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## It's a grass, not a tree Bamboo off-shoots

Nitin Sethi, TNN Jan 21, 2011, 04:34am IST

It is official now: bamboo is a grass. Union environment minister Jairam Ramesh said on Monday the prime minister and senior ministers had reached the conclusion, putting an end to a long-standing debate.

Why the top echelons of the government got around to tackling a 10th standard biology question is the story, though. Positioning bamboo, the government feels, will mark a crucial step in tackling the socio-economics of Naxalism.

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This is how it all began. The UPA government woke up to the fact that the common thread running through Naxal-affected areas was lack of development. This was alienating tribal communities and pushing them to take up arms and join the Naxalite cadres. It concluded that these tribal belts were also rich (and slowly degrading) forest areas. A home secretary-led committee concluded that the tribal communities needed to be given better rights, control and revenue from the forests they lived in or depended on and that the role of the forest departments should be reformed – they could not act as the police that keeps tribals out of the forests.

The officials deliberated on how to increase the incomes of those dependent on forests for their earnings. 'Minor forest produce' – minor products or goods that are collected from forests and sold in the market – played a key role in local economics. The Planning Commission, in turn, concluded there was nothing minor about it. It was a booming unregulated trade worth Rs 50,000 crore annually – roughly two times the total rural health budget of the country. It also discovered the small tricks the government had played over decades to keep the tribals out of this lucrative trade.

Defining bamboo as a "tree" was one of them. Forget what taxonomists and biologists all over the world believe conclusively – bamboo is a type of grass.

The government listed bamboo as a tree under the Indian Forest Act. This ensured that cutting bamboo, selling it or trading in it became the monopoly of the government and gave the forest bureaucracy control over what some estimates suggest is a Rs 10,000 crore trade. Bamboo is grown in roughly nine million hectares of forest area in India – more than twice the size of Haryana. The major demand for it comes from the paper and pulp industry and the housing and construction sector.

Long leases over 30 years are given over bamboo forests to contractors and industry. The leases give the state some revenue. The government controls the trade, the industry gets cheap raw material and the people living in these forests, get nothing.

In various states, the people living in or dependent on these bamboo forests get a few bamboo

shafts on subsidized rate for their housing needs – the government continues to believe it is extending a concession. The government is able to do so because it calls bamboo - timber - a 'nationalized' forest product that it holds sole rights over.

The parallel with the story of mineral resources is hard to miss. The resource is first taken over by the government as a caretaker of public asset. It is then sold to the industry for a pittance and the average citizen (through the exchequer) gets peanuts out of it as royalty. The villager or tribal owning the resource rich lands gets well near nothing.

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Delisting bamboo from the 'timber list' is only the first step the government could take towards altering this regime in favour of people – the environment ministry is yet to do so formally. It's also not such a huge step, considering the Forest Rights Act that UPA legislated in 2006 already defines bamboo as a non-timber forest produce. So the government is merely acknowledging that it will adhere to the laws.

It would now need to ensure that communities claim their traditional legal rights over these bamboo forests under the Forest Rights Act. So far, the forest departments have been reluctant to allow such rights over forest produce and the state governments have not encouraged it either.

Establishing community rights would mean precious little until the government also reworks the entire policy of auctioning off entire forests to the paper and pulp industry and other industries through contractors. Just as the government is now thinking of revenue sharing mechanisms for the mining sector, it would need to think how communities can sell and negotiate their precious green resource to industry.

It's a long haul right now with the forest bureaucracy, still opposed to even calling bamboo a grass. If UPA does want to turn this large revenue stream towards the tribals within its current term it will need to move faster.

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**Prit Ranjan Jha** (GROWMORE Biotech, Hosur, Tamilnadu.)  
22 Jan, 2011 05:13 PM

I appreciate the article which highlights the positive development in the Bamboo sector. The discussion about the Tribal rights on Forest produce and minerals is also justified. To remove the pressure from forest, community forestry, social forestry, urban forestry, agro forestry, etc. should be promoted.

**Indrani Mukherjee** (Bangalore)  
21 Jan, 2011 10:02 AM

Though this is only the initial stages, lots has to be done. Bamboo is a Green Gold. Bamboo is a Grass which breathe in carbon from the air and breathe out more oxygen for our life. (Ill rd Std. biology). Bamboo is a fantastic long lasting eco-friendly construction material. Bamboo construction has a very long tradition. Innovative technologies and innovative architecture are putting bamboo in the centre of attention for building in a sustainable manner around the world. Govt. should give optimum importance to this Green Gold and adopt policies to replace timber with Bamboo Products which will reduce carbon footprints and foremost help in rural development.

**SAMIR** (Agartala) replies to Indrani Mukherjee  
09 Feb, 2011 08:45 PM

Very good thinking