GI Tagging in Ayurveda

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Anybody who has had the fortune of visiting a flea market in India will be familiar with the availability of brands with the likes of Gucci and Armani at unbelievably discounted prices in the narrow lanes of the bustling capital city of India. With no offence to the rather enthusiastic salesmen of these products, it is quite evident and well known that they are not even the tenth copy of the originals. If however, a fancy showroom with well dressed, English speaking salespersons in a posh locality of a metropolitan sells a luxury product, say a Kanchipuram Saree, at a suitng price, anyone is very unlikely to second guess its credibility. Unfortunately, most counterfeit businesses around the world run as per the latter scenario.

The obvious lack of knowledge of most customers makes it easy for growing number of businesses to thrive and flourish at the expense of the often small community of manufacturers of original products. A report by International Chamber of Commerce and International Trademark Association projected that the value of world trade in counterfeit and pirated goods could reach USD 991 Bn by 2022. This trade, encompassing critical sectors like automobile and pharmaceuticals, creates an enormous drain on global economy depriving governments and private organisations off revenue that they rightfully deserve.

While the practice of counterfeiting goods is possibly as old as civilisation itself, modern economies have managed to find ways of substantially decreasing, if not eliminating, this business. Amongst several other strategies Geographical Indication (GI) tagging has come out as an easy, reliable and strategic technique to ensure quality and authenticity of goods traditionally and historically originating from specific regions. A GI is a sign used on products that have a specific geographical origin and possess qualities or a reputation that are due to that origin. In order to function as a GI, a sign must identify a product as originating in a given place. In addition, the qualities, characteristics or reputation of the product should be essentially due to the place of origin. Since the qualities depend on the geographical place of production, there is a clear link between the product and its original place of production.

This paper covers the economic rationale behind GI tagging while exploring the scope and benefits of GI tagging Indian Ayurveda products. The paper goes into details of domestic and international geographical indications and highlights the opportunity that faces India in terms of export of Ayurveda products through the help of GI tag. It covers the bottlenecks that have hindered the reach of Indian Ayurveda in global markets and attempts to provide solutions to some of these issues.
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Socio-economics of GI Tagging
GI addresses the most common problem in economics i.e. the problem of asymmetric information. In most buyers–seller interactions seller happens to have a lot more information about the product being traded than the buyer of the product. This gap in information available in the market has the twin disadvantage of buyers being duped into paying hefty amount for fake products and the eventual crowding out of the sellers of original products who cannot compete with the prices of sellers marketing fake products.

A GI right enables those who have the right to use the indication to prevent its use by a third party whose product does not conform to the applicable standards. For example, in the jurisdictions in which the Darjeeling geographical indication is protected, producers of Darjeeling tea can exclude use of the term 'Darjeeling' for tea not grown in their tea gardens or not produced according to the standards set out in the code of practice for the geographical indication.

The economic rationale behind the practice of GI tagging is to reduce the informational asymmetries existing in the market and put the buyers at somewhat the same bargaining position as the seller by indicating the quality of a given product through a specific symbol. The practice not just equates buyers and sellers in terms of bargaining power but also significantly reduces the search costs for buyers associated with finding a good quality, original product. The resources saved through cutting these costs can then be used for more economic purposes.

For sellers of original products GI Tag ensures that the market is not saturated by non-traditional sellers of the product and at the same time assurance of quality to the buyers enables sellers to extract better revenue for their product by charging a ‘quality premium’. GI tag also brings in investments towards the often subsistence businesses which can have an increased, more visible presence in the market powered by the legal assistance offered through GI Tag. Eventually these marginal sellers build a reputation for themselves in the market leading to economic development of an often impoverished section of the society.

Quality assurance opens up channels for export of domestic traditional products around the world, like in the case of tequila manufacturers in Tequila (Mexico). The Mexican government’s GI for tequila was enforced in 1974 and covers two types of tequilas – one that is made from 100 percent blue agave and the second made from 51 percent agave and 49 percent alcohol from other types of sugar. What makes the tequila made in Tequila different from that in, say Los Altos, is that the agave grown in Tequila is sweeter and a lot subtler. By promoting this very difference, the producers of tequila were able to secure for themselves a place in the global market. Today, Tequila bottles are a common sight across duty-free shops across international airports.

General quality of products in the market, which is indicative of the development of economy of any country, is maintained if there are legal channels to protect small communities of original manufacturers. A general environment of fair trade exists in the economy when the rights of original producers are protected by the government. This fair trade environment in turn promotes innovation in a country when non-scientific innovations get the same protection as what scientific disruptions have been getting through patents.
Darjeeling Tea
The Case of India’s first GI Tagged Product
If there can ever be ‘precious herbs’ as there are precious metals, tea would undoubtedly be the diamond of this group. Right to a good cup of hot tea can be called an unofficial fundamental right in most Southeast Asian countries. The quintessential morning routine of an average Indian wouldn’t be complete without a hot cup of tea and Darjeeling tea is easily the favourite in every family. As much as tea is revered as the flag bearer of modern Indian culture, the ‘Champagne of Teas’ – the Darjeeling tea actually finds a place in every tea loving household around the world. The likes of Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe second flush or Oolong are among the most famous and expensive tea available around the globe.

The very obvious popularity of this specific tea makes it an even obvious candidate for GI tagging and it did receive an official GI tag by the government of India in 2004. Following this, tea from estates of Darjeeling in West Bengal found its way to the cafes of London, Australia, China and the Gulf countries even more than before and became a staple for many. And so, the Gorkha Land agitation disrupting the supply of tea from Darjeeling to rest of the world naturally brewed fear among global tea connoisseurs, so much that the shortage and the subsequent price rise were reported in popular dailies like The Telegraph and The Guardian.

What is to be noted in this incident is the lack of substitution of the Darjeeling tea with tea from any other estate in India or elsewhere despite rising price. Indian GI tag on Darjeeling tea first helped in creating an exclusive market for the tea in the world and then prevented any other estate from taking over its position thereafter, even during crisis. Sellers abroad could not be manipulated into buying replicas or ‘similar’ varieties of the tea because its reputation actually came from the Geographical Indication.
GI Tagging in Ayurveda
Herbs are becoming increasingly popular in healthcare and beauty industry as the global move towards natural products is in full swing. The lower cost of herb based medicines as compared to their laboratory made counterparts, is driving the growth of the Herbal Medicine Market. The desire to use ‘safer’ products with fewer side effects is also a primary motivation for purchasers of natural Over the Counter Products (OTCs). According to a report conducted by Kline Group, a global consulting services firm, about 50 percent of the US consumers surveyed perceive natural OTCs to be safer than traditional OTCs. Safety drives substantial use of natural products in the pediatric population and 49 percent of parents give natural OTCs to their children, with 72.3 per cent giving their children natural OTCs first before administering traditional (allopathic) OTCs.

According to a 2018 report published by Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, Natural and Organic Beauty Market may reach USD 22 Bn by 2024. In India itself the leading personal care brands like Himalaya Herbals, Lotus Herbal Naturals, relatively new entrants like Mamaearth and WOW Skin Science and even high end brands like Forest Essentials and Kama Ayurveda have been dominating the market on basis of their sole claim of using ayurvedic and natural ingredients in cosmetics. Unlike the herbal medicine market, herbal cosmetics markets, where products are usually priced higher than their synthetic counterparts, highlight the fact that consumers are willing to pay a ‘premium’ for natural products. The new age consumer is regarding traditional medicine has not let ayurveda rise from being perceived as mere rudimentary cure, at least as far as the healthcare and lifestyle industry is concerned. In a press release by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry dated January 2019, amongst other reasons, inadequate quality control procedure was listed as one of the top reasons for low share of India in the world herbal medicine trade.

Traditionally, because the usage of plants was a part of a local community’s culture and health practices quality was more manageable. However, this tradition is being rapidly eroded as control of medicinal development and usage moves to the industry. The very reason that has led to renewed interest in natural products has given rise to unregulated use of traditional herbs and erosion of traditional methods of production. Innumerable brands existing in what can be broadly labeled as the natural products industry makes it hard to maintain authenticity of herbal remedies that are often of value precisely because of the region they are produced in and the method used for their production,more environmentally conscious that its predecessor and is willing to invest in sustainable lifestyle products over chemical products.

Quality in the case of medicinal plants includes identity, purity and safety, as well as efficacy and there are many challenges involved in quality standardization of medicinal, aromatic and natural dyes plants. These include the following: (a) Unlike allopathic drugs that have a single or a set number of compounds that can be easily standardized, plants have a plethora of phytoconstituents that contribute to their bioactivity; (b) Bioactivity also varies according to time (day, season, constellar position) and to region (arid, marshy); (c) There are differences in the bioactivity depending on the way the plant has been collected, processed and stored.
While government has taken commendable measures to enhance quality procedures, like the Voluntary Certification Scheme for Medicinal Plant Produce, in order to further exports it is necessary to take globally followed measures such as GI tag which is better known and trusted around the world. GI tag happens to solve most of the above mentioned quality related bottlenecks by ensuring authenticity through giving a group or community of traditional herb producers and suppliers the sole right over production and trade of specific herbs.

Medicinal plants are among the most precious bio-resources of the planet, and are also among the most threatened due to over usage. GI tagging of medicinal plants is not just important for quality-assurance and trade but also for conservation of these species while helping supplement the incomes of the farmers. GI tagging medicinal herbs generates positive externality related indiscriminate use of essential plants and herbs. Without any regulation in place biodiversity becomes a common use product vulnerable to the phenomenon that is referred to in economics as the tragedy of commons. It is an economics problem in which every individual has an incentive to consume a resource, but at the expense of every other individual – with no way to exclude anyone from consuming. As the demand for the already scarce resource overwhelms the supply, every individual who consumes an additional unit directly harms others — and themselves too — by making the resource even scarcer.

Nobel Prize winning economist Elinor Ostrom suggested the most popular solution to the tragedy of commons — collective ownership of local resources. Before the English enclosures laws, customary arrangements among rural villagers included common access to most farm lands which managed their use and conservation. By mutually limiting use of commons, managing use through practices such as crop rotation and seasonal grazing, and providing enforceable sanctions against overuse and abuse of the resource, these collective action arrangements readily overcame the tragedy of the commons.

Even today local communities are well known for living in peace with their natural environment, protecting the integrity of nature while using it to their benefit as well. Making local communities the guardians of traditional herbs will first give use rights of these herbs to a smaller (more manageable) group of people and then force big industrialists to include these people in the process of product designing and manufacturing, thereby stopping the arbitrary use of important plants in beauty and health industries. The biggest benefit here is the limited need for continuous government intervention which is costly and can lead to inefficiencies due to extreme division of power.
GI Tagged Ayurveda Products
India boasts of a rich culture of effective traditional treatments beginning from Charak Samhita, the only text available worldwide on restorative science, to the current AYUSH guidelines for immunity in Covid times being shared worldwide. With hundreds of medicinal plants existing in the subcontinent it is surprising and rather disappointing to know that only a select few of these have so far received GI tag while the numerous others still lack the limelight they deserve. From the ones that do have GI as well, none are traditional ‘herbs’ but rather food items with ayurvedic benefits. There are two important reasons behind this.

Firstly, since Ayurveda is not limited to a state or region of India, most medicinal herbs are produced all around the country with limited differences in properties accruing to area of origin. And thus GI tagging makes little sense if we consider only domestic trade. However, the scene changes completely when we look at international trade. It is important to highlight here that that there does not exist any ‘international GI’, so to say, as yet. A government’s GI Tag is applicable only in its own country at least as far as legal matters are concerned. Unlike trademarks, there is no globally enforceable geographical indication that protects a product of one country in all national jurisdictions. There are ways to expand the scope of GI tag in international markets as well but GI tag as a standalone doesn’t provide global protection.

However, that being said, it’ll be incorrect to assume that Indian GI tag will have no benefit whatsoever beyond the Indian border. As the Darjeeling Tea case showed, despite lack of global legal framework on GI tag, Indian GI tag protected the market for Darjeeling Tea from sellers of counterfeit products. This is a fundamental concept to understand here. When it comes to Ayurveda, especially, it is not the domestic market that will be impacted from the GI tag but the markets abroad. While there aren’t many differences in Ayurvedic plants produced in different states, there are significant differences in same plant being cultivated in different countries. Indian herbs facing competition in international markets need protection from similar products being produced in other countries and being sold in same markets as the Indian products. In absence of a global protection framework it is the Indian GI tag that differentiates Indian products from those produced elsewhere.

Secondly, GI tag is unfortunately not as popular in India as someone might assume. While there is no research available on how far the GI tagging system has penetrated into the country, the figuratively handful number of products having received GI tag does not show a very optimistic picture. An excellent economic strategy such as this wouldn’t have been left unexploited if sufficient awareness would have existed. Imagine going to a sale (an excellent economic strategy, at least for the sellers) at Zara and not seeing women with determination nothing less than inspiring making up a crowd bigger than the store can fit. Clearly, Zara didn’t advertise its sale. This is very similar to the crucial issue of lack of awareness of GI tag mechanism that we are facing right now. Any legal mechanism is as good as the amount of people aware of its existence. A policy or law will remain valuable only on paper if the very people it impacts remain unaware of it. Despite a well thought out policy in place, India is missing out on the benefits of GI tagging primarily because it lacks a strong advertising framework. Something Zara would never do by the way!

In every phenomenal feat that India has achieved, from the country becoming polio free through mass polio vaccinations to successfully conducting the largest vaccination drive in the world during Covid-19 crisis, advertising has bridged the gap between government policy and its ground implementation. Among the give GI tagged Ayurveda products Navara Rice and Kewda flower were registered to private organisations involved in their production and for the others, namely the two varieties of cardamoms, private individuals played a key role in highlighting their importance.

The government can provide a mechanism for protection but it is the individual beneficiaries who need to come ahead and apply for Geographical Indication of Ayurveda herbs. And for that to happen the producers and traders of these herbs need to be made aware of such a mechanism existing. TV and radio advertisements by the government can do the job just fine initially, just like they have been doing in the case of Covid vaccinations. Awareness is not just required for people to come ahead and apply but also to efficiently implement the registered GI. GI will have value only when its use by parties other than the applicant is prevented by law. If, however, the third party selling or producing a GI tagged good is itself unaware of the GI mechanism then the law has no power to punish it, essentially making the system ineffective.
Ayurveda Research
Conventional medicine or allopathic medicine has, over the past few decades, made significant strides in the area of disease management. However, in spite of the significant breakthroughs that it has witnessed, modern medicine continues to be primarily an offense strategy for managing ailments. It does not stress upon disease prevention because the etiology of chronic diseases is unknown. In contrast to this, Ayurveda system primarily utilizes the defence strategy in health management. Ayurveda prescribes a holistic approach towards managing health, and diseases and is very pertinent in today’s world.

The problem that any traditional medicine system faces recurrently is the lack of research backed evidence on its medical uses. There is an extreme lack of trust in herbal medicines, partly coming from lobbying by large drug companies, and partly from lack of initiative from Ayurveda experts to develop concrete theories around its efficacy. India has a strong network of Ayurveda institutes and universities and if there is any country in the world that can push traditional medicine into the mainstream through science backed evidence, it is India.

To begin with India must identify products which may be relevant to diseases found in the developed world, which is the most apprehensive towards traditional medicine, and for which no medicine or only palliative therapy is currently available. People will be more receptive towards cures for such ailments such as could be seen for treatments for Covid-19 and its prevention. This would enable rapid access of these herbal medicines into developed country markets.

Research grants should be made available to Ayurveda scholars and private enterprises should also be incentivized to use some of their resources for Ayurveda research. Government-Private partnership can be of immense value in this situation as private pharmaceutical enterprises can work in collaboration with academia, providing increased credibility to these researches by having a well-known private name associated with it. R&D tax incentives, direct government funding of R&D and patent protection are just a few incentives can be used.
Covid-19 Impact
With all the struggles and mayhem that the pandemic has caused, one thing cannot be denied that it has brought into focus the limitations of allopathic medicine system with its focus on curative rather than preventive measures. For a disease that has no medicine and vaccine development is obviously a long process, it is preventive medicine that can dramatically reduce casualties. This is not to say that allopathic system is ineffective or not needed anymore, but to highlight that there is a strong need to supplement the allopathic system with a preventive system of medicine, and this is where the opportunity for Ayurveda comes in.

There is a continued increase in awareness amongst masses about adopting immunity friendly lifestyle in the long run. As reported by Euromonitor, a leading player in market research, the growing level of anxiety caused by Covid-19 resulted in greater demand for herbal/traditional sleep aids, while sales of herbal/traditional cough, cold and allergy (hay fever) remedies benefited from greater enthusiasm amongst consumers to treat flu-like symptoms such as coughs and sore throats, particularly when these are mild cases, with natural remedies, as they are perceived to boost the immune system. This stands true for countries like Germany, Argentina, Latvia and Morocco among others.

According to research by Market Research Future, Americas is projected to procure the second-largest market share during the analysis tenure (2018-2023) owing to the surging cases of chronic illness among the expanding populace. The US is likely to be a lucrative market due to the growing awareness about the benefits of herbal medicines which got a kick due to the pandemic. Europe has emerged as the largest market for herbal medicine. The market in Europe is projected to reach a valuation in excess of USD 58,600 Mn by the year 2023.

The growing demand for herbal cures can also be judged by the fact that the World Health organisation will soon open its first global centre for traditional medicine in India. The announcement came at the peak of pandemic in 2020 when scientists and researchers world over asked people to work on their immunity as the only solution to Covid-19. The prejudice associated with traditional medicine is in part removed on its own owing to the health crisis. This means that half the battle is already won for the Ayurvedic system and all that is left to do is augmenting this growing demand by bringing in credible research on Ayurveda. Ayurveda is not the only form of traditional medicine in the world and thus early entry into research backed traditional medicine market is a good way to establish the dominance of Ayurveda.
Making GI Tags International
There are not one but three international agreements on protection of GI tag. According to the Madrid Agreement, in which India is a signatory, goods bearing a false or deceptive indication by which one of the countries to which this Agreement applies, or a place situated therein, is directly or indirectly indicated as being the country or place of origin shall be seized on importation into any of the said countries. The Madrid System is a convenient and cost-effective solution for registering and managing trademarks and indications worldwide. File a single application and pay one set of fees to apply for protection in up to 124 countries. Modify, renew or expand your global trademark portfolio through one centralized system. The cost of an international trademark registration includes the basic fee (653 Swiss francs; or 903 Swiss francs for a mark in colour), plus additional costs depending on where you want to protect your mark, and how many classes of goods and services will be covered by your registration.

An international application must be presented to the International Bureau of WIPO through the intermediary of the office of origin. If there are no irregularities in the application, the International Bureau records the mark in the International Register, publishes the international registration in the WIPO Gazette of International Marks, and notifies it to each designated Contracting Party. While India is a contracting party to the Madrid Agreement, there is no clear information available on Indian GI tags that have been registered internationally.

As mentioned before, GI tagging Ayurveda is more for the international market than the domestic one and thus without focusing on enhancing international protection we are narrowly missing the target. While domestic GI tags do offer a level of protection, it is mostly dependent on the knowledge of GI that consumers have. What amount of knowledge of the same exists in different countries is debatable but it is clearly not enough to compensate for a lack of legal mechanism to protect GI tags internationally. A secondary issue comes from the problem of free-riding that emerges when individuals or organisations try to outsmart the system by using the GI tag of a product as a trademark and registering the trademark in jurisdictions where the GI tag is not legally enforced. A trademark does not require evidence of historical links or traditional methods of production for registration, essentially allowing third parties to free ride on the GI tag registered by a valid user in some other jurisdiction.

The strategy should be to apply for an international GI tag as soon as a domestic one is registered in order to ensure complete protection in one go. For the GI tags that are not registered by government bodies, the government needs to actively educate and encourage the private applicators to seek an international registration. Other than making use of International Agreements, which may be time consuming and hard to access from a purely regulatory point of view, India should also focus on bilateral agreements with countries and international collaborations like EU, ASEAN, etc. The advantage of bilateral agreements is that they are easier to arrive at as there are only two parties involved and are also easier to monitor. This, however, requires in depth research into understanding international markets for different products (in this case medicinal herbs) and based on that curating agreement for specific countries.

This strategy has already been tried and tested in case of Darjeeling Tea when in order to protect ‘Darjeeling’ and ‘Darjeeling logo’ as GI, the Tea Board of India registered the marks in various countries, including the United States, Canada, Japan, Egypt, and the United Kingdom and some other European countries, as a trade mark/CTM. In order to prevent the misuse of ‘Darjeeling’ and the logo, the Tea Board has also hired the services of Compumark, a World Wide Watch agency. Compumark is required to monitor and report to the Tea Board all cases of unauthorized use and attempted registration. Pursuant to Compumark’s appointment, several cases of attempted registrations and unauthorized use of ‘Darjeeling’ and Darjeeling Logo have been reported.
Use Case
GI Tagging Ashwagandha
Touted as the ‘wonder herb’ of India, Ashwagandha (Withania somnifera) is an annual to perennial, branched herb with multiple medicinal properties. It is widely grown in dry parts of subtropical regions of India. Rajasthan, Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh are major ashwagandha growing states in India. All plant parts of ashwagandha have medicinal properties and are used in preparation of various drugs; however, roots are mainly used for preparation of vital tonics.

Pre-treatment with Withania somnifera (WS) showed significance protection against stress induced gastric ulcers. WS have anti-tumor effect on Chinese Hamster Ovary (CHO) cell carcinoma. It was also found effective against urethane induced lung-adenoma in mice. In some cases of uterine fibroids, dermatosarcoma, long term treatment with WS controlled the condition. It was also found useful in neurodegenerative diseases such as Parkinson’s, Huntington’s and Alzheimer’s diseases. It is an anti-inflammatory and anti-arthritic agent and was found useful in clinical cases of Rheumatoid and Osteoarthritis. Ashwagandha has especially gained prominence recently as an immunity booster against the Corona Virus.

Ashwagandha is compared well with Eleutherococcus senticosus (Siberian Ginseng) and Panax Ginseng (Chinese / Korean Ginseng) in its adaptogenic properties, and hence it is popularly known as Indian Ginseng. However, that is not an accurate description as Indian Ashwagandha is a completely separate plant genus from Siberian or Korean ginseng and comes with different properties and health benefits. It is confused with ginseng due to the energy giving properties that ginseng and ashwagandha both contain. Indian Ashwagandha comes with a hoard of other medicinal benefits that continue to be researched at national and international level.

There are two studies registered with National Institutes of Health, Department of Health and Human Services of United States which substantiate the immunomodulatory activity of Ashwagandha. Ashwagandha was shown to increase swimming performance in rats as judged by increase in swimming time during physical endurance test. Ashwagandha treated animals showed a significant increase in the duration of swimming time as compared to control. The control group of mice swam for a mean time of 385 minutes, whereas the drug-treated animals continued to swim for a mean duration of 740 minutes. Thus, the swimming time was approximately doubled after Withania somnifera (WS) treatment. The findings of another study suggest that Ashwagandha root extract enhances the cardiorespiratory endurance and improves Quality of Life (QOL) in healthy athletic adults. The World Health Organization self-reported QOL questionnaire (physical health, psychological health, social relationships, and environmental factors) was used for assessment.

It is thus of economic value to differentiate Ashwagandha from other forms of ginseng to create an exclusive global market. Marketing Ashwagandha as an Indian Ayurvedic herb, separate from other forms of traditional medicine, requires a distinction that only GI tag can offer. Even though GI tagging it is not the key to selling it in international markets but it is a means to that end. To create a brand value a brand needs to exist first and to differentiate Ashwagandha from ginseng a separate brand in form of GI tag is to ought to be the way out.
Beyond GI Tag: The Case of Alleppey Green Cardamoms
Alleppey Green Cardamom is the variety which traditionally came from the southern region of Kerala state, Alleppey (presently Alappuzha) having been the port city from which it was exported in olden days. It is kiln dried, has a reasonably uniform shade of green colour and is three cornered with ribbed appearance. The variety of cardamom received GI tag in 2008 and is registered against the Spices Board, Ministry of Commerce and Industry. A brand of Samex India Pvt. Ltd, Emperor Akbar Cardamom is the only brand of authentic, GI-tagged Alleppey Green Cardamom from India. Known for the superior flavour & aroma, Alleppey Green Cardamom also contains high level of nutrients and medicinal properties.

According to Mr. Hemen Ruparel, CEO of Samex India, who has been involved in the GI tagging of Alleppey Green Cardamom and its promotion thereof, the usage of “Alleppey” is an important differentiating factor which can be used to prove the superiority of cardamoms produced in Alleppey over Guatemalan cardamoms. Emperor Akbar has been promoting the GI tag to various other industrial users so that they can differentiate their offerings such as ‘tea with the authentic Alleppey Green Cardamoms’ amongst others. Mr. Ruparel mentions that this extends the ‘quality premium’, made possible through GI tag, from just the sellers of Alleppey green cardamoms to sellers of products using these cardamoms as raw material for their end product. This can have a huge potential payoff in the long run with multiplier effect it creates by delivering the benefits of GI tagging one raw material to the entire production chain of an end product.

With that being said, the real picture is not as promising as the ideal scenario sketched above. As noted by Mr. Ruparel, the GI Tag of Alleppey green cardamom has not been promoted and advertised by the spices board enough for the GI tag to actually disrupt the cardamom market. The lack of knowledge of the GI tag being registered resulted in complete loss of the differentiation feature which is needed to take advantage of the GI. While Emperor Akbar has been consciously promoting GI in all communications, the absence of government intervention in promotional activities makes these efforts barely credible in the eyes of the consumer. Mr. Ruparel notes that GI Tag has made an important difference in some consumers who are aware of its meaning and implications, highlighting the fact there is tremendous potential in getting a premium for the GI Tag of Alleppey green cardamoms if the communication strategy doesn’t falter. Currently, without an effective communication from the government in coordination with private exporters, this GI tag remains largely ineffective.

Another issue highlighted is regarding the many players in India and Overseas that are wrongfully and wilfully using the GI Tag without authorisation, clearly benefitting from the lack of marketing from government’s end. Mr. Ruparel highlighted that there are even cases where some importers are freely repacking Guatemalan cardamom and selling it as Alleppey cardamom due to the lack of control measures on such usage. Without steps taken to counter this, the credibility is further getting lost. This ultimately results in the end user having little or no value for the GI Tag.

In partnership with the Government, there is a need to urgently start a marketing campaign about differentiating factors of Alleppey green cardamoms vis-a-vis other cardamoms, giving payoffs to the entire industry. This will be the key to moving away from a commodity into a brand with demand pull and removing the peg to the prices of Guatemalan cardamom. It’ll lead to much higher price realisation and will also remove the various ills of adulteration being faced by the farmers.
The case of Alleppey green cardamoms shows that GI tagging is more complex than just giving an authorized user tag to producers and sellers. The real struggle starts post GI tagging when the authorized tag actually has to be protected. There is tremendous opportunity for growth of Indian traditional medicine globally if only we are able to devise a strategic, step-by-step framework for GI tagging herbal medicines. The procedure begins at creating awareness and ends also at creating awareness, while in the meantime acknowledges and resolves global and domestic bottlenecks.

Creation of a robust and flourishing Ayurveda industry in the country will not only bring in revenue but also create a new channel for employment generation, a unique career path away from the oversaturated allopathic medicine sector of India and revive an important and glorious part of India’s rich history. The groundwork has already been done by our ancestors and continues to happen in humble villages of India. All that is needed is a sophisticated system to channel this knowledge worldwide.

Creation of a body under the AYUSH ministry that deals specifically with intellectual property rights of herbal medicines and research and development in the field to give economic relevance to these rights through science backed evidences will remove the various logistical and regulatory challenges and streamline the process of GI tagging Ayurveda. A similar structure can then be followed for other types of good as well.

And as far as advertising GI is concerned, we have a rather long history of social advertising, starting from the 1980s ad by the National Egg Coordination Committee with the memorable tagline ‘Sunday ho ya Monday, roz khao ande’ urging Indians to include eggs in their daily diet to PM Modi’s ad campaign urging Indians to give up their gas subsidies which ultimately led to release of subsidy funds for the needy section. If we are able to pull off similar advertising strategy for GI tag in general and Ayurveda in particular, we might just get a success story.
GI Tagging in Ayurveda

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