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Separate norms for biodiversity projects in third world stressed

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"I AM ALREADY involved in formulating standards for American and European companies engaged in genetic engineering of crops and I am very agreeable to the idea of drawing up norms for companies involved in commercialising technology derived from the biodiversity of Third World countries, in sectors like medicinal plants," says Dr Peter Raven, member of President Clinton's advisory committee on science and technology. He is also chairman of the report review committee of the National Research Council.

Dr Raven told *The Economic Times* that some of the norms for genetic engineering were mandatory (like those concerning release of organisms and testing before planting) and some voluntary. Replying to a query, he agreed that much of the suspicion in Third World countries regarding the commercialisation by multinationals of their biodiversity could be removed if there were norms for American and European companies engaged in this sector.

At present, there were no overall norms drawn up for American and European companies seeking to commercialise technology derived from Third World biodiversity. Whatever norms were there were formulated by individual Third World countries. For instance, Costa Rica had a National Institute of Biodiversity. Any foreign company seeking to commercially exploit the biodiversdity of Costa Rica had to not only pay a sum up front (to be utilised for the benefit of the local people in the area) but also had to sign an agreement agreeing to pay the institute 50 per cent of the royalties derived from any patent. The key issue was not so much the patent but the licensing of applications, Dr Raven said.

In the case of India, there was no kind of framework in place and hence there was a fair amount of confusion and controversy, some of it politically generated, he felt. In a world which was growing progressively smaller with technological upgradation, multinationals would themselves be all for a system with transparency, he said.

Asked about Ricetec's patenting of Basmati in the US, he said, "I do not have all the details but, if they have patented something which is widely grown in India, then, on the face of things, it would seem ridiculous. However, I do not agree that the US Patent Office rushes things through. It takes sometimes a year for the office to agree to process an application and then the actual process takes some more years."

Earlier, at an international conference on medicinal plants, Dr Vandana Shiva lambasted the multinationals for, as she put it, trying to patent life forms which belonged to Third World biodiversity. It was, she said, all indicative of an acquisitive culture which sought to monopolise something engrained in traditional systems of medicine over the ages. She characterised the process as one where Third World biodiversity became the raw material for patents for MNCs which used their clout to have this rammed down the throats of the South in the form of intellectual property rights ratified by the World Trade Agreement.

Dr Gerard Bodeker of the Institute of Health Sciences, University of Oxford, cited instances where the discovery of the efficacy of a medicinal plant had resulted in its over-exploitation to an extent where it had almost become inaccessible to the common people who had been using it for ages. Instead, the plant had now become a complementary medicine for the elite in Addis Ababa as also in the West!

Presenting some of the findings of the programme to formulate a People's Biodiversity Register (carried out in selected villages in seven states over the last two years or so), Dr Madhav Gadgil said that some of the richest biodiversity was found in the poorest areas and that those most aware of the potential were often those to benefit the least from it. He cited the instance of a village in the Western Ghats near Pune.

Dr Andrew Cunningham, regional co-ordinator (Africa), WWF/Unesco/Kew People & Plants' Initiative, estimated global trade in medicinal plants at around $800 million a year. The export trade was, he said, dominated by China (1,21,000 tonnes a year) followed by India with 32,600 tonnes.