

3 SEP, 2010, 03.43AM IST, PEERZADA ABRAR,ET BUREAU

## Wonder Grass builds an enterprise selling from bamboo screens to complete houses

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When Mr Reddy, a businessman craved to shield his new Villa situated in a tony suburb of Bangalore from the prying eyes of the neighbours, he gave the task to Wonder Grass, an enterprise that offers end-to-end solutions for bamboo-based building systems.

The Bangalore based start-up obstructed the view of the villa, which is the size of a superstore, with a bamboo screen 16-feet-high and 100-feet-long in a couple of weeks. The creeper-covered wall, which now protects the privacy of Reddy's and allows only translucent light to pass, has also become a tourist attraction.

From making bamboo screens for high net worth individuals, such Mr Reddy, to setting up affordable houses for rural users, Wonder Grass has grown quickly. The firm, which earned `7 lakh in the first year of its inception in 2007-2008, is expecting to earn about `1 crore for the year 2010-2011. The company, with four core team members and around 25 artisans, is looking to increase its topline to `6 crore within five years.

"Using bamboo to build structures is not rocket science. Bamboo is renewable, cost-effective and appropriate material to be used for housing segment. It is available in abundance in India," said Vaibhav Kaley, co-founder of Wonder Grass, who started the firm along with his younger brother Nachiket Kaley in December 2007. Vaibhav said that he was inspired by his father Vinoo Kaley, an expert on bamboo, to start the venture.

Vaibhav apprenticed with his father at construction sites while in school. Bamboo was always at the back of his mind, though he did his graduation in interior design, following it up with a postgraduate degree in urban planning from Bauhaus, Germany.

Wonder Grass was kick-started with a project to make an extension to the house of NS Raghavan, co-founder of Infosys Technologies. Wonder Grass is currently working on a sustainable housing complex for cement major ACC's 240-acre campus in Bellary, about 270 km away from Bangalore. It is using bamboo for roofs and other structures for utility and club buildings, cattle sheds and barns. All these would have otherwise required steel.

Some other the interesting projects include a 50-unit low-cost housing venture in Wardha, Maharashtra; a guesthouse in Nagpur; and a waterless toilet. Bamboo grows quickly without irrigation, pesticides or fertiliser. Besides having a number of benefits such as reducing water runoff, energy consumption and household temperatures; it has antimicrobial properties also.

"Bamboo is the fastest-growing plant on earth. Unlike trees, bamboo has the potential to grow to full height and girth in a single growing season of 3-4 months. It has high tensile strength and can be used as an alternative for steel," said Harsha Sridhar, architect and director of Initiative for Green Habitats, who is working along with Wonder Grass for some of the affordable housing projects.

Industry experts say bamboo solutions for the high-end luxury and rural housing market forms a `41,875-crore market. Almost half of this opportunity includes supplying structures such as green-wall panels, pergolas, rooftops, cottages to high net worth individuals, corporates and resorts. The other half of this market comprises of making affordable houses in rural areas, for corporate foundations, NGOs and during disaster-relief initiatives .

"The rural end-user gets a new home built by Wonder Grass for `1.25 Lakh in only 15 days, which includes integrated sanitation, water and lighting. They have to pay at least 30% more labour for traditional brick-and-mortar house, which also excludes these services," says Robert Moore, who works for Villgro Innovation Foundation, which is currently incubating Wonder Grass. Started in 2001, Villgro, a non-profit organisation that focuses on rural India, has till date incubated over 43 innovative start-ups including Wonder Grass.

"I think Wonder Grass is creating a very sustainable business. Start-ups such as these need an exposure, where ordinary people should feel persuaded to buy their products. This means besides high-end products such as bamboo based building system, they should make small bamboo products. By adopting a low-margin-high-volume model, they can tie up with retail chains to sell their products. This can generate employment to thousands of people," said Professor Anil Gupta, faculty member at the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, and executive vice-chairman of National Innovation Foundation.

And Wonder Grass is already moving in this direction. "The next big leap for us is to construct a 20,000 sq ft auditorium," said Vaibhav.

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