

NON-WOOD FOREST PRODUCTS OF BANGLADESH : AN OVERVIEW

S. A. Khan
N. A. Khan

ABSTRACT

The nature and status of the non-wood forest products (NWFP) of Bangladesh have been discussed. The present institutional arrangements for collection and processing of NWFP have been analysed and major problems identified. Some policy and functional/managerial suggestions have been made to improve and augment the production and management of the NWFP.

সারসংক্ষেপ

আলোচ্য নিবন্ধে বাংলাদেশের কাঠ-বহির্ভূত বনজ সম্পদের পরিচিতি ও প্রকৃতি আলোচিত হয়েছে। উক্ত সম্পদ সমূহের সংরক্ষণ, সংগ্রহ ও প্রক্রিয়াজাতকরণের প্রাতিষ্ঠানিক ব্যবস্থা ও সংশ্লিষ্ট সমস্যা আলোচিত হয়েছে। সমস্যা সমূহের আলোকে কিছু নীতি নির্ধারণী ও কার্য সম্পাদনমূলক সুপারিশ করা হয়েছে।

INTRODUCTION

In a developing country like Bangladesh, the non-wood forest products (NWFP) play a vital role in the economic resource arena. Though branded as minor forest products in old forestry literature and departmental records, they are certainly not minor products in the context of our economy, rather deserve to be given due importance in their own perspectives. NWFP contribute an estimated Tk 1.3 billion annually to the Bangladesh economy (Anon 1992a). This paper proffers a short overview of the NWFP in Bangladesh, including their export value, organisational arrangements for collection and suggestions for future promotion.

There is a controversy as to the definition and scope of the term NWFP. For the purpose of this paper, NWFP implies all renewable and tangible products, other than timber, firewood and charcoal derived from forests or any land under similar use, as well as woody plants.

PROFILE OF NWFP

Some of the important NWFP are enumerated below.

Bamboo : Often called as poor man's timber, bamboo plays a crucial role in our rural economy. It not only earns handsome revenue for the country, but also serves as the singular essential material for construction of house/shelters for rural populace, especially for the tribal people and the 'subculture' groups. Within a given period, it is the fastest growing plant in the world. The countries like Japan and China have over 400 species of bamboo which contribute significantly to their economy. There are about 27 bamboo species under 9 genera in Bangladesh (Alam 1992). Some of the major bamboo species are, *Bambusa vulgaris*, *Bambusa balcooa*, *Bambusa tulda*, *Bambusa nutans*, *Bambusa baccifera*, *Bambusa teres* etc. According to one study, the forest bamboo in Bangladesh covers a total area of 0.6 million ha with an annual yield of about 2.0 million ton (Ali 1981).

Late Dr. S. A. Khan, formerly Conservator of Forests, Chittagong Forest Circle, Bangladesh and N. A. Khan, Research Scholar, Centre for Development Studies, University of Wales, Swansea SA2 8PP, UK.

Sungrass (*Imperata spp.*) : It is the most common roofing/thatching material for low-cost housing in the villages and forest terrains of Bangladesh. Sungrass is grown naturally in the forest areas, specially in low-lying areas or around the denuded and barren hills, not fit for growing high quality timber trees.

Leaves/bark and fruits : Kurchi (*Holarrhena antidysenterica*) is very popular for medicinal use. Haritaki (*Terminalia chebula*), amlaki (*Phyllanthus emblica*) and bahera (*Twenibalia bellerica*), popularly called trifala (*Myrabolum*) are used as medicinal plants in herbal and ayurbadic medicine in the country.

Cane : Canes (*Calamus viminalis*, *C. guruba*) are climbing plants, mostly grown in the homesteads, as also in the low-lying areas of reserved forests. These are used for domestic purposes by the rural people, but more so, for sophisticated furniture making and luxury souvenir articles, worthy of export. Attempts have recently been made by the government to raise regular plantation of these species by importing seed from Malaysia.

Pati pata/murta (*Clinogynae dichotoma*) : It is naturally grown in the low-lying areas of the Sylhet Forest Division, as also in the rural areas of greater Tangail and Dhaka districts. It can be grown artificially in other areas of the country through suitable planting material. This is an excellent

material for floor-mats, which is extensively used by the poor villagers and also as a luxury item for the rich people. As a finished product, it is exported by the cottage industries.

Honey : Out of the NWFP, honey occupies a very important position as a foreign exchange earner. It is internationally known and used as food, beverage and medicine. Honey is grown naturally in the bee-hives of Sundarbans under the Forest Department (FD), yielding a handsome revenue every year. It is also grown in other forest regions like Sylhet, Cox's Bazar and Mymensingh. Recently, artificial bee-keeping known as apiculture, is being tried in some areas of North Bengal and Mymensingh, with considerable success. It is probably the most promising NWFP in terms of export potential, provided it can be organised on a national basis.

Gol-pata (*Nypa fruticans*) : It is one of the most abundant NWFP which grows naturally in the Sundarbans forest, as well as in other areas along the southern coastal belt in relatively small quantities. This is a very popular thatching/roofing material for the poor people, around Khulna, Bagerhat and Satkhira districts and fetches handsome revenue for the FD.

The following table shows the output of some major NWFP (Anon. 1992 b).

Table 1. Production/output of major NWFP of Bangladesh

year	bamboo (nos./thousands)	sungrass (bundle/thousands)	gol-pata (tons/thousands)
1983-84	92061	1279	63
1984-85	76989	1295	61
1985-86	75786	859	62
1986-87	92616	1710	71
1987-88	105050	1525	80
1988-89	140636	1384	68
1989-90	119131	1117	67
1990-91	84240	641	72

There are some other items that are found and collected from the forest areas, but are not readily accepted and accommodated under the umbrella of NWFP. We have taken the liberty to shed lights on these unconventional items, considering their contributions to the economy and national income of the country.

Stone and sands : These are available in some selected parts of the country, like greater Sylhet, Chittagong, Chittagong Hill Tracts and Dinajpur districts. Stone is required primarily for construction of infra-structures. In Dinajpur alone, there is said to be a deposit of 11.5 crore cft of hardstone for immediate use. Similarly, sand is a basic requirement for construction purposes and found throughout the country.

Shells/conch-shells, oysters, etc. : In the coastal forest-belts, like Cox's Bazar, Teknaf, Moheshkhali, Barisal, Patuakhali, Sundarbans, considerable quantities of shells, oysters, conch-shells are collected by the local inhabitants as a means of livelihood. These are highly priced by the tourists as souvenir articles and as such, may be exported. Presently, there is no organised effort for their collection and subsequent processing. Provided the government takes up as an exportable industry with proper incentive, these have high potentials for future export.

Fish and wildlife resources : In the rivers flowing inside the forest areas like Sundarbans, Chittagong Hill Tracts and Sylhet, as well as in the coastal regions and off-shore islands under the jurisdiction of Forest Department, considerable quantities of diverse types of fish, both sweet-water and saline fish, are collected by the local fishermen for which the FD earns a good deal of revenue. It may be mentioned that recently export-oriented shrimp cultivation has been launched in the coastal belts and off-shore islands. It has, however, caused considerable damage to the mangrove/coastal forest plantations.

A sound management policy of conservation must include, not only protection and breeding of wildlife but also harvesting and utilisation thereof, on a sustained-yield basis. Since wildlife management has not developed to the desired extent and because of incidence of indiscriminate poaching of valuable wildlife, at the moment all wildlife export, shooting and trapping are banned. However, Bangladesh has tremendous potential for breeding, regeneration and export of a number of wildlife and its finished products. Famous for 'Royal Bengal Tiger' the Sundarbans forest, for example, offers a high potential for developing tourism and organised safaris, provided the number of wildlife can be significantly increased through scientific management to deserve exploitation and marketing within a foreseeable future. It may be mentioned that about 20 years ago, *Rhesus* monkey used to be exported from Bangladesh to the USA for medical research. Similarly, lizard skins were also regularly exported till recently. Bangladesh has also got potentials for export-oriented wildlife trade like deer-farming, crocodile farming, snake farming, etc.

The following table shows the export value of bamboo and shell (Anon. 1991).

ORGANISATION FOR COLLECTION AND PROCESSING

Probably, the organisation and management for collection and processing of NWFP is the weakest phenomenon, which requires immediate attention from the concerned authorities. The collection and processing arrangements are primarily done by two sectors, viz. the Government primarily through FD and small scale private entrepreneurs. The FD has no specialised cell for handling the NWFP. It is done as an additional responsibility. Some astray steps have been taken by the private sector entrepreneurs on a very small scale and on purely commercial basis. For example,

there are a number of cane and bamboo processing units in Sylhet, Dhaka and Chittagong, which are engaged in manufacturing furniture and souvenirs to be offered in the local market. Though this has great potentials of becoming a booming industry, yet it remains suppressed due to lack of professionalism and technically sound project planning. Similarly, collection and processing of shells in the coastal belts, Cox's Bazar and Chittagong have become an attractive cottage industry. There are a number of traditional forest-merchant families in Sylhet, Cox's Bazar and Chittagong, who are involved in extraction of NWFP by conventional means. So far hardly any scientifically trained professional body has emerged to deal with the collection, processing and export of NWFP.

uplift in the quality of socio-psychological life of the involved population. Though virtually no study is available on the social aspect, this becomes evident from the behaviour pattern of the concerned people. The Chakmas (bamboo collectors of the greater Chittagong Hill Tracts region), honey collectors of Sundarbans, stone merchants and murta workers in Sylhet forests are few of these groups, who are in close interactions with foresters. It has been observed that a distinct change has been emerging in their sense of values and world-views. They are now more conscious about their rights, legal status and regulations regarding forest resources, the different dynamics and manifestations of interaction with the government bureaucracies. This issue needs to be addressed thoroughly by the social scientists.

Table 2. Export of bamboo and shell

year		bamboo	shell
1982-83	Tk.	19,572.00	37.00
	(US\$	544.00	1.00)
1983-84	Tk.	24,266.00	--
	(US\$	674.00)	
1984-85	Tk.	15,239.00	248.00
	(US\$	423.00	7.00
1985-86	Tk.	10,048.00	7.00
	(US\$	279.00	0.19)
1986-87	Tk.	3,467.00	
	(US\$	96.00)	
1987-88	Tk.	1,806.00	--
	(US\$	50.00)	
1988-89	Tk.	1,617.00	--
	(US\$	45.00)	
1989-90	Tk.	2,430.00	--
	(US\$	68.00)	--

With the employment generation and security of regular earning through NWFP, there is growing

RECENT STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTION OF NWFP

On the face of utter degradation of state forests, renewed emphasis has been attached to NWFP and some significant steps have been taken by the government to propagate and conserve some major NWFP. The abstract of these promotional steps is as follows :

Artificial plantation of bamboo through improved planting materials (offset, branch-cutting and tissue culture) is being tried at selected sites by the Bangladesh Forest Research Institute. Regeneration of canes through improved quality of seeds (imported seeds) has been experimented for commercially important species of canes in the state forests, as also in homestead agroforestry areas.

Promotion and improvement of patipata/murta have been attempted in Sylhet by restricting indiscriminate cutting and by enforcing rules of regeneration.

In spite of all limitations, cottage industries relating to finished products of bamboo, cane, shells, oysters, honey, cultivation of lemon grass, apiculture, etc., have achieved notable success in recent years.

BOTTLENECKS

The preceding discussion is indicative of the unfortunate reality that the status of NWFP in Bangladesh is far from being satisfactory. The followings may be considered as primary bottlenecks :

Trained personnel and efficient management have not yet been developed for dealing with the development, collection, processing and export of NWFP.

Good marketing facilities have not been developed either mainly due to lack of awareness at the levels of government and non-government entrepreneurs, as well as the buyers.

Lack of incentive and input from the government as well as private entrepreneurs for promoting this promising trade.

Lack of physical infrastructure, institutional support and logistics for collection, processing and transportation of NWFP.

Lack of technical know-how at almost all levels.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Suggestions for organising a planned policy and managerial framework for promoting NWFP can be approached from the following two perspectives :

Policy issues :

Clear-cut national policy on NWFP has to be framed at the earliest. Proposed policy should contribute to the formation of a platform for

harmonious functioning of all public and private sectors concerned.

Broad range inventory has to be carried out regarding the availability and stock of NWFP and its future potentials.

To raise the technical standard of the public and private workers relating to the collection and processing of NWFP, a condensed technical/vocational training package should be devised. There are a number of forestry and agricultural research and training institutions in the country, which are well equipped and qualified to design and entertain such a programme.

Private entrepreneurs expect a strong political commitment from the government for the promotion and harvesting of NWFP.

Private entrepreneurs should be encouraged with sufficient incentives and policy protection to take up NWFP at their level, since the government is already functionally over-burdened. Moreover, if there is a bi-lateral policy on NWFP, it might as well catch the eyes of foreign investors.

Government may also associate the trade and processing of NWFP with the flourishing of export processing zone (EPZ) in the country.

Functional Issues :

The potentials of NWFP can not be fully utilised due to lack of a sound marketing policy. The government may initially launch efforts to organise market for NWFP, until private investors are fully established and the market is quite matured.

Coordination among the different public and private agencies involved in the collection and processing of NWFP is the need of the time.

An incentive/welfare scheme may be launched for the forest staff working in remote areas associated with NWFP until a separate professional body relating to NWFP can be launched.

The participatory/social forestry projects in Bangladesh have achieved notable success in motivating and mobilising the local inhabitants and resources. The NWFP may be linked up with these community-oriented projects for greater efficiency.

A government sponsored programme should be taken up for the development of modern apicultural techniques to improve and augment honey production in the country, especially in the Sundarbans and Chittagong areas, for processing the best quality Sundarban honey, 'Kulshi' - out of *Aegiors* spp.

NWFP can serve as a major role-player in boosting a rather stagnant economy like ours. Ruthless and unscientific exploitation has already threatened this promising resource. A national action plan, formulated with an insight into the above-noted problems and with the consensus among scientists, foresters and the concerned people can ensure production and scientific

exploitation of NWFP, ultimately to flourish the life, living and economy of the forest and forest based populace.

REFERENCES

- Alam, M. K. 1992. An introduction to the bamboos of Bangladesh. BIC-India Bulletin, 2(1) : 1-4
- Ali, M. O. 1981. Proceedings of Division 5, xvii, International Union of Forest Research Organisations World Congress.
- Anon. 1991. Office records of the Export Promotion Bureau, Government of Bangladesh, Dhaka.
- Anon. 1992a. Forestry master plan (forest industries). Ministry of Environment and Forest, Government of Bangladesh, Dhaka. 43-57
- Anon. 1992b. Statistical year book of Bangladesh. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Government of Bangladesh, Dhaka. 198-199