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Role of Muga Silk-Gi of Assam in the Sustainable Development of Assam

PRATIMA KALITA¹

ABSTRACT

The Muga Silk culture is an integral part of socio economic and cultural aspects of people of Assam since time immemorial. Muga is a traditional art and craft has huge potential for the Muga farmers to generate sustainable livelihood through Muga cultivation. This industry has the capability to reshape the rural economy of Assam to a greater extent. Assam alone produces more than 90% of the total Muga Silk raw production as the weather condition suits for the growth and development of Muga Silkmoth. It is one of the most important cottage industries that is eco-friendly and helps in creating employment opportunities with low capital intensive. It is the first registered GI product of Assam. This article will discuss the role of the Muga Silk-geographical Indication of Assam in the sustainable development of Assam.

Keywords: Assamese, culture, Geographical Indication, IPRs, Muga Silk.

I. INTRODUCTION

Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs) have emerged as a leading topic due to their importance for global innovations and trade policies. Intellectual Property laws aim at safeguarding the interests of creators over their intellectual goods and products by granting them some exclusive rights to the owner for a limited period of time. The protection of Intellectual Property is important as it enables people to earn recognition and financial benefits for their creations or innovations. According to nature, intellectual property can be broadly divided into two branches-

- Patents, Geographical Indications, Trade Design, and Trade Marks, which are also termed as Industrial Property and
- Copyrights and Neighbouring Rights

Geographical Indication is one of the tools of Intellectual Property which identify products/goods as originating from a particular area and is used as a sign of goods/products possessing certain qualities, reputations, and other characteristics that comes from that specific

¹ Author is a LL.M. Student at Assam Rajiv Gandhi University of Cooperative Management, Sivasagar, Assam, India.

geographical place of origin. In India, at present Geographical Indication protection system is provided by The Geographical Indication of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, of 1999. GI serves as a marketing tool that gives economic value to the producers by conveying information about products quality and origin of products.

GI rights are collective in nature unlike other IPRs, hence all producers from GI designated regions/areas/localities can avail the benefits of GI. GI rights are not transferable as it is a community rights. For GIs connection between products and place of origin must be maintained, and due to that, the cultural ethos, traditional knowledge, and the process or techniques involved in making the product get preserved and linked with a particular area/region/locality. GI right holders cannot create a monopoly, though the GI status of their product enables people to translate their traditional knowledge into livelihood and income.

The GI registry has a total of 362 GIs registered in India as of 24th February 2020, out of which 347 are Indian GI Applications (318 are Indian Products and 29 are GI logos) and remaining the 15 GIs have been registered for foreign GI applications.

II. MUGA SILK AND GI

Muga Silk is a variety of wild Silk geographically tagged to the state of Assam in the year 2007. Muga Silk is a golden yellowish Silk produced by Muga Silkworm (*Antheraea assamensis*) which is found only in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. Muga Silk is the pride of Assam which is associated with Assamese culture and tradition from time immemorial. The name Muga comes from the Assamese language which means rich amber colour, representing the colour of the cocoon of the Silkworm. Assam produces two types of Silk- Eri and Muga but it alone contributes more than 90% of the total raw Muga Silk production. This Silk is considered as the queen of all fabrics due to its high durability and elegant and natural lustrous colour.

Assam has a total of 10 GI-registered products till 2022. They are as follows-Muga Silk(2007), Assam (Orthodox)(2007), Assam Karbi Anglong Ginger(2015), Joha Rice(2016), Boka Chaul(2016), Gamusa (2017), Chokuwa Rice(2019), Kaji Nemu(2020), Tezpur Litchi(2020), Judima Wine(2021). Muga Silk is the first registered GI of Assam. It has become the 38th product that has got GI protection from GI Registry in Chennai.

For registration of Muga Silk as GI, the application was made by Patent Information Centre with the address Patent Information Centre, Assam Science Technology and Environment Council (ASTECC), Department of Science & Technology, Government of Assam Bigyan Bhawan, G.S. Road, Guwahati- 781005, Assam, India. The date of filing for registration was 20th July 2006 and the certificate date was issued on 13th July 2007 under handicraft goods.

Assam Science Technology and Environment Council (ASTECC) is the registered Proprietor of GI. Finally, in the year 2007 Muga Silk has got registered as GI of Assam and was published in the GI Journal No.52 and application number 384 with only two authorised users. Muga Silk logo got protection under trademark through GI Journal No. 55 and application number 384. The total number of authorised users of Muga Silk increased to 286 as per GI Journal No.90. As per GI Journal No. 52 goods of Muga Silk have been classified under the following five classes of goods-

Class 23– Raw Silk yarns and threads for textile use

Class24– Textile and Textile goods including Mekhela-Chadar, Shawls, dress materials, sarees, Wall hanging.

Class 25– Clothings/Garments, Footwears, Head gear, made-ups, Ties, Motifs, fashion wears.

Class 27– Quit, furnishings & upholstery.

Class 31– Cocoon.

Authorised Users of GI can enjoy their exclusive GI rights for a period of ten years which can be renewed after every ten years. Muga Silk after getting GI tag in the year 2007 was renewed in the year 2017 by ASTECC. Recently there are 106 Muga Silk production centres in Assam. Sualkuchi is known as the “manchester of Assam” and “Silk village of Assam”.

III. INSPECTION BODY

The Inspection body is formed comprising of the following members from various organizations:

Chairman

Commissioner & Secretary, Govt. of Assam Handloom Textiles & Sericulture Department

Members

- i. Director of Sericulture, Assam
- ii. Director, Weavers Service Centre, Khanapara.
- iii. Director, Assam Science Technology and Environment Council, Bigyan Bhawan, ABC, Guwahati.
- iv. Chief General Manager, Assam Regional Office, NABARD, Dispur.
- v. Chief Manager, NHDC, Kolkata.
- vi. Joint Secretary, Central Silk Board, Housefed Complex, Dispur
- vii. President, Technology Development and Production Centre for Muga Silk, Amingaon.

- viii. Chairman cum Managing Director, Fabric Plus, Zoo Road, Guwahati.
- ix. Managing Director, BRAWFED, Kokrajhar.
- x. Officer-in- Charge, Handloom Research & Designing Centre, Guwahati.
- xi. Officer-in-Charge, IJIRA,NE Centre & Powerloom Service Centre, Department of Textiles, Govt. of India, Amingaon, Guwahati.
- xii. Secretary, Assam Cooperative Silk House Ltd., Sualkuchi.
- xiii. Officer-in-Charge, Bureau of Patents and Trade Marks, Silpukhuri, Guwahati.
- xiv. One Producer of Muga Silk.
- xv. Director, Handloom & Textiles, Assam.

Administrative structure

- i. Sericulture department
- ii. Assam Science Technology and Environment Council (ASTECC) - Registered proprietor)
- iii. Central Silk Board
- iv. Assam Apex Weavers & Artisans Cooperative Federation Ltd (ARTFED)

IV. ROLE OF MUGA SILK-GI OF ASSAM IN SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OF ASSAM

A society cannot grow without proper planning and proper implementation of policies. For all round development of society, active participation of each and every individual and a sense of belongingness is a key to growth. GIs encourages and put development with systematic dynamism, and renewal of resources. A product after getting GI tag its geographic locations/ regions are seen to be successful in increasing the income of their farmers, families, processors, and suppliers by capitalizing on the advantages of using the GI-tagged products.

Reasons for the protection of Muga Silk as Geographical Indications for development are:-

- i. It improves access to markets for local products.
- ii. It protects traditional knowledge and cultural heritage.
- iii. It gives support to rural producers by protecting their rights over their products.
- iv. Muga Silk as GI is effective to use, organize and manage collectively for rural development programs.
- v. It is useful to reduce fluctuation in market price of the products.
- vi. It can provide better legal protection to right holders.
- vii. It can control duplication and fake marketing of genuine products.

GI protects the interest of the producers and traders, and prevents unfair competition, cartelization, and misuse of GI products for commercial purposes. GI registration increases consumer's willingness to pay the premium price by increasing the perception of the product's quality as GI serves as a guarantee of quality and a link between the product and place of origin, such details can minimize consumers from getting deceived, and when qualities of the products get assured then consumers would definitely be benefited. GIs genuinely supports traditional communities/craftsmen/artisans/producers. The products after GI registration become widely accessible through export in national and/or international markets.

Muga Silk- GI of Assam is playing a significant role in terms of the socio-economic development of Assam. Besides manufacturing Muga Silk products, this Silk industry is giving employment to thousands and thousands of needy people. As Brahmaputra Valley is also known as a tourist place, tourists visit the valley every year, and now the Muga Silk has reached each corner of the country and also in other parts of the world. Some of the roles played by this industry have been discussed briefly below-

A. Women Friendly Occupation

Muga Silk industry increases women's empowerment in the underlying economy. Most women have their traditional handlooms in their households. In rural areas, women were seen to get engaged in their traditional handlooms and in the manufacturing process of Muga Silk from degumming, hand reeling, winding, weaving, and then shaping it in the form of a piece of cloth and selling them and earning their returns. Thus, it is seen that women, apart from doing all their household work, engage themselves in this industry and thereby afford their basic needs. According to Central Muga Eri Research and Training Institution, the livelihood of 185000 families in Assam, 65% of those making a living from Muga are women.

B. Reduces Gender Inequality

Muga Silk industry is successful in reducing gender diversity. Both men and women are seen to engage equally in this industry which is the secret behind the success of this industry. It helps in creating employment for lots and lots of people, which, on the other hand, helps in reducing poverty. Women in rural areas consider it as one of their important sources of livelihood. This industry promotes women's economic empowerment through access to markets and helps in earning additional income.

C. Helps in the sustainable development of the region.

Muga Silkworms feed on Som (*Persea Bombycinas Kost.*) and Soalu (*Litsea Polyantha Juss.*) as a primary food plants and a few other plants such as Mezankari (*Litsea cubeba*) as secondary

and Dighloti (*Litsea salicifolia*) as a tertiary food plant. This occupation is very eco-friendly. The presence of the natural environment (i.e., soil, inclination, rainfall, etc.) is supportive for the growth of Som and Sualu trees. Developmental programs initiated for mulberry plantations are mainly in vacant areas, hill slopes, etc., where unused cultivable lands are made productive, and also in watershed areas due to their deep-rooted perennial nature. Mulberry plants planted support silkworm rearing for 15-20 years, depending on inputs and management provided. Five crops can be taken in one year under topical conditions.

Muga Silk industry helps in the sustainable development of the region. “Sustainable Development is the development that meets the need of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. In order to increase its productivity, one needs to grow lots of trees which helps in controlling air pollution and global warming and also helps in creating a good environment.

D. Enhanced tourism sector

The tourism sector plays an important role in the development of the GDP of a country. Protection through GI can bring direct and indirect effects on the local economy by increasing tourism inflow and on local society by increasing social cohesion and identity and also on the local environment. In the post GI study of Muga Silk, it is seen to influence more and more tourists from other parts of the nation. They visited those places of Assam, which is famous for Muga Silk (Sualkuchi, Guwahati, Districts from Upper Assam), and were seen to buy hand-woven Muga products. This sector has been developing day by day not only for Muga Silk but also because of Assam tea and one-horned rhino, and many more.

E. Ideal program for weaker section

Muga Silk industry is labor intensive industry; it does not require huge capital. Any person, through less investment, can earn a huge sum within a very short period of time. As the gestation period for Muga Silk is very low i.e., 50 days in summer and 107 days in winter. This cultivation is seen more common in rural areas, especially among the weaker section as they need to invest less and get high in return. This cultivation helps in creating self-employment for lots of people, thereby helping in reducing poverty.

F. Increasing premium price

In the post-GI study, GIs act as an effective tool to unlock economic or commercial benefits of the products as it influences customers to purchase GI-registered products, and due to such influence, small and rural enterprises and farmers of the GI-designated areas are largely benefitted. Muga Silk, after achieving GI tags, gives an assurance that the product contains

some unique qualities and characteristics and gives quality assurance to the consumers that the product is purely original. It's after Muga Silk got the GI tag in 2007 price of Muga products increased, and people were willing to buy products at a premium price. Muga cloth's price increased to a higher range after GI tagged in 2007. Its ranges from Rs. 10,000 to 1,50,000. Cocoon, which was available at Rs. 2 to Rs. 3, is now available at Rs.6 to Rs.9

G. Helps in socio-cultural and traditional development

GI helps in socio-cultural and traditional development. For registration of a product as GI, its connection between product and place of origin must be maintained and due to that, the cultural ethos, traditional knowledge, and the process or technique involved in making that product gets preserved and linked with that particular area/region/locality. Muga Silk is considered as cultural and traditional identity of Assam. During the Bihu festival in Assam, people wear Muga attire as their traditional wear and cultural identity. During rituals like the marriage ceremony, the bride and groom are seen to wear Muga attires. People were also seen doing exhibitions of Muga Silk products within and outside India, thereby trying to promote our Assamese culture and traditions, and viewers are trying to accept our Assamese culture and traditions. It gets more popularity after Muga Silk gets GI tagged.

H. Helps in consumer protection

Consumers always pay attention to the origin and quality of the goods they buy. GI provides detailed information on where and how the goods that carry GI labels are produced. GI tag gives quality assurance of the product and the assurance that it comes from a specific geographic location. GI tag protects consumers from getting misled by buying fake products. Conscious consumers always choose GI-certified products over others in the market. Consumers of Silk face many difficulties in identifying pure Silk from the host of other fibers just like consumers of gold in finding purity of gold. So, a GI tag is necessary.

V. PRESENT SCENERIO OF MUGA SILK- GI OF ASSAM

Despite lots of advantages like the traditional cottage industry, suitable climatic conditions for producing raw materials, availability of skilled manpower etc. this silk industry is in a struggling state to survive.

The Muga Silk market in Assam is not well organized. The actual producers are not receiving the economic benefits they actually deserve, even though government and cooperative societies are working on their behalf through the implementation of different schemes. The main reason behind this may be pointed out is the absence of control over the intermediaries. Intermediaries

have been given equal rights like that of actual producers by the GI Act, 1999 through the definition of producers. This empowers intermediaries in exploiting the genuine producers and the products. Their main goal is to sell more products rather than uphold genuine products so, they were seen to get indulge in malpractices resulting in the dilution of the product quality, while the actual producers try their best to maintain high-quality standards of the products.

The Duplicacy of Muga Silk products in the market is increasing day by day. With the increase in demand in the market, duplicacy is also increasing. In order to prevent the appearance of duplicity in the market, the definition of producers has to be restructured. Study reveals that duplicates in the market are the product of the intermediary group. The role of intermediaries cannot be completely avoided as actual producers are busy manufacturing Silk products and intermediaries have a direct link with the customers as compared to producers. These duplicates have the potential to adversely affect the reputation of the business of Muga Silk GI. In order to prevent duplicacy and to protect the purity of Silk, the Central Silk Board under the Ministry of Textile has introduced Silk Mark for pure Silk products for Eri and Muga Silk since 2005. Since Muga Silk is highly expensive, at the time to buy Silk items, one must look for a GI tag, and Silk mark tag, and handloom mark and buy it from a reputed seller only.

Peoples are less aware of the fact that Muga Silk was granted GI protection in the year 2007. The government and other cooperative agencies must try to increase awareness levels by conducting various workshops. It is also seen that actual producers are not willing to train their children in the same business as this is very labor intensive. Youngsters are not interested in pursuing this profession as youths are now educated and are seen to move to urban areas in search of jobs. Peoples from rural areas are also seen to migrate to urban areas in search of other alternative livelihood opportunities such as education, job opportunities, better standards of living, etc.

In spite of lots of disadvantages, it is a pleasure to see that demand for Muga is increasing day by day. People are seen to accept Assamese culture and traditions at both national and international levels. Producers are trying to promote Muga Silk products through exhibitions and trade fairs at national and international levels.

VI. CONCLUSION

GI has been considered as the most effective tool that supports development in GI-designated areas. GI has profound great benefits not only to producers but also to consumers and local communities. GIs are considered to be a successful tool for promoting Rural development, as they have a positive socio-economic impact on local communities. They increase production,

creates local job, and helps the producer to obtain a premium price for the products in exchange for guarantees offered to consumers on production methods and quality, and empowers women to earn their own incomes through handlooms in handicrafts goods.

Muga- the golden Silk is the pride of Assam. It is an age-old tradition. Assam is the second largest Silk producing region after China. The silk industry is an integral part of the cultural heritage of Assam. To cope with national and international market competitions, adequate training facilities should be arranged by the Government. Initiative must be taken by the government regarding the marketing strategy of Muga Silk as the market for Muga Silk is not well organized. It will enrich Assamese culture if this industry is able to market its products globally. So, encouragement from the government to the local handloom industry is the need of an hour.

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