

## Bamboo — the ordinary plant with extraordinary uses

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BAMBOO is almost ubiquitous in nature. One of the oldest plants on Earth, bamboo is cultivated, or grows, throughout the world and has uses from cradle to coffin. For various reasons, this grass has fascinated people, especially poets.

Opening the Seventh World Bamboo Congress in the Capital recently, the Prime Minister, Mr Atal Bihari Vajpayee, paid a poetic tribute to the "miracle plant" in his inimitable style. He said the `ordinary plant' with `extraordinary qualities' had always fascinated him. And growing lyrical, he took the large global audience on a fancy flight to the *Vedic* times. He explained how in the *Vedic vajapeya yajna*, bamboo seeds were offered to the fire.

"There is a great beauty in bamboo's amazing range of functionality. In a flute, it creates music; in brush and paper, it creates poems and paintings; and in simple sticks and strips in the hands of ordinary men and women, it inspires wondrous works of art," Mr Vajpayee said. The plant, which for centuries has been integral to the daily lives of people throughout the world, had 1,500 documented uses, from the cradle to the coffin. From an `orphan' crop, bamboo can emerge as the "green gold" for India.

The Government allocated Rs 2, 600 crore in the Tenth Plan for the promotion of bamboo. It hopes to create about eight million jobs in the bamboo industry, lift five million families out of poverty and earn Rs 16,000 crore in revenue by the end of the Tenth Plan, in 2007.

The Government recently launched a National Mission on Bamboo Technology and Trade Development that will involve the community in the growing and primary processing of bamboo, leaving all value-addition and commercial activities to cooperatives and private entrepreneurs, with the Government playing the role of a facilitator to create an enabling environment.

India would particularly like to develop bamboo cultivation and bamboo industry concentrated in the north-eastern region and extend it to new areas as well.

According to the Planning Commission Deputy Chairman, Mr K. C. Pant, the Government has recognised the potential of bamboo both as a commercial product and for employment generation, particularly in tribal and rural areas.

A national mission has been proposed to promote not only industrial application of this group of plants, but also the cultivation of suitable species for specific end uses. This would ensure scientific development and utilisation of these resources and prevent their over-exploitation, as in the case of timber the world over.

A committee set up by the Plan panel under Member, Dr D. N. Tiwari, has recommended the setting up of a Mission on Bamboo Technology and Trade Development.

The report of the mission envisages strengthening of the resource base by planting bamboo on two million hectares in forest and non-forest land, including wasteland. It also envisages development and adoption of technologies and processes for enhancing efficiency and quality in the production of bamboo-based products.

The World Bamboo Congress indeed came at an opportune time for India. A number of countries are well ahead of India in the technologies of bamboo production and use. India can benefit from knowledge of practices, traditions, usages and markets for such products. The importance of bamboo to the world economy and its people is enormous. Over 2.5 billion people live in association with bamboo and the money value of the annual usage worldwide runs into billions of dollars. Global and national trade in bamboo and bamboo products is growing annually at 15-20 per cent.

The potential of bamboo to help fuel rural, economic and industrial development has been bolstered by the triennial International Bamboo Workshops and Congresses. These events have contributed substantially to the development of the bamboo sector throughout the world and raised the profile of bamboo among peoples, governments and institutions. These events have also encouraged global interaction through improved networking and sharing of ideas.

This was recognised on World Environment Day in 1999 when Mr Vajpayee announced a significant new initiative, committing the government to a major development of the bamboo sector. Indeed, with an established industrial base and a consumptive market in place, there is no reason why bamboo cannot leverage itself into a position of strength in India or any other bamboo-growing country.

It is for this reason that the Seventh World Bamboo Congress was held in India with the theme "Bamboo for Integrated Development".

The World Bamboo Congress is an international event organised every three years. In the past, WBC was hosted by the Philippines, Mexico, Japan and the last two Congresses were organised by Indonesia and Costa Rica.

A cross-section of the delegates at the New Delhi Congress stressed the need for legislative support to popularise the use of the eco-friendly bamboo.

Mr William Ipokre, a high-ranking forest officer from Tanzania, said there is no specific legislation in his country to support bamboo cultivation and popularise its use in day to-day activities.

"Yes, it is a good idea to seek legislative support. The government is going to notify bamboo as a horticulture product by removing it from the category of forest goods. This will help in the reduction of taxes and make for freer movement of bamboo from one place to another," according to Mr Sushanto Mittra, consultant, World Bamboo Congress. Mr U. Jay Raj, senior consultant, School of Agriculture, Indira Gandhi Open University (IGNOU), said that in India too there is no bamboo-specific legislation.

"Time has come for a serious re-think on the whole question of bamboo cultivation and its popular use. Bamboo is so strong a grass that it can be used for building houses that can withstand the devastating effects of earthquake. We must promote its use in quake-prone areas of the country," he said.

"Over the last 100 years or so, better harvesting technologies for timber and logwood have contributed to the increased use of these materials for buildings and furniture leading to the neglect of bamboo. So much so bamboo came to be just burnt. Now, because of economic factors, the cost-effective bamboo can be used for various activities.

Since India has a large area of bamboo cultivation, the material can be put to profitable use on a mass scale. The current legislation covers the overall forest preservation and ecological conservation. It needs to be bamboo-focussed."

(The author, a former Deputy Editor with PTI, is a New Delhi-based freelance writer.)