Stamp of quality to help carve niche for TN wood industry

Aug 26, 2020, 04.44 AM IST

Last month, the Thammampatti wood carvings from Salem got the much awaited geographical indication (GI) tag. Since the sculptures can now be marketed better, the question turns to sourcing quality raw material — the fine textured wood 'vaagai', 'mavilangai', 'atti' and teak. These trees grown outside forests can be sold for commercial use under prescribed guidelines. But with risks of exploitation of resources, authenticity of the item and intervention of middlemen, the need arises for a certification. While the Tamil Nadu Forest department's assistance in planting of trees outside forests (TOF) has created many patches of tree growth outside notified forests, this repository needs to be used sustainably by hand holding small and marginal land-owners. Sculptors could make use of forest certification to promote the GI tagged Thammampatti wood, concomitantly adding value to similar industries in the state. The importance of forest certification comes in as a marketing mechanism to promote sustainable use and management of forests and as a stamp of quality for consumers.

At present, the light-coloured wooden panels and idols from Thammampatti have low capital investment with a huge export potential. Forest certification can help boost demand of these wooden artifacts in Europe, Australia, New Zealand, South America, Japan, South Africa and Gulf countries. The handicraft industry of Tamil Nadu to cater to the export requirements needs to produce items promoting sustainable and responsible trade meeting global standards. Though tree growers prefer not to involve government to avoid extra charges, they are end up with a poor deal as the export market insists on certified products, steady of which could help provide a facelift to the Tamil Nadu wood industry.

Such a certification could also help streamline forest operations adding to efficiency and greater control of production processes. Agroforestry plantations in Tamil Nadu could use the opportunity of forest certification through community based group certification, compensating farmers with a fair price for the produce through fair price certification. Fair trade certification shows whether a tree producer is getting adequately and fairly compensated for his produce, it could help small-scale producers receive a fair and stable price for products. Fair trade certification demonstrates the way of doing trade, which is

based on partnership, fairness and transparency. In a group, it could also promote social justice, economic security and sound environmental practices.

To ensure sustainable supply of wood for the industry, private growers of trees need to come together and take responsibility and control the stock of trees outside forests. There must be a clear accounting of the usage, the rate of the wood growing stock and the number that has to be continuously replenished. The community of tree growers, including small and marginal tree growers, as a group could apply for forest certification thus reducing the cost of certification. The small land holders growing trees would then be empowered in the management of local resources, promoting conservation and sustainable use of tree plantations outside the forests.

Many in India consider certification costs to be high for small producers and companies. With a digital framework, small landholders can be grouped together to group certification scheme and multi-chain of custody certification could be followed. The chain of custody certification helps track timber from where it is grown till it reaches the consumer. The chain of custody documentation allows users to trace the origin of wood and further could measure change of hands at every step along the supply chain. Blockchain is the latest technology trend that has potential to fulfil the requirements of forest certification.

When physical means of promotion are on the decline and potential of international certifications as marketing tools have increased significantly, the future patterns of forest resource management would have to be restructured through mobile governance platforms to build a people-powered movement for trees to ensure an environmentally sustainable future. The way forward lies in agroforestry community, wood based industries, artisans, forest department and other stakeholders joining hands through a digital platform to develop profitable models for use of trees outside forests.

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