

The Rich Heritage of Tribal GI-Tagged Products

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India is a nation celebrated for its remarkable cultural and traditional diversity. The country is also home to numerous distinct tribal communities. According to the Census Report of 2011, India's tribal population constitutes about 8.64% of the total—one of the largest in the world. The tribal art of India is as diverse as its communities, with each tribe showcasing a unique form of artistic expression that reflects its way of life, beliefs, stories, and, most importantly, its deep connection with nature.

Every tribal art form and other product is a symbol of rich cultural heritage and craftsmanship, preserved and perfected over generations. A Geographical Indication (GI) tag is a form of recognition granted to products that possess unique qualities or reputations linked to their geographic origin. It aims to preserve the cultural, traditional, and artisanal practices that give these products their distinctive identity.

Many handcrafted items and other products produced by indigenous communities have rightfully been granted GI status due to their unique nature, craftsmanship, materials, and cultural significance. The GI tag serves as a mark of authenticity and protection, ensuring that tribal communities receive due recognition for their products and craftsmanship while safeguarding them from imitation and exploitation. Furthermore, it provides a global platform for showcasing India's tribal products and art, creating new market opportunities and sustaining the livelihoods of tribal communities.

The potential of GI registration to promote and preserve tribal products while also supporting the economic well-being of indigenous communities has been recognized. With this in mind, the Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India (TRIFED), a national-level cooperative organization dedicated to promoting the economic development of tribal communities through marketing and skill enhancement, launched the TRIFED GI Movement on India's 75th Independence Day in 2021. Under this initiative, 75 tribal products from 20 states were identified for registration under the *Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999*. Notably, 37 of these products were from the eight North-Eastern states, seven from Jharkhand, and six from Madhya Pradesh.

Ranging from paintings and embroidered textiles such as shawls to metal artwork, the distinct bamboo mirror mats of Kerala, and pottery, a variety of tribal art forms have found their way into the GI recognition list. While crafts remain a major category of GI-tagged tribal products, several food and agricultural products have also received recognition. These include Odisha's Kai Chutney (red ant chutney), Assam's Bodo Jou Gwan (rice beer) and Bodo Napham (fermented fish dish), Arunachal Pradesh's Khaw Tai (Khamti Rice) and Adi Kekir ginger, Naga chilli from Nagaland, Karbi Anglong ginger from Assam, Dalle Khursani (fiery red pepper) from Sikkim, and Warangal Chapata Chilli from Telangana—all celebrated for their distinctive characteristics.

Today, the list of GI-tagged tribal art forms includes Warli paintings (dating back to 2500–3000 BCE), Gond paintings by one of India's largest tribes, Dongariya Kondh embroidered shawls, and Lanjia

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Saura (Idital) paintings from Odisha, along with Rajasthan's blue pottery, Kota Doria fabric, Madhya Pradesh's Chanderi and Maheshwari silk, Bagh print, Odisha's Pattachitra, Karnataka's Bidriware, and Banarasi silk from Uttar Pradesh—all featuring distinct tribal motifs and traditional craftsmanship. These creations represent a deep bond between the land, the tribe, and its artistic heritage.

The Significance of the GI Tag for Tribal Products

Economic Empowerment

GI recognition helps artisans and producers access wider markets by promoting their products and increasing demand. This provides tribal communities with a sustainable source of income while establishing the value of their products as unique, high-quality items.

Preservation of Tradition

Many tribal art forms such as weaving, pottery, metal casting, and painting face the threat of extinction due to industrialization and proliferation of mass-produced goods. The GI tag ensures that these traditional practices are protected, nurtured, and practiced in their authentic form.

Protection from Misuse

GI status ensures that only genuine artisans and producers from a specific geographic region can use the tag. This prevents unauthorized or non-traditional producers from exploiting tribal heritage, safeguarding both the art form and the intellectual property of the community.

Cultural Preservation

GI tagging helps preserve India's cultural diversity. Tribal art is a living tradition that connects people to nature, history, and spirituality. It reflects community beliefs, lifestyles, and harmony with the environment. Protecting these products from dilution or misrepresentation is essential for maintaining the cultural integrity of tribal communities.

GI-Tagged Tribal Artifacts – The Way Forward

As global awareness of indigenous crafts and cultural preservation continues to grow, GI tagging plays an increasingly vital role in supporting tribal communities. These artifacts and other products deeply rooted in their distinct geography and cultural history not only provide economic benefits but also foster greater appreciation of India's diverse tribal traditions.

For GI-tagged agricultural products, sustainable production and strategic branding are crucial to strengthening their position in international markets. The GI potential of agricultural goods, particularly those of tribal origin, remains largely untapped and deserves greater attention.

In the years ahead, expanding the GI registry to include more tribal art forms and other traditional products—while ensuring that tribal communities have access to resources, training, and marketing platforms—will be key to preserving these priceless traditions. Equally important is for consumers to recognize the true value of these products—not merely as premium commodities or decorative pieces, but as carriers of a living cultural legacy that embodies India's artistic, spiritual, and cultural heritage.