

Modi govt wants more bamboo trade but it must end control of China, Vietnam first

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A worker unloads bamboo into a chipper at a paper mill in Chandrapur, Maharashtra | Photo: Amit Bhargava | Bloomberg

The Narendra Modi government had [announced](#) through an ordinance in November 2017 its intent to change the legal status of bamboo from 'tree' to 'grass' (taxonomically it is essentially grass). The 1927 Indian Forest Act was amended accordingly and passed in Parliament in December, empowering the masses to grow and trade bamboo freely. The amendment, however, got lost in endless debates and discussions despite parliamentary backing.

Bamboonomics, a self-explanatory term, is an attempt to unleash the potential of bamboo economics and obliterate trade barriers. It isn't a rhetoric of another economic theory that typically focuses on deciphering the reasons and explanations of a phenomenon that contributes to growth. But Bamboonomics predominantly deals with bamboo and its eco-processing in a gainful manner to make products as a major source of income for tribal farmers by adding value to the products that are in demand.

Where the govt's faltering

The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) has literally failed to comprehend this aspect of Bamboonomics. The restructured National Bamboo Mission (RNBM) [introduced](#) in 2018 too has failed to identify the vital issues pertaining to the

wrecked bamboo trade. And, therefore, the RNBM couldn't point out the correct reasons. As a result, all the schemes and plans pertaining to bamboo have gone haywire.

Instead of improving domestic knowledge to make efficient use of bamboo, the Narendra Modi government is aiming at bamboo plantations especially Chinese moso bamboo. This is not going to help overhaul the wrinkled bamboo trade situation in India.

Indian forest officers at the helm of the RNBM suffer from the "silviculture syndrome", so their main focus has been restricted to bamboo plantations. Their "import substitution" theory of planting Chinese moso bamboo for competing with China in bamboo trade is misleading. Unfortunately, India's top decision makers have bought into this faulty perception, and therefore the amount of Rs 1203 crore allocated to RNBM is largely being wasted. They haven't done enough to identify the commercial use of existing stock of bamboo species.

Breaking China's grip on Indian market

Interestingly, the RNBM has declared that out of 136 Indian bamboo species, only 10 are commercially viable. On the contrary, my research proves that all of them are commercially viable.

My research study "Bamboonomics: Aspirations in the Bamboo Regime" provides a roadmap for the Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India (TRIFED) to enter the bamboo industry in a very unique way.

With its vast network among the tribal communities, TRIFED to encourage millions of tribals to use bamboo, and it is also aiming at new value-added products that have a demand in the market. While providing new employment opportunities, the policy remains in sync with sustainable development goals and addresses concerns about climate change.

Bamboonomics can break the grip of the Chinese and Vietnamese raw materials on the Indian incense stick industry and thus help in reviving not only the existing bamboo industries but also lead to the emergence of new industries such as that of bamboo charcoal, activated bamboo charcoal, bamboo fiber, to name a few.

The problem area

The major problem killing the bamboo industry in India is non-utilisation of the bamboo waste generated during manufacturing processes. India produces bamboo sticks for Rs 100-120 per kg with 88 per cent wastage of bamboo in manufacturing. The cost of this wastage is added to the final product, which makes it costlier. The imported Chinese and Vietnamese round sticks for Agarbatti (incense stick) industry are cheaper and cost Rs 50-60 per kg as they use almost 100 per cent of their bamboo.

Naturally, the Indian incense stick industry goes for cheaper, imported round bamboo sticks coming largely from China for agarbatti manufacturing. This has led to the closure of many Indian round bamboo stick manufacturing units rendering thousands of men and women jobless.

It is hard to digest how an industry that is worth thousands of crores of rupees in India has come under the control of China and Vietnam. This kind of economic hegemony by the Chinese on Indians goes contrary to the Modi government's objective of 'Make in India'. Yet, this has gone unnoticed by everyone in India. The Agarbatti industry was one of the few industries in India truly carrying the 'Make in India' flag. But the Modi government has failed to save this 'real make in India' and that has gone out into the hands of China.

Making good use of bamboo waste

The Indian government's efforts to revive the bamboo trade do not address the issue of bamboo waste and its commercial utilisation, which is the key to success. The first NBM (2006) was a failure without any positive impact. The RNBM is performing no better.

India too can utilise every part of bamboos in manufacturing bamboo sticks for incense industries, bamboo silk, bamboo charcoal, activated bamboo charcoal, bamboo shoots and biodegradable bamboo plastics to begin with. Bamboo powder can be mixed with plastic to form bamboo plastic composite. This way as much as 50 per cent of India's total plastic consumption can be reduced if this is wholeheartedly adopted. Bamboo housing is also a great option.

The immediate income from bamboo waste can come by making bamboo charcoal (BC) and activated bamboo charcoal (ABC). Bamboo charcoal can be used for cooking purposes in hotels, eateries, households and can also be used in resorting degraded lands by increasing the soil quality. Currently, Indian soil varieties have less than 2 per cent carbon content in the hilly areas and less than 1 per cent in the plains, whereas the world average is 4 per cent.

Bamboonomics: A global tribal movement

Desertification and climate change are global phenomena and cannot be solved in isolation. Bamboo, if harvested carefully, can grow again from its same rhizomes. As it grows very fast, bamboo sequesters more carbon compared to the trees. So to achieve the targets of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, India can no longer afford to ignore the bamboo.

Bamboonomics is poised to initiate the biggest tribal movement in the world by bringing together 30-35 million tribals for countering desertification and climate change. In fact, without the bamboo, people's participation in combating climate change cannot be achieved. In the last three decades of the proposal of numerous environmental solutions, only Bamboonomics talks of people's empowerment.

It is hoped that bamboo policy makers and the Forest ministry both will have a relook at their policy and programmes in order to put the toppled cart of bamboo back on track.

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