

Chetan Chauhan, [Hindustan Times](#)  
Email Author  
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## Bamboo to be income source for tribals

Bamboo could be a new source of livelihood for millions of poor tribals and forest dwellers across India.

The Environment ministry has decided to define bamboo as grass under the Indian Forest Act of 1927 - a bible for forest bureaucracy in the country -- thereby allowing forest dwellers its harvest.

As of now, bamboo is categorized as a tree, meaning timber, which is under exclusive control of the forest departments. It means that removing bamboo without permission of forest department can result in jail of up to one year. Bamboo, unlike trees, can grow again on its own after harvesting.

The bamboo's definition under the colonial forest act was in violation of the watershed Forest Rights Act of 2006, which defined bamboo as minor forest produce. It meant that even through rights of over a million forest dwellers and tribals were recognized, they did not had access to bamboo, a rich forest produce.

"Most bamboo is found in India's poorest tribal areas," said Nandan Saxena, whose film on bamboo Hollow Cylinder prompted Members of Parliament to urge the government to change its definition. Several civil society bodies such as the Centre for Science and Environment had also sought a similar change.

Environment minister Jairam Ramesh confirmed to *HT* that the change was under way and will be announced in couple of days. "I will usher new livelihood avenue for millions of poor living in and around forests," he said.

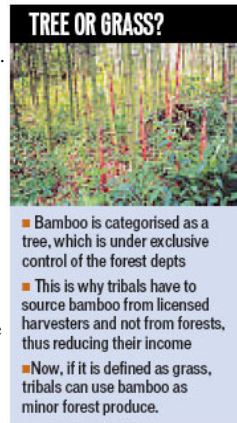
The UPA government's decision can improve livelihood of tribals such as Kangila Devi in north-eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh, who gets just fifty paisa for a making pack of 10 sticks of incense, which in the retails market costs more than Rs 20. It is because they get bamboo from the licensed harvesters, not directly from forests, their traditional source for centuries.

Bamboo has changed rural economies of China and Taiwan, its biggest exporters in the world. Both countries are now pioneers in using bamboo as a replacement for use of timber in homes and as high design fabric. In India, forest department's regulations have been termed as a biggest stumbling block in its wider use, which could have provided livelihood sources to millions living around bamboo forests.

Shankar Gopalakrishnan of tribal rights group Campaign for Survival and Dignity said the poor would not benefit unless right of the people in owning, managing and use of bamboo is respected. "License raj of Forest Departments should end and the ministry should clearly state that," he said.

Many foresters such as M K Ranjitsingh, a former joint secretary in the environment secretary, do not agree with Gopalakrishnan, fully. "The benefit to the poor will depend on how the locals exercise their right and they don't fall prey to paper mill owners," he said, while asking the government not to allow harvesting of bamboos inside 600 protected areas.

The UPA government's decision would have little effect if the state governments fail to set up bamboo intensive industries close to homes for tribals, who would have free access to it.



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