

Bamboo: Rejuvenating Rural Economy

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Bamboo is a natural indigenous raw material that can play a key role in the rejuvenation of the rural economy impacting, both, the agricultural sector and industrial sector. It is the most environment-friendly plant on this planet, being one of the highest carbon sequesters amongst all the floral species, which grows rapidly, matures within a few years and re-grows after harvesting without the need for replanting, making it a perennial 'renewable' resource.

The Coronavirus epidemic has wreaked havoc on the global economy, and the Indian economy has not come out unscathed. The lockdown dealt a double whammy to the economy, one due to the closing down of all economic activities and two, due to the flight of labour from cities back to rural areas. The losses accruing to the industrial, services and agricultural sector due to the lockdown are huge. Add to it, the time it will take for these industries to ramp-up production to their

pre-Covid levels and the numbers are staggering.

The large-scale reverse migration of rural populations from cities and industrialised and agricultural & horticulture belts across the country has created immense pressure on the rural economy, that is already dealing with issues of unemployment and underemployment. The government has responded to the distress of the returning migrants by expanding MGNREGA works to ensure that they have some work on hand.

But a significant majority of these returning migrants are skilled and semi-skilled labour having worked in the industrial and construction industry and service industries like hospitality, logistics, retail as well commercial agriculture and horticulture. MGNREGA is unable to offer them opportunities that allow them to utilise their skills and earn livelihoods and can at best be an emergency provision. It was in fact the lack of adequate employment opportunities in their villages and towns that had led to the



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Bamboo: Cultural Linkage

Pena is a single stringed musical instrument. It consists of two parts, the penamasa or dhorr which is a bamboo pole attached to a coconut shell and pena cheijing or chorr, which is a bow used to produce friction on the string. The pena player, called Pena Asheiba/Pena Khongba, also sings along while playing. Pena is an indispensable part of **Meitei society in Manipur**, used in ritualistic functions like Lai Haraouba and Lai Ikouba.



draw lessons from this great economic heritage to grow our footprint in the global market. As we march on this redesigned trajectory in economic growth, we must walk the path of sustainable development, building climate resilience through mitigation and adaptation processes.

Bamboo is one such natural indigenous raw material that can play a key role in the rejuvenation of the rural economy impacting, both, the agricultural sector and industrial sector. It is the most environment-friendly plant on this planet, being one of the highest carbon sequesters amongst all the floral species. It grows rapidly, matures within a few years and re-grows after harvesting without the need for replanting, making it a perennial 'renewable' resource. Bamboo is also a very effective natural resource to control soil erosion, raise the water table and improve fertility of even the most degraded soils. Bamboo can thus play a key role in combating desertification by restoring degraded lands and protecting forests.

outmigration of these populations in the first place.

Scientific research has provided evidence that the Novel Coronavirus is here to stay. At the same time, our urban-centric growth model makes it imperative that we contain the pandemic in our cities as soon as possible so as to enable the opening of our economy. The urban-centric and concentrated nature of our development has led to the emergence of high-density economic clusters. The lack of affordable housing and planned urban growth has led migrants to live in congested unhygienic environments, often without regular access to water and hygienic sanitation facilities. The pandemic has also exposed the lack of readiness of public and private health-care infrastructure to take in rising numbers of COVID-19 patients.

But the industries, service and commercial agriculture in the growth clusters across the country have been badly hit due to the flight of migrants; and efforts are being made to bring back skilled migrants and restart the economy. It is also a reality that underemployment and unemployment existed in urban growth clusters due to the availability of surplus labour that had migrated from the rural areas in great numbers. It is therefore imperative that a significant portion of this semi-skilled and skilled labour that contributed to this surplus labour be retained in the villages. This will have a two-pronged impact; for one it will reduce the population pressure on our urban growth centers and two,

it will make available semi-skilled and skilled labour in our villages to rejuvenate the rural economy across the country.

The contemporary 'coping with coronavirus' context offers us an excellent opportunity to think of out-of-the-box ideas and work towards building an 'Aatmanirbhar Bharat'. We must remember that India was a strong and self-reliant economy in ancient times. The pre-industrialised Indian economy saw a vibrant global mercantile trade where products made by local artisans using natural raw materials had great demand. We must



Bamboo can add up to 6-8 inches of humus to the soil every year while a single Bamboo plant can bind up to 6 CUM of soil. Besides, most Bamboo species form an evergreen canopy, shedding leaves all year round and this too contributes to improving soil health. It can be easily integrated into agriculture by growing it on farm boundaries and farmland as well as non-agricultural land including wastelands and degraded lands, and in homesteads. Bamboo provides farmers a perennial income, allowing for annual harvests at any time of the year offering them a robust and dependable supplement to an otherwise relatively fickle agriculture.

Bamboo, a woody grass is a versatile material with an aesthetic appearance and lends itself to the manufacture of furniture, lifestyle and interiors products and is increasingly being used to replace timber. The tensile strength of bamboo is also being harnessed to reduce the use of steel, a high embodied energy resource, in industries like construction and has the potential to generate exponential employment, on-site and off-site, in the construction industry.

The International Bamboo and Rattan Organisation (INBAR) is a multilateral development organisation that promotes environmentally sustainable development using Bamboo and Rattan. It has 46 Member States. Its unique set-up makes INBAR an important representative for Member States. With over 40 of its Member States from the Global South, INBAR has played an especially strong role in promoting South-South cooperation for the last twenty years. Since its inception, it has been making a real difference to the lives of millions of people and environments around the world, with achievements in areas such as: raising standards; promoting safe, resilient Bamboo construction; restoring degraded land; capacity-building; and informing green policy and Sustainable Development Goal objectives. In 1998, when I was the



Union Minister for Environment and Forests, India became a signatory to the INBAR treaty.

My Ministry took the initiative to start Bamboo promotion in our country. I also facilitated to establish a not-for-profit organisation, Konkan Bamboo and Cane Development Centre (KONBAC), in my constituency, Sindhudurg district of Maharashtra in 2004. KONBAC in

partnership with INBAR focused on the development of Bamboo as a key resource for catalysing an inclusive green economy. One of the key strategies pursued by KONBAC was to work towards positioning bamboo as a pro-poor credible alternative to timber providing the rural poor and small land holders an opportunity to participate in and benefit from the US\$100+ billion wood products market. The second important strategy was to leverage Bamboo's off-farm economic value and opportunity to realise the considerable environmental benefits that its growing offers.

KONBAC manufactures not only furniture and interior accessories, but also constructs entire building structures made entirely from Bamboo, both in India and abroad. Over the last sixteen years, it has succeeded in changing the perception of Bamboo from being a 'poor man's timber' to a 'rich man's choice' as a credible alternative material of high-quality wood that is currently being used for furniture and construction. This has helped move bamboo up the value ladder as a material of choice for the environmentally conscious community and for those consumers who seek novelty.

Today, KONBAC has developed a self-sustaining institutional ecosystem and has a fully developed facility for designing, prototyping

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and producing marketable Bamboo products for domestic and international markets. It has also put in place mechanisms to link poor Bamboo producers to larger lucrative markets and has emerged as a model that is being emulated elsewhere in India and abroad. These interventions have provided an income to thousands of people over the last sixteen years. It has also led to the greening of the environment through the plantation of Bamboo. The KONBAC experience demonstrates that the Bamboo sector has the potential to offer exponential entrepreneurship and employment opportunities to rural populations like farmers, youth and women in farm-based and non-farm enterprises.

Another dimension of promoting Bamboo key driver for agro-industrialisation is its low dependence on high-technology or infrastructure, its easy availability in the rural areas and availability of local labour. Further, Bamboo clusters can be developed as hub-and-spoke models with technology enabled and high-skill processes being undertaken at the hub and primary processing undertaken at the village level. This dispersed model of production can lead to exponential employment opportunities to rural communities across the country.

This humble grass, also known as green gold, not only has the potential of rejuvenating the rural economy but is also a key resource for building climate resilience and catalysing an inclusive green economy. The sustainable qualities of bamboo are critical to the contemporary policy discourse on 'circular economy' that involves designing products, services and supply chains which are regenerative: that is, which are based on renewable energy and resources, do not generate waste and keep products and materials in use for the longest time possible. Bamboo can become the cornerstone of the circular economy and offers India the opportunity to leapfrog to an inclusive green economy. □

KALEIDOSCOPE Nazhu Festival - Nagaland

The Nazhu Festival of the Pochury-Naga from Müluori merits attention as it continues to be observed by a small group of people who barely keep alive the ritualistic practices associated with the ancestral religion. The most symbolic and unique element common to all is heralding of Nazhu, with the erection of a bamboo totem Awuthrüü, that resembles a giant wind chime hung from a tall bamboo. The totem is erected any day from the 20th to 24th February. For the Laniri Nale, the totem goes up on the 24th February with all the formalities completed on this day.

