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India Builds Database to Stop Theft of Lore

India Builds 30-Million-Page Database to Stop Theft of Traditional Knowledge

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NEW DELHI Dec 23, 2005 — For thousands of years Indian villagers have used an extract from seeds of the neem tree as an insecticide. So when a U.S. company patented a process for producing the substance in 1994, India reacted with outrage.

After spending millions of dollars in legal fees to successfully overturn the patent, India's government now is creating a 30-

million-page database of traditional knowledge to fend off entrepreneurs trying to patent the country's ancient lore.

India is not alone in worrying about "bioprospectors" profiting from the genetic resources of its plant life with no benefit to its people. It joined with China, Brazil and nine other nations a few years ago to begin pushing for international protections.

The database project already has caught the interest of others. A South African team recently visited and a Mongolian mission is coming in January, said V.K. Gupta, chairman of India's National Institute for Science Communication and Information Resources.

The database, called the Traditional Knowledge Data Library, will make information available to patent offices around the world to ensure that traditional remedies are not presented as new discoveries.

"If societies have been using it for centuries why should it be patented?," said Shiv Basant, a senior official at the Health Ministry's **Department of Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy**, India's traditional health and medical disciplines.

The government also has successfully challenged patents on the use of the spice turmeric to heal wounds and rashes and a patent on a rice strain derived from India's famed Basmati rice.

But that is a tiny fraction of the problem. A 2003 study by Gupta's institute estimated some 7,000 patents worldwide are based on Indian indigenous knowledge, far too many for India to challenge in expensive legal fights.

Officials hope the database will head off future battles.

"If we have all the data in TKDL, we will not have to spend all those millions of dollars," said Ajay Dua of the Commerce Ministry's Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion.