



India Stopping Theft of Ancient Knowledge

By Gavin Rabinowitz
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Protection: The nation is building a database of indigenous knowledge to keep entrepreneurs from making a profit from it.

New Delhi - For thousands of years Indian villagers have used an extract from seeds of the neem tree as an insecticide. So when a US 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 "bio-prospectors" profiting from the genetic resources of its plant life with no benefit to its people. It joined 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 (TKDL), 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?" asked 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 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. But 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.

It is difficult for overseas patent office researchers to prove purported innovations are really based on old lore because, while the information is widely published in India, it is often in ancient languages like Sanskrit or modern regional languages like Tamil.

Gupta convened a group of 150 experts in traditional medicine, scientists, doctors, patent lawyers and computer programmers to put together the database of traditional knowledge.

Instead of laboriously translating the manuscripts, the scholars structured the texts into classifications widely used by patent examiners. The texts are then entered in the database, where specially developed software translates them into Hindi, English, German, French, Japanese and Spanish.

More than 10 million pages already have been loaded into the system and 20 million more will be available by the end of 2006, Gupta said.
