GI tag to Manipur black rice, Gorakhpur terracotta

Both the products have been in circulation for centuries and are important sources of income

• Chak-Hao, the black rice of Manipur and the Gorakhpur terracotta have bagged the Geographical Indication (GI) tag.

• Chinnaraja G. Naidu, deputy registrar, Geographical Indications, confirmed that the GI tag had been given for the two products on Thursday.

• The application for Chak-Hao was filed by the Consortium of Producers of Chak-Hao (Black Rice), Manipur and was facilitated by the Department of Agriculture, Government of Manipur and the North Eastern Regional Agricultural Marketing Corporation Limited (NERAMAC).

• In the case of Gorakhpur terracotta, the application was filed by Laxmi Terracotta Murtikala Kendra in Uttar Pradesh.

• Chak-Hao, a scented glutinous rice which has been in cultivation in Manipur over centuries, is characterised by its special aroma. It is normally eaten during community feasts and is served as Chak-Hao kheer.

• Chak-Hao has also been used by traditional medical practitioners as part of traditional medicine. According to the GI application filed, this rice takes the longest cooking time of 40-45 minutes due to the presence of a fibrous bran layer and higher crude fibre content.
At present, the traditional system of Chak-Hao cultivation is practised in some pockets of Manipur. Direct sowing of pre-soaked seeds and also transplantation of rice seedlings raised in nurseries in puddled fields are widely practised in the State’s wetlands.

The terracotta work of Gorakhpur is a centuries-old traditional art form, where the potters make various animal figures like, horses, elephants, camel, goat, ox, etc. with hand-applied ornamentation.

Some of the major products of craftsmanship include the Hauida elephants, Mahawatdar horse, deer, camel, five-faced Ganesha, singled-faced Ganesha, elephant table, chandeliers, hanging bells etc. The entire work is done with bare hands and artisans use natural colour, which stays fast for a long time. There are more than 1,000 varieties of terracotta work designed by the local craftsmen.

The craftsmen are mainly spread over the villages of Aurangabad, Bharwalia, Langadi Gularia, Budhadih, Amawa, Ekla etc. in Bhatat and Padri Bazar, Belwa Raipur, Jungle Ekla No-1, Jungle Ekla No-2 in Chargawan block of Gorakhpur.

Coronavirus is pulling millions back into poverty

World Bank estimates sub-Saharan Africa will see its first recession in 25 years & South Asia its worst downturn in 40 years

Like thousands of women across South Asia, Shahida Khatun dropped out of school to work in the garment factories that were springing up in Bangladesh’s cities, hoping to pull her family out of poverty.

At 12 years old, she clocked in for long shifts in an overcrowded factory. But the $30 she made each month ensured that for the first time, her family had regular meals and could buy previously unheard-of luxuries like chicken and milk.

A decade later, Ms. Khatun more than tripled her wage.

But when Ms. Khatun and her husband were laid off in March as Bangladesh, like much of the world, went under lockdown because of the coronavirus pandemic, she dropped back to dark places she hoped she had left behind.

“The garment factory helped me and my family to get out of poverty. But the coronavirus has pushed me back in,” Ms. Khatun, now 22, said in a recent interview.

The gains the world was making in fighting poverty are now at grave risk.
• The World Bank says that for the first time since 1998, global poverty rates will rise. By the end of the year, 8% of the world’s population — half a billion people — could be pushed into destitution, largely because of the wave of unemployment brought by virus lockdowns.

• While everyone will suffer, the developing world will be hardest hit. The World Bank estimates that sub-Saharan Africa will see its first recession in 25 years, with nearly half of all jobs lost across the continent. South Asia will likely experience its worst economic performance in 40 years.

Informal sector

• Most at risk are people working in the informal sector, which employs 2 billion people who have no access to benefits like unemployment assistance or health care. In Bangladesh, 1 million garment workers like Ms. Khatun — 7% of the country’s workforce — lost their jobs because of the lockdown.

• The financial shock waves could linger even after the virus is gone, experts warn. Countries like Bangladesh, which spent heavily on programmes to improve education and provide health care, which help lift families out of destitution, may now be too cashstrapped to fund them.

• “These stories, of women entering the workplace and bringing their families out of poverty, of programmes lifting the trajectories of families, those stories will be easy to destroy,” said Abhijit Banerjee, a winner of the 2019 Nobel Prize for economics.

• “There will be groups of people who climbed up the ladder and will now fall back,” he added. “There were so many fragile existences, families barely stitching together an existence. They will fall into poverty, and they may not come out of it.” The gains now at risk are a stark reminder of global inequality and how much more there is to be done. In 1990, 36% of the world’s population, or 1.9 billion people, lived on less than $1.90 a day. By 2016, that number had dropped to 734 million people, or 10% of the world’s population, largely because of progress in South Asia and China.

• Some of the biggest gains were made in India, where 210 million people were lifted out of poverty from 2006 to 2016, according to the UN. Since 2000, Bangladesh lifted 33 million people — 10% of its population — out of poverty.

• Famines that once plagued South Asia are now vanishingly rare, the population less susceptible to disease and starvation. But that progress may be reversed, experts worry, and funding for anti-poverty programmes may be cut as governments struggle with stagnant growth rates or economic contractions as the world heads for a recession.

March core sector output slumps 6.5%
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Sharper contraction likely in Index of Industrial Production.

- Output at India’s core sector contracted by 6.5% in March, Commerce Ministry data show, reflecting the early impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent nationwide lockdown.

- The index of eight core sector industries, which form 40% of the weight of items included in the broader Index of Industrial Production (IIP), reflected a contraction in key parts of the economy in March, according to the data released on Thursday. Its cumulative growth during the last fiscal year was 0.6%.

- Analysts warned that the core sector data signalled a much sharper contraction in the wider IIP, especially in April, as several core sector industries were actually exempted from the lockdown.

Steel declines 13%

- Leading the contraction at the core industries were a 13% decline in steel output, and a 7% fall in electricity generation. The two sectors account for almost 40% of the index. Cement production crashed 25%, while natural gas production slid 15%, the data showed. Fertiliser production also fell 12%, while crude oil production slipped 5.5%.

- Coal was the only core sector which saw some growth, with output up 4%. The largest component of the index — refinery production — also dipped by only 0.5%.

- “Several of the core sector industries were given exemptions under the lockdown. Electricity and steel are continuous processes and have not been stopped. But movement of goods faced major restrictions, so it could be that they reduced production as much as possible to deal with reduced demand,” said eminent economist Pronab Sen, a former chief statistician of India.

- Going forward to April, he expected these trends to worsen slightly but within the same magnitude, noting that demand has fallen drastically in the power sector due to the full lockdown this month, and gas powered plants were likely to have been shut down. Coal may also dip for April, while cement production will fall sharply as all construction activity came to a halt, he said.
“The wider IIP will see a much bigger hit, as non-essential industries were completely closed in April. The core sectors account for about 40% of the IIP, but I’d say about 45% of all industries will show zero production,” said Dr. Sen. “I would project a 30-40% drop in the IIP in April.”

Fellow economist D.K. Srivastava, policy advisor with Ernst and Young, added that the March core sector data also reflected the cut in capital expenditure by both state and central governments in order to make up for falling tax revenues. “This trend is bound to continue because both government and private demand for infrastructure investment has collapsed,” he said, adding that a revival in the core sector is unlikely until the government starts spending on infrastructure.

Religion and freedom: On India and communal violence

India must protect its freedoms, and come down heavily on religious violence

Religious freedom is of paramount importance, not because it is about religion, but because it is about freedom. The characterisation by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) of India as a country of particular concern, in its annual report, is not entirely surprising, considering its dim and known views about sectarian violence and aggravating governmental measures over the last year. The Indian government not only repudiated the report but also ridiculed the USCIRF. The autonomous, bipartisan commission’s influence over any
U.S. executive action is limited and occasional but its presumption of global authority appears amusingly expansive. Whether or not the U.S. government acts on its recommendation to impose targeted sanctions on Indian government agencies and officials depends on American strategic interests. The U.S. has used arguments of freedom, democracy, tolerance, and transparency as tools in its strategic pursuits, but there is no proof of any uniform or predictable pattern of enforcement of such moral attributes. The process can be selective and often arbitrary in spotlighting countries.

Mirroring this pattern, India selectively approaches global opinions on itself, embracing and celebrating laudatory ones and rejecting inconvenient ones. The frantic, and relatively successful, efforts to raise its Ease of Doing Business ranking by the World Bank is a case in point. Many of these reports have a circulatory life — the USCIRF report quotes U.N. Special Rapporteurs to buttress its point on the discriminatory outcome of the National Register of Citizens in Assam. Overall, such reports contribute to the construction of an image of a country, and the Indian government is cognisant of this pattern. In March, the Indian government told Niti Aayog to track 32 global indices and engage with the bodies that measure them, to advance reform and growth.

• India advertises itself as a multi-religious democracy and as an adherent to global norms of rule of law. It also aspires to be on the table of global rule making. For a country with such stated ambitions, its record on religious freedom as reflected through events of the last one year is deeply disconcerting. The catalogue of religious violence, incitement and wrecking of the rule of law in several parts of the country remains an unsettling fact. The partisan nature of the ruling dispensation is also difficult to wish away. Reputation is important for a country’s economic development and global standing but beyond that instrumental perspective, rule of law and communal harmony are essential for any functioning democracy.

**Needed: a pandemic patent pool**

This will give all countries the right to implement innovations without further permission from patent-holders.

• Every April 26, we celebrate World Intellectual Property Day. This year, it was not a day for celebration, but one for reflection and dedication. It provided us an opportunity to reflect upon the role of intellectual property (IP) in the ongoing health crisis and dedicate IP to finding a solution.

A long road ahead

• The purpose of creating and recognising patent rights is for the common public good, i.e., innovation should be made public in exchange for a limited monopoly. Thus, patents need to be disclosed to the public in order to enable further research. Should pandemics such as COVID-19 be an exception to this?
• For human life to become normal again, vaccines or medicines are the only permanent solutions. However, even by conservative estimates, it will take at least 6-10 months for any vaccine/drug to be available. Even when approval for marketing of a vaccine/drug is granted, it will be impossible for it to be made instantly available across the world. This is because even after approval for commercial production is granted, say, in one country, in order for the product to be available to the rest of the world, approvals will be required in each and every country. Then countries will have to gear up for instant manufacturing and marketing of the drug. For this to happen, continuous dialogue has to take place among innovators, manufacturers and supply chains. This requires massive efforts by private players, governments and international organisations.

• With the outbreak of COVID-19, there are several innovations. All these innovations may be the subject matter of patent applications around the world. It will be a few years before patents are even granted. However, friction already exists among various stakeholders. For instance, one country made attempts to obtain exclusive rights to a vaccine being developed. On the other hand, there are also collaborations taking place. However, the spirit of collaborative solutions is only on the anvil. The question that arises is whether the exclusivity that is recognised by patent rights will be detrimental to society. Will patents create roadblocks or is there a solution?

• Pandemics need disruptive solutions. Governments and international organisations need to arrive at a consensus in advance to ensure that the system is ready. Procrastination would be disastrous. Creating hindrances through exclusivity claims, in the wake of a pandemic, will result in dividing countries, corporations and international organisations. This will not benefit patients and the world as a whole. If patent owners create impediments on the strength of patent rights, the world will start despising patents and that is not a situation IP owners ought to be in. Under the TRIPS (Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights) regime, there are several tools such as compulsory licensing that are available to ensure access to medicines. However, beyond the laws, society needs to respect innovation. To protect the sanctity and integrity of patent systems, and in order to ensure that an anti-IP sentiment is not generated globally, answers need to be found within the existing regime. In exceptional circumstances such as these, there is a likelihood that societies may resort to extreme steps to protect themselves. Before such ideas are floated, solutions should be created.

Creating a patent pool

• One method by which aggregation and dissemination of innovative products can be ensured is by creating a patent pool. Patent pools are usually effective in aggregating, administering and licensing patents related to specific areas of technology. Such pools are usually managed by a central agency and the patents which become part of the pool are readily made available for licensing. Some pools even publish the royalty rates payable for such licences. Anyone who wishes to obtain a licence will be able to approach the pool, agree to the terms, and begin to manufacture and sell the products. Such pools are prevalent in, for instance, standard essential patents related to telecom and digital innovations.
At the moment, individual efforts are being made by research organisations to create their own pools. A more fruitful endeavour would be to create a global pool of COVID-19 related innovations, or innovations related to rare pandemics, in respect of vaccines and medicines. This could be managed by a trustworthy international organisation. All countries ought to have the right to implement these innovations without further permission from the patent-holders and without resorting to provisions such as compulsory licensing, state acquisition, etc. Even if royalties are at a minimal level, the revenues would still be in billions of dollars owing to the large swathes of the population affected by the pandemic, who will need to be administered these products.

Creation of a pool and immediate licensing will ensure that there are hundreds of manufacturers across the world. As a result, vaccines and medicines will be quickly available. Some part of the royalties could then be disbursed to patent owners on a periodic basis and some part could be retained to fund further research to deal with such pandemics in future.

Such a pool needs the cooperation of not just countries and international organisations but also the hundreds of researchers, innovators, companies and universities involved. Concerns relating to patents and profits to be earned therefrom should be put aside. The world has to come out of this crisis quickly and patents ought to accelerate rather than impede the path. Combating the crisis and earning collectively is the need of the hour.

Pooling of patent resources is also in line with the Doha Declaration on Public Health which is a part of the TRIPS agreement. This declaration recognises the need for taking measures to ‘protect public health’ and ‘promote access to medicines’.

Public-private partnerships (PPP) need to be scaled up. Creation of the ‘PPP-pandemic patent pool’ at a global level, to pool all innovations, is the way forward. Let us not wait any longer.