

India Mainstreams Medicinal Plants



Researchers in India study and propagate medicinal and aromatic plants in a nursery. (IDRC Photo: Daniel Buckles)

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A new Indian government program to bring medicinal plants into the country's medical and livelihood mainstreams should put money into the pockets of the villagers who collect them, while making the plants safer to use.

The effort marks a shift away from viewing India's state-owned forests strictly as timber stock, to seeing them as sources of a potentially rich medicinal plant repository and as a raw material source for rural industry. South Asia's 16 agroclimatic zones harbour up to 50 000 plant species, of which up to 16 000 are believed to have medicinal properties.

A program in Chhattisgarh State is a template for similar programs across India, federal and state officials reported during a meeting at the International Development Research Centre's (IDRC) Ottawa headquarters on September 26. The program is partly sponsored by IDRC's [Medicinal and Aromatic Plants Program in Asia \(MAPPA\)](#). IDRC has supported medicinal plant research in the region since 1992.

Improving quality control

R.B.S. Rawat, CEO of India's [National Medicinal Plants Board](#), said people in Chhattisgarh and other states stand to benefit from India's efforts to develop medicinal plant gathering, processing, and marketing into a large scale economic sector.

"In the future, we feel we have to regulate or systematize some sort of mechanism for herbal medicines," Rawat said. "The concern is how to make it a more quality-controlled system, so it is safer and efficacious and standard from the health point of view."

Rawat said traditional medicine is an appropriate and affordable health care option in many developing countries. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 4 billion people around the world use herbal medicines for their primary health care. In South Asia alone, Ayurveda, Unani, Siddha, Chinese, Amchi, and homeopathic traditional healing approaches make use of about 9000 plant species.

Developing standard guidelines

India's aim is to integrate such traditional medicinal practices into its national health care system, while protecting indigenous knowledge, some based on age-old texts. At the moment, the National Medicinal Plants Board and some 27 state medicinal plants boards are focused on developing protocols and markets for 32 main medicinal plants, with plans to include more over time.

Dr R.C. Sharma, the state government of Chhattisgarh's Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, says the new state, created in 2000, is rich in plant resources that will financially benefit villagers in state forests where they grow.

"It is the richest piece of land (in India) but it is inhabited by the poorest of the poor," he said, adding that it is they who will earn most from plans to systematize gathering, grading, and export of medicinal plants.

Encouraging community management

Sharma coordinates a community-based program in which villagers in and near the forests decide how to manage wild medicinal plant resources. To date, his department has helped about a million people in Chhattisgarh organize into some 7000 forest-user cooperatives.

"We are trying to raise the capacity of the people rather than just passing the entire burden on to them," he said.

Profits from plants gathered and sold, using guidelines that federal and state governments are still working out, go mainly back to gatherers. Last year his department distributed about CA\$20 million in profits from such plants.

He added that developing standard guidelines is a major project. According to oral traditions and ancient Indian medical texts, different parts of different plants are effective, and may need to be picked at a specific time of year or day to retain their properties. As well, governments, with traditional gatherers' help, need to prescribe how much of a particular plant, or what parts of it, can be safely gathered while keeping plant resources sustainable.

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