BBC

[an error occurred while processing this directive]



Watch One-Minute World News

Home News Sport Radio TV Weather Languages

Last Updated: Wednesday, 7 December 2005, 13:22 GMT

India hits back in 'bio-piracy' battle

Printable version

News Front Page Africa

Americas

Asia-Pacific

Environment

Entertainment

Video and Audio

Programmes

Have Your Say

Country Profiles

Special Reports

RELATED BBC SITES

In Pictures

SPORT

WEATHER

ON THIS DAY

Languages

EDITORS' BLOG

Also in the news

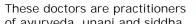
Technology



E-mail this to a friend

By Soutik Biswas BBC News, Delhi

Europe In a quiet government Middle East office in the Indian capital, South Asia Delhi, some 100 doctors are hunched over computers UK poring over ancient medical Business texts and keying in Health information. Science &



of ayurveda, unani and siddha, Yoga exercises have been patented in ancient Indian medical systems the west that date back thousands of

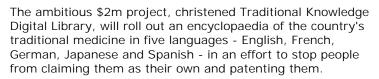
One of them is Jaya Saklani Kala, a young ayurveda doctor, who is wading through a dog-eared 500-year-old text book for information on a medicine derived from the mango fruit.

"Soon the world will know the medicine, and the fact that it originated from India," she says.

With help from software engineers and patent examiners, Ms Kala and her colleagues are putting together a 30-millionpage electronic encyclopaedia of India's traditional medical knowledge, the first of its kind in the world.

'Bio-piracy'

years.



The electronic encyclopaedia, which will be made available next year, will contain information on the traditional medicines, including exhaustive references, photographs of the plants and scans from the original texts.

Indian scientists say the country has been a victim of what they describe as "biopiracy" for a long time.



The tulsi (holy basil) plant has medicinal qualities



Low graphics | Accessibility help

News services Your news when you want it



SEE ALSO: India wins landmark patent battle 09 Mar 05 | Science/Nature Traditional medicine takes on the world 05 Nov 02 | South Asia Doctors investigate Indian herbs 30 Sep 02 | Health Traditional medicine being exploited 19 Mar 02 | Health Patent to protect ancient knowledge 19 Feb 02 | Boston 2002

RELATED BBC LINKS: Yoga

RELATED INTERNET LINKS: National Institute of Science Communication and Information Resources

Indian traditional medicine National Medicinal Plants Board

The BBC is not responsible for the content of external internet sites

TOP SOUTH ASIA STORIES

Nato's Afghan death toll mounts Dalit murders death penalty dropped

Sri Lanka cabinet meets in north

News feeds

"When we put out this encyclopaedia in the public domain, no one will be able to claim that these medicines or therapies are their inventions. Till now, we have not done the needful to protect our traditional wealth," says Ajay Dua, a senior bureaucrat in the federal commerce ministry.

Putting together the encyclopaedia is a daunting task.

For one, ayurvedic texts are in Sanskrit and Hindi, unani texts are in Arabic and Persian and siddha material is in Tamil language. Material from these texts is being translated into five international languages, using sophisticated software coding.

The sheer wealth of material that has to be read through for information is enormous - there are some 54 authoritative 'text books' on ayurveda alone, some thousands of years old.

Then there are nearly 150,000 recorded ayurvedic, unani and siddha medicines; and some 1,500 asanas (physical exercises and postures) in yoga, which originated in India more than 5,000 years ago.

Under normal circumstances, a patent application should always be rejected if there is prior existing knowledge about the product.

But in most of the developed nations like United States, "prior existing knowledge" is only recognised if it is published in a journal or is available on a database - not if it has been passed down



People outside India are not aware of our immense traditional knowledge wealth

VK Gupta, project director

through generations of oral and folk traditions.

The irony here is that India has suffered even though its traditional knowledge, as in China, has been documented extensively.

But information about traditional medicine has never been culled from their texts, translated and put out in the public domain.

Litigation

No wonder then that India has been embroiled in some highprofile patent litigation in the past decade - the government spent some \$6m alone in fighting legal battles against the patenting of turmeric and neem-based medicines.

In 1995, the US Patent Office granted a patent on the wound-healing properties of turmeric.

Indian scientists protested and fought a two-year-long legal battle to get the patent revoked.

Last year, India won a 10year-long battle at the European Patent Office against a patent granted on an antifungal product, derived from neem, by successfully arguing that the medicinal neem tree is part of traditional Indian knowledge.

In 1998 the US Patent Office granted patent to a local company for new strains of rice similar to basmati, which has been grown for centuries in the India got a patent on turmeric, used in Himalayan foothills of north-

west India and Pakistan and



curries, revoked

has become popular internationally. After a prolonged legal battle, the patent was revoked four years ago.

And, in the US, an expatriate Indian yoga teacher has claimed copyright on a sequence of 36 yoga asanas, or postures.

Dr Vinod Kumar Gupta, who is leading the traditional wealth encyclopaedia project and heads India's National Institute of Science Communication and Information Resources (Niscair), reckons that of the nearly 5,000 patents given out by the US Patent Office on various medical plants by the year 2000, some 80% were plants of Indian origin.

Practitioners of traditional medicines say their importance cannot be denied - according to the WHO, 70% of the people living in India use traditional medicine for primary health care.

Also, some 42% of the people living in the US and 70% of the people living in Canada have used traditional medicines at least once for treatment.

By one estimate, a quarter of the new drugs produced in the US are plant-based, giving the sometimes much-criticised practitioners of alternative traditional medicine something to cheer about.

The mammoth Indian encyclopaedia may finally give alternative medicine the shot in the arm it sorely needs.



Back to top ^ ^

Help Privacy and cookies policy News sources About the BBC Contact us

MMIX