

Bamboo trade may open up for tribals

NEW DELHI: Environment minister [Jayanthi Natarajan](#) has overruled objections from her officials to break the forest bureaucracy's monopoly over the annual Rs 10,000 crore bamboo trade and declared it a 'minor forest produce' instead of a 'tree' under forest laws. This will allow tribals, instead of forest departments, to harvest and auction bamboo, which is one of the major raw materials for the paper, pulp and board industry, from their community and private lands.

The forest ministry had for long classified bamboo as a tree despite its scientific description as a grass. The classification ensured that under the Indian Forest Act, 1927, fallen bamboo got classified as timber and remained under the firm control of the forest bureaucracy which harvested and sold it to the industry. The tribals got a pittance on some occasions even as the industry got bamboo at low rates over long lease periods.

With the introduction of UPA's flagship Forest Rights Act, the tribal affairs ministry pushed to get the fast growing species of grass out of the control of forest officials with the law providing that the right to harvest minor forest produce (products not classified as timber) grown on traditional forest lands would lie with the tribals.

But the forest bureaucracy refused to alter its regulations and classification of the species and put up hurdles in various states based on the Indian Forest Act and its existing rules.

Previous environment minister Jairam Ramesh too pushed the case for relaxing the archaic and incorrect classification of bamboo and easing the norms to ensure that tribals got their rights under FRA but met with only partial success.

Earlier this year, the tribal affairs ministry secured Cabinet nod to offer minimum support price for minor forest produce, including bamboo, to tribals through a new scheme along the lines of the support prices provided to farmers for major crops. The prime minister announced the scheme in his August 15 speech as a prominent part of UPA-2's pro-tribal measures.

But the tribal affairs ministry, in the last stages of transferring control of bamboo to tribals and finalizing the scheme, got a jolt when senior environment ministry officials stuck to the line that bamboo was a 'tree' under the Indian Forest Act, 1927 and could not be harvested, transported or sold by tribals.

Environment minister Jayanthi Natarajan then stepped in and overruled her officials and put on record that bamboo would be classified as a minor forest produce under the Indian Forest Act, 1927 as well.

The decision will pave the way for the tribal affairs ministry to launch the scheme though officials still expect a lot of resistance from state forest officials in handing over real control to the tribals. In some states, forest officials have blocked tribals from selling bamboo by using other regulations like working plans for forestlands being amended to permit the harvest. The tribal affairs ministry believes once the scheme is launched, the forest bureaucracy will have to fall in line.