The Way We Live Now: Ashok Row Kavi

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Just yesterday I was talking with pharmacologist Roopam Bhatt of Welex Labs, a small Indian Ayurvedic drug company fighting the multinationals that are swarming into India, smelling profits. Roopam's father was a "vaid," a medicine man, who fought the Indian elite's antipathy to traditional Ayurvedic medicine, and clinically tested herbs that are mentioned in ancient Indian texts.

Both Bhatts have experienced marginalization by India's new "brown sahib" culture, a hangover of the British colonial contempt for older Indian traditions, but have worked quietly on their own. What a success they have been! In Malaysia and Thailand, Welex Labs sells herbal remedies for everything from diabetes to HIV infection. Its herbal product Ayuvigo has received excellent anecdotal results in Thailand from people with HIV for whom antiviral therapies have failed. Marketed as a general immune booster, Ayuvigo is recommended by doctors in such disparate places as Iran and Laos, and sells so well that the company cannot produce enough.

Not that India's allopathic doctors are listening. The Bhatts don't get the time of the day from India's corrupt Food and Drug Administration. Since it's so expensive to pass any drug for clinical tests, only the multinationals can afford to get them going.

During the time of Indira Ghandi's rule, certain basic drugs -- TB and leprosy meds, common antibiotics -- were price-controlled. But ever since the government threw open the country's doors to multinationals two years ago, the price of basic drugs has escalated by 150 percent. With all this so-called globalization, most drugs will be out of reach to 80 per cent of Indians. We'll be forced to fall back on the Roopam Bhatts for medical relief.

And maybe the answer really lies with them. The colonial and post-colonial periods have wreaked havoc with the developing world's indigenous sciences and skills, dating back to rule by the British, who cut off the thumbs of master weavers of Murshidabad. By 1920, British cloth flooded the market.

The process continued with Mahatma Gandhi and gang, who were, after all, funded heavily by textile tycoons. But the assorted Gandhians and Nehruites are now in the ashbins of history, and India faces the next millenium on her own. Perhaps our solutions will do, and I'll see you in 2000, treating my HIV with an inexpensive bottle of Ayurvedic immune boosters.

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