



# Traditional uses of bamboo in Nagaland, India

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## Abstract

Northeast India is blessed with abundant natural resources. This study highlights the bamboo resources in Nagaland. The paper analyses the importance and uses of bamboo. The bamboo, being a widespread, renewable, low cost and environmental friendly resource has been given importance since time immemorial. An attempt is made to trace the uses of bamboo in the traditional society.

**Keywords:** Bamboo products, Indigeuous identity, Natural resources, Northeast India, Traditional society

## 1. Introduction

Bamboo is the term applied to a broad group of large woody grasses, ranging from 10 to 400 cm in height (Scurlock *et al.*, 2000). Bamboo has gained importance as a resource capable of providing ecological security and nurturing economic benefits to the people. From a poor man's timber (Sagwal, 1982) to the miracle plant as addressed by the former Prime Minister of India Atal Bihari Vajpayee, bamboo is regarded for its high economic value. The Prime Minister in the seventh world bamboo congress in 2004 had tagged bamboo as a vehicle to boost rural economy (<http://www.m.rediff.com>).

It is considered as fast emerging super material of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Products of bamboos are used everywhere and bamboo industries are now thriving in Asia and are quickly expanding across the continents of Africa and America (FAO, 2007). Bamboo is used from solid to liquid form. Every part of bamboo, from roots to leaf is useful. Even the discarded bamboo can be used to make charcoal. Nothing gets wasted in a bamboo plant. Bamboo has lots of potential for alleviating many of the social and environmental problems in many countries (Quintans, 1998). It is also utilized as wood in construction work, furniture, utensils, fibers and paper. Bamboo charcoal is used as it is three times as porous as wood and releases more energy and gives huge fuel backup. It is used as medicine, food, vinegar, beverage and natural pesticide and in construction of houses; bamboos have multiple uses (Hammond, 2006). It is estimated that about

8.6 million people depend on bamboo for their livelihood.

Bamboo is like a ubiquitous phenomenon with its presence in one form or the other. This rich resource is yet to be tapped in order to be viable for the economy of the state. The importance of this resource is such that its multiple uses cannot be bypassed by a community dependent on it. It continues to play a predominant role in the life of *Nagas* till date in every walk of life that ranges from agricultural tools to shelter and food. There are many regions those use bamboo for variety of purposes. Home gardens in villages of India often possess bamboo clump as practiced in Indonesia (Widjaja, 1991).

Bamboo has a very strong relationship with the rural community of *Nagas*. As part of the tradition of the people, bamboo handicraft is an important source of livelihood especially in the rural areas where most of the artisans are neither educated nor employed and their skills are passed on from generation to generation through practice. As time passed, bamboo has started to gain economic importance. It is considered as an aid to the rural population.

## 2. Materials and methods

A field survey was conducted in Dimapur and Mokokchung districts of Nagaland. The state lies between the parallels of 98 and 96 degrees east longitude and 26.6 and 27.4 degrees latitude north. Visits were carried out to Chumpo museum

(a private museum), Nagaland Bamboo Research centre (Nagaland Bamboo Development Agency, Govt. of Nagaland) and Bamboo Emporium in order to collect data concerning traditional uses and economic importance of bamboo. The interviewees ranged from farmers, business men to government officials. Qualitative approach was used as the research methodology. The study relied on primary as well as secondary data.

### 3. Results and discussion

#### 3.1. Use of bamboo in Naga society

In olden days, bamboo was used in the Naga community in a crude way for everything, from kitchen to farm and became a way of life. Association of men with bamboo in India is as old as human civilization (Chandrashekara, 1997). Bamboo has wide acceptance for construction of the houses due to its desired structural properties like size, shape, flexibility and strength (Laha, 2000). At present, there are many options and alternatives available in the market to meet the needs of the people. However, in the olden days, almost every product was made of bamboo. It can also be ascertained that, it was organic and natural. Ranging from ethnic cuisine to utensils, bamboos had a vital role in the day to day lives of the people then and its uses were plenty as compared to present.

Naga community continues to depend on bamboo. To study a Naga village closely, one has to make amend with the fact that a Naga society has its identity associated with bamboos. Zeme tribe used a double weave basket known as *kelung* to store paddy. *Kola* is a type of basket used for storing rice made of split bamboo is popularly used by *Angami* tribe. For tattooing a common practice of *Ao* tribe, holder for pigment and pigment sticks were made of bamboo. There is a wide range of bamboo made items available then and now. As opined by Varuni (2017), the making of baskets is an age-old craft of leisure which was practiced by the male elders of the family in the traditional rural economy of Nagaland. It was never a profession in the old context and hence this skill is dwindling at present. Bamboo and cane basketry is not an art in tribal economies like Nagaland, but an intrinsic part of daily life and activity that produced essential household items like baskets to carry firewood, bamboo tubes for water, food and grain storage, vessels, plates, furniture,

containers, spoons, fishing and hunting traps. The use of bamboo basket has various advantages as it is healthier, safer, organic and eco-friendly. It is heat-resistant, antimicrobial, lightweight and durable. Unlike in the olden days where bamboo crafts were created individually, today bamboo cluster groups are engaged in this work due to the increased commercial market for bamboo products. The important species of bamboo found in Nagaland are *Dendrocalamus hamiltoni* which is used to make baskets, *Bambusa balcooa* for house construction and *Melocanna baccifera* for making floor and walls.

#### 3.1.1. Traditional products of bamboo

**3.1.1.1. Kitchenware:** Several products made of bamboo are used as kitchenware. Bamboo jugs and multipurpose bamboo cups were used for drinking rice beer and water during the olden days. Salt container made of bamboo with a lid was often kept near the fire place. Bamboo made grinder was used often for the preparation of side dish such as chutney, which forms an important part of Naga diet. It is also served as a *dao* shelf. Baskets in different designs used for various purposes like keeping vegetables, fruits, dry meat, fish and preserved grains. Serving spoons in different shapes are popular cutlery items. The flat ones are used to serve rice while the oval ones for curry. Bamboo was used as bucket or can for water storage in olden days. Rice sieve in different shapes were used for cleaning rice. Bamboo stirring spatula was conventionally used for stirring rice beer

**3.1.1.2. Infrastructure building:** Rope, water pipes, bridges, fences, verandah and even houses were mostly made of bamboos. Some of the basic infrastructures made of bamboo signify protection, shelter, leisure space and support were a common part of traditional houses. To connect from one village to the other, bamboo bridges played a major role. Balconies, fences and also roof, posts, rope, ladder and floor were made of bamboo. A traditional Naga house is built with at least 90% bamboo.

**3.1.1.3. Household products:** Household items made of bamboo range from coat, chair, mat to dry grains, basket, used as wardrobe, tool handle, etc. The mats are closely knitted bamboo splinters and form an important part of a traditional room design. The hammers are usually heavy stones fixed to a long bamboo handle. The traditional wardrobes are huge baskets used for keeping



**Plate 1.** a. Jug; b. Cups; c. Salt container; d. Grinder; e. Basket; f. Spoons and spatula; g. Tiffin basket; h. Container to keep dry seeds and fish; i. Water storage can; j, k & l. Sieve; m. Rice paddle; n. Bamboo slits used for making different types of baskets and also use as rope; o. Pipe for collecting water from running river; p. Bridge; q & r. Boundary wall and fences; s. Balcony; t. Hut

clothes. Plate 1 shows some of the household items made of bamboo.

#### 3.1.1.4. Agricultural implements/practice:

Agriculture being the main occupation of the Nagas, lot of bamboo products are used for agricultural practices such as hat, umbrella, spades and spade handles, storage baskets, basket to carry paddy and vegetables, tree guard, etc. (Plate 2. a-n).

**3.1.1.5. Food products:** Bamboo shoot is considered as the staple food for the Nagas and has been consumed for centuries. Different bamboo based food products are bamboo water (vinegar), fermented bamboos, fresh and dry bamboo shoots (Plate 2. o-r). *Dendrocalamus hamiltoni*, *D. latiflorus*, *Bambusa pallida* and *B. tulda* are edible species found in the State.

The season for consumption of bamboo shoot in Nagaland in fresh form is mainly in the month of August and September and fermented bamboo shoot, bamboo shoot juice and dried shoots are consumed throughout the year.

#### 3.1.1.6. Traditional ornaments:

Bamboo made accessories were the ultimate ornaments during olden times and it is still used in modern days. Comb made of bamboo known as *kushu* was popularly used by *Yimchunger* tribe. Head gears were usually made by layers of bamboo mesh and were sturdy. It not only had a fashion value but also was used for safety purpose. Waist belts for carrying *dao* were also made of bamboo (Plate 3. a-g).

**3.1.1.7. Marriage ceremony:** Bamboo basket with rice, salt and clothes were carried by bride



**Plate 2.** a & b. Mats used for drying grains and also as bed mat; c. Stone hummer handle; d. *Dao* handle; e. *Dao* hanger; f. Bamboo bed; g. Basket to store grains; h. Bamboo chair; i. Umbrella; j. Spades; k. Storage basket to store paddy; l. Baskets to carry grains; m. Rope used as handle; n. Tree guard; o. Bamboo vinegar; p. Fermented bamboo shoot; q. Fresh bamboo; r. Dried shoots



**Plate 3.** a. Armlet and calf let worn by the male folk of *Angami* tribe; b. Bamboo comb; c. Smoking pipe used by women of *Sumi* tribe; d & e. Head gear used by *Konyak* tribe; f. Decorative *dao* used by all the *Naga* tribe during festivals; g. Waist belt used by *Khiamniungan* tribe; h. Basket used as wardrobe; i & j. Basket containers for rice and salt; k. Stage decoration made of bamboo; l & m. Trumpet; n & o. Flute and mouth organ; p. Weaving tool set; q. Basket to keep yarn; r. Back strap; s & t. Baskets to store fish and crab; u. Shield to protect from animals; v. Fishing net basket which is most used by *Karbi* tribe of Nagaland; w. Community fishing practiced by *Ao Naga* tribe

in earlier days after their wedding as the most prized belonging (Plate 3. h-k). This is a popular tradition of *Ao* tribe. Bamboo is also used for stage decoration during marriage reception.

#### 3.1.1.8. Traditional musical instruments:

Popular bamboo made musical instruments include *tati*, flute and mouth string. *Tati* (Plate 3.1) one of the local musical instrument is used by *Chakesang* and *Angami* tribe. *Atutu* is an indigenous bamboo trumpet used by *Pochury* tribe (Plate 3. m). It is played by male members of the community. The trumpet serves as a warning signal to ward off birds and animals in the paddy fields, to alert the collective habitat when enemies attack and also to signal the declaration of war. A special type of flute known as *dungdung* is used by *Yimchunger* tribe of *Naga* (Plate 3. n&o).

**3.1.1.9. Weaving tools:** Weaving is a traditional art in all *Naga* tribes. Beautiful traditional skirts and shawl are weaved using tools made of bamboo (Plate 3. p-r).

**3.1.1.10. Hunting and fishing:** Hunting equipments like bow and arrow, shield, different kinds of fish traps and basket to store fish and crab were made of bamboo (Plate 3. s-w).

## 4. Conclusion

Bamboo being one of the most valuable and abundant forest resources occupy central place in the lives of *Naga* society. It plays a major role in the life of the *Nagas* and is considered as a silent member of every family. The multiple uses of bamboo in the day to day lives of people in *Naga* society are evident. Use of bamboo in different forms are extensively recognized and practiced by the *Nagas*. Bamboo products are

used widely in various forms as food, utensils, furniture, tools and played an important role in construction and agriculture and thus an integral part of *Naga* family and also in culture and civilization. Bamboo is a marker of indigenous identity and will continue to be so as long as the resources sustain.

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