

## For Arif, Bamboo Made the Difference



Arif's day starts early, much before the sun is up. He gets to his workplace at the Common Facility Centre (CFC) in Mancherial, Andhra Pradesh, by 6:30 in the morning. Once there, he doesn't waste any time: "Shall we start?" he asks his colleague, another youngster like him, who is collecting a bundle of bamboo cylinders that have already been cut to length. Together they squat on the floor, with a slat-making tool between them. Arif fits one bamboo cylinder to the guide on the tool and pushes it across the knife in one stroke. The first slat of the day is made. Soon Arif picks up a rhythm and the production of slats is in full steam.

Arif is a recent addition to the CFC. After schooling, he tried junior college for a year. Like many other rural youth he dropped out, and spent one year idling. Through a neighbour he came to know about CFC and signed up for training. After four months of training, he started making bamboo slats on a regular basis. The slats he makes are supplied to the women from nearby Van Samrakshana Samithis (VSS) for producing agarbatti sticks.

Work is good, and Arif appreciates the difference the CFC has made to people in the area. "There was nothing here," he says. "People used to idle most of the time, as work was seasonal". He feels things have now changed for the better. "Now my parents are happy, since I am working and earning a living." Working till 4 PM, he makes Rs 150 (US\$3.35) on a good day and Rs 100 (US\$2.25) on a regular day.



Arif and his colleague at work, producing bamboo slats

Arif sees improvement in business.

Earlier, it used to take about three months for one truck-load of agabathi sticks to be ready. Now a truck-load gets readied and sold within a month and there is demand for more. Arif is confident that business will pick up further, as more people realize the benefits of working as part of the community forest management initiative.

The work has its downs. Though the hand tool has made slat-making easier, repetitive motion gives a backache at times. Arif feels that if the tool can be operated standing instead of sitting, that would be more ergonomic. Pain or no pain, he is proud that his earnings now contribute to the upkeep of the six-member family.



Arif takes a break

There are many young men like Arif in rural India, but most of them have no livelihood avenues open to them. Many

migrate to urban centres with hopes that it would be easier to get work there. Such hopes rarely bear fruit, as urban centres have their own army of unemployed and under-employed. Some come back to their villages to eke out a living by whatever means available. Others continue to chase the dream, stubbornly refusing to accept the truth and becoming easy recruits to unlawful activities.



Arif (front row, fourth from left) and coworkers of the Common Facility Centre, Mancherial, with Forest Department officials

For Arif and many like him in Mancherial, bamboo and the community forest management initiative have made the difference – a difference that could be replicated in a number of villages across the length and breadth of India.

The Andhra Pradesh Community Forest Management (APCFM) project is being implemented by the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department (APFD), with funding support from the World Bank. In 2005, APFD had organized a workshop to explore the possibilities of forest-based livelihood promotion activities, and the International Network for Bamboo and Rattan (INBAR) was invited to the workshop to present the possible livelihood strategies using bamboo as a resource. In view of its expertise, INBAR was also requested to be part of the Supervisory Mission of the project.

Officials from APFD later visited the Tripura Bamboo and Cane Development Centre (TRIBAC), an Action Research Project of INBAR that was implemented by the Centre for Indian Bamboo Resource and Technology (CIBART). TRIBAC also supplied bamboo (*Melocanna baccifera*) seeds for planting in project areas in Andhra Pradesh. CIBART/INBAR has recently completed a technical evaluation of the production system used by the VSSs/CFCs under APCFM, examining the quality system in place and the hand tools and machines used.