

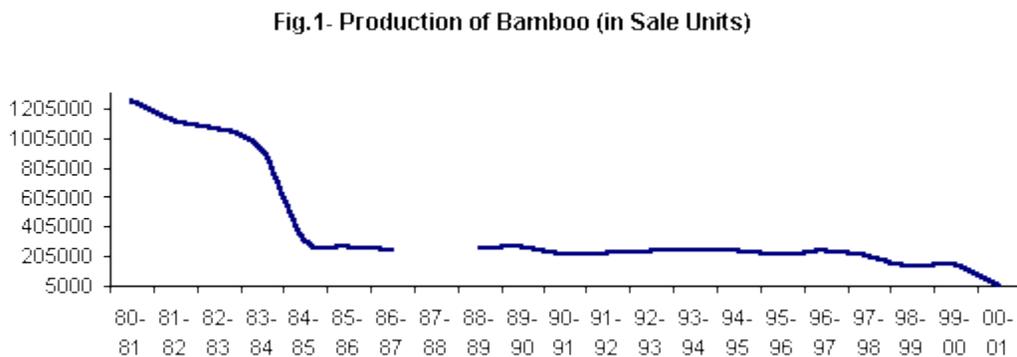
Bamboo:

The state has bamboo forest of about 18491 sq.km divided into 325 zones. The official records show the average annual outturn of bamboo as 2.50 lakh tons. But it is reported that outturn of bamboo is much more than the stated one. At one time, requirement of bamboo by M/s Orient Paper Mills, M/s Straw Products Ltd. and M/s BILT was 5 lakh MT annually. In addition to meeting their needs from forests, these companies also procured bamboo privately from bamboo growers.

1.1 Production and Pricing

In 1950-51, number of bamboo harvested stood at 3.89 crores with a revenue of Rs. 6.2 lakh. But in 1996-97 the revenue from bamboo reached Rs. 828 lakh with production of bamboo of 2.5 lakh tons or roughly 25 crores in numbers. However, as can be seen from the figure below the production of Bamboo significantly reduced in the mid 80s to stagnate for the next 10 years. And again there has been a fall in bamboo harvesting in the late 90s. Now bamboo harvesting has virtually come to a stop. The details are given in the next section.

Figure : Production of Bamboo(in Sale Units)



1.2 Policy and its Impact

Bamboo was leased out to paper mills prior to the Forest Enquiry Committee of 1959 on a long-term basis. 5 Paper Mills were involved in the working of bamboo. The state government had made an agreement with paper mills to meet the needs of the tenants. 14 Forest Divisions were leased to M/s Orient Paper Mills for working of bamboo on a long-term basis up to 30th

September 1980. The lease was renewed for 12 years w.e.f. 1st October 1977 with a royalty of Rs. 2.90 per 100 metres of salia bamboo and Rs. 5.80 per 100 metres of dabba bamboo.

Bamboo was nationalised on 1st October 1988. OFDC was made the agent for working of bamboo. The Paper Mills were appointed as sub-agents of the corporation by paying lease rent violating Forest Conservation Act. Here an interesting issue of law arises whether the arrangement with the paper industry amounts to leasing of forests or not. The official position says it is leasing of forest produce, and not of land, and hence the provisions of the Forest Conservation Act are not attracted. However, an arrangement would amount to leasing of land if the lessee pays a royalty to the owner of land, the payment to wage labourers is made by the lessee, and the lessee has the right to take the produce away. Therefore forest leases in favour of private parties in Orissa are against the Forest Conservation Act. As the permission of the GOI has not been taken for the assignment of bamboo forests to industry, the entire arrangement is unlawful. In addition to this, after the announcement of Raw Material Procurer (RMP) System OFDC and paper industries failed to comply with needs of the tenants and rural artisans although there is legal provision for supply of bamboo to rural artisans under "Supply of Bamboo to Artisans including Cooperative Societies (Orissa) Rules, 1980." When paper mills were provided with bamboo at a minimal price, the rural artisans had to get bamboo from OFDC depot, at several times the former price. This was ostensibly done by Government of Orissa to promote industrial interests at cost of poor artisans and rural rustics. These arrangements in Orissa not only revive the old contractor system, even worse, as at least in the older system there was some transparency.

OFDC and the paper mills also exploited bamboo cutters by paying low wages. The bamboo cutters also did not get bonus. The Minimum Wages Advisory Sub-committee recommended giving minimum wage to the bamboo cutters but it was hardly observed. There were also examples of non-payment of wages to bamboo cutters. Workers engaged in cutting, dragging and carrying them to transport points used to get wages of Rs 321.45 per tonne of bamboo. Besides, the labourers got Rs. 14.70 and Rs 101 per tonne of bamboo for bundling of bamboo in the main depot and making motorable roads inside the forests, respectively. Taking the average annual production of two lakh tonnes of bamboo, the remuneration received by those employed in the bamboo trade worked out to a whopping Rs. 8.62 crores annually.

These earnings have now come to a stop since the state government stopped bamboo operations in 2000. Hundreds of labours dependent on bamboo now have been rendered

completely jobless, while several hundred more have become migrant labourers. Still others have taken to 'podu' or shifting cultivation after clearing the once precious, but now worthless bamboo forests.

According to the state government, closure of bamboo cutting was necessitated after the paper mills in the state refused to lift 68,000 MT of bamboo from the depots of OFDC in 2000-2001 collection season. The unsold bamboo is valued at nearly 10 crores. The paper mills, however, say that the unsold stock of bamboo is rotten and not fit for production of paper. For another, one sale unit of bamboo which, as per OFDC calculation is equivalent a tonne - actually weighs only 0.6 tonne.

Kailash Mallick, a resident of Ambakana in Ganjam district, used to eke out a decent living by cutting bamboo, till the state government stopped bamboo operations in 2000. Today he works as a mason, a trade he is hardly familiar with, and earns a meagre amount, which is not enough even to feed his family. He cannot even think of consulting a doctor for a swollen eye he got after an injury while working on a road project. "The only work I ever knew was bamboo cutting. After it was stopped, it has been very difficult for me to make ends meet," says Kailash, with an unmistakable tinge of helplessness in his voice.

Kailash was, at least, lucky enough to find an alternative employment, however inadequate it may be. But there are hundreds of others who have been rendered completely jobless, while several hundred more have become migrant labourers and are at the mercy of rapacious employers. Still others have taken to 'podu' or shifting cultivation after clearing the once precious, but now worthless bamboo forests.

In Khamanakhol panchayat of Andaman district alone, 578 acres of exclusive bamboo forests have been cleared. 457 families, which earlier earned a livelihood in bamboo operations, are now completely dependent on shifting cultivation. "There was no shifting cultivation in our area, as long as bamboo operations continued. We feel very bad about having to destroy the bamboo forests that sustained us for so long. But, is there a way out?" says Japa Kanr, a resident of Porubhatta village ruefully.

The reason for refusal of the paper mills to lift their quota of bamboo seems to be the advances in paper making technology. Following the rapid strides paper technology has made in the last

few years, bamboo has lost its status as the sole raw material for making paper. It has lost its place to low grade wood, which is a much cheaper option for the paper mills. Where as the government has fixed the rate of bamboo at Rs 1,650 per tonne, acacia (*Acacia auriculaeformis*) or chakunda (*Cassia Siamea*) wood is available at Rs 750-1000 per tonne, while jhaun (*Casuarina equisetifolia*) is available at Rs 1,400 per tonne. By using hard wood, the paper mills are able to save on transportation cost too, as bamboo is much lighter than wood.

Till a few years back, the paper mills in the state used to consume about 5 lakh tonnes of raw material. Nearly half the requirement was met from forests of Orissa. However, the collective requirement of the mills came down to about 3.75 lakh tonnes after closure of the Orient Paper Mills in Brajarajnar. As the paper mills started using more and more wood in place of bamboo, production of bamboo went continuously downhill. From a high of three lakh tonnes in 1983-84, it plummeted to a mere 1.5 lakh by 1998-99.

The three functioning paper mills in Orissa- two units of Ballarpur Industries at Chowdwar and Jeypore and the JK Paper Mill at Rayagada - are now meeting even their meagre requirement from bamboo from Chhatisgarh as it works out much cheaper for them. For wood, they depend mostly on Andhra Pradesh, for the same reason. Besides, they are relying on captive plantations.

Though the state government blames the paper mills for all this, experts say the government is now paying for a decision it took a decade ago. As per that decision, it was made mandatory for paper mills to meet at least half of their requirement with other, alternative material. Having tasted blood, the paper mills are now not ready to meet even half their requirement from bamboo.

Besides, the reason for bamboo not being harvested has been lack of a bamboo-working scheme - a mandatory requirement before cutting of bamboo - for 13 of the 23 forest divisions. Preparation of the working plan takes 2-3 years and the government has clearly failed to do things in time. A section of OFDC believes that the paper mill owners have to obey the government conditions. The loser in this whole process is the state exchequer and the poor forest dependant people for whom bamboo working related jobs meant food. Neither the FD nor the paper industries lose as much as the forest dwellers. The FD does not feed its staff from the revenue that comes from bamboo royalty, so why should they bother?

It is not as if the workers are the only ones affected by the closure of bamboo operations. The state itself was a big loser in terms of revenue. The government had fixed a rate of Rs 647/- as royalty for a ton of bamboo in 1999-2000, the last year when bamboo cutting was done. At this rate, the revenue lost annually since then works out to Rs 13 crores. But, in the last three years the royalty earned by the state was from Rs. 5.11 to 8.52 Crores as the amount of bamboo collected was less. In a state going through its worst ever financial crisis, this is no mean loss of revenue.

The biggest fall-out of closure of bamboo operations, however, has been on the bamboo forests themselves. Experts are of the opinion that the rich bamboo forests of the state may soon become a thing of past, if bamboo cutting is not resumed shortly.

This is so, they say, because the onset of flowering - already seen in parts of Baliguda block of Kandhamal district - is a sure sign of the impending rout of bamboo forests. It may be noted that coastal Orissa has now become devoid of bamboo primarily due to this reason. Cutting of bamboo every four years is a mandatory requirement to prevent flowering. But, with the closure of operation in force for the last two years, the entire bamboo forest in the state is in serious danger of complete annihilation. Field level forest officials maintain that - bamboo cutting should resume immediately, for no other reason than to ensure the survival of bamboo forests. The closure has led to other problems too. Owing to non-cutting of bamboo, the bushes are fast getting joined with each other. If a forest fire breaks out, not just the bamboo forests, but the entire stretch of forest in the area runs the risk of getting wiped out. Besides, with no gaps between bushes, growth of fresh bamboo shoots is completely ruled out. Apart from the very real danger of the entire bamboo forests in the state getting wiped out, the clustering of bushes also has serious implications for man and animal. Elephants have to move about in the bamboo forests. But, with their passage blocked by joining of bushes, they are certain to stray into human settlements, creating an avoidable problem.

For the crop year 2002-03, the State government decided to give a free hand to OFDC for Bamboo operation. It was decided that OFDC will harvest bamboo directly and will enjoy the freedom of disposing it regionally or at divisional level or through national tender. The state Govt. also slashed the sale price of bamboo per sale unit from Rs.1650/- to Rs.1185/-. For this reduction royalty was reduced from Rs.670 to Rs.350. The rest comes from operational cost and commission to OFDC. As per this bamboo operations were started in 13 divisions where working plans are ineffective. OFDC had floated a national tender and Bhadrachalam paper

mills had come forward. Operations had started in some of the divisions. But due to the failure of the Forest dept. in complying information in connection with T.N.Godavaran case, the MOEF has instructed the state that other than regeneration all other activities are to be stopped even if the working plans are effective. After this, the bamboo operation by OFDC has been stopped completely.