

Geographical Indication (GI) Tags and Their Impact on Traditional Textile Products

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Abstract: -

Geographical Indication (GI) tags have emerged as an important intellectual property tool for protecting the identity, authenticity, and economic value of traditional textile products originating from specific regions. In India, textiles such as Banarasi sarees, Kanchipuram silk, Pochampally Ikat, Chanderi fabric, Muga silk, and Patan Patola have received GI recognition under the Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999. This article examines the legal framework governing GI protection for textiles, highlights notable case studies, and analyses the socio-economic and cultural impact of GI tagging on artisan communities. It further discusses the persistent challenges — including low grassroots awareness, weak enforcement, limited benefit-sharing, and gaps in international recognition — that continue to limit the full potential of GI protection. The article concludes with suggestions for strengthening the GI ecosystem so that traditional textile artisans can derive greater and more equitable benefit from this form of intellectual property protection.

1. Introduction:

India's textile heritage is a reflection of its vast cultural and regional diversity, with each state contributing distinct weaving traditions, motifs, and techniques developed over centuries. Traditional textiles such as handloom sarees, ikat weaves, and hand-block

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prints are deeply tied to the identity of the communities that produce them. However, with the rise of machine-made imitations and unauthorized use of traditional names and designs, many authentic textile crafts have faced problems of misrepresentation, loss of market share, and dilution of cultural identity.

Geographical Indication (GI) tags address this problem by legally linking a product's name to its region of origin, thereby preventing others from using that name for similar goods produced elsewhere. For traditional textiles, a GI tag is not merely a legal label; it functions as a certificate of authenticity, a marketing tool, and a mechanism for preserving the cultural and economic interests of artisan communities.

2. Legal Framework Governing GI Protection

In India, GI protection is governed by the Geographical Indications of Goods

(Registration and Protection) Act, 1999, which came into force on 15 September 2003. The Act is administered by the Controller General of Patents, Designs and Trademarks, through the Geographical Indications Registry located in Chennai. It is aligned with the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement of the World Trade Organization, which sets minimum international standards for GI protection.

A notable limitation in the international framework is that Article 23 of the TRIPS Agreement, which provides a higher level of protection, applies only to wines and spirits, leaving textile and handicraft GIs to rely on the relatively weaker protection available under Article 22. This has, at times, made it more difficult for Indian textile GIs to prevent misuse or imitation in foreign markets.

3. GI-Tagged Traditional Textiles:

Illustrative Cases

Table 1: Select GI-Registered Traditional Textiles of India

Textile Product	State/Region	Year of GI Registration	Distinctive Feature
Banarasi Sarees	Uttar Pradesh	2009	Fine silk brocade with gold/silver zari work
Kanchipuram Silk	Tamil Nadu	2005–06	Heavy silk with contrast-colour borders
Pochampally Ikat	Telangana	2004–05	Geometric patterns via resist (tie-and-dye) technique
Chanderi Fabric	Madhya Pradesh	2004–05	Lightweight sheer texture, silk-cotton blend
Muga Silk	Assam	2007	Natural golden sheen, durability
Patan Patola	Gujarat	2013	Double ikat weave with intricate motifs
Tangaliya Shawls	Gujarat	2009	Dotted bead-like weaving technique

India currently has several hundred registered GI products, a significant share of which belong to the textile and handicraft category. Table 1 presents a few well-known traditional textiles that have received GI protection.

The case of Muga silk from Assam illustrates one of the practical challenges of GI protection: the textile has repeatedly faced confusion with a similarly named product, 'Moonga silk,' produced in other states, despite the Silk Board of India clarifying that no such variant exists. This highlights how enforcement and public awareness remain as important as registration itself.

The case of Tangaliya shawls from Gujarat also illustrates the limits of GI protection when it is not accompanied by sustained market and livelihood support. Although the craft received GI recognition in 2009, the weaver base is reported to have declined sharply over recent decades, underlining that legal recognition alone cannot reverse a decline in traditional practice without complementary economic and training interventions.

4. Impact of GI Tags on Traditional Textile Products

4.1 Economic Impact

GI tags help create a distinct market identity for traditional textiles, often enabling artisans and weaver cooperatives to command

premium prices and access wider domestic and export markets. Certification of authenticity also helps build consumer trust, which is particularly valuable in competing against cheaper machine-made imitations.

4.2 Cultural and Heritage Preservation

By formally recognizing a textile's link to a specific region and community, GI tags contribute to preserving traditional knowledge, weaving techniques, and design vocabularies that might otherwise be lost to standardization or imitation. This recognition can also strengthen a community's sense of ownership and pride in its craft heritage.

4.3 Legal Protection Against Misuse

GI registration provides a legal basis for restricting the use of a protected name by producers outside the designated region, offering a remedy against misrepresentation and trademark-style imitation that traditional artisans previously had limited means to contest.

4.4 Social Empowerment of Artisan Communities

Several GI textile clusters have seen the formation of weaver associations and producer collectives to manage the GI registration and its benefits jointly. This collective structure can improve artisans' bargaining power and provide a platform for representing their interests in policy discussions.

5. Challenges in Realizing the Full Potential of GI Protection

- ☞ Limited awareness among grassroots artisans about the existence, purpose, and procedure of GI registration and its benefits.
- ☞ Weak on-ground enforcement, allowing continued sale of imitation products under GI-protected names, particularly in domestic markets.
- ☞ Unequal distribution of benefits within artisan communities, with intermediaries and traders sometimes capturing a larger share of the value addition than the actual weavers.
- ☞ Limited international recognition and enforcement, partly due to the narrower scope of protection available to textiles under the TRIPS Agreement compared to wines and spirits.

6. Suggestions for Strengthening GI Impact on Textiles

- ☞ Conduct sustained, grassroots-level awareness campaigns among artisan communities regarding GI registration, authorized user status, and enforcement mechanisms.

- ☞ Strengthen monitoring and legal enforcement against unauthorized use of GI-protected textile names in domestic and online marketplaces.
- ☞ Support the formation and capacity building of weaver producer collectives to ensure a fairer share of GI-linked economic benefits reaches the artisans themselves.
- ☞ Integrate GI promotion with skill development, design innovation, and market linkage programmes so that legal protection is matched by sustained livelihood support.
- ☞ Pursue stronger international recognition of textile GIs through bilateral and multilateral trade negotiations.

7. Conclusion

Geographical Indication tags have proved to be a valuable instrument for protecting and promoting India's traditional textile heritage, offering both legal safeguards and market advantages to artisan communities. However, the experience of various GI-tagged textiles shows that registration alone is not sufficient; its benefits depend on sustained awareness-building, enforcement, equitable benefit-sharing, and complementary livelihood support. A more integrated approach — combining legal protection with skill development, market linkage, and community

empowerment — is essential if GI tags are to fully realize their potential in safeguarding traditional textile products and the artisans who create them.

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