

Carve out own solutions

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Just like Malaysia, India, too, must have its own forest certification to help promote wooden handicraft exports

In India, around 100 million artisans are involved in making handicrafts and they form the backbone of the non-farm economy in the hinterland, where mostly the tribal and rural poor live. Over the years, this sector has been the major source of livelihood for the landless poor. According to an estimate of the export-import council, the total export of handicraft during the financial year (FY) 2018-19 was to the tune of Rs 26,590 crore as compared to Rs 24,500 crore in 2016-17. Around 70 per cent of this is wood/forest-based. It is a sizeable amount and if proper institutional and other help is extended, this sector has the potential to act as an effective anti-poverty programme. The important clusters of wooden handicraft, according to a report of the World Wide Fund for Nature India, are based at Saharanpur and Nagina in Uttar Pradesh, Hoshiarpur and Amritsar in Punjab, Jaipur and Jodhpur in Rajasthan, Srinagar in Jammu and Kashmir, Jagdalpur and Behrampur in West Bengal, Channapatna and Chennai in Tamil Nadu, Bengaluru and Mysore in Karnataka and Ernakulum and Cochin in Kerala. There are many others artisans in small towns/villages producing handicraft and selling through middlemen. There is adequate availability of raw material and talent and the scope for scaling up the growth of the wooden/forest-based handicraft sector exists. However, due to trade barriers, poor policy and institutional back-up, the necessity of procuring a certificate of origin from sustainable forests/plantation sources, the sector has not grown. Forest certification has become a Gordian's knot for artisans.

So what is this certification? On account of deforestation in tropical countries there was a hue and cry in the Western world, especially in the US and other European countries. Civil society activists and NGOs started pressurising their governments to stop importing timber and timber products unless the source of production was certified as having been obtained from sustainably-managed forests/plantations. Introduced in the 1990s, this rule entails that the certificate be validated by an independent agency with a complete chain of command confirmation, right from its origin to final manufacturing of the product and its export. The certification covers forest/plantation inventory, management practices, harvesting and environmental, economic and social impacts of such forests/plantation. Many countries have enacted laws and banned import of timber and wooden handicraft if the same is not accompanied by a "validation certificate." The certification today covers 30 per cent of the world's timber trade. This gave rise to the birth of some agencies like the Stewardship Council of Canada as a global body to help exporters certify their products.

Indian wooden handicraft artisans and exporters started facing hurdles, especially after 2000, though they kept exporting goods after payment of high fee. There is, therefore, an urgent need to have an independent autonomous body within the purview of the Centre to

deal with the issue of forest certification. The Malaysian forest department, which was way behind India in the 60s, has attained a position of leadership in forestry issues in Asia as they created a National Forest Certification Council after 2000 and set-up standards and mechanisms to certify timber and wooden products.

The Indian forest working plans are based on the sustained yield concept, the bedrock of Sustainable Forest Management (SFM). India being a timber-deficient nation needs to import wood. We need not buckle under international pressure for institutionalising certification for domestic use of timber as most of the timber coming from Government forests is as per the working plan-based sustained yields concept. The Centre should not support any agency outside the Government to do certification for obvious reasons. However, as over 70 per cent of wood is coming from agro-forestry and other private lands, we would need to have a certification set up for timber grown outside recorded forests, mainly to overcome the trade barrier imposed by Western nations to help our handicraft export.

In fact, all over the world, the basic focus of certification is to overcome trade barriers. In 2003, the setting up of a National Forest Certification Agency under Section 3 of the Environmental Protection Act, 1986 was proposed, with zonal offices in the Ministry's regional offices and a provision for accreditation of charter foresters and other experts. The then Minister, TR Baalu, approved it but then it got entangled in a bureaucratic web and never saw the light of day. The problem in this Ministry is unnecessary projection of foresters as anti-development before Ministers and the Prime Minister.

Senior officers should rid themselves of unnecessary fear and angularities for better governance. The late TN Seshan, who also worked as Environment Secretary, is remembered for making landmark reforms like setting up regional offices, setting up of The Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education and National/State Forest Academies and so on. He will be long admired for setting environment governance on the right trajectory. It is time for a national forest certification agency to be created under Section 3 of the Environment Protection Act, 1986 within the overall purview of the Environment, Forest and Climate Change Ministry with authority to conduct its business independently and focus on helping the exporter with minimum transaction cost.

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