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Mr. Prabhu Chawla,
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Give tribals the right to harvest, sell bamboo

By The New Indian Express | 03rd September 2012 11:59 PM

A contestant in the television programme 'Kaun Banega Crorepati' lost Rs 25 lakh when he could not answer the question: Which is the tallest grass? Any student of botany would know the answer: bamboo. Ask the forest department and it will tell you that whatever be the characteristics of bamboo and its scientific name, it is treated as 'tree' under the Indian Forest Act, 1927. Fallen bamboo is considered as timber over which only the forest department has control. The tribals, who sustain themselves on forest produce, have thus been deprived of their right to harvest bamboo to make a living. At long last, the government has realised the folly of the classification of bamboo as 'tree'.

It is against this backdrop that environment minister Jayanti Natarajan's decision to overrule forest department officials and declare bamboo as a 'minor forest produce' should be seen. The enactment of the Forest Rights Act a few years ago should have brought about the much-needed change in the definition of bamboo. However, forest officials have been resisting any liberalisation on bamboo, as it would have deprived them of the power to harvest bamboo and auction it to the pulp, paper and cardboard industry. The tribals could only watch in despair the industry getting bamboo at throw-away prices because of the long-term lease they enter into with the government, whereas they had to face all kinds of harassment for cutting bamboo even for their own domestic use.

With this decision, the forest department will cease to enjoy its monopoly vis-à-vis bamboo. One of the main reasons for the growing pauperisation of the tribals and their growing affinity with extremist forces is the difficulty they face in eking out a living.

They will now be able to grow bamboo in community and private lands and sell it in the open market. However, this is easier said than done, given the manipulative abilities of the vested interests against which the tribals are no match. The responsibility, therefore, devolves on the government to ensure that the change in definition of bamboo empowers the tribals in every respect.

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