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Digital library on traditional knowledge to get bigger

Addition Of 220 Texts On Cards To Check Biopiracy Of Country's Ancient Wisdom

Amiti Sen
NEW DELHI

INDIA has begun work to include 220 additional Ayurveda, Unani and Siddha texts in its **Traditional Knowledge Digital Library (TKDL)**, which will help check rampant biopiracy of the country's ancient wisdom by developed countries.

The digital library is a joint effort of **CSIR** and the department of **Ayush** (Ayurvedic, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathic) against biopiracy or attempts by individuals or institutions in the developed countries to patent traditional knowledge passed down from generation to generation in India.

"The **TKDL** is being enhanced for 220 additional texts in Ayurveda, Unani and Siddha. The current coverage is 148 texts," said **VK Gupta**, director, **TKDL**,

Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR).

The government also wants to go beyond the known text to include it in the database information on traditional medicine that may be stored in other forms such as hand-written manuscripts on palm leaves, paper, cloth or inscribed on metal, a senior official has said.

"It is estimated there are about half-a-million such manuscripts in the country, which could be a source of new knowledge. Issue is that of access, preservation of these manuscripts and identifying the knowledge elements which are not available in known texts," **Dr Gupta** said.

"The National Manuscript Mission did do a comprehensive exercise on inventurisation, but now we need to move forward," he added.

India felt the need to work on a digital

library of its ancient knowledge after the government had to fight long battles with the US Patents and Trademark Office (USPTO) and the European Patent Office (EPO) to revoke patent on wound healing properties of turmeric and anti-fungal properties of Neem in the late nineties.

In 2000, an expert group estimated that about 2,000 wrong patents concerning Indian systems of medicine were being granted every year internationally. It took almost a decade of painstaking data collection and digitisation by the **CSIR** and ministry of Ayush, to put together the digital library, the first of its kind in the world. The data is available in English, Japanese, French, German and Spanish.

The US and the European patents offices have access to this library for establishing prior art in case of patent applications based on Indian system of medicine. Similar agreements are being

pursued with other countries including Canada and Japan.

The effort seems to be already paying off. Beginning July 2009, the **TKDL** team identified 36 patent applications at the European patents office that concern Indian system of medicines, and filed third party evidence against them.

In two of the cases, the EPO set aside its earlier intention to grant patents after viewing the evidence, while in eleven cases, the applicants themselves withdrew their applications. India is hopeful of a favourable outcome in the remaining cases as well.

"**TKDL** on Ayurveda, Unani and Siddha did take 10 years for completion, but now it is paying off as it is leading to cancellation of several patents at international offices at no cost," **Dr Gupta** said adding that it took ten years to get the Neem patent revoked and involved huge costs.

