THE RIGHT TO RESOURCE: PEASANT KNOWLEDGE, PROTOCOL OF ITS 'EXTRACTION' AND ETHICS OF COLLABORATION IN EXTRACTIONS

By

Anil K Gupta

W P No. 851
January 1990

INDIAN INSTITUTE OF MANAGEMENT
AHMEDABAD-380 056
INDIA

Draft 1990

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Whose knowledge? whose right? One may even change the context by asking, But who defines these rights? That the knowledge produced by peasants, pastoralists, artisans and women in the households laboratory - the kitchen - is an important source of generating technologies for sustainable development is not a remark which would shock many. It can slightly agitate a few, if one argued that extending the frontiers of science is possible by building upon some of functional, intuitive, composite recipes of peasant culture.

But before I discuss the protocol for understanding the domain of peasant/farmers' (choose the term you please) knowledge, let me dispose off an irritant. There isn't a more inappropriate term than 'resource poor' farmer for one richness of whose knowledge I want to talk about in this note. Readers should recognise the ethical, political and cultural biases underlying use of such terms. Disadvantaged, yes, resource poor, no! Of course, only if we did not consider knowledge about micro-environmental imperatives of biotic and edaphic relationships as a resource. If peasants knowledge is a resource and if scientists recognise utility of this resource, how do we develop rules of the game dealing with definition, appropriation, value addition, distribution of

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Anil K Gupta, Professor, Centre for Management in Agriculture , Indian Institute of Management,Ahmedabad. Abridged version of this paper is appearing in ILIEA, March, 1990.

resource and added value (or residue) amongst different claimants.

What could be the residue in knowledge industry? Residue is not something left after use. It could, in present case, be a pride, guilt or even disdain about a resource. By finding a herb useful for hitherto intractable disease, a multinational corporation (or a national corporation) can do the following, (a) camouflage the end use and thus make the entry of other possible users difficult in the resource market, (b) collect the herb excessively and deplete the natural habitat, (c) generate alternative ways/locations for cultivating the herb so that if natives in the original habitat came to know of the rent expected by the company, the production system did not suffer unduly and (d) price the historical research by people involved in identifications of herb at a very low level and the value adding research at a very high level such that drug is out of reach of the very natives who conceptualized the possibility. The residue thus is not the just physical output or input but also the emotive or institutional artifact created by the extractive system.

There could be many other ways in which different extractive systems could dealt with resource of local technical knowledge of individual or groups. These ways may depend upon whether a resource itself is a function of (a) prior knowledge and (b) relative power of school, system or peer group granting validity to this knowledge.

There are many herbs and grasses which are weeds in the 'modern' agronomy but have had important part in the medicinal kit for

human or animal use. The local use systems lost its validity because local medicine system was termed traditional, superstitious, 'unscientific'. The local social groups which might call that herb as a valid medicine may lose out to the other dominant groups. They may lose out also because 'modern' allopathic system like modern fertilizers and pesticides show immediate positive effect. The side effects show up only after a long time. The shortening of time frame for appreciating the results of a system of knowledge is thus the first conceptual contribution of the 'modern' extractive system.

Isn't it a paradox that while the process of development is defined as (a) widening the decision making horizon and (b) extending the time frame, the instrument though which development impact is measured is appraised in short term. Sustainability is the obvious casualty.

Right to resources, knowledge system providing validity to that resource and expropriation of that resource by outsiders or dominating social groups among the locals, are part of the same problem.

Let us take the case next of ourselves-the scientists/academicians (social, biological or physical), the members of voluntary organizations, funding agencies, international consultancy systems, editors of journals and civil servants (national or international) i.e. the outsiders. How do we relate to the local knowledge and rights of the people to this resource?

I can deal with the knowledge in following ways:

(a) Systematic research, surveys, case studies and interactions with people to find functional technologies (ii) no-more-considered-functional examples, (iii) discontinued but once used technologies, (iv) local innovative modification of external technologies and (iv) documentation of the knowledge as such. The documentation may be done by me or my staff hired from outside and thus the local knowledge about global dimension of extraction may remain unexpanded.

(b) Share the documented knowledge with every body in profession as a past of normal academic activity. I share it back also/or first with the people - the providers of knowledge, In the process get access to hitherto unavailable knowledge because people know only now why I was collecting the knowledge (Gupta 1982, 1983, 1987).

(c) Invite possible users of this knowledge including large agribusiness companies to support my research in lieu of sharing my findings only/also just with them with or without exclusive rights over its use or dissemination. Or I share more information with them than with others.

(d) get invited to various international bodies/conferences, gain esteem, monetary or non-monetary career rewards without even bothering to acknowledge the local innovation to the innovators (individual or groups along with their full details so that others could also locate the source, validate it or pursue other dimensions of the resource. Not to mention, I demystify my con-

tribution as a mere chronicler rather than founder of a new school or faith.

(e) I mask the sources of the knowledge which brought professional rewards to me lest some among the providers even ask me accounts of the rent extracted from the knowledge gathered from the peasant providers;

(f) I mask the sources not because I do not want to acknowledge the source but the professional peers/do not consider acknowledgement of contributing nameless-face less-poor a necessary professional activity. I do not even realize that I have done anything inappropriate by not acknowledging the peasants.

(g) I may seek cover under the argument that providers of knowledge are so many scattered in a large area that acknowledging each one of them is physically impossible. I acknowledge the area of study/sometimes the village names but particular individuals/groups who gave me the information about knowledge resource remain unacknowledged.

(h) I want to acknowledge but realize the providers do not care whether I do or not. Thus absence of pressure from peers, respondents and gate keepers for professional glory make me indifferent, lax or insensitive.

(i) I extract rent from the knowledge resource by setting up or aiding in setting up a value adding enterprise with commercial profits as end. I retain the profits and share the due amount with my employers who made my study of resource possible.

(j) I feel myself under no obligation to share the profits in 'some' proportion with those who made rent extraction possible. (Please note : my organisation does not let me use an academic case study based on a company without their written consent. But there is no pressure on me to clear a case study with the poor disadvantaged or rich disinterested respondent). When somebody makes a plea that any one known to be extracting such a rent be denied entry to a professional meeting, I keep quiet, ignore such pleas and do not record them in the proceedings.

(k) I gain consultancy to help others in identifying, using/extracting conceptual insights and converting these into technologies. I behave the same way with disadvantaged third world scholars, administrators, grass root workers as I do with rural innovators. I don't acknowledge their contribution in letting me the entry into the village where the innovation was. I assume it as a 'natural' duty of a third world public servant. I may also assume that the journals in which I publish may never reach those nondescript grass root functionaries and thus consider lack of acknowledgement as a liscenced activity. Professional peers tolerate my behaviour as a minor lapse, a citation missed here or there rather than violation of any fundamental ground rule. Result: I get more consultancies with an advice : to be more careful in masking the sources or obliquely acknowledging the source along with many others.

(l) I don't tell the people that genes for resistance against a particular disease were transferred in a new marketed variety

from a source or parent which, they (the people) had preserved in a specific 'ecological niche 'or' 'environmental particularity'(Richards, 1985). This gene I claim had no value till I recombined it with other of value. Thus marginal contribution of this gene is very little. It is the technology and skill of transference which is important. The instrument and not the idea is the resource. Right to instrument overrides the rights to the idea/resource. Peers legislate that no injustice has been done to the providers. After all, didn't they get a new variety with better combination of genes (so what if also more profits for the agri-input industries). When the variety needs replacement every other year, terms of trade shift against the cultivators, inputs becomes less productive because the soil nutrient balance and micro-organism base has been depleted, I ask for subsidies. State provides these subsidies because it is difficult to suppress dissent/protest from articulated, aggregated, concentrated agri-input using people making demand, And when interests of agribusiness coalesces with the interests of articulated people and elitist state, the deficit in the budget of the state increases. Borrowing from abroad results in cut down of subsidies in minimum needs programme. Internal borrowings and continued budget deficit fuels inflation. The reduced value of meager money that poor earn through wages makes survival of poorest in the marginal regions mare difficult. The poor migrate to cities - provide cheap labour for domestic and other aid.

Resourceful people and provider of the genes for resistance (often found in most stressed environments like semi-arid or hill

areas or flood prone region or forests) become resource-poor. Swaminathan provides a graphic illustration of this possibility from "The Jeypore tract of Orissa, which is believed to be an ancient centre of origin of rice, The regions where man first settled down to cultivate plants and thereby initiated what we now call "agriculture" are also the regions which contain the greatest number of hungry people today" (1973, 1980:287). He called it a 'World of sad scientific ironies and economic enigmas'. He added, "The regions where technical skills were of a high order in ancient days are today characterised by relatively poor quality of output and workmanship (1988:287)."

The problem which Swaminathan did not then realise lay with the conceptualisation of what is resource. He called grain as the 'commercial' 'economic' yield and the rest was non-commercial and non-economic.

Dry fodder prices during drought of 1979 & 1987 were far more than the prices of cereals, But many scientists continued to define only part of the knowledge (concerning grains) as a resource. 'Lab to land' became a credo and not 'land to lab to land' which K.M. Munshi had pleaded far way back in 1957. Incidentally, Swaminathan had quoted Marx and Engels quite approvingly to argue that fear of law of diminishing returns ever setting in due to depletion of soil nutrition was misplaced given the modern fertilizers. The people's knowledge of crop rotation, fallowing etc. was just somehow ignored.

(m) I plead for LISA (low external input sustainable agriculture)

not because U.S. congress increased its allocation for LISA from $13.9 million in 1988 to $14.45 in 1989 under the Food Security Act of 1985 (subtitle of Title 14, Section 1463, in a small Section on Agricultural Productivity Research, see Cooperative State Research Service, Washington DC, USA). I argue that third world needs in future could not be met through input intensive/responsive soil depleting pest 'enhancing technologies. I export age old low external input technologies to third world under 'modern' labels from the well meaning first world members. The elite civil servants in third world incorporate all this (along with labels and terms) in their 'official programme' through a small budget provision. The power of local resource providers, experimenters and their peer group in rural disadvantaged regions remains undisturbed. They remain 'resource poor' and thus in need of external aid to cultivate plants with low external inputs.

(n) It does not occur to me that while sharing back the models of LISA (I have already been enslaved by this term) with the original inventors /discovers of the same, (I should atleast restore 'the pride of these 'arrogant' 'resistant to change', 'irrational' fools in rural areas. I robbed them in collaboration with colonial masters and post colonial granters of professional esteem in the west. My reference point remains the same, the Westerners. Ashis Nandy puts is so well in context of the paradox of an Indian genius; Jagdish Chandra Bose (who demonstrated wireless technology before Marconi did and who proved that plants had life and feelings), "Margins are meaningful only with reference to the

centres to which they are marginal and every marginality respects its corresponding centrality by carrying within it intimation of the latter (1979:120).

But then who said poor people lacked pride in what they knew? If it were so, would they have maintained some of the viable sustainable technologies for so long. If pride has to be restored, it is my own. And by me by peers in my own society. The margins must lie in the centre.

In this long essay, I have merely enumerated some of the dilemma that face us/me while dealing with the problem of the 'rights' that poor disadvantaged people face in the third and first world (American Indians, Aborigines in Australia, tribals and dry farming households or flood prone landless or poor tenants in India etc.).

The ethics in the modern knowledge industry is itself a commodity. I can sell it only if someone buys. I can use transfer pricing as a means of solving my dilemma. I can invest rent I extract through consultancies in certain socially desirable activities. But will that change the protocol of rent extraction, I am not sure. Paul Richards and others refer to the core of 'ecological particularism' as the basis of most innovations in high risk environments (Richards, 1985, Gupta, 1981, 1984 Munshi, 1957, Dharampal 1972). Being limited in its diffusion potential, experts in local knowledge do not generate a socio-cultural edifice of rent extraction through secretiveness, private control and even manipulation which industrialization or accumulation

oriented ethic inevitably generates.

But the same eastern societies generated 'Ayurvedic' and 'Yunani knowledge system which permitted if not encouraged local experts retaining family/kinship control over some popular recipes.

If knowledge is a common property, the academic quibble over right to resource is a trivial issue. But if knowledge resource like any other common property can be expropriated by free riders or rent seekers, the evolution of rules of the game is necessary for sustainable institution building.

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