



INTERNATIONAL LAW
JOURNAL

**WHITE BLACK
LEGAL LAW
JOURNAL
ISSN: 2581-
8503**

Peer - Reviewed & Refereed Journal

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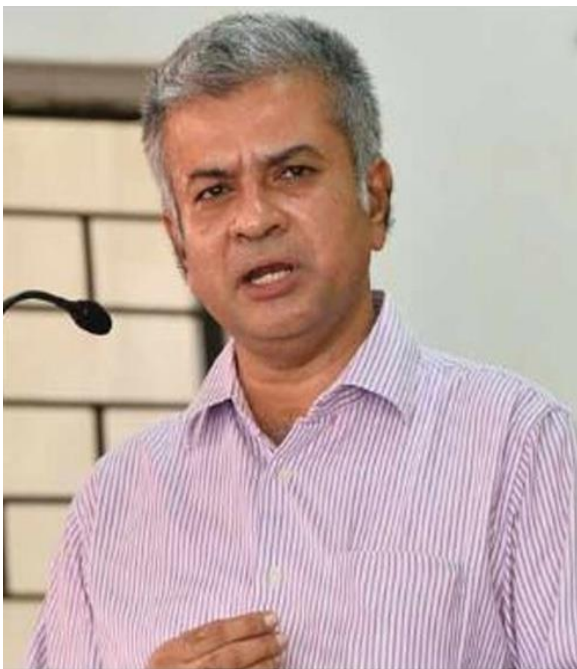
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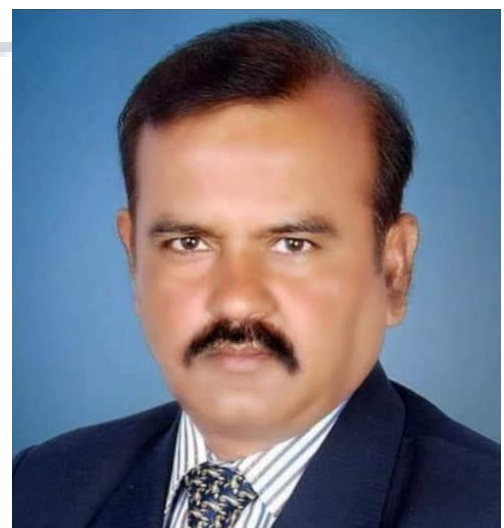
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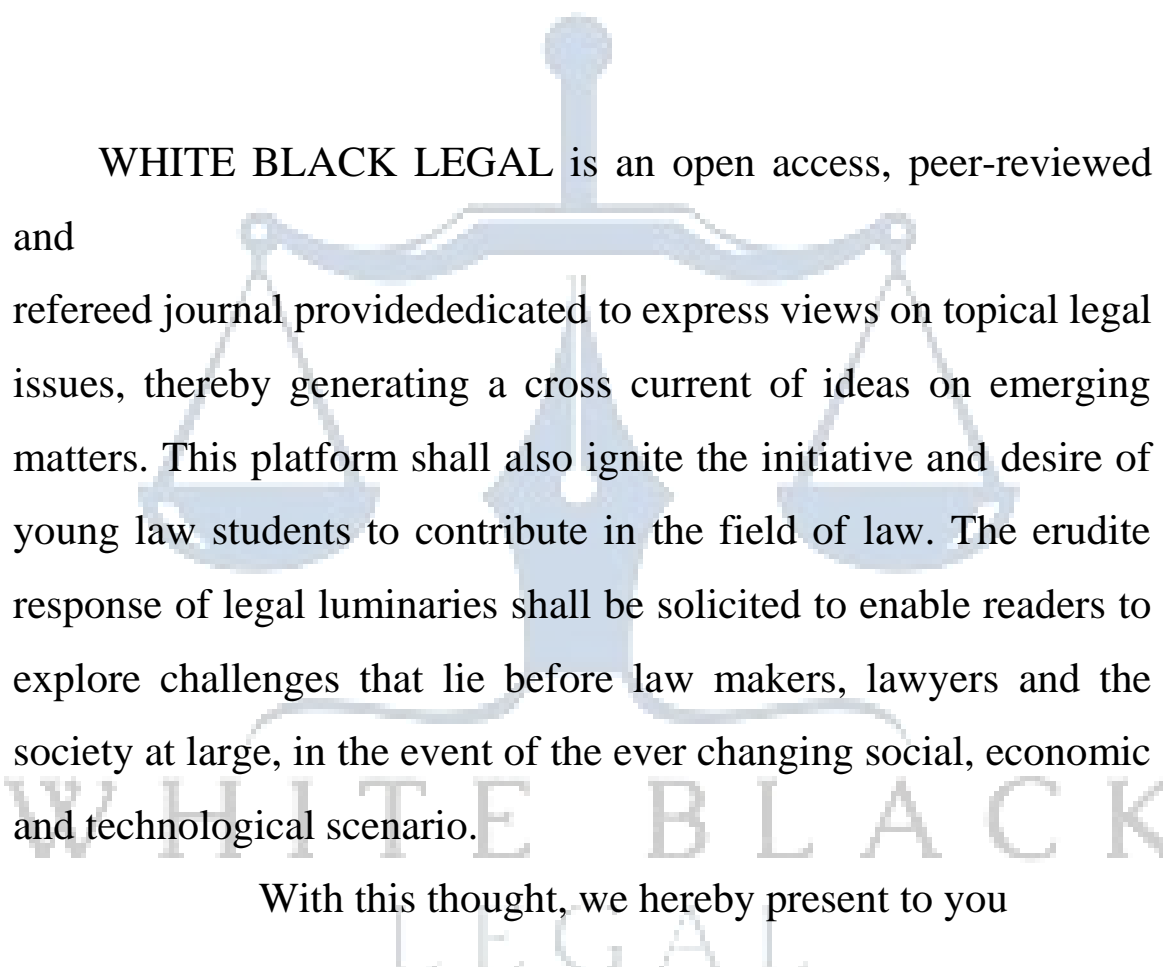


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WHITE BLACK LEGAL is an open access, peer-reviewed and refereed journal providededicated to express views on topical legal issues, thereby generating a cross current of ideas on emerging matters. This platform shall also ignite the initiative and desire of young law students to contribute in the field of law. The erudite response of legal luminaries shall be solicited to enable readers to explore challenges that lie before law makers, lawyers and the society at large, in the event of the ever changing social, economic and technological scenario.

With this thought, we hereby present to you

THE LEGAL AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATION IN PROTECTING TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE IN INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY RIGHTS

AUTHORED BY - ANKITA KUMARI & PRIYANSHU LUCKY

INTRODUCTION

Traditional knowledge (TK) and cultural heritage represent the living expressions of human creativity, often passed down through generations within communities. These elements encompass a diverse range of practices, skills, innovations, and expressions closely linked to the cultural and social identity of their custodians. As globalization advances, the preservation and protection of traditional knowledge have become increasingly vital, especially in light of its misappropriation and commercialization.¹ This research delves into the intricate relationship between cultural heritage and intellectual property rights (IPR), examining legal and ethical considerations in protecting traditional knowledge. The need to safeguard TK arises from the threat posed by biopiracy, exploitation by corporations, and the erosion of traditional practices in the face of modernization. Indigenous communities, which are often the primary custodians of this knowledge, face significant challenges in protecting their intellectual contributions due to inadequate legal frameworks. Intellectual property systems, designed primarily for commercial innovations, often fail to recognize the communal and intergenerational nature of traditional knowledge. This mismatch underscores the urgency of developing robust mechanisms tailored to the unique characteristics of TK.²

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY

Traditional knowledge encompasses a wide range of information, practices, and innovations rooted in the cultural and social traditions of communities. This knowledge includes medicinal practices, agricultural techniques, folklore, and artistic expressions, among others. It is often transmitted orally and evolves through the collective contributions of community members

¹ Brown, M. F. (2003). *Who Owns Native Culture?* Harvard University Press.

² Brush, S. B., & Stabinsky, D. (Eds.). (1996). *Valuing Local Knowledge: Indigenous People and Intellectual Property Rights*. Island Press.

over generations. Unlike conventional intellectual property, which is typically attributed to an individual creator, TK is inherently communal and intergenerational, reflecting the collective identity of its custodians. Cultural heritage, a broader concept encompassing both tangible and intangible elements, serves as a repository of human creativity and history. Tangible heritage includes artifacts, monuments, and sites of historical significance, while intangible heritage comprises practices, expressions, and skills integral to a community's identity. Traditional knowledge is a vital component of intangible cultural heritage, linking past practices to contemporary life and shaping future innovations.

Intellectual property rights serve as a mechanism to protect and promote innovation and creativity. However, traditional knowledge often falls outside the scope of conventional IP systems due to its communal nature and lack of formal documentation. Patents, copyrights, and trademarks, designed primarily to reward individual creativity, do not adequately address the complexities of TK. For example, a traditional herbal remedy developed over centuries by a community may not meet the criteria of novelty or inventiveness required for patent protection. Consequently, communities face challenges in asserting their rights over TK, leaving it vulnerable to exploitation and misappropriation.³

The ethical dimensions of protecting traditional knowledge are equally significant. Respecting the autonomy and rights of indigenous communities is paramount, as these groups often view TK as an integral part of their cultural identity rather than a commodifiable asset. Ethical considerations also extend to ensuring that any benefits derived from the commercialization of TK are equitably shared with its custodians. The principle of prior informed consent, which requires obtaining approval from communities before using their knowledge, is a critical ethical safeguard in this regard. Traditional knowledge systems have also contributed significantly to modern science and innovation. Medicinal plants used in traditional remedies have informed pharmaceutical research, while indigenous agricultural practices have inspired sustainable farming techniques. Despite these contributions, the lack of recognition and protection for TK has led to instances of biopiracy, where corporations or researchers exploit indigenous knowledge without acknowledgment or compensation. This exploitation not only undermines the rights of TK holders but also perpetuates economic inequalities.⁴

³ Hendricks, D. (2009). The Intersection of Intellectual Property and Indigenous Knowledge. *Journal of Intellectual Property Law*, 15(2), 135-150.

⁴ Mgbeoji, I. (2001). Patents and Traditional Knowledge of the Uses of Plants: Is a Communal Patent Regime Part of the Solution to the Scourge of Biopiracy? *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies*, 9(1), 163-186.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR PROTECTING TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Traditional knowledge (TK) plays a pivotal role in shaping cultural identities, preserving biological diversity, and fostering sustainable development. However, as globalization increases the accessibility of cultural and natural resources, the protection of TK has become a pressing concern. The legal framework governing the protection of TK is both complex and multifaceted, involving international conventions, national legal provisions, and case law that address the ethical and legal aspects of safeguarding this invaluable resource. This chapter provides an in-depth exploration of the various international legal instruments, national legal frameworks, and case law that seek to protect traditional knowledge, focusing on the ethical considerations inherent in these protective measures.

World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) and Traditional Knowledge

The World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) has been a central institution in the global effort to protect traditional knowledge. WIPO's initiatives focus on creating a framework that ensures the protection of TK through intellectual property (IP) law, which is traditionally designed to protect individual inventions and creations. In contrast, traditional knowledge is collective and passed down through generations, making it difficult to fit within the conventional IP paradigm. WIPO's work on TK includes the development of a sui generis system—an alternative legal framework specifically designed for the protection of TK. This system aims to prevent the misappropriation of TK and to ensure that the benefits derived from its use are shared equitably with the communities that hold this knowledge. WIPO's efforts are centered around creating standards for the documentation and use of TK, while also respecting the cultural and spiritual significance of these knowledge systems.⁵ One of the most significant challenges in the protection of TK is the issue of "biopiracy," where companies or individuals exploit traditional knowledge without the consent of the communities that have developed it. WIPO's initiatives seek to prevent such exploitation by promoting the principle of prior informed consent (PIC) and the establishment of mutually agreed terms (MAT) between knowledge holders and those seeking to utilize traditional knowledge. These measures are designed to ensure that communities benefit financially and culturally from their contributions

⁵ World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). (2001). *Intellectual Property Needs and Expectations of Traditional Knowledge Holders*. WIPO Report.

to global knowledge.⁶

Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the Nagoya Protocol

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), adopted in 1992, marks a critical point in the international legal landscape regarding the protection of biodiversity and the rights of traditional communities. The CBD emphasizes the conservation and sustainable use of biological resources and seeks to ensure the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from their utilization. This includes traditional knowledge associated with genetic resources, which is often used by indigenous and local communities to maintain biodiversity and traditional practices.⁷

The CBD's influence is further strengthened by the Nagoya Protocol, which came into force in 2014. This protocol specifically addresses access to genetic resources and the sharing of benefits from their use, with a particular focus on traditional knowledge. The Nagoya Protocol establishes guidelines for obtaining prior informed consent from indigenous communities before accessing their genetic resources or traditional knowledge. It also emphasizes the need for the fair and equitable sharing of benefits, such as monetary compensation or other forms of recognition, to those communities whose knowledge and resources are utilized. By regulating these processes, the CBD and the Nagoya Protocol provide a framework for ensuring that traditional knowledge is protected and that its benefits are shared with the rightful holders.⁸

UNESCO's Convention for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has been instrumental in promoting the protection of intangible cultural heritage through its 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. This convention recognizes that traditional knowledge, along with other forms of intangible heritage such as oral traditions, rituals, and crafts, is a critical aspect of cultural identity and heritage. The convention aims to safeguard these practices, ensuring that they are passed down to future generations while also respecting the cultural and spiritual significance they hold for the communities that maintain

⁶ Roberts, G. (2004). From Biopiracy to Benefit Sharing: The Protection of Indigenous Knowledge in International Law. *Global Governance*, 10(2), 157-175.

⁷ Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). (1992). *The Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit-Sharing*.

⁸ Posey, D. A. (1990). Intellectual Property Rights and Just Compensation for Indigenous Knowledge. *Anthropology Today*, 6(4), 13-16.

them.⁹

India has made significant strides in protecting traditional knowledge through its national legal provisions. The **Indian Patent Act** (1970) has been instrumental in preventing the misuse of traditional knowledge through patents. In particular, it prohibits the granting of patents for inventions that are based on traditional knowledge unless the knowledge has been fully disclosed and the community's consent has been obtained. This provision is designed to prevent the appropriation of traditional knowledge by commercial entities and ensure that indigenous communities have control over how their knowledge is used.¹⁰ In addition to the Patent Act, the **Biological Diversity Act** (2002) is another critical piece of legislation in India that aims to regulate the access to genetic resources and traditional knowledge.¹¹ The Act establishes the **National Biodiversity Authority (NBA)**, which is responsible for ensuring that access to biological resources and TK is done in accordance with the principles of fairness and equity.

ETHICAL CHALLENGES IN PROTECTING TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

The ethical dilemmas surrounding the protection of traditional knowledge (TK) are multifaceted, deeply rooted in both historical injustices and the contemporary dynamics of globalization, intellectual property rights, and biotechnological advancements. At the heart of these challenges is the tension between preserving the cultural and intellectual heritage of indigenous communities and the pressures of commercialization, research, and intellectual property systems. As such, the ethical considerations are not merely legal but involve a delicate balancing act that seeks to respect the rights of knowledge holders while facilitating the responsible use and distribution of their knowledge. Biopiracy has emerged as one of the most significant and contentious issues in the realm of traditional knowledge protection. It refers to the unauthorized extraction and commercial use of indigenous knowledge, typically by corporations or research institutions, without compensation or acknowledgment of the source communities. Often, this knowledge is transformed into patents or trademarks, effectively privatizing it in ways that undermine the cultural and collective ownership of indigenous peoples. The ethical dilemma here lies in the fundamental unfairness of exploiting knowledge

⁹ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). (2003). *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*.

¹⁰ Indian Patent Act, 1970 (as amended in 2005).

¹¹ The Biological Diversity Act, 2002.

that has been nurtured and preserved by indigenous communities for generations.¹²

A prime example of biopiracy is the **Neem Patent Case** (1994), which became a landmark in the struggle against the misappropriation of traditional knowledge. In this case, a U.S. company attempted to patent a pesticide derived from neem, a tree widely used in India for its medicinal properties. Despite the widespread use of neem in India for centuries, the patent was granted by the U.S. patent office to the corporation. The Indian government contested this patent, arguing that the use of neem was part of India's cultural heritage and had been well-known long before the company's patent claim. Eventually, the patent was revoked, marking a significant victory for India and setting a global precedent against biopiracy.¹³

Similarly, the **Basmati Rice Case** highlighted the misappropriation of knowledge in agriculture. When a U.S. company, RiceTec, tried to patent certain strains of basmati rice, a crop that has been cultivated for centuries in India and Pakistan, the Indian government intervened, asserting that basmati was an indigenous crop and that its unique qualities were the result of centuries of cultivation by Indian farmers. The legal battle that ensued underscored the ongoing struggles to protect the intellectual property rights of indigenous communities in the face of globalization.¹⁴

The commercialization of traditional knowledge presents a complex ethical challenge. While it can create opportunities for economic growth and development, particularly for indigenous communities, it can also lead to exploitation and the erosion of cultural identities. Many indigenous communities face the dilemma of balancing the potential for economic gain with the preservation of their culture and traditions.

From an ethical standpoint, the central issue in the commercialization of traditional knowledge is the question of consent. Traditional knowledge is often collective, passed down through generations, and not owned by individuals. This raises difficult questions about who holds the right to give consent for its use in research, development, or commercialization. Indigenous communities may find themselves in a position where their knowledge is commodified, often

¹² Safrin, S. (2004). Hyperownership in a Time of Biotechnological Promise: The International Conflict to Control the Building Blocks of Life. *American Journal of International Law*, 98(4), 641-685.

¹³ *W.R. Grace & Co. v. India (Agracetus)*, 1994, U.S. Patent and Trademark Office, Case No. 09/198,933.

¹⁴ *Indian Government v. RiceTec Inc.*, 2001, [Case No. 8/2001], Intellectual Property Appellate Board, India.

without their full understanding of its commercial value, or they may be subjected to agreements that disproportionately benefit external parties, such as multinational corporations. Furthermore, the transformation of traditional knowledge into intellectual property, such as patents, can lead to its commodification in ways that strip it of its cultural and spiritual significance. For instance, sacred plants, medicinal practices, or agricultural techniques may be commercialized, but the knowledge holders may not receive a fair share of the profits or may lose control over how their knowledge is used. This process can undermine the cultural integrity of the knowledge and its connection to the communities that have sustained it.¹⁵

Access and Benefit Sharing (ABS) is an essential framework for addressing the ethical concerns surrounding traditional knowledge and biopiracy. ABS mechanisms were developed under the **Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)** to ensure that when traditional knowledge or biological resources are used for commercial or research purposes, the benefits are shared fairly with the communities from which the knowledge or resources originated. Fair and equitable sharing cannot be achieved through one-size-fits-all agreements; rather, each agreement must be tailored to the specific needs and aspirations of the communities involved. This requires careful consideration of the social, cultural, and economic context of each community and their unique relationship with their traditional knowledge. Despite the positive framework that ABS mechanisms provide, there are significant challenges in ensuring that they function effectively. Indigenous communities may lack the legal or institutional capacity to negotiate fair terms, and corporations or research institutions may prioritize profit over equitable sharing. The challenge, therefore, lies not just in creating ABS agreements but in ensuring that they are implemented in a way that is transparent, just, and beneficial to all parties involved.¹⁶

Corporations and research institutions have a significant role to play in the ethical use and protection of traditional knowledge. While they can help facilitate the responsible use of TK in research and commercialization, they also have a responsibility to ensure that they do not exploit indigenous knowledge for profit without fair compensation. Their role is vital in establishing ethical research practices, which include obtaining prior informed consent,

¹⁵ Berryman, C. A. (1994). Toward More Universal Protection of Intangible Cultural Property. *Journal of Intellectual Property Law*, 9(3), 245-263.

¹⁶ Ute, S. (2008). Indigenous Knowledge and Intellectual Property Rights: The Role of Fair Trade. *International Journal of Intellectual Property*, 16(1), 92-112.

adhering to ABS principles, and ensuring that any research or commercialization that uses TK is done in a way that benefits the knowledge holders. Companies are now expected to go beyond profit generation and consider the social, cultural, and environmental impact of their operations. Ethical CSR practices in relation to traditional knowledge involve ensuring that companies obtain the consent of indigenous communities before using their knowledge and that they provide fair compensation for any commercial use of that knowledge.¹⁷

CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING IP PROTECTION FOR TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

Intellectual Property (IP) systems, which were developed in the context of individual ownership and innovation, face significant challenges when applied to the protection of Traditional Knowledge (TK). TK, by its very nature, is collective, passed down through generations within indigenous communities and often tied to cultural, spiritual, and environmental practices. The mismatch between the structure of conventional IP systems and the communal nature of TK creates a complex landscape where effective protection of indigenous knowledge remains an unresolved issue. This chapter explores the key challenges in implementing IP protections for TK, with a focus on the conflicts between traditional knowledge and conventional IP systems, the difficulties of documentation and registration, and the economic implications for indigenous communities and global economic disparities. The central challenge in applying conventional IP protections to TK lies in the fundamental differences between the two. IP systems, such as patents, copyrights, and trademarks, are designed to protect the intellectual creations of individuals or entities, typically by granting exclusive rights over specific inventions or creative works. In contrast, TK is collective, intergenerational, and often based on shared practices and knowledge that cannot be attributed to a single person or organization. This disparity creates several issues when it comes to protecting TK within the current IP framework.¹⁸

Issues of Prior Informed Consent

One of the key ethical principles in the protection of TK is the concept of **prior informed consent (PIC)**, which refers to the necessity of obtaining permission from indigenous

¹⁷ Munro, L. L. (2006). Indigenous Intellectual Property: A Study in Property, Ethics, and Public Policy. *Yale Journal on Regulation*, 23(1), 49-84.

¹⁸ Wager, H. (2008). Biodiversity, Traditional Knowledge and Folklore: Work on Related IP Matters in the WTO. *Intercultural Human Rights Law Review*, 8, 7-22.

communities before using their knowledge, particularly when it is being commercialized or patented. In the context of conventional IP systems, obtaining PIC can be problematic for several reasons. First, TK is often shared among many members of a community, with no clear individual ownership or clear record of who holds the knowledge. This makes it difficult to identify the rightful holders of the knowledge and to obtain their consent in a manner that aligns with the principles of informed decision-making. Second, the fast-paced nature of research and development in industries such as biotechnology often leads to a situation where knowledge is used before consent is obtained or before the community has had time to fully understand the potential implications. This leaves communities vulnerable to exploitation, as they may not fully grasp the scope of commercialization, the risks, or the benefits associated with their knowledge being used outside of their traditional context.¹⁹

A notable case highlighting the lack of PIC is the **Turmeric Patent Case** (1995), in which a U.S. company was granted a patent for the medicinal use of turmeric, a plant widely used in India for its healing properties. The patent was granted despite the fact that turmeric had been a part of Indian traditional knowledge for centuries. The Indian government and indigenous communities argued that no prior informed consent had been sought from the communities who had long used turmeric in their traditional healing practices.²⁰

Limitations of Patent Systems

Patent systems are designed to grant exclusive rights to the inventor of a new product or process, typically after they disclose the details of their invention. While patents are effective for protecting novel inventions, they are ill-suited for the protection of TK. For a patent to be granted, an invention must be novel, meaning it must be new and not previously disclosed. However, TK is often ancient, shared knowledge that has been passed down for generations. The very nature of TK means that it does not meet the novelty requirement of conventional patent systems, as it has already been in use for centuries. Patents typically recognize individual ownership of an invention. However, TK is usually collective, belonging to entire communities, and cannot be attributed to a single inventor. This creates significant challenges in the patenting process, as the idea of individual ownership does not align with the communal

¹⁹ Howard, T. (2011). Trade, Intellectual Property, and Traditional Knowledge. *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 18(1), 75-96.

²⁰ *Council of Scientific & Industrial Research (CSIR) v. The University of Mississippi*, 1995, Patent No. 5,401,504, United States Patent and Trademark Office.

nature of TK. Even when TK is patented, there are no guarantees that the knowledge holders will receive fair compensation or benefits from its commercialization. Multinational corporations, for example, may patent a product based on TK, but the benefits often do not trickle down to the communities that have sustained the knowledge for generations.²¹

For indigenous communities, the economic implications of TK protection are both positive and negative. On the one hand, the proper protection and commercialization of TK can lead to new sources of income, particularly through fair and equitable benefit-sharing arrangements. For example, when indigenous communities are able to license their traditional knowledge to pharmaceutical or biotechnology companies, they may receive compensation in the form of royalties or other financial benefits. This can help improve the economic well-being of these communities and provide funding for important social and cultural projects. On the other hand, the commercialization of TK without fair compensation can lead to exploitation and the erosion of cultural values. If indigenous communities are unable to secure fair benefits from the commercialization of their knowledge, they may find themselves marginalized, with little control over how their cultural heritage is used. Furthermore, the commodification of TK may result in the loss of cultural integrity, as traditional practices and knowledge become commercialized and detached from their cultural context.²²

Global Economic Disparities

The global economic disparities between developed and developing countries play a significant role in the challenges of protecting TK. Developed countries often have more robust legal frameworks for IP protection, access to resources, and the capacity to exploit TK for commercial gain. In contrast, many indigenous communities in developing countries lack the legal infrastructure, financial resources, and institutional support necessary to assert their rights over their traditional knowledge. This disparity creates a power imbalance, where indigenous communities are at a disadvantage in negotiating fair terms for the use of their knowledge. Large multinational corporations and research institutions, which have the resources to secure IP protections and engage in global commercialization efforts, may exploit TK without compensating the knowledge holders. This exacerbates existing global inequalities, as the

²¹ Phillips, V. J. (2008). Indigenous Rights to Traditional Knowledge and Cultural Expressions: Implementing the Millennium Development Goals. *Intercultural Human Rights Law Review*, 9, 93-108.

²² Brown, J. C. (2014). The Challenges of Protecting Traditional Knowledge under the IP System. *European Journal of International Law*, 25(1), 5-22.

benefits of commercializing TK flow disproportionately to wealthy corporations and developed nations.²³

CONCLUSION

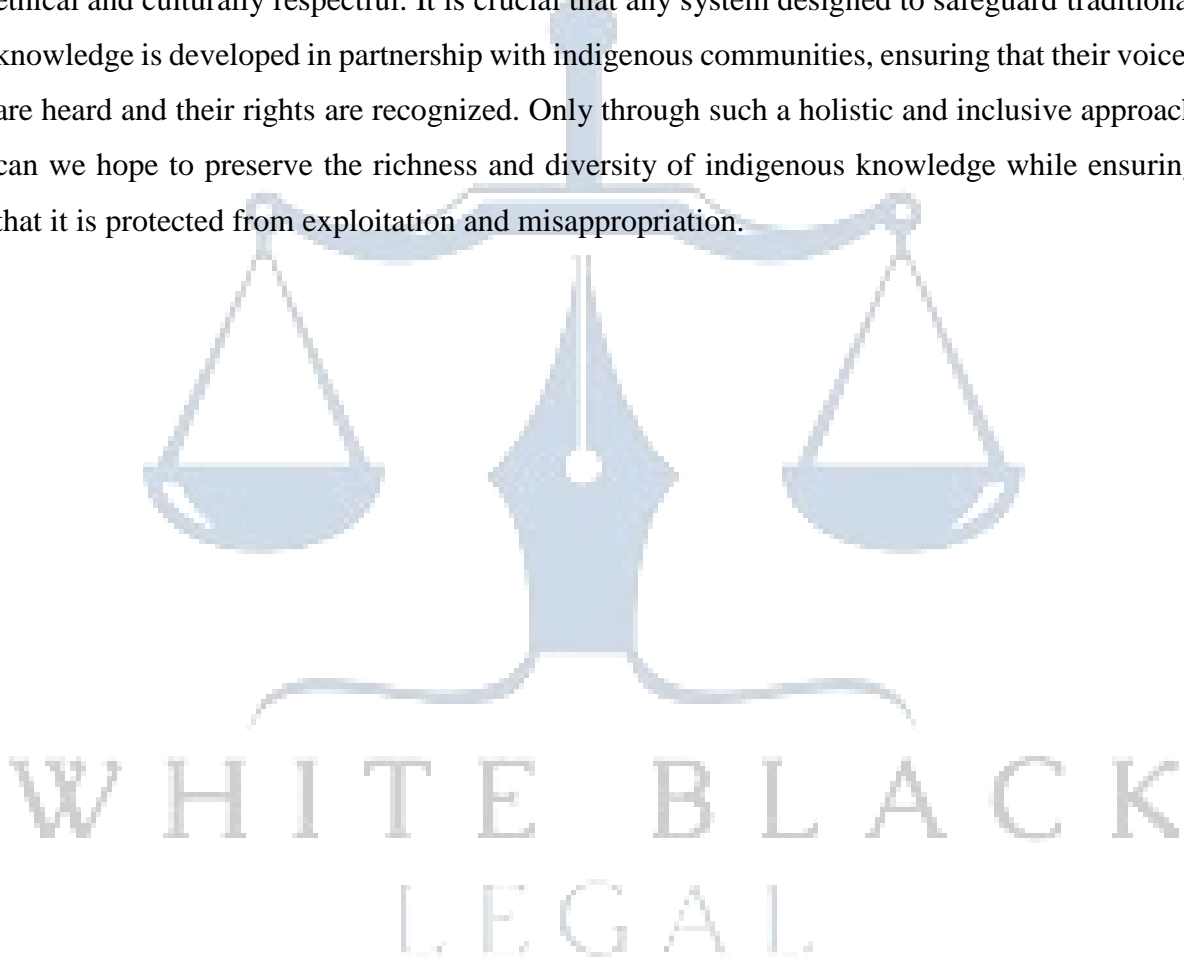
The protection of Traditional Knowledge (TK) within the framework of intellectual property (IP) law presents a complex and multifaceted challenge. Over the course of this research, we have explored the theoretical underpinnings of intellectual property, examined the history and significance of TK, and analysed the inherent conflicts that arise when attempting to apply conventional IP systems to the unique characteristics of TK. This exploration has underscored the need for a more inclusive, culturally sensitive, and adaptive approach to IP protection that respects the communal, intergenerational, and often spiritual nature of traditional knowledge.²⁴ First, we have seen that conventional IP systems, developed within the context of individual ownership and innovation, struggle to accommodate the collective and shared nature of TK. The issues of prior informed consent and the limitations of patent systems, among other challenges, highlight the gaps in current IP frameworks. TK is often passed down through generations in indigenous communities, with no clear individual ownership or documentation, which makes it difficult to apply the principles of conventional IP systems to safeguard such knowledge. This misalignment between IP law and TK is further compounded by the challenges of documenting and registering TK, as indigenous knowledge is often transmitted orally and informally, lacking the formal written records required by modern legal systems.²⁵ Moreover, the economic implications of protecting TK are profound. While the commercialization of TK has the potential to generate financial benefits for indigenous communities, there are significant risks, including the exploitation of these communities and the commodification of their cultural heritage. The global economic disparities between developed and developing nations exacerbate the vulnerability of indigenous communities, leaving them at a disadvantage when negotiating the terms of knowledge use and commercialization. In many cases, the exploitation of TK occurs without proper compensation or benefits flowing to the knowledge holders, further deepening the existing economic inequality between indigenous peoples and the multinational corporations that often benefit

²³ Ahuja, V. K. (2020). Protection of Traditional Knowledge under Intellectual Property Rights Regime. *Journal of Intellectual Property Rights*, 25(2), 89-97.

²⁴ Gopalakrishnan, N. (2008). *Traditional Knowledge and Intellectual Property: Legal and Ethical Perspectives*. LexisNexis.

²⁵ Forman, D. (2013). *Patents and Indigenous Knowledge: A Critical Review*. Cambridge University Press.

from their knowledge. The implementation of sui generis systems, or systems specifically designed for the protection of TK, may provide a solution that respects the cultural and collective nature of indigenous knowledge while still offering economic incentives for its sustainable use. Additionally, ensuring that indigenous communities have access to resources, legal expertise, and opportunities for meaningful participation in the development and enforcement of IP protections is essential for overcoming the economic barriers they face.²⁶ Ultimately, the protection of TK requires an approach that is not only legally sound but also ethical and culturally respectful. It is crucial that any system designed to safeguard traditional knowledge is developed in partnership with indigenous communities, ensuring that their voices are heard and their rights are recognized. Only through such a holistic and inclusive approach can we hope to preserve the richness and diversity of indigenous knowledge while ensuring that it is protected from exploitation and misappropriation.



²⁶ Posey, D. A., & Dutfield, G. (1996). *Beyond Intellectual Property: Toward Traditional Resource Rights for Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities*. IDRC.