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Stream: Theory

The long road to Khari Baoli : Environment Discourse and the Market for Medicinal Plants

The issue of the market for medicinal plants in India lies in the cusp of the environment discourse and common property resources. On the one hand, medicinal plants are to be found most often in fields, forests, hills and valleys, most of which are common lands. These lands are owned by the villages they circumscribe, and embody the most contentious aspects of political and communitarian life. On the other, the issue is not simply a matter of their physical existence -- for by themselves, they really mean nothing. They acquire significance to the extent that they exist in the common reservoir of knowledge and usage of any community, and communities know and understand them. This knowledge and understanding, when it reveals itself to the world outside, has usually been channeled through two constituencies -- first, those that seek to manufacture medicines from them and then environmentalists and scientists who wanted to ascertain the damage to the natural environment resulting from the activities of the former.

The manufacture of medicines directly based on the plants has meant, apart from anything else, using/exploiting of natural resources that are common property, for purposes of private profit; that too, for those that live many miles away and have no historical linkage with the habitat in which the plants thrive and flourish. They now see it as a right to use it, if only they pay some quantified price for it. Directly implicated too, in this entire process are those who access the plants and sell them to the market for the manufacture of medicines. They are usually the people who have lived there a long time and have a historical and organic relationship with the resources from which they take the plants, as also the plants themselves. When the overusage and exploitation become an issue therefore, both these concerned parties are held responsible, either in direct statement or in implication.

What is never clear is the unevenness of the power structure in which these two parties function. Not only do the manufacturing companies make profits, they also manage to project an image of being in tune with the times and going back to nature. As for the collectors, their returns are meager, though more than what they are unable to get from other possible sources of livelihood. Yet, they participate in this process knowingly, and do so as a result of a combination of factors

of policy and politics, well beyond their control. Their dilemma is the most acute, their position most unenviable, their lack of political and bargaining power most unedifying. However, I do not see them figure in the environment discourse around medicinal plants, which by now, is quite diverse and built up. As a student of politics, they beckon urgently to me, to be recognised at least as an analytical category and, I wish to put this particular constituency at the heart of this paper. By examining closely the environment discourse in India and juxtaposing it with the market for medicinal plants as it exists today, I wish to explore the possible directions it needs to take such that common lands and people who live close to them, become as much part of the discourse as the other forms of nature that inhabit them..

Locating the environment discourse in India

To begin with, it might be useful to see what the environment discourse around medicinal plants is all about. There can be identified three components, which need to be explicated, in order to understand what the focus of the discourse is currently.

The oldest component of this discourse are mainstream scientists, who have been very curious about the properties of medicinal plants. This interest dates back to colonial times, when the British first tried to systematically make compendia of these plants and medicines, for purposes of scientific curiosity as well as commercial interest. In the post colonial period in particular, a new agenda set in scientific institutions was the ratification of the medicinal and healing activities claimed by different traditional systems of medicine, specially Ayurveda. This involved the scientific analysis of medical preparations as well as the medicinal plants from which they are made. However, much of this interest is in the active compounds in the plants and which are being applied in various medicines, i.e., a fairly narrowly defined range of issues. Of this group of scientists, there are a small number who are interested in the larger questions around medicinal plants. They are aware that many species are endangered because of over harvesting and many of these are not known in terms of their characteristics or efficacy, to modern medicine or science. They have made it their task therefore, to collect, report and thereby try to preserve some of the knowledge which seems to be vanishing with the species. The disciplinary boundaries of the scientists are both in forestry and botany, sometimes together with those trained in traditional medicine systems, so a rather wide spectrum is involved within this component.

Some of the above scientists are part of the IUCN/SSC Medicinal Plants Research Group. This is an international lobby, a working group with a shared intention of keeping the agenda of medicinal plants constantly alive.[1] The focus of their perspective is that "Medicinal plants play an increasing role in nature conservation. Whereas forests have for long been regarded more or less exclusively as a source for timber extraction, the value of their by-products, the 'non-wood forest products', have only recently been fully understood. Medicinal plants are important non-wood forest products and they help to preserve the world's forests" (Kasperek 1996 :7). This explicates the broad position of the conservationist scientists, for whom the focus is on the saving of the forests, in which medicinal plants play a significant role, and not on the plants and their uses per se. Most certainly there are exceptions to this and they are becoming progressively more vocal. But their voices constitute still a very small part of the overall environment /

conservation discourse and so those aspects that are sought to be referred to here, are only at the fuzzy margins of their concern.

The second component of the discourse, is a range of institutions with a rather wide spectrum as well. On the one end are located any number of publications: books, pamphlets and magazines dealing with health-care derived from plants, spices and everyday foods. These are based on the principles of naturopathy, Ayurveda, Unani, Siddha or local traditions and can be found in most Indian languages. In the natural course of things earlier, much of this knowledge which would have been handed orally, but is being lost for a number of socio-economic political reasons. The large numbers of these publications seem to indicate a real anxiety at this loss and also, a market available for this literature.

Thus, the print media seems to be trying to replace the oral traditions with a ready-to-access form. But their influence or relationship with the overall environment discourse is rather limited for two reasons. One, that any literature that is not in English, is not read by the elite in the policy-making or newspaper writing/reading circles, while it may be read by thousands of common people -- so its concerns would not normally be reflected in the policy debates. The second reason why it is limited, is that it does not concern itself with the fact that issues of health care based on natural ingredients and remedies, are organically linked with that of the natural resource base which is being destroyed and used. Thus while the issue they address is political, it does not self-consciously acknowledge it and remains at the level of activating the individual's interest in systems of health-care for the realm of the narrowly personal.

At the other end, there are institutions -- mostly non-governmental agencies engaged in the documenting and collecting of information on medicinal plants which are used by people and communities in specific areas.[2] This is done primarily with the view to revitalise local health traditions and help people utilise them for primary health care and to reduce their dependence on systems of health care which the government promises, but is unable to deliver. These institutions are self-conscious initiatives which directly accept and intervene in the organic linkage referred to above. Thus they purport to help people retrieve the power they have lost over their own bodies and healthy well-being, while also recognising that this requires intervention at the level of the personal and the wider context in which the individual functions. In this sense, they perform a primarily political activity. While the first component, in terms of the ultimate benefits that would accrue from the activities of their contribution is political too, this is more directly so.

The third component in the discourse is the policy debate over India's position vis a vis the international trade agreements and particularly the World Trade Organization. The idea of Intellectual Property Rights as the right of an individual, which means in real terms, the rights of individuals of the developed world to dominate the agreements on trading, has set off a debate in India, with clearly defined opposing positions. In as much that the anti-colonial struggle was essentially a struggle against an imperialism of an unfair international economic order, India's development policy of the post-colonial period sought to establish an autonomy of decision-making in matters of development, even though the terms that defined development and economics were clearly borrowed from post-Enlightenment Europe. The economic policy of the late 80s onwards has marked a radical departure from this and this has serious implications for

the politics, culture and livelihood of millions of people. As a consequence, the desire to push what is popularly and somewhat ironically called liberalisation, has prompted the mainstream political parties to try and marginalise any discussion of these implications from the dominant political agenda. While they have been successful to the extent that a very small portion of them become electoral issues, (though ordinary folks continue to consider these important), a self-consciously separate, non-electoral stream of politics has developed around these issues.

The two positions of this component can be then described as follows: one, India needs to break out of the near 'autarkic' situation of the post-colonial years and enter open competition if it is to be able to achieve world standards in economic development; so, its trade and intellectual property regime needs restructuring and adjusting to allow new competitive forces to push the frontiers of excellence for the Indian economy. The other is that the actual fall-out of these policies is on the poor, marginalised sections of society, in as much that it involves drawing in more natural resource sites and sources into the purview of "development", in a way that threatens the access, control and right that many communities have had as a source of livelihood, sometimes the only one. In the light of the fact that uneven and short-sighted development policies of the first thirty years had already done enough harm on that score and many movements had come up to combat those measures, they are now having to push the frontiers of their protest to include this attack on the vestiges of their remaining autonomy.

The first is dominated by the new policy-makers and their supporters in industry, agriculture and more particularly in the service sector and the second by social movements developed as protest movements against certain development policies, in favour of sectors of the environment, but articulated in terms of larger political questions as people's rights to jal, jangal and zameen (water, forests and land). It is interesting to note that there are bureaucrats working for government who are vocal supporters of the second group (Rangachari and Subbarao 1998) and leaders of farmers who are clearly in the former lot. Thus, it is important to remember, that while there is a distinction made in the composition and orientation of each group, the boundaries are relevant really for analytical purposes. There are many in each who would easily identify with those in other groups, in terms of inclination and politics, and those overlaps are very crucial to understanding the character of the discourse overall.

The market for medicinal plants in India

In the title of this paper figures the name of one of the biggest markets for medicinal plants in North India. Khari Baoli is actually a large grain market, in which one of the products that are bought and sold are medicinal plants. But they do not come here directly from the fields, forests, hills and valleys referred to in the first paragraph. They travel a long road, from the lands and hands of the collectors, through those of intermediaries and finally to the buyers in Khari Baoli. On the way, there are those who know the processing required for the different species -- the leaves of some, the fruits of others and some in whole -- for the different kinds of medicines that will be made from them and which will be in demand in the market.[3] And in the last thirty years or so, medicine manufacturing companies are required to follow the instructions stated in texts identified by the Government of India or the Official Formularies created by it. The requirement not only applies to the actual making of the medicine, but also, the form in which

the different of the plants are to be used. Since these are widely known and are as much the part of the professional knowledge and wisdom of those who treat these plants as possibly the manufacturers themselves, most plants are available to the latter in the precise form in which they are required. The significance of these intermediate markets therefore, lie not only in their size and the variety which they attract, but also the fact that these smaller, processing markets ultimately need to feed into the large one, as the biggest buyers are here.

Given that the industrial manufacture of traditional medicine has become a very profitable proposition and this market has consequently grown rapidly, this is where the linkage between market, manufacture and the discourse is most significant. The broad ways in which this is manifest is as follows: the profit logic of industrial manufacture implies that the demand for raw materials grow continuously over time, therefore the volume of demand grows, putting increasing pressure on the land for higher yields; the logic of returns to scale of industrial manufacture implies that only a big volume at a point in time would be profitable to buy. Both of these naturally give a fillip to the raw material market and in terms of classical economics, this is the singular achievement of the market. But the fundamental shortcoming of this school of thought has been precisely its underlying assumption that resources are unlimited. So what results is the continuous erosion of resources, though there is conflicting evidence on the question of overharvesting, depending on who is providing it, of course.

What is important is that both the logic of profit and that of returns to scale encourages a kind of harvesting which is inimical to the species in the long run. A very sad, though evocative example is that of the plant guggul, which yields a gum of exceptional medicinal qualities. It grows in the arid regions of North India and has proved to be a source of steady income to the otherwise parched economy here. A recent study[4] however, shows how this plant has been harvested until lately, whereby its innate capacity to reproduce the gum for the next harvest is almost completely impaired! The reason for this, they found, was the almost inordinate pressure on the collectors to deliver and that too, within a given time, which meant that the traditional, more sustainable practices of extracting the gum had been abandoned. In response to this, the scientists undertaking the study took the initiative to draw up and implement a project to evolve a more sustainable form of harvesting, which fortunately they have been able to convince the collectors of. While they have come away from this experience relieved that a cheap and effective intervention was accepted by the collectors, they found it hard to come to terms with the widespread and irreparable damage they had seen in the area.

The politics of the discourse and the market

The environment discourse on medicinal plants as it has developed amongst the three components, has two internal positions of debate: one about the position to be accorded to the plants per se vis a vis their context and two about the best way to counter the problem. As for the first, it was referred to earlier, that on the one hand saving medicinal plants is about preserving biodiversity and needs to occupy a position of pristine significance, single-minded if necessary, because without it nothing else is possible; and on the other that it has to take into account a particular perspective on the relationship between the people and the natural source they live close to, in the light of new wants, new relationships and new markets. The question as

it is posed here is about the same in terms of its orientation as that of sanctuaries and wildlife parks in India. Should it be people versus resources, or people and resources redefined? Also, is the responsibility for the resources going to be put squarely on those who have an obvious relationship with them or is the entire picture, fuzzy boundaries and all, going to be viewed when such assessments are made? The position that seems to me most valid is this. Natural resources are meant to be used, and the beauty of human interaction and usage lies in restraint rather than absence. Particularly, medicinal plants embody a human knowledge of centuries and one that has been marginalised for the last century or so because of the hegemonic position occupied by biomedicine, even in India. But now the potential to heal of knowledge systems that directly use them and those that have developed over the centuries, are being rediscovered and recovered, almost in a pattern of completing a cycle of healing patterns. Of course in the poorer, especially rural parts of India, these systems embody a continuity of the healing process. But what has changed from before are patterns of usage which is what is reflected in new wants, new relationships and hence, new markets. Biomedicine and indeed, modern manufacture of goods has made easy availability and easy-to-use, basic criteria for their competitiveness in markets.

Both of these criteria are very deceptive. They shroud the issue of who it is to be available for and what kind of usage, in which context, is envisaged. This means that medicines based directly on plants would need to go through a transformative process in order to qualify. It also means that this process would alienate them from their immediate context and their accessibility would always be defined by the larger market outside. The last is inevitable, because the very definition of the market excludes anyone without a certain kind of purchasing capacity. So it may well be that precisely those who have had the knowledge and access to medicinal plants for generations and are in a position to make them available to the market, are being competed out by market forces.

This is what brings us to the other issue of the debate: what could be ways to counter the situation. Some of the front pages and editorials of newspapers in India would indicate that the focus of any effective counter would have to be legislation, court cases and decidedly firm policy measures, if the interests of the natural resource and India as a developing country are to be looked after. This is largely true, considering that the international context of trading is so much about so called "agreements", and developing countries are always at a disadvantage in negotiations for them. In India, precisely because of a tradition or certainly a self-perception, of autonomy in international circles which was asserted in matters of foreign policy since the early post-independence period, there is still a substantial lobby that asserts both the need and the ability to take tough positions in these negotiations. But then, this is not the dominant position within the bureaucratic and official political circles that are responsible for decision making -- as has been indicated earlier, the lobby that favours increased trading and opening up of the Indian market is what dominates decision-making today.

My argument is that while legislation and policy measures are significant, they are but subsets of politics. The continuing marginal status of those who argue for rights to *jal, jangal, jameen* of the community, as opposed to individual intellectual property rights, is fundamentally about a political belief about the character of development and why it is necessary to bring all people within its purview. The positions of medicinal plants for the market as opposed to medicinal plants for nature, embody a wide spectrum of political beliefs about the fundamental relationship

of human beings to nature and the knowledge that comes from it, including hierarchising knowledges of the past and present. Even positing/referring to the question of the control over resources, in terms of institutions like panchayats and intra and inter community norms, which seem culturally entrenched, are actually questions of politics, for the politics established in one generation becomes the cultural practice of the next. Yet inversely for those who make policies, their understanding of certain people's right to resources needs to be, in the final analysis, in terms of culture, but in the first instance needs to be mediated through politics. That is, it is important to state that those who live closest to natural resources and have had an organic cultural relationship with them must continue to have so for the sake of retaining cultural predicates, including habitat, usage and such like. But before that, it is important to assert these as counterpoints of political alternatives which serve to fulfill precisely those targets of international recognition and bargaining power that the policy-makers so crave. This is what the politics of social movements have the capacity to do, though, I do believe that they yet haven't been able to articulate so ambitious an agenda. As of now, they are still at the level of and in an attitude of wresting concessions. It means for them then, the need to fundamentally challenge the very terms of discourse continuously and, posit alternatives. Difficult as it is, I would argue for it not only because that is a politics far more worthwhile doing, but also because the already existing alternatives base is wide enough to foster it. There are any number of examples of continuous experiments in committed seeking of alternatives, of movements that combine social reform with ecologically sensitive lifestyles, of those that seek to recover the relevance of traditional wisdom for contemporary problems -- the list is very long. They mostly exist in the realm of what in the widest social science meanings would be culture -- though at the periphery. There is a painstaking, but sure move to bring it in an interface with politics to correspond with what is happening in the centre and it is when this happens on a wider and faster scale that the issues raised by the discourse can influence what is happening in the market.

The discourse and the market: where do the twain meet?

I would like to argue that one of the crucial points where they can and do meet is at the point of the collectors and their communities. The collectors are, at once, both the victims and participants in the processes set up by the power structures of the market and policy. They link the understanding of medicinal plants in their multi-faceted forms, to the larger picture -- of the struggles of social movements on the one hand and the market on the other. In terms of the movements therefore, they would be the ideal target group for an active political reorientation and providing support to, for an intervention which would protect their livelihood and the resource base together. Instead, they are the effective target groups of the market, who are rightly as of now, perceived as at least the providers of an immediate livelihood. Any extent of intervention at either level has to ultimately retain them as a point of reference because of their crucial location. Thus, if they are located in the centre of the debate, a very important step in the right direction would be taken. Given that it is through the social movements and their linkages with a wide base of alternatives that challenges to the present power structure and its biases against such people, their resources and their livelihood, can be slowly but definitively challenged, it makes sense to find the correct locus of politics with them at the centre.

Endnotes:

[1] This is the group that emerged in 1994 from the initiative to implement the Guidelines on the Conservation of Medicinal Plants (1993), following the Chiang-Mai Declaration (1988). India has twenty members in this group so far, both governmental and non-governmental institutions and organisations, some very recent and some established for over twenty years. Complete information available in Kasperek et. al. 1996.

[2] Perhaps one of the most outstanding and relatively better known examples is that of the Lok Swasthya Parampara Samvardhan Samiti, based in Bangalore, but attempting to cover most of India south and inclusive of Maharashtra. One of the most glaring gaps in this question is that hardly any comprehensive work of the kind done by the LSPSS, has been initiated in North India, in this scale.

[3] While there has been a tradition of medical practitioners making their own medicines, whereby, they would access the plants locally and make medicines from them, two other historical trends made the market significant. The first was the trade in them that grew and became established many centuries ago, once the efficacy and value of the medicines made from the plants were known far and wide. Second, through the colonial period in India, with the pressure from the hegemonic position being acquired by biomedicine and Swadeshi position developing to counter it, indigenous medicines began to acquire an industry form. This required that a bigger, more organised market for the raw materials be developed, which did over time. For a detailed analysis of this phenomenon in terms of both policy and politics, please see Banerjee 1995.

[4] Ph.D. thesis, University of Delhi.