Rawat, Joint Insurance Commissioner, E.S.I., New Delhi, and Mr. P.C. Patir, Ex-Regional Director, E.S.I., N.E. Region for their kind advice and encouragement which have helped me to complete the work.

I must also express my thanks to Sri. P.L. Hazarika, Dr. S. Sikdar, and Dr. H.K. Boruah of the Department of Commerce, Gauhati University for their help and co-operation. I have also
to express my gratitude to the staff of Sapru House Library, New Delhi, the staff of E.S.I. Corporation Library, New Delhi, and the staff of Birinchi Kumar Barua Library, Gauhati Commerce College and the officials of various Government Departments of Assam for their help and co-operation in making the books, journals and other published and unpublished materials available to me. My heart felt thanks also goes to Mr. A.Y. George Kutty, who has kindly agreed to carry out the necessary typing works.

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