MP's Basmati GI Tag Demand - Validity and Concerns

What is the issue?

- The Madhya Pradesh (MP) government is seeking Geographical Indication (GI) tag for Basmati rice produced in 13 of its districts.
- But the All India Rice Exporters' Association (AIREA) argues against this. Here is why.

What is Geographical Indication (GI) tag?

- GI might apply to an agricultural, natural or a manufactured product.
- A GI product must originate from a specific geographical area due to which it possesses unique characteristics and qualities.
- GI tag is essentially an assurance that the product is coming from that specific area.
- It is a kind of trademark in the international market.

What is the present GI status of Basmati?

- In May 2010, APEDA got GI certification for Basmati.
- [APEDA - Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority; a statutory body under the Commerce Ministry]
- The above GI applied for the region located in Indo-Gangetic Plains (IGP) below the foothills of the Himalayas, spreads across 7 states.
- These are Himachal Pradesh, J&K, Punjab, Haryana, Uttarakhand, Western UP (26 districts) and Delhi.
- According to APEDA, Basmati rice is identified as a 'long grain, aromatic rice.'
- The origin and reputation for this from the IGP is found in tradition, folklore, scientific and culinary literature and political and historical records.
- Dehraduni Basmati, Amritsar Basmati and Tarawari basmati are being produced for hundreds of years.
- [For cultivation of basmati paddy, alluvial soil having high water retention capacity is more suitable.]

What are MP's claims and demands?

- Madhya Pradesh (MP) falls in the Madhya Bharat Pathar (plateau).
- It does not fall in the IGP (Indo-Gangetic Plains) region.

- MP started cultivation of varieties of Basmati rice only around the middle of the first decade of this century (21st C).
- But it claims that this rice possesses the same characteristics and qualities as that of the rice grown in the IGP.
- It also claims that nearly 80,000 farmers of the state are growing Basmati in 13 districts.
- They are exporting the same worth Rs 3,000 crore annually.
- With these, MP government seeks GI tag for its Basmati rice.

What are MP government's efforts at this end?

- Apart from putting pressure on the Centre, MP has appealed in Madras High Court.
- But its plea was rejected in February 2020.
- Earlier too in 2016, Intellectual Properties Appellate Board (IPBA) in Chennai had given the decision in favour of the APEDA.
- [APEDA is not in favour of including MP in the GI list.]
- Despite these orders, MP has been repeatedly agitating and trying its best through political and bureaucratic channels.
- Even many traders from MP are selling the rice from MP using the IGP imagery on their packages.
- This is despite the fact that MP is located far away down south of the IGP.

Why can MP not be rightfully offered the GI tag?

- Under WTO's TRIPs (trade-related aspects of intellectual property rights) agreement, physical attributes are not enough for a product to earn GI tag.
- The reputation linked to the geographical region is also essential and imperative.
- As per GI of Goods (Registration & Protection) Act in 2003 too, 'reputation' to a geographical area is central to the GI recognition.
- In the case of Basmati rice, only the above-mentioned 7 states have that reputation.
- Even if the rice grown in MP has all the required characteristics, it would not still entitle such rice to qualify as Basmati.
- This is much like the fact that sparkling wine produced in Australia or California or Italy cannot be called Champagne (-France).
- Likewise, Kancheepuram Silk Sari is a GI product, but a Banarasi sari cannot claim a share of the status though it might be as beautiful as the Kancheepuram Sari.
- The same goes with Basmati; any rice which is grown outside the designated area cannot be called Basmati.

Why is AIREA particularly opposed to MP's demand?

- India stands tall in the global arena as the only producer of premium Basmati.
- No other country (other than 18 districts of Pakistan) can call any of its rice as ‘Basmati’.
- It had been a tough battle for the country to protect Basmati name from the encroachment of various nations.
- Notably, many countries came out with their own versions of Basmati.
- It is only the GI tag that has protected India's Basmati.
- This is because it has been grown from time immemorial in the IGP area of India and 18 districts of Pakistan’s Punjab.
- This indisputable fact alone has enabled India to win the various cases.
- Notably, APEDA has taken up over a 1,000 legal actions in nearly 50 countries, spread across all the continents.
- It has spent over Rs 200/300 crores in promoting Basmati rice, defending its GI status and shaping it into a global brand.
- Given this, if MP is included in the GI list of Basmati crop, it would harm the reputation of Indian Basmati as a whole.
- It would also affect the national interest.

What are the possible implications if MP is offered its demand?

- Any such inclusion will nullify APEDA’s efforts made earlier to secure and protect Indian Basmati since 1995.
- All those 50 and more nations had been unequivocally restricted from calling any of their aromatic rice’s with even “Basmati-like” names.
- If MP is included, all of them will grab the opportunity to start sowing Basmati.
- Pakistan and China will also be equally benefitted.
- If Basmati loses its premium tag it will deprive over 20 lakh farmers of the 7 states from the economic premium of growing this unique product.
- The decision thus involves preserving and protecting the integrity of one of the most cherished national produce of India.

Source: The Indian Express

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