

## Leh's wonder berry

Sujatha Padmanabhan *in collaboration with Kalpavriksh National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan*

Ten years ago, a few women got together to form a cooperative to market seabuckthorn juice. And then a multi-national company came up, manufacturing the same juice...



The hoarding boldly advertises "nature's miraculous fruit". I barely manage to read the words as the taxi that I am travelling in in Pune, whizzes past. But the large illustration of a tetra pack with the words "Leh Berry" does not escape me.

The hoarding transports me to Chushot and Shey, two small villages in the high mountains of Ladakh. It is 2001. A group of women are busy making juice from this "miraculous" fruit, the seabuckthorn. I spend a whole morning observing the tasks involved in production.

The first is to harvest the fruit. We set off, armed with plastic tubs and long sticks. I am curious about the fruit, as I have never seen it before. We soon arrive at a row of shrubs, laden with small, yellowish-orange, round berries. I taste one and make a face! The berry is very sour, and I wonder how it could make a drinkable juice. The women get down to work. One gently taps the branches with a stick, while two hold a tub below to catch the fruit. The fruits are too small to pluck and, besides the trees, are thorny. Soon the tubs are filled and we carry them to the backyard of a house.



**A sour fruit enterprising local women making seabuckthorn juice**

As we wash the fruit, we chat with the help of a translator. The women formed a cooperative over 10 years ago. A local non-governmental organisation helped them by providing training in various skills from working the machines that extracted the juice to accounting to marketing. Over the years their product, named Tsetalulu, after the fruit's Ladakhi name, gained popularity and their production rose to about 8,000 bottles a year which they mainly sold in the markets in Leh.

But now the women were concerned about a factory that had been set up to make seabuckthorn juice. Would their business suffer? Would the berries be harvested so that there would be a guarantee of availability of fruits for the following years? They had heard that many medicinal plants that grow wild in the Himalayas had been extracted in such large quantities that there was very little left. And, above all, is not the seabuckthorn their fruit? Why had an outsider set up a factory?

Soon the berries are washed clean and two women set off with it to a nearby village where their factory is located. The berries will be pulped and juiced later in the day, whenever there is electricity to run their juicing machine. The women who stay back start getting a set of glass bottles ready for the next batch. One group washes bottles that have been returned to them from the shops, while another starts to cut out labels that advertise their product.

Many thoughts come to mind as I watch them. I think that small is really beautiful; that local groups and specially women must be encouraged to run such small scale business units using whatever grows or lives around them; that left to these women the seabuckthorn will never be over-used or over-exploited; and that profits from the resources of a region should go to the local communities that live in that area and not be swallowed up or enjoyed by industry.



The taxi comes to a halt and I am jolted out of my reverie. That evening I make my way to the market near home and I notice rows of Leh Berry tetra packs jostling for space along with long established brands like Pepsi, Coke, Thums Up.

The berry has traversed thousands of miles to add to a variety of beverages that we urban Indians enjoy. This is the product from the factory that the women had spoken about. I am troubled. I wonder what has happened to the fears that the women of Chushot and Shey had voiced. And as I watch a group of teenagers at the shop sip their juice, I want to scream out and tell them this story of the seabuckthorn, of "nature's miraculous fruit".

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### **Make a difference**

You find a great variety of almost everything in the markets today. You can make a difference by choosing what you buy. Would you support a multinational or a corporate firm? Or would you rather opt for the products of smaller units? Or products that are not tested on animals? Or products that use less packaging? Find out what the safer, less damaging and less polluting alternatives are to the products that you consume. Become a responsible consumer .