Water Warriors

The poor have the greatest water needs, especially those living on marginalised lands. These are the people whose needs have to be addressed.

- Anil Agarwal
1947-2002

Society for Promotion of Wastelands Development
Wonder Timber
Bhraramarai: An Unsolved Mystery?
Bikash Rath

For centuries, the name of Keonjhar state in Orissa has been associated with that of a tree popularly known as Bhraramarai. The timber of this extremely rare plant was believed to be very effective in the treatment of leprosy, a dreaded disease, and the King of Keonjhar, who had a monopoly right over this plant, used to distribute free of charge, small pieces of this timber to the leprosy patients who came from far and near to his state in search of this "wonder timber". The state even received royal requisitions from other states and responded accordingly.

The wonder plant became extinct in Keonjhar probably by mid-20th century or may be earlier. The medicinal tree was substituted with the roots of another species (said to have some effectiveness in curing leprosy), but this was not declared to the public by the person(s), who used to deal with this medicine, until this author discovered the same.

Some 15 years ago, an article in a popular Oriya daily said that scientists were still in search of the legendary Bhraramarai plant. When contacted, a few experts on the flora of Orissa either gave contradictory statements or simply expressed their inability to enlighten us on this subject.

The general tendency however in many of these experts was to identify Bhraramarai as nothing but Antiaris toxicaria lessch, an evergreen species found in south India. There people almost found it impossible to associate Orissa with Bhraramarai since Antiaris toxicaria was not known to occur in Orissa.

Further inquiry by this author soon revealed that the confidence of these experts to identify Bhraramarai as Antiaris toxicaria was based almost only on the descriptions of Kirtikar and Basu in the 'Indian Medicinal Plants' (in four volumes, first published in 1916 with subsequent editions). Volume-III of this remarkable publication mentions that Antiaris toxicaria is called 'Bhraramarai' in 'Urya' (see page 2335, Vol-III, 1981 edition) and the experts have used this only clue to understand and describe Bhraramarai.

Careful Comparison
But a careful comparison between the descriptions of Kirtikar and Basu and the one found in the Oriya traditions and literature (particularly the great lexicon - Purnachandra Bhushakosha, published in 1936) certainly suggest that a sincere and extensive research on Bhraramarai is necessary before accepting the statement of Kirtikar and Basu. Major contradictions that form the basis of this suggestion are:

- According to Purnachandra Bhushakosha, Bhraramarai is found in abundance in the Malwa region in the north of central India. Purnachandra Bhushakosha does not mention any other region (not even Orissa) with regard to the occurrence of Bhraramarai. However, Antiaris toxicaria, as we know, occurs in abundance in some parts of southern India only.

- In Purnachandra Bhushakosha, we find more than four Sanskrit names of Bhraramarai which do not include the only Sanskrit name 'Valkala' of Antiaris toxicaria mentioned in Kirtikar and Basu.

- One of the Sanskrit names of Bhraramarai is Kushtari, literally meaning 'the enemy of leprosy'. However, in Kirtikar and Basu, we do not find any mention of the use of Antiaris toxicaria in the treatment of leprosy.

Research has led to the renaming of many plant species and even some of the claims regarding their properties have been verified resulting in either the confirmation or dismissal of such claims. Unfortunately, almost nothing of this sort has happened with regard to the confusion about Bhraramarai. Let us hope that scientists and research scholars will feel the significance of this lacuna and the research on Bhraramarai Antiaris toxicaria will take a new turn.
New Goals... New Initiatives

Achievements

- High powered medicinal plants board setup to promote sustained availability of medicinal plants and to co-ordinate all matters relating to their development and sustainable use.
- State drug testing laboratories and pharmacies upgraded to enforce quality control of drugs and augment production of standard drugs by government pharmacies.
- Good manufacturing practices for ISM drugs notified.
- New extra mural research scheme introduced to finance collaborative research for scientific validation of ISM drugs and therapies.
- Scheme for recognition of private laboratories as government approved laboratories to undertake testing of identity, purity, quality and strength of ISM&H drugs introduced.
- 313 blocks in the Country take up propagation of ISM&H strategies through Non-governmental Organisations.
- Essential drug lists for ayurvedic, unani and homoeopathy medicines issued.
- 49 homoeopathic drugs made available at licensed pharmacies (chemist's shops) to improve their access to public.
- Scheme for accreditation of panchkarma facilities finalised for seeking accreditation.
- Agrotechniques ready for 30 medicinal plants out of 140 awarded.
- Financial assistance to upgrade facilities in UG and PG colleges of ISM&H.
- State medical college hospitals assisted for improving patient care services.

Activities through Medicinal Plants Board

- Encouragements for cultivation of select medicinal plants backed by buy-back arrangements.
- Registering raw drug traders.
- Simplification of transit permit/legal procurement certificate for transportation of raw drugs.
- 28 selected priority medicinal plants like Ashwagandha, Brahmi, Atis, Guggal, Sanai, Must, etc. which are in great demand both in domestic and international markets to be brought into cultivation status for the overall development of the medicinal plants sector.
- Specialised surveys of the international market for medicinal plants and products to be undertaken for identifying niche areas.
- Registration of farmers/cultivators of medicinal plants to be entrusted to the respective state medicinal plants board/ vanaspati van societies.
- Manufacturers/NGOs and representative individuals to be supported for participation in international fairs, seminars and meetings with a view to create awareness and explore the international market for plant based herbal products.
- R&D studies in the areas of post harvest management, shelf-life, storage and simple agrotechniques to be taken up through CSIR, NBR, CIMAP, RRLs, DBT, horticulture and forests.