

Flowering of *Melocanna baccifera* (Bambusaceae) in northeastern India

Flowering of bamboo is a botanical enigma. The factors responsible for this are still not clearly established. Bamboos flower only once and die after flowering to regenerate from seeds¹. The strange phenomenon of simultaneous flowering in bamboo clumps in vast areas is called gregarious flowering and causes ecological havoc. The bamboo clumps die after flowering and it takes a few years before bamboo plants produce seeds again, leaving bare, exposed soil which could be disastrous in mountainous regions. This would lead to food scarcity, since several animals depend on this plant. The second factor is that rats feed on the flowers and seeds of the dying bamboo tree. This activates a rapid birth rate among the rodents, which leads to the huge rat population feeding on agricultural crops in the fields and granaries, thus leading to famine. This had happened in Mizoram² in the late 1950s.

Melocanna baccifera is a sympodial bamboo growing to about 20 m height. Unlike other sympodial bamboos, the rhizomes are long and so rather than growing as compact clumps, *M. baccifera* produces groves of widely spaced culms, more akin to those of large monopodial bamboos. It is an aggressive colonizer and often forms the dominant vegetation on the tropical and subtropical hill slopes on which it grows. It is naturally distributed in a swathe cutting south to north from southwestern Myanmar through western central and northern Myanmar and the Chittagong hill tracts of the eastern to the northeastern states of India, where it represents between 60 and 95 regional bamboo resources.

The first recorded flowering of *M. baccifera* was in 1863; various periods of

vegetative growth prior to flowering have been noted in different locations and there is a wealth of reports that give a reliable picture of the flowering cycle of this species. A study by the Jorhat-based Rain Forest Research Institute (RFRI) has estimated that the 'gregarious flowering' of *M. baccifera* or Muli bamboo will occur in several northeastern states in 2004, over an area of 18,000 km². The states identified are Mizoram (Figure 1 a–d), Tripura, Manipur, Meghalaya and parts of Assam. According to the estimate of INBAR³, flowering of *M. baccifera* occurred in approximately 1.76 m ha

in the northeastern states of India during 2004–08 and about 26 mt of bamboo will flower and die. Millions of people who depend directly or indirectly on Muli bamboo for their livelihood will suffer, and if famine strikes the whole populace of the region could be at risk. The neighbouring regions of Bangladesh and Myanmar could also be equally affected.

The large fruits of Muli bamboo are also eaten by non-human consumers and the sudden enormous increase in their availability will cause a rapid explosion in the rat populations, whose numbers are related to the availability of food



Figure 1. a, *Melocanna baccifera* without flowers in Mizoram. b, *M. baccifera* – Green patch without flowers which is surrounded by flowered plants (in pale colour). c, Profusely flowering *M. baccifera*. d, Enlarged flower of *M. baccifera*. e, Fruits attached to culms. f, Germinating seeds from fruits.

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(Figure 1 *e* and *f*). The rats not only devastate the naturally regenerating seeds and seedlings, and thereby reduce the regeneration rate, but also destroy other crops and stored grains. Such famines have occurred in the Lushai hills of Assam (as Mizoram was known before its independence)⁴, in 1815, 1863, 1911 and 1959. Throughout the North East, the flowering-induced famine in 1959 claimed 10,000 to 15,000 lives, and flowering in 1881 also claimed a similar number⁵.

During December 2005, we observed the flowering of *M. baccifera* in Nongpoh (91°52'E, 25°53'N) in the East Khasi Hills, Meghalaya.

Recent reports about the flowering of *M. baccifera* are not from Mizoram alone, but in the huge forested areas across the other northeastern states of Tripura, Manipur and southern Assam, which has attracted national and international attention. In Mizoram, the phenomenon is known as 'Mautam', literally meaning 'bamboo dying' ('mau' meaning bamboo and 'tam' meaning to die)⁵⁻⁸.

As most bamboo flowering is unpredictable, for no species is sufficient information available to state unequivocally that flowering at such long, fixed

intervals is the norm for that species. Only for *M. baccifera* there is reasonable evidence to suggest that the patterns observed are likely to be representative of the species³. The present observation confirms that the said prediction can be true in case of bamboo flowering for the above-mentioned species.

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