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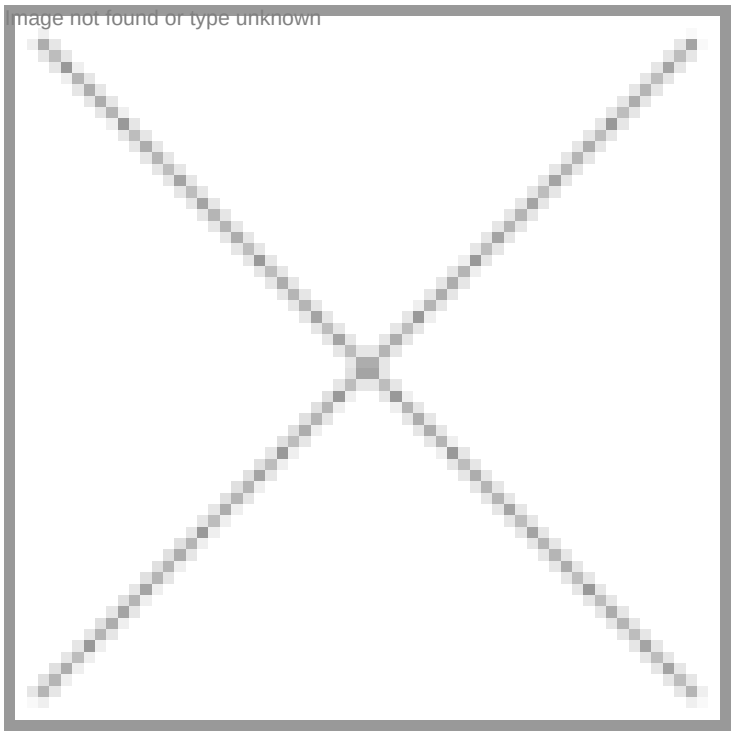
Traditional Knowledge

12 April 2004 | News



Great gene robbery II

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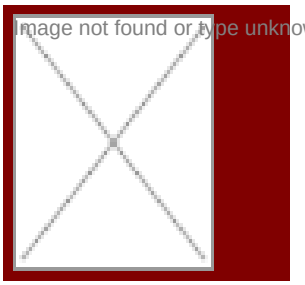

The world's largest collection of plant germplasm, some 6,00,000 plant accessions, are in a safe custody under the control of the US Department of Agriculture. These genetic resources that lie stored at Fort Collins/Fort Knox in the United States are outside the purview of any international treaty. The countries from where these were collected have no rights over these resources, nor do they get any benefit from providing these valuable resources.

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This is the outcome of the Great Gene Robbery part 1.

Some 30 years later, the international community and that includes the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the World Intellectual Property Rights Organisation (WIPO), the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) and several other organisations and donor agencies have joined hands to rob the developing world of the knowledge that comes attached with the huge biodiversity that existed in the tropical countries.

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Thirty years after the developing countries were made to believe that their economic interests were perfectly safe in collecting and conserving the massive plant germplasm that was getting lost, the world is at it again. And this time, it is the traditional knowledge that the international community is suddenly so concerned and worried about. This is in reality the green gold that lies unaccounted with the developing countries, including India. This knowledge is worth the entire gold that is stocked with the US treasury.

In India, the Department of Science and Technology, Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), the Indian Council for Agricultural Research (ICAR) and numerous agricultural universities, institutes and civil society organisations are engaged in documenting traditional knowledge. Like the earlier efforts to misappropriate genetic resources in the name of "mankind's heritage" and "security", this time the same language is being used to document the traditional knowledge that tells the exploiters of genetic wealth as to what uses the plant species can be put to. WIPO is already putting together a mechanism to draw intellectual property rights over the traditional knowledge that comes from the developing countries.

I have often warned of the emotional rhetoric that has gone to sell the golden hardware (traditional knowledge is the real green gold) that lies in our backyards. It is often said that traditional knowledge, which has been passed on from generations to generations by local and tribal communities in the developing world, is getting lost. These would soon be lost to posterity and the humanity would be paying a heavy price for not conserving and keeping the same alive for future generations. The answer, therefore, is to document the traditional knowledge. After all, it too is mankind's heritage.

It was in the mid-60s and early '70s that the same language and expression was used to seek monopoly control over the plant germplasm resources of the developing countries. At the height of the green revolution, with the land grant system borrowed from the United States well in place, we were told that plants were a mankind's heritage but were being lost in the process of development. Letting the plant germplasm disappear would be at the world's own peril. So what needs to be done is to collect whatever is available and keep these safely in gene banks.

We did it. We made plant expeditions and picked up, classified and put the germplasm resources in the gene banks. It was then that we were told that the society would gain if, for instance, all the rice-growing countries were to keep their rice collections at an international centre, which in turn would act as a custodian of the invaluable genetic wealth. We did it again in good faith. India provided a copy of its rice collections for a common custody at the International Rice Research Institute, Manila, in the Philippines. The wheat collections were kept at the International Research Centre for Maize and Wheat (CIMMYT) at Mexico City. The other collections went to the 14 other international agricultural centres under the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research (CGIAR).

We were then told that these collections are not safe at Manila or Mexico city. After all, there is a distinct probability that a terrorist group can blow the gene banks with the result that these resources would be lost forever. So what do you do? You keep a copy of these collections in safe custody. And where is this safe custody? At Fort Knox and Fort Collins in the United States. We did it again and of course in good faith.

The US has these plant genetic resources, has the finances for research and has the mastery over genetic engineering. But what is coming in the way is as to what to do with these genetic resources. After all, you cannot work out the chemical composition and find out the pharmaceutical properties of each and every plant stored at Fort Collins. The best way is to revert back to the countries, which originally had these plant resources. To find out from the local communities as to how and what uses they were putting these plants to. And that would give the companies the chemical route to decipher the knowledge, draw industrial uses, seek patents and market the product back to those countries where it has been traditionally

been used for centuries.

At a time when there exists so much of anger over biopiracy, sending a bio-prospecting team from a western university or a company would invite the wrath of the civil society in the developing world. The best way to legitimise biopiracy, therefore, is to encourage researchers, NGOs, and the public sector institutes to document the traditional knowledge. Give them a little research grant and you will have the civil society and cash-starved research institutes documenting the traditional knowledge virtually free for you.

The UNDP, UNCTAD, the DFID, SIDA, CIDA, GTZ and almost all other donors are pumping in grants for documentation of the traditional knowledge. Except for the donors who continue to misguide the Indian researchers, no one wants to know what this documentation is for. No one wants to know why have we become suddenly so conscious of the fast eroding traditional knowledge. No one wants to work out the economic price of the traditional knowledge that is being given on an official platter. Moreover, who is using the documentation that is being done so speedily?

The answer is that we all are facilitating the process of biopiracy. And we are doing it legally and with the backing of the international donors. Once again, such documentation is safely going into the hands of the companies who need them desperately. But unlike the genetic resources, it will not take 30 years for these companies to draw IPR over traditional knowledge. International effort has already begun on how to draw a sui generis system over traditional knowledge. It is a matter of few years. The documented traditional knowledge will then be out of the control of the communities, which nurtured them. The tragedy is that unlike biopiracy in the pastâ€”neem, turmeric and the likesâ€”the scientific community and the civil society is a willing partner this time.

Devinder Sharma