

Bamboo-zled: Stem sells in the northeast

Shobha John | TNN

How about making a style statement with a jacket made of water hyacinth? Or showing off delicate jewellery from the same material? Or warding off the sun with a stylish hat? Why, you could even get bedroom slippers, bags, lamps and mats from the same weed.

This is one of the success stories of rural empowerment and recently got the North Eastern Development Finance Corporation Ltd (NEDFi) the 'NABARD award for Rural Innovation 2012'.

Enterprise and innovation have converted a menace that choked and killed aquatic life, hindered transport and increased mosquitoes into imaginative products.

It all started in 2010 when members of NEDFi saw how the plant was converted in Thailand into popular handicraft products. They



WONDROUS WEAVES: Water hyacinths stems are collected, dried and made into various items such as bags, jewellery and furniture

realized water hyacinths could be a smart alternative to bamboo and cane in the northeast and started giving assistance to artisans in Assam, Manipur, Tripura and Meghalaya. NEDFi CMD B Paul Muktieh says from Guwahati, "While earlier cane and bamboo were abundant and of good quality, now they are expensive. Water hyacinths, on the other hand, are freely available

and our artisans already have the required skills."

Rita Das, a 38-year-old artisan from Dhubri district of Assam, thanks the day she started making water hyacinth products. "Earlier, I made products from jute, but neither would I get a good price nor was it easy to make with jute threads. Plus, I had to buy the raw material. With water hyacinths, my monthly income has shot up to Rs 25,000-30,000." It takes Rita just a day to make a bag (from 1kg) which is sold for around Rs 500. "I

also roped my neighbours into this vocation and was elected ward commissioner by the Dhubri municipality board," she says happily.

It takes 1kg of hyacinths to generate 100 gms of dry stems, says M K Das, deputy GM, NEDFi. "These hyacinths take just 18 days to grow back. After this project, we plan to tap banana fibres too."

This aquatic plant, incidental-

ly, originated from the Amazon Basin and was used as an ornamental plant. Today, mature water hyacinths 15-30 inches long are cut by these artisans and their stems split open and dried for 5-6 days. These are then flattened using rollers and given anti-fungal treatment. These brown and dried stems are strong enough to be made into ropes, fibre boards and braids.

But support was essential and the North Eastern Council gave a grant of Rs 1.6 crore to train 1,300 artisans over a three-year period (2010-13), while NEDFi gave Rs 40-50 lakh, says Muktieh. "We wanted our artisans to be trained in Thailand but initially, their experts were secretive about their craft but helped us after we roped in UNIDO." In fact, this craft has been in practice in southeast Asia and the region has garnered a huge chunk of the international handicraft market.

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