

#PERSPECTIVE

Roadmap to GI status for Tangail Saree – A COMPREHENSIVE LOOK

Recently, the Indian state of West Bengal was awarded the geographical indication (GI) tag for Tangail sarees — a decision that has stirred up considerable debate and concern. Tangail sarees have been an essential part of our cultural heritage since the craft of producing taant began in Pathrail, Tangail. To understand the stance regarding GI better a roundtable discussion was held at The Daily Star Centre on Monday, 12 February, 2024 with economists, craft revivalists, and legal experts from Bangladesh and India. Here we publish a summary of the discussion.

Munira Emdad,
Proprietor, Tangail
Saree Kutir



Through the centuries, amidst various waves of geographic partition and consolidation, Bangladeshi weavers and associated craftsmen of the trade have demonstrated their skills to the world through unique designs and production techniques. They have also managed to evolve and reinvent their craft with the changing times to remain relevant.

After the decline of the Muslin trade, the Hindu artisans of Dhamrai, who used to weave plain Muslin cloth for the European market, migrated to Pathrail, Tangail upon the invitation of the local Zamindars. They shifted their skills to focus more on weaving fine sarees for the local market.

I set up Tangail Saree Kutir in the early '80s, and have since then continued working with the craftspeople to create weaves that cater to the modern women while maintaining the authenticity of their craft.

During the 1947 Partition, Basaks relocated to the West Bengal and established trade there. However, the intellectual property still belongs to the weaver community in Tangail. There are subtle differences that we can notice between weaves of West Bengal and Tangail — it is demonstrated in both yarn processing and the design aesthetics.

Raghunath Basak,
Master weaver, community leader,
and President, of Tangail Saree
Merchant Association

There is an uproar amongst the *Basak* community of Tangail regarding the recent GI accreditation of Tangail Saree by West Bengal. We have been engaged in this craft for hundreds of years.

Furthermore, there is no place called Tangail in West Bengal. Nevertheless, West Bengal has registered its local saree as "Tangail". This is unacceptable and ironic as we export approximately 75 lac sarees to India every year.

It is extremely disheartening to know that India, particularly West Bengal, has been granted the GI for our craft. If we leave this usurpation unchallenged, our future generations will not forgive us. What legacy will we be leaving behind for them?

Frankly, we do not want to engage in endless theoretical discussion on this issue. We want proactive steps to reclaim our heritage. It is not about profit; it is about our identity. Our community will come forward to assist, if necessary, with any credible steps to retain our heritage.

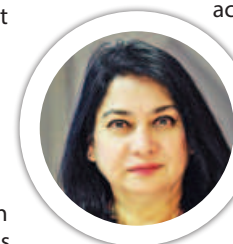
Dr Fahmida Khatun,
Executive Director, Centre for Policy
Dialogue (CPD)

GIs are distinctive signs that tell us where a product comes from and how special it is. Some of these signs have become well-known and trusted. If we do not protect them, dishonest businesses might use them wrongly for their financial benefit. This is undesirable for both the buyers and the honest producers.

GIs can also help create a competitive advantage for products in the international market because the fact that a product is eligible to have a GI tag implies that it has certain unique qualities for which it has gained a reputation.

Socially and culturally, GIs help safeguard the cultural heritage of a region by preserving the distinct characteristics and qualities of products tied to that specific location. This preservation not only maintains the authenticity of the products but also contributes to the overall cultural identity and heritage of the region. It may also help to get a special price for the uniqueness of a product. Of course, this is not automatic. It requires branding and marketing of the product simultaneously.

The producers of GI goods will have to be linked with the market so that they can benefit economically by producing the goods. Without GI, similar products may be available at a cheaper price attracting more consumers. This will in turn help them expand their businesses and continue to keep prices lower as they have economies of scale. As a result, the unique product may lose its acceptability amidst price wars and economies of scale.



To hold onto the heritage, give value to the exclusivity, and justify the price and hard work behind a product, GI tags are very important. Otherwise, heritage products are certain to get lost, especially due to the acceleration of technology, power looms, and economies of scale.

Sarwat Siraj Shukla,
Lawyer, Bangladesh Supreme Court

The process of GI claim for Tangail saree by our neighbouring India commenced in 2020. A few local newspapers, including a prominent Bengali daily, had carried an exclusive report on the issue back then. And yet, as a nation, we have vented in collective protest only after India was granted the GI right of Tangail saree last month.