

## Forest babus block plan to give tribals bamboo rights

Subodh Ghildiyal & Nitin Sethi, TNN Aug 17, 2012, 03:30AM IST

NEW DELHI: UPA's initiative to give tribals control over the Rs 20,000 crore forest economy is again under threat, with the Union environment and forests ministry saying it will continue to treat bamboo as a tree and not "grass".

The ministry's stance on bamboo sets the clock back after the Centre had announced that bamboo was a "grass", thereby qualifying it as non-timber forest produce. Forest-dwellers can cut and sell non-timber produce under community rights given by the Forest Rights Act but keeping bamboo classified as "tree" under the Indian Forest Act would prohibit harvesting of the fast-growing species.

The reclassification of bamboo as "grass" came after protracted efforts to unshackle minor forest produce from the monopoly of forest bureaucracy for local dwellers. The massive bamboo business is a big revenue earner as it feeds the paper and pulp industry.

While Centre is in the last stages of shifting the control of bamboo to tribals backed by a commission to fix minimum support price for all minor produce, the tribal affairs ministry has been jolted by its forest counterpart's U-turn.

According to top sources, the environment and forest secretary this week told an official meeting that bamboo continued to be classified as timber under Indian Forest Act of 1927. He reportedly said, "Bamboo is a tree but it is grass once it is cut." The implication: tribals cannot harvest the rich and vast bamboo tracts, but only use dead and fallen ones.

The environment secretary's stance negates the efforts over two years to release bamboo from the clutches of forest department. The decision to pave the way for tribal control of bamboo came in March 2011 when the Prime Minister, Planning Commission and then environment minister [Jairam Ramesh](#) decided to declare it as a minor forest produce. When contacted, environment and forests minister [Jayanthi Natarajan](#) dissociated herself from any rethink on bamboo.

"I fully support the rights of forest-dwellers to access bamboo and their access should not be curtailed. If there are any hindrances to their rights under Indian Forest Act, I shall review them," she said.

In 2011, Ramesh had sent letters to CMs that bamboo be treated as minor forest produce and added it was a non-timber forest produce under the Forest Rights Act.

The rethink on bamboo could take the sheen off the UPA initiative which was even mentioned by PM [Manmohan Singh](#) in his Independence Day speech.

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