

GOLDEN JUBILEE BEGINNINGS

DHAKA WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 17, 2021, FALGUN 4, 1427 BS

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#BUSINESS

As Bangladesh moves towards becoming more visible in the global arena, and its people begin to take pride anew in things that are traditional and local, the GI issue came into the limelight. The initial push from the general people came from the fear, however unfounded, that the registration of certain items by the neighbouring country would rob the locals of the right to produce or sell products like Jamdani, jute, mango or even Hilsa.

The GI factor: Marking what is truly ours

SANIA AIMAN

What GI enlistment or tag does is that it allows customers and producers to create trust and confidence on the product's authenticity and quality in internal or external markets. It helps create a reputation of the product, facilitating fairer prices and access to larger markets for the producers.

But unlike patents or copyrights, which prevent other producers from using the same techniques/technologies/designs by law and subject to penalties, a GI does not provide such protection. GI, or Geographical Indication registration simply provides recognition for a particular product to have certain qualities associated to or for belonging to a geographical area.

Currently, Bangladesh has three GI registered products, namely the 'Jamdane', hilsa, and the Khirsapat mango. The country has also applied for the same enlistment for the newly revived Muslin, along with a whole list of products waiting for acceptance.

Interestingly, India had already registered the Uppada Jamdani before Bangladesh, which is why the officials here insisted on not using a Dhakaiya or other locality indicating prefix while registering the Jamdane, to underscore the originality and uniqueness of the sari, which belongs

techniques. However, once certified, each item's producers have to make the effort themselves, to truly drive benefit from this increased visibility.

Another matter of concern is whether a GI certified product has any real or direct export potential. So far, of the items that Bangladesh has received GI certificates for, only the Ilish has a significant role in international trade, where the certification can actually have a real role. The Khirsapat mango production is significant, but most of it is exhausted by simply supplying the local markets, and the returns are significant. How and to which markets shall these be exported are questions that still need to be explored.

In the case of Jamdane, regardless of how beloved it is in Bangladesh, or the respect it garners from sari aficionados around the global diaspora, remains to be tapped for real trade potential in other forms, like yardage. The GI certificate did in fact help boost interest in the preservation of all things Jamdane, and with additional endowments received under the Ambassador's Cultural Preservation Fund, the NCCB researched and recorded some 200 different motifs, and published a book with some of them. They also organised a Jamdane exhibition in collaboration with the Bengal Foundation in late 2019, at Bengal Gallery. That was also the first attempt to manually weave 200/200 count thread successfully, creating a very fine material.

The GI certificate did create some awareness in the people, but it did not happen in the same way for the 'sheetal pati', which can be another one of our certified products, and the weavers of this type of pati fell into deep trouble during the pandemic lockdown as well, Sheikh Saifur Rahman of the NCCB said. Perhaps, with a GI certification, more local and non-government benefactors would have known about the artisans and their plight, and extended a helping hand.

"It is important to continue with work in bringing work orders, creating market linkage, and providing them with basic necessities of life and respectful recognition, so that artisans are encouraged to stay in the profession of their forefathers," he said.

"A lot of the artisans are being tempted away from the artisanal angle of the craft as the mechanical options are far more economical and less labour intensive. That's not the case for a pit loom, where the weavers have their legs inside the pit, sitting in a particular posture for hours at end, doing delicate handiwork. The pit can get incredibly cold in winter and quite hot in the summer. An artisan with one helper could spend up to an entire day weaving just one inch of a typical 44-inch-wide sari," he added.

The time, skill, and patience for the more intricate designs of course increase proportionally. Thus, it becomes more important to ensure with the follow up after receiving the GI certificates.

Given that many of the traditional products of Bangladesh may not have export potential for pragmatic reasons like perishability, or the demand patterns dependent on population structure, there is no dearth of unique items that Bangladesh can seek GI certifications for, like the jute mats in Rangpur, more commonly known as shotoronji, or the honey from Sundarban, the traditional weaves of the indigenous tribes, Rajshahi's heritage handloom silk, traditional toys of wood and cloth dolls, the special 'kantha' quilts from Sylhet, Shokher Hari, etc.

These are all items that hold cultural and emotional significance for the people of Bangladesh, and also indicate to decent trade potential. It now remains for individuals dedicated to these arts to refine their product, and seek and avail the government's support in securing GI certification and gaining the associated benefits, for safeguarding the country's inheritance, and to improve the lives of its cherished artisans.

Photo: Sazzad Ibne Sayed
Model: Antora
Wardrobe: Jamdani from Aranya
Blouse: Zabin Iqbal
Make-up: Md. Hossen
Hair: Gazi
Styling: Zabin Iqbal
Location: Bengal Carpet Mill, Ford Nagar, Dhamrai



PHOTO: LS ARCHIVE/SAZZAD IBNE SAYED

only to Bangladesh, informed Sheikh Saifur Rahman, General Secretary at the National Crafts Council of Bangladesh.

While the similarities and differences between the crafts and products of Bangladesh and the Indian State of West Bengal are certainly extensive as well as debatable, it stands true that due to geographic proximity and shared cultural heritage does play a large role.

One of the key aspects of GI certification is the requirement to prove the clear distinguishability of the product. In the case of the Khirsapat mango, it has been demonstrated that the mango derives its composition and taste from being part of that particular region, namely Chapainawabganj, in Rajshahi.

"There have been instances of people trying to grow the Khirsapat by replicating the conditions of the traditional orchards in Rajshahi, going so far as to bring in the same soil, in some gardens in Gazipur, near the capital. But the mangoes produced were not the same in taste or fragrance," said Dr Md Azhar Ali, Director, Department of Agricultural Extension.

GI certification can help to create awareness about a product's real qualities and lead to the creation of quality control measures or guidelines, which can protect the real and traditional producers of an item from replicas created with very similar