

ARE GI TAGS THE BOOST THAT INDIGENOUS RICE NEEDS?

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Issues relating to Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs)

While a GI tag brings recognition to rice varieties on the verge of extinction, much more is needed to truly make a difference to the lives of paddy farmers

The range of products with Geographical Indication (GI) tags in India is rich and diverse—from Darjeeling tea, Karbi Anglong ginger, Coorg orange and Mysore betel nut to Allahabad Surkha Guava and Monsooned Malabar Arabica Coffee. But the one crop that comes up repeatedly is rice, with nearly 16-17 varieties on the list. Rice is represented, for instance, in the form of Navara, Palakkadan Matta and Pokkali from Kerala, Uttar Pradesh's Kalanamak, Maharashtra's Ajara Ghansal and Ambemohar, Assam's Joha saul and West Bengal's Gobindobhog and Tulaipanji.

In April, Chak-Hao rice became the latest addition to the list of 370 products certified by the Union government's GI registry, established in 2003. This fragrant, glutinous rice, pitch black in colour, has been an integral part of ceremonial feasts in Manipur for centuries., and is either eaten plain or combined with milk to make a pudding. It is also a great source of anthocyanins, a powerful antioxidant.

While the news of more and more rice varieties getting GI tags is heartening, one wonders if this is actually the shot in the arm that indigenous paddy needs. Some argue that the GI tag, though celebrated, has outlived its utility. They maintain that it leaves out those in surrounding areas who may have been growing that particular variety traditionally, even conflicts with other protections, and doesn't help farmers reach a wider market.

Ushakumari S., from the Kerala-based not-for-profit Thanal Trust, says that over the past few decades, this sector has been plagued with challenges, ranging from climatic changes and loss of biodiversity to new trade policies and the dismantling of support systems. It's ironic, given that many of the indigenous varieties are drought resistant, offer greater nutrition and are key to food security. "The green revolution benefited only the big farmers in irrigated areas such as Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh but bypassed the tribal farmers. India had over 100,000 indigenous varieties of rice, which got replaced by high-yielding, hybrid ones," says Ushakumari, who leads the Save Our Rice campaign in 10 states.

As a result, indigenous varieties such as the Navara from Kerala and Katarni from Bhagalpur, Bihar, nearly went extinct. The former, a medicinal "Shastika" rice, which even finds mention in the *Susruta Samhita*, an ancient text on medicine and surgery, was used extensively in Ayurvedic treatments such as the *Navarakizhi*, in which the rice was boiled in a decoction of *sida* root and milk, wrapped in cloth pouches and used in massages. "It was grown traditionally in certain parts of Kerala, mainly in Palakkad and near the Ayurveda centres," says P. Narayan Unny, 62, whose agricultural society successfully campaigned for the GI tag for the rice in 2004. Today, he grows Navara on his 125-year-old eco farm, located on the banks of the Shokanashini river in Palakkad.

The reasons cited for the decline of this variety are many. "The price of rice didn't go up but the cost of production did. The opening up of the market in the 1990s brought in competition from foreign agricultural products. People started adapting to modern medicine for ailments. No one wanted a short-term duration rice such as Navara, which grows only once a year after the

summer monsoons," says Unny. When he started managing the farm after his father's death, Unny decided to grow Navara. But he couldn't find seeds easily. Eventually, he had to approach the handful of farmers who were growing hybrid varieties on 90% of their land and Navara on the rest. He decided to revive the crop, and applied for a GI tag not just for Navara but also for the Palakkadan Matta variety.

A similar story played out in Bhagalpur, with the Katarni. "*Kuch saal pehle yeh bilkul hi lupt ho gaya tha* (Some years back it had completely disappeared)," says Raj Kumar Panjiara of the Bhagalpuri Katarni Dhan Utpadak Sangh, a not-for-profit based in Bhagalpur district's Jagdishpur village, which received the GI tag for it in 2018. The organization of 100 members works with farmers in and around the district. "There are mentions of Katarni having been cultivated in Mughal-era gazettes as well. It is so fragrant that you will even forget Basmati (which also has a GI tag) in front of it. And it is a hardy variety, which can be stored for four-five years," says Panjiara.

In each case—be it the Chak-Hao, Navara or Katarni—the tag has inculcated pride in the locals and attracted farmers to the rice variety. "A hundred to 200 new farmers have expressed an interest in growing it," says Panjiara.

Ushakumari is quick to burst the bubble, however: "All that GI does is bring recognition to the product. It is a marketing tool. But does it make a difference on the ground? Not really. In fact, it adds to confusion." She cites the example of the Navara, which is grown in other parts of Kerala and even outside the state, and has the same medicinal properties as the Palakkad variety. In fact, her grandfather in Thrissur used to be a Navara farmer and she remembers it being used in the Ayurvedic centres there. "But now farmers growing Navara in other parts can't sell it legally under that name. Only one society in that small region can sell. That's not fair to the rest," she adds.

This is now the issue with basmati, with Punjab chief minister Amarinder Singh having requested the Centre not to give a GI tag to the basmati grown in Madhya Pradesh. There was a war of words last week, with MP chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan writing to Congress chief Sonia Gandhi that Singh's stance is "anti-farmer" in nature.

The famed basmati rice has been through intellectual property (IP) challenges too. Shalini Bhutani, a Delhi-based law and policy expert, recalls one from the 1990s, when a US-based company took a patent on the rice variety. "India fought it, after which the United States Patent and Trademark Office toned down the patent claims but trademarks on it still abound. Even today, in US stores you can see 'Texmati' rice—a made-in-US basmati rice," she says. That's not all—the basmati has been a matter of contention between Pakistan, Nepal and India as well. Similarly, when one set of farmers in India got IP protection for Gobindobhog rice, another set in the same region claimed it had also been growing the variety for ages. "We still haven't figured a way to resolve these counter-claims," she says.

In fact, according to Bhutani, such tags make farmers, who have been producing the same product in other geographies, compete rather than cooperate. "In shared agro-climatic zones, political boundaries don't count," she adds. "It's just a race to the finish, and which society, NGO or farmer-breeder files the application first." And that is just the beginning, for a GI tag is no guarantee of a wider market. "*Koi katarni ko national platform dilaaye* (can someone give Katarni a national platform?)," says Panjiara.

Critics, in fact, question the logic of GI, a legacy of the World Trade Organization (WTO). "It is not a 'Made in India' concept and doesn't apply to local beliefs that life forms cannot be exclusively owned. Though even before the WTO, GIs have been used by European nations

when they traded with other countries to secure their products from competition and piracy," she explains.

What complicates matters further is that the GI tag is not the only IP on agricultural produce in India. The Protection of Plant Varieties and Farmers' Rights Act, 2001, (PPV & FRA) also seeks to secure the IP rights for breeders of crops, trees and vines. And it is possible for one product to have multiple IP rights "Instead of the GI tag, we should just sufficiently market the agricultural product. The focus should be more on resource sharing and benefit sharing agreements," says Bhutani. There is a need to support local farmers by creating demand and facilitating their innovative plant breeding practices. "In a post-covid world, when we need to be 'vocal for local', we have to ensure that we support these indigenous varieties in our local public distribution systems and nutrition supplement programmes," she argues, "And we need to revisit the very use of the IP rights in the food and farm systems."

[Click here](#) to read the Mint ePaperLivemint.com is now on Telegram. [Join Livemint channel](#) in your Telegram and stay updated

Log in to our website to save your bookmarks. It'll just take a moment.

Your session has expired, please login again.

You are now subscribed to our newsletters. In case you can't find any email from our side, please check the spam folder.

END

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com

CrackIAS