

Challenges and Future Prospects of Forest Product Marketing in Northeast India

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The Northeast region (as defined in many studies) has a forest cover of about 171,964 km², which corresponds to approximately 65.6% of its total geographical area. The Northeast region of India is one of the most biologically rich and culturally diverse parts of the country. With nearly two-thirds of its area covered by forests, the region is home to an extraordinary range of plants, trees, medicinal herbs, bamboo species, cane, wild fruits and other natural resources. For generations, the people of the Northeast especially indigenous tribal communities have depended on forests not only for food, shelter and medicine, but also as a major source of livelihood. Non-timber forest products (NTFPs) such as bamboo, broom grass, lac, resins, essential oils, mushrooms, natural dyes, cane handicrafts and forest honey contribute significantly to household income and local economies. Despite this richness, forest cover in the region has not remained static — between 2011 and 2021, the region lost around 3,698 km² of forest cover.



Fig. 1. Different forest products from NE region

In recent years, there has been growing interest in natural and eco-friendly forest products across national and international markets. This presents a valuable opportunity for the Northeast to emerge as a hub for sustainable forest-based industries. However, despite abundant forest wealth, the region has not yet achieved its full potential in the marketing and commercialization of these resources. Challenges such as poor infrastructure, weak market linkages, limited value-addition facilities and lack of organized marketing systems continue to restrict economic progress.

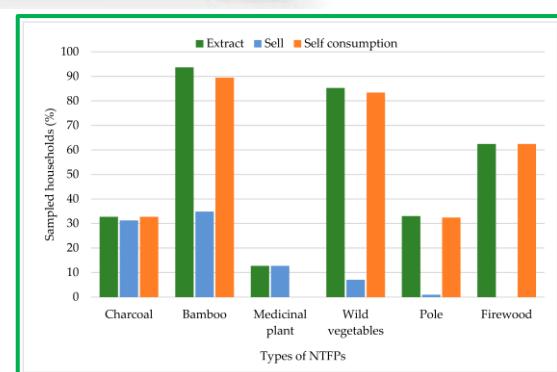


Fig. 2. NTFP utilization pattern by sample households. (NTFPs: non-timber forest products)

Regional product profiles in northeast india

The Northeastern region of India is rich in diverse forest products, with each state having its own specialties. In Nagaland, bamboo and cane resources are abundant and local artisans produce furniture, baskets and traditional handicrafts. The state also has a variety of medicinal herbs and wild forest products that are collected for local use and small-scale trade. Mizoram is known for its cane and bamboo weaving, producing baskets, mats, stools and decorative items, along with wild vegetables and forest greens that contribute to local diets and markets. Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya and Tripura have extensive bamboo forests, supporting the production of bamboo furniture, utensils and shoots, as well as broom grass, resins, aromatic plants and forest fruits, which are used locally and sold in regional markets. Across the region, non-timber forest products such as medicinal plants, wild mushrooms, wild fruits, honey and other forest foods are collected by tribal communities and form a vital part of their livelihoods. Handicrafts made from bamboo and cane, along with traditional forest-based products, are widely produced across all states and find their way into local, national and sometimes international markets. While exact production numbers are hard to quantify due to informal collection systems, this diversity highlights the immense potential of the Northeast to supply forest products for both domestic and export trade.

Traditional vs marketing-oriented management

The flowchart below compares two approaches to business management. In traditional management, marketing comes at the end of the production process first raw materials are collected, then products are manufactured and only afterwards companies think about how to sell them. This means marketing plays a limited role and customers are considered only at the final stage. In contrast, marketing-oriented management treats marketing as an integrator and central component of the entire process. Here, customer needs are studied first and marketing guides decisions related to raw materials, production and distribution from the beginning. The focus shifts from simply making products to satisfying customers effectively, ensuring better planning, efficient distribution and stronger market success.



Market pathways of forest-based products in northeast india

Forest products from Northeast India such as bamboo, cane, broom grass, medicinal herbs, honey, wild fruits and traditional handicrafts move through several marketing channels. Most products are initially sold in local village markets and weekly bazaars, where forest-dependent tribal communities earn their primary income. From there, many items especially bamboo and cane furniture, hand-woven baskets, traditional crafts and processed forest foods reach bigger town markets and state-level trade fairs and are supplied to shops across the region. In recent years, there has been a growing trend of selling these products through national-level exhibitions, government craft outlets and private retail chains, allowing producers to connect with customers across India. Some forest-based products from the Northeast also reach international markets, particularly bamboo and cane handicrafts, essential oils from plants like citronella and lemongrass and agarwood, which is highly valued in perfume and incense industries. Export channels are growing as more entrepreneurs and cooperatives adopt better packaging, branding, certification and online marketing. However, a major challenge is that many producers still sell raw materials at low prices, while middle-men who handle transportation and processing capture most of the profit. With improved value-addition, direct-to-buyer platforms and stronger export support, forest products from the Northeast have immense potential to achieve higher economic returns and global recognition.

Challenges in forest product marketing

Although the Northeast has tremendous forest wealth, several barriers continue to limit the growth of forest product marketing. One of the biggest challenges is the poor connectivity and transportation facilities. Many forest-dependent villages are located in remote and hilly areas where roads are narrow or damaged, especially during the monsoon. Transporting bulky products like bamboo, cane and broom grass becomes costly and time-consuming, reducing the profit earned by local producers. Another serious issue is the absence of organized market channels. Most forest products are traded informally and producers often rely on middlemen due to lack of information and access to larger markets. As a result, collectors and farmers receive very low prices compared to the final retail value. Without proper market linkages, producers are unable to expand or improve their businesses. The region also faces a shortage of processing and value addition facilities. Even though there is high demand for items like bamboo boards, herbal extracts, essential oils, natural dyes and medicinal products, most raw materials are sold without processing. This limits employment opportunities and reduces income. Setting up processing units within the region could provide better prices and generate local jobs for youth and women. Lack of storage, packaging and grading facilities further complicates marketing. Perishable products like wild fruits, mushrooms and medicinal leaves spoil quickly without cold storage or scientific handling. Poor packaging reduces product quality and market appeal, especially when selling outside the region. Many producers are also unaware of government schemes and financial support available through departments such as TRIFED, National Bamboo Mission, KVIC, NABARD and state forest development corporations. Limited knowledge and weak extension services prevent them from accessing training, subsidies and credit.

Future prospects and opportunities

Despite the challenges, there is enormous scope for growth in forest product marketing in the Northeast. The global demand for natural, organic and eco-friendly products is rising rapidly, creating new opportunities for sustainable forest-based industries. Establishing processing units for bamboo flooring, essential oils, herbal cosmetics, natural dyes, bamboo packaging and handicrafts can open up new markets and significantly increase income. There is also great potential for branding and geographical indication (GI) certification. Products such as Naga King Chilli, Khasi Mandarin, Muga Silk, Assam Lemon, bamboo shoot pickle and traditional crafts already have strong cultural identity. With proper branding, packaging and quality certification, they can reach national and international markets. The expansion of digital and e-commerce platforms offers opportunities to connect local producers directly with consumers. Government e-marketplaces, online craft stores and social media can reduce the role of middlemen and provide better prices to producers. Strengthening Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) and cooperative groups can improve bargaining power, enable bulk supply and create community-owned enterprises. Youth involvement in entrepreneurship training, skill development and startup support can play a crucial role. Linking forest products with eco-tourism is another promising avenue. Tourists visiting hill stations, forest reserves and cultural destinations are interested in buying traditional crafts, herbal products and local food items, creating sustainable local markets.

Using technology, artificial intelligence and modern advertising for market expansion

In today's digital era, technology and artificial intelligence (AI) can play a powerful role in transforming the marketing of forest products from the Northeast. AI-based tools can help producers analyze market trends, estimate consumer demand, determine suitable pricing and identify profitable markets across India and abroad. For example, AI platforms can track which products are currently gaining popularity—such as eco-friendly packaging, bamboo lifestyle products, herbal cosmetics or wild-harvested honey—and suggest the best marketing strategies. Digital tools can also support supply chain management by predicting seasonal availability and improving storage and transportation planning.

Modern advertising through social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and online marketplaces can significantly increase the visibility of forest-based products. Attractive videos, storytelling about tribal craftsmanship and branding based on cultural identity can help create emotional connections with customers. Many small producers can build strong promotional networks using simple digital marketing methods, rather than depending solely on local markets. If AI-driven marketing analytics and digital advertising are combined with traditional knowledge and natural resources, the Northeast can strongly position itself in national and global markets. This technological shift can motivate young entrepreneurs, create new job opportunities and increase income for forest-dependent communities.

Conclusion

Northeast India is rich in forest resources and non-timber forest products play a vital role in supporting rural and tribal livelihoods. However, challenges such as poor infrastructure, lack of organized marketing, limited processing facilities and low awareness about schemes continue to restrict growth. To realize the full potential of this sector, it is important to improve value addition, storage, transportation and cooperative marketing systems. Looking ahead, digital platforms, modern advertising and AI-based market analysis can open new opportunities and connect producers directly with national and international customers. By combining traditional knowledge with technology and entrepreneurship, forest products from the Northeast can achieve stronger market presence, create employment and contribute to sustainable economic development.

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