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Bamboo Under the Forest Act and the Forest Rights Act

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Bamboo Under the Forest Act and the Forest Rights Act

Bamboo grows like a grass but was legally treated like a tree for nearly a century. That single label controlled who could cut it and move it. This lesson shows how the label changed in 2017, and why it still matters.



A bamboo grove in Bokkapuram, Nilgiris. Bamboo’s legal status has shifted between forest law and forest-rights law. Photo by Timothy A. Gonsalves, via Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0).

At a glance

Four facts that settle most exam questions on this topic

01 2017 Year the Indian Forest (Amendment) Bill dropped the word bamboos from the tree definition.

02 Non-forest only The exemption applies only to bamboo grown outside forest land.

03 MFP status The Forest Rights Act, 2006 separately classifies bamboo as minor forest produce.

04 Ownership The Forest Rights Act, 2006 grants forest dwellers ownership of minor forest produce.

Four terms to know

Bamboo

Botanically a grass. It is fast growing. Some species grow up to 30 cm a day.

Minor forest produce (MFP)
: All non-timber forest produce of plant origin, including bamboo, cane, honey and tendu leaves.

The Godavarman case
: A long-running Supreme Court case. Its 1996 order stopped the movement of cut trees and timber out of the North-East.

Mautam
: The famine in Mizoram that follows mass flowering of Melocanna baccifera bamboo, about every 48 years.

1 How two laws treat bamboo differently

1.1 Is bamboo a tree or a grass?

Botanically, bamboo is a grass. It can grow tall and woody like a tree. Britannica calls bamboos tall treelike grasses.

The law once ignored the botany. The Indian Forest Act, 1927 listed bamboos inside its definition of a tree. Section 2(7) said a tree includes palms, bamboos, stumps, brush-wood and canes.

1.2 What did the tree label mean for a farmer?

Before 2017, felling and moving bamboo needed permits under the Act. This held for bamboo grown on forest land and on non-forest land. PIB called this a major impediment for farmers growing bamboo on their own land.

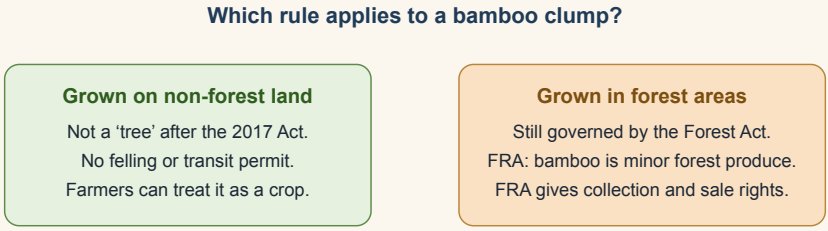
A permit was also needed to move bamboo between States. The Bill's own statement of objects said farmers faced hardship in getting permits for felling and transit.

1.3 What did the 2017 amendment change?

The Indian Forest (Amendment) Bill, 2017 removed one word from section 2(7). That word was bamboos. The Bill replaced an Ordinance that the President promulgated on 23 November 2017.

Lok Sabha passed the Bill on 20 December 2017. Rajya Sabha passed it on 27 December 2017. Both Houses passed it. The Bill deems the change in force from 23 November 2017.

PRS explains the effect. Felling or transporting bamboo grown in non-forest areas no longer needs a permit.



Original diagram: the split created by the 2017 amendment.

1.4 Does the amendment cover bamboo inside forests?

No. The Environment Minister said bamboo grown in forest areas will continue to be governed by the Indian Forest Act, 1927. The reform is for non-forest land only.

1.5 What does the Forest Rights Act, 2006 say about bamboo?

The Forest Rights Act, 2006 is a different law with a different aim. It recognises the rights of forest dwellers. Section 2(i) defines minor forest produce, or MFP. The definition includes bamboo, brush wood, stumps and cane.

Section 3(1)(c) lists a right of ownership, access to collect, use and dispose of minor forest produce. The produce must be what the community traditionally collected, within or outside village boundaries.

	Indian Forest Act, 1927 (as amended in 2017)	Forest Rights Act, 2006
Main aim	Regulate forests, forest produce and transit	Recognise rights of forest dwellers
Label for bamboo	No longer a tree on non-forest land	Minor forest produce
What it gives	No felling or transit permit for non-forest bamboo	Ownership, access, use and disposal of MFP
Year	Amended in 2017	Enacted in 2006

7. **Try it yourself:** Bamboo grows on a farmer's own field. Does the farmer need a Forest Act permit to cut it after 2017? See answer ↓

Show the answer

Quick check 1. True or false: The 2017 Forest Act amendment lets forest dwellers freely fell bamboo grown anywhere on forest land. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 2. True or false: The 2017 Act removed the word bamboos from the definition of tree in section 2(7) of the Indian Forest Act, 1927. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: pib.gov.in; prsindia.org; britannica.com

Sources: ies.gov.in

2 Why this conflict existed in the first place

2.1 What did the Supreme Court order in December 1996?

The case is T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad v. Union of India. On 12 December 1996, the Supreme Court passed an interim order. Paragraph 4 banned the movement of cut trees and timber from any of the seven North-Eastern States to other States.

The ban did not apply to certified timber needed for defence or other Government purposes. It also did not stop felling in a private plantation on land that is not forest.

2.2 Why did the order hit bamboo users?

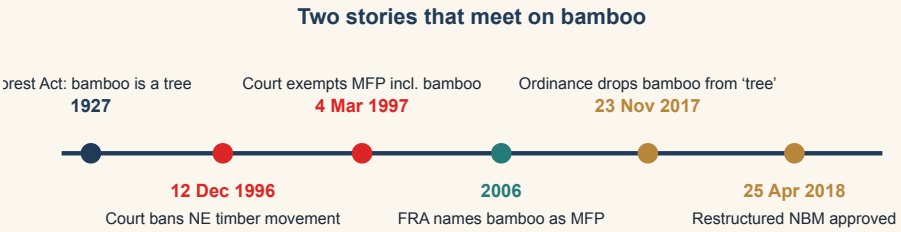
Down To Earth links the incense shutdown to the Supreme Court ban on felling and moving bamboo. Incense stick units across the country shut from 15 February 1997. They had no bamboo splits.

A member of the All India Agarbatti Manufacturers Association told the magazine the ban affected over a million workers in Karnataka. The magazine called it a Rs 800 crore industry.

2.3 How did the Court answer?

The Court met again on 4 March 1997. It modified its order as an interim step. Down To Earth reports that the Court made clear the ban would not apply to minor forest produce, including bamboo.

So the later rule was already softer for bamboo. Plywood and timber mills were hit hard too.



Red: the court-order story. Teal: the forest-rights story. Gold: the 2017 and 2018 reforms.

Original diagram built from the PIB, PRS, Supreme Court and Down To Earth sources listed in this lesson.

2.4 How big was the damage to plywood?

Down To Earth wrote that Assam's plywood industry made 60 per cent of the entire requirement of the country. It was the second biggest industry in Assam after tea.

A Wood Workers' Union leader said most plywood mills stopped on 24 December 1996. He said about one lakh (100,000) people were directly affected. This is the union leader's own estimate, not an official count.

2.5 Was the 2017 amendment a reply to the court order?

The sources do not say so. The Bill's statement of objects gives other reasons. Farmers faced hardship in getting permits, and States needed free inter-State movement of bamboo.

The Minister's reasons were to raise farm income and green cover. The court order and the 2017 Act are two separate stories. Both show how the tree label caused trouble.

8. **Think it through, before reading on.** A single legal label, tree, hurt both a plywood worker in Assam and a bamboo farmer. Why could one word cause such wide trouble? See answer ↓

Show the explanation

Quick check 3. True or false: The government's stated reason for the 2017 bamboo amendment was the 1996 Supreme Court order. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: api.sci.gov.in; downtoearth.org.in

Sources: prsindia.org; pib.gov.in

3 The famine hidden inside bamboo's biology

3.1 Why do most bamboos flower only once?

Britannica says most bamboos flower only after 12 to 120 years of growth. They flower once in their lifetime.

Mizoram’s forest department adds that Melocanna baccifera and Bambusa tulda both have lifecycles of 48 years.



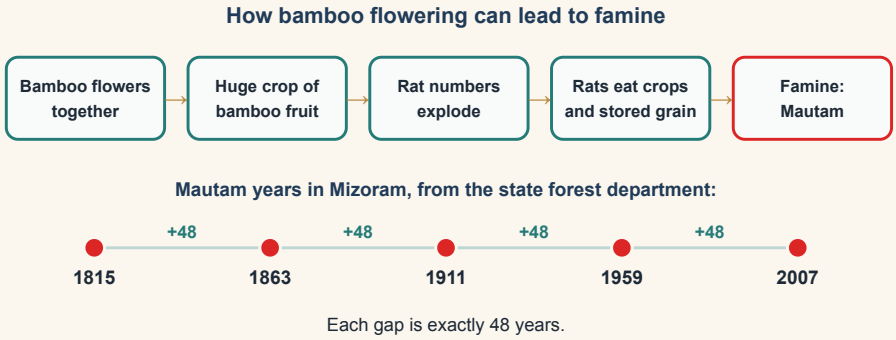


Melocanna baccifera, the bamboo behind Mizoram's Mautam cycle. Photo: George Muttathil Pulikurumba, CC BY-SA 4.0, from Wikimedia Commons.

3.2 What is Mautam?

The bamboo fruit is edible. When many plants fruit at once, food for rats suddenly rises. The department says this causes an explosion in rat numbers.

The rats destroy seeds and seedlings. They also eat other crops and stored grain. Serious famines follow. The famines caused by Melocanna baccifera flowering are called Mautam. The flowering of Bambusa tulda causes Thingtam.



Original diagram from the Mizoram Forest Department page. The chain of causes is as that page describes it.

3.3 When did Mautam strike?

The department lists Mautam in Mizoram in 1815, 1863, 1911, 1959 and 2007. Each gap is 48 years. MP-IDSA called it a 48 to 49 year cycle. No source used here gives 50 years.

MP-IDSA notes bamboo groves began flowering in November 2007. It said the flowering came with ‘all the attendant consequences’, as it had in 1959.

3.4 Why does the cycle matter for exams?

It shows that a plant’s life cycle can shape a region’s food security. It also explains why the Mizo Hills famine of 1959 comes up in modern history. The Mizoram history lesson on this site covers the political result.

9. **Try it yourself:** The Mautam years are 1815, 1863, 1911, 1959 and 2007. Add 48 to 2007. What year follows? See answer ↓

Show the answer

Quick check 4. True or false: Mizoram's Mautam famine happens because bamboo plants die off after decades, cutting off the region's main food source. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 5. True or false: The Mautam famines listed by Mizoram's forest department are 48 years apart. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: forest.mizoram.gov.in; idsa.in; britannica.com

4 A mission to grow bamboo, an industry still importing it

4.1 What is the National Bamboo Mission?

The National Bamboo Mission began as a Centrally Sponsored Scheme in 2006-07. It later came under the Mission for Integrated Development of Horticulture during 2014-15. It continued until 2015-16, says PIB.

On 25 April 2018, the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs approved a restructured Mission. It carried an outlay of Rs 1,290 crore, with Rs 950 crore as the Central share. The outlay was for the rest of the 14th Finance Commission period, which meant 2018-19 and 2019-20.

4.2 What has the restructured Mission achieved?

PIB's 2025 backgrounder gives progress as of 31 December 2024. Here are the numbers.

- 408 bamboo nurseries, 14 of them accredited.
- 60,000 hectares of non-forest area under bamboo plantation.
- 104 bamboo treatment and preservation units.
- 528 product development and processing units.
- 130 market infrastructure facilities for bamboo trade.



A bamboo-walled farm building on stilts at Sasatgre, West Garo Hills, Meghalaya. Photo: Timothy A. Gonsalves, CC BY-SA 4.0, from Wikimedia Commons.

4.3 What was done for the incense stick industry?

Incense sticks, or agarbatti, need thin bamboo sticks. In 2019 and 2020 the Government acted twice. PIB records that raw agarbatti imports moved from free to restricted trade from 1 September 2019.

A notification dated 9 June 2020 raised the import duty on round bamboo sticks for agarbatti from 10% to 25%. KVIC welcomed it. It said, quoting industry players, that at least one lakh new jobs would come in 8 to 10 months.

4.4 Is the supply gap closed?

The sources I used state the policy aims. They do not give a current share of imported sticks. So this lesson does not say how large imports are today.

What the sources do show is the intent. The Government wanted local bamboo to supply the incense trade, so that rural jobs stay at home.

10. **Try it yourself:** Name the two import steps taken for agarbatti in 2019 and 2020. See answer ↓

Show the answer

Quick check 6. True or false: In June 2020, India raised the import duty on round bamboo sticks for agarbatti from 10% to 25%. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: pib.gov.in; static.pib.gov.in

Sources: pib.gov.in

5 Why bamboo's classification mattered economically

5.1 Why does a legal label change a farmer's income?

Treating non-forest bamboo like an ordinary farm crop, rather than a regulated tree, opened new markets and income for rural growers. PIB said the reform would make a viable option of cultivation on 12.6 million hectares of cultivable waste land.

It also gave figures on the sector. Bamboo grows abundantly outside forests, with an estimated growing stock of 10.20 million tonnes. About 20 million people are involved in bamboo related activities.

PIB added that one tonne of bamboo provides 350 man days of employment.

5.2 Is bamboo really fast growing?

Yes. Britannica says bamboos are typically fast-growing perennials. Some species grow as much as 30 cm, or one foot, per day.

This lesson does not claim bamboo grows faster than every timber tree. None of the pages I used makes that comparison.

5.3 How much does the North-East hold?

An FAO paper quotes these figures. North Eastern states hold 28% of India's bamboo area and 66% of its growing stock. Their share of stock is more than twice their share of area.

This is why the 1996 order mattered to the region. A big part of the country's bamboo stock stands in the North-Eastern States.

5.4 What else can bamboo make?

PIB listed wood substitutes, panels, flooring, furniture, blinds, shoots for food, housing, charcoal and incense sticks. It said the change would also help paper and pulp units and rural craftsmen.

> 11. **Try it yourself:** The North-East has 28% of the area but 66% of the stock. What does this tell you about the region's bamboo?
>
> See answer ↓
>
> **Show the answer**

Sources: pib.gov.in; britannica.com; fao.org

The pattern examiners keep testing

This topic is tested by mixing true facts about the Forest Rights Act with a false claim about where the 2017 felling right applies.

UPSC CSP 2019, Q55. The question gave three statements. Statement 1 said that, after the recent amendment to the Indian Forest Act, forest dwellers can fell bamboos grown on forest areas. Statement 2 said bamboo is a minor forest produce under the Forest Rights Act, 2006. Statement 3 said that Act allows forest dwellers to own minor forest produce.

The answer key says statements 2 and 3 only. Statement 1 is false because the 2017 amendment's felling right applies to non-forest land, not forest areas. Statements 2 and 3 match section 2(i) and section 3(1)(c) of the Forest Rights Act. UPSC's official key gives B for Q55 in Series A.

Exam tip: when a statement gives forest dwellers a right over bamboo, check the land. Forest area or non-forest land? That one check settles most such questions.

Remember this

- **Two laws, two labels.** The Forest Act counted bamboo as a tree. The Forest Rights Act, 2006 calls it minor forest produce.
- **2017 reform:** Ordinance on 23 November 2017. Lok Sabha passed the Bill on 20 December and Rajya Sabha on 27 December. The word bamboos left section 2(7).
- **Only non-forest land.** Bamboo in forest areas stays under the Forest Act.
- **Court order:** 12 December 1996, ban on cut trees and timber leaving the seven North-Eastern States. The 4 March 1997 order

exempted MFP, including bamboo.

- **Mautam:** 1815, 1863, 1911, 1959, 2007. A gap of 48 years each time.
- **Mission:** started 2006-07. Restructured on 25 April 2018 with Rs 1,290 crore.

Explain it back: Say in your own words why the 2017 change helps a farmer but does not open forest bamboo to forest dwellers.

Quick Q&A

Does the 2017 amendment let forest dwellers cut bamboo on forest land?

No. It only applies to bamboo grown on non-forest land.

What did the 1996 Supreme Court order do?

It banned the movement of cut trees and timber out of the seven North-Eastern States. A 1997 order exempted minor forest produce, including bamboo.

What causes Mizoram's Mautam famine?

Mass bamboo flowering every 48 years. Rat numbers jump, and the rats destroy crops and stored grain.

What did the Government do for the incense stick industry?

It restricted raw agarbatti imports from 1 September 2019. It raised duty on round bamboo sticks from 10% to 25% on 9 June 2020.

How much did the restructured National Bamboo Mission get?

Rs 1,290 crore, approved on 25 April 2018.

Who holds most of India's bamboo growing stock?

The North-East, with about 66% by one FAO-quoted estimate.

Practice MCQs

1. What did the Indian Forest (Amendment) Bill, 2017 change about bamboo?

A. It banned bamboo cultivation entirely

B. It removed bamboo from the legal definition of 'tree' on non-forest land

C. It transferred all bamboo to the Forest Department

D. It made bamboo a protected species

See answer ↓

2. Under the Forest Rights Act, 2006, bamboo is classified as what?

A. A minor forest produce

B. A restricted timber species

C. A revenue crop

D. A protected wildlife species

See answer ↓

3. What right does the Forest Rights Act, 2006 grant over minor forest produce like bamboo?

A. No rights at all

B. The right to sell it only to the government

C. Ownership, access, use, and disposal rights to forest dwellers

D. Only the right to view it

See answer ↓

4. In which year was the National Bamboo Mission originally launched?

A. 2006-07

B. 2018-19

C. 2014-15

D. 2010-11

See answer ↓

5. Bamboo is botanically classified as a:

A. Grass

B. Palm

C. Shrub

D. Tree

See answer ↓

6. Roughly what share of India's bamboo growing stock (biomass) is held by North-East India?

A. 20%

B. 90%

C. 66%

D. 36%

See answer ↓

7. What was the financial outlay approved for the restructured National Bamboo Mission in 2018?

A. ₹2,481 crore

B. ₹10,103 crore

C. ₹1,290 crore

D. ₹35,000 crore

See answer ↓

8. A severe famine, linked to a cyclical bamboo-flowering phenomenon, hit the Mizo Hills in 1959 and is known by what name?

A. Chhut

B. Mautam

C. Thingtam

D. Buhrei

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **B.** The correct answer is **It removed bamboo from the legal definition of 'tree' on non-forest land**. Bamboo was a tree under section 2(7) of the Indian Forest Act, 1927. That meant a permit even for bamboo on private land. The change came first as an Ordinance in November 2017 and removed bamboos from that definition outside forests. Memory hook: grass in law, too, outside the forest. ↑ Q1
2. **A.** The answer is **a minor forest produce**. Section 2 of the Act defines minor forest produce as non-timber forest produce of plant origin. The list includes bamboo, brush wood, stumps and cane. Why the others fail: bamboo is a plant, not a wildlife species. The Act does not call it a revenue crop. It also does not list bamboo as restricted timber. Memory hook: bamboo is on the minor forest produce list. ↑ Q2
3. **C.** Section 3(1)(c) of the Forest Rights Act, 2006 gives a right of ownership, access to collect, use and dispose of minor forest produce. This covers produce the community traditionally collected. ↑ Q3
4. **A.** The correct answer is **2006-07**. The Mission began that year as a Centrally Sponsored Scheme. In 2014-15 it was folded into MIDH, and new work stopped after 2015-16. Cabinet then approved a restructured Mission on 25 April 2018. Memory hook: born 2006-07, restructured 2018. ↑ Q4
5. **A.** The correct answer is **Grass**. Bamboo belongs to the grass family, Poaceae. It grows tall and woody, so the law once treated it as a tree. The 2017 Ordinance removed that treatment for bamboo grown outside forests. Memory hook: tall as a tree, family of grass. ↑ Q5
6. **C.** The correct answer is **66%**. The North East holds more than two-thirds of India's bamboo growing stock. A 2006 estimate put its area share near 28% and its stock share near 67%. So each hectare there carries far more bamboo. Memory hook: a small share of the land, two-thirds of the stock. ↑ Q6
7. **C.** The correct answer is **₹1,290 crore**. Cabinet approved the restructured Mission on 25 April 2018 for 2018-19 and 2019-20. The Centre's share was ₹950 crore. Memory hook: 1290 in total, 950 from the Centre. ↑ Q7
8. **B.** Mautam is the famine that follows mass flowering of Melocanna baccifera bamboo. Mizoram's forest department lists it in 1815, 1863, 1911, 1959 and 2007. ↑ Q8

Quick-check answers

1. **False.** The 2017 change applies to bamboo grown on non-forest land. Bamboo in forest areas stays under the Forest Act. ↑ 1
2. **True.** The Bill omitted the word bamboos from section 2(7). ↑ 2
3. **False.** The Bill's objects speak of farmers' hardship with permits. The court order and the amendment are separate events. ↑ 3
4. **False.** Mautam is a famine caused by rats. Bamboo flowers and fruits together, rat numbers jump, and the rats eat crops and stored grain. ↑ 4
5. **True.** 1815, 1863, 1911, 1959 and 2007 are each 48 years apart. ↑ 5
6. **True.** A notification dated 9 June 2020 made this change. ↑ 6
7. **Think it through.** Bamboo on non-forest land is outside the tree definition now. PRS says no permit is needed to fell or move it. ↑ 7
8. **Think it through.** The Forest Act used one list for many plants. Bamboo sat in the list beside timber trees. Any rule made for trees then reached bamboo too. A court ban on cut trees froze bamboo for a while. A permit rule for trees made farmers ask for permits to move bamboo. One label, many side effects. ↑ 8
9. **Think it through.** 2055. The pattern is a gap of 48 years each time. This is a pattern worked from the dates, not a forecast made by the sources. ↑ 9
10. **Think it through.** In 2019, raw agarbatti imports became restricted from 1 September. In 2020, duty on round bamboo sticks rose from 10% to 25% by a notification of 9 June. ↑ 10
11. **Think it through.** Each hectare there carries more bamboo than the national average. So the region is a rich source of bamboo. ↑ 11

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