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Ponduru Khadi and India's GI Tag System — Protecting Craft Heritage as Economic Asset

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WHY IN NEWS

Ponduru Khadi from Srikakulam district, Andhra Pradesh received a Geographical Indication (GI) tag — registered in favour of KVIC. Ponduru Khadi is unique globally for using fish jawbone from the local Valuga fish in the cotton cleaning process, and for producing thread counts of 100–120, among the finest in handspun textiles anywhere in the world.

WHAT IS PONDURU KHADI?

Ponduru is a small town in Srikakulam district, Andhra Pradesh, on the banks of the Nagavali River. It has been producing handspun, handwoven cotton khadi for centuries — but the Ponduru variety is distinct from all other khadi in one fundamental way: it is woven to a **thread count of 100–120 counts** (sometimes up to 200 counts in the finest pieces), making it lighter and finer than almost any other handspun textile in the world.

To understand this: a count of 100 means 100 metres of yarn weighs 1 gram. Finer yarn = higher count = more skill required to produce it without breaking. Commercial cotton mills today work at 40–80 counts; Ponduru weavers — using nothing but a spinning wheel (charka) and their hands — regularly exceed 100 counts.

The Valuga Fish Bone — Ponduru's Globally Unique Feature:

The most distinctive element of Ponduru Khadi production is the use of **jawbones from the Valuga fish** (*Wallago attu* — a large freshwater catfish found in Andhra Pradesh's rivers) to clean and comb raw cotton before spinning.

Why fish bone? The Valuga jawbone has a natural serrated structure that is:

- Fine enough to separate cotton fibres without breaking them

- Slightly curved to align fibres in the spinning direction

- Non-metallic (metal combs create static; fish bone doesn't)

This technique is not used anywhere else in the world. It is a piece of craft knowledge that was transmitted orally across generations and faces extinction as the Valuga fish population has declined and fewer artisans learn the old cleaning method.

Three Cotton Varieties, All Local:

Ponduru weavers use three locally cultivated cotton varieties:

Hill cotton — grown on upland fields; longer staple

Punasa cotton — short-staple variety; produces very fine thread

Red cotton — a heritage variety with natural reddish-brown colour; produces naturally dyed thread without chemical dyes

None of these varieties are grown outside the Ponduru-Srikakulam region in significant quantities.

THE GI TAG SYSTEM: WHAT IT DOES

Geographical Indication (GI) is an intellectual property right that identifies a product as originating from a specific territory when its quality, reputation, or other characteristic is essentially attributable to that geographic origin.

India's legal framework: The **Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999** (in force from September 15, 2003) administered by the **GI Registry**, Chennai (under the Office of the Controller General of Patents, Designs and Trade Marks, under DPIIT).

What a GI tag provides:

Legal protection against imitation or misuse of the product name

Only producers from the designated geographic area can use the GI designation

Creates a marketable brand identity — “Authentic Ponduru Khadi” vs. generic khadi

Premium pricing leverage: Consumers willing to pay more for authenticated origin

Who gets the GI tag?

GI tags are granted to an **applicant** — usually a producer association, state government body, or relevant authority. For Ponduru Khadi, the tag is registered in favour of **KVIC (Khadi and Village Industries Commission)**, a statutory body under the Ministry of MSME established under the Khadi and Village Industries Commission Act, 1956.

KVIC administers khadi standards, provides artisan support, and issues khadi mark certifications.

The Authorised User system: After the GI tag is granted, individual producers from the region can register as “Authorised Users” — allowing them to use the GI designation on their products. This creates a legal supply chain that consumers can trust.

INDIA'S GI TAG LANDSCAPE

As of 2026, India has **over 600 registered GIs** — one of the highest in the world. Major categories:

Category	Examples	Count (~)
Agricultural products	Darjeeling Tea, Basmati Rice, Coorg Orange	~200
Handicrafts/Textiles	Kancheepuram Silk, Banarasi Saree, Pashmina	~150
Foodstuffs	Alphonso Mango, Tirupati Laddu, Jodhpuri Mirchi	~100
Natural goods	Nilgiri Tea, Kashmir Walnut	~50

State with most GIs: Tamil Nadu (90+) — followed by Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, and Kerala.

International GI battle — Basmati: The most contested GI in India’s history. India’s Basmati GI protects rice grown in the Indo-Gangetic plain. Pakistan also claims GI protection for its Basmati. The European Union’s GI protection for “Basmati” (since 2023) recognises both Indian and Pakistani Basmati — a partial victory for India.

WHY GI TAGS ARE NOT ENOUGH ON THEIR OWN

The GI tag creates a **legal entitlement** — but it does not automatically create market access, premium pricing, or artisan welfare. The gap between GI tag grant and artisan income improvement is India’s biggest GI policy failure.

Case study — Darjeeling Tea (first Indian GI, 2004):

- Has GI protection since 2004 (India’s first)

- Global recognition is high — “Darjeeling” commands premium prices globally

- Yet ~65% of tea sold as “Darjeeling Tea” internationally is counterfeit or diluted

- Artisan farmers in Darjeeling earn below minimum wage; plantation workers face debt bondage

- Enforcement failure: The Tea Board of India (GI owner) lacks resources to pursue international IP violations

Ponduru Khadi risks the same pattern:

- KVIC holds the tag but has limited enforcement capacity in export markets

- The actual weavers — women artisans in Srikakulam — need the premium to reach them, not be absorbed by intermediaries

- Valuga fish decline + fewer young people learning fish-bone cotton cleaning = the technique may disappear within one generation even with GI protection

What needs to change:

- Direct market linkage:** KVIC’s online platforms must connect Ponduru artisans directly to conscious consumers and exporters

Heritage practitioner documentation: The fish-bone cleaning process should be documented, filmed, and archived before it disappears

School-to-artisan pipeline: Srikakulam's vocational schools should include traditional textile arts in curriculum with stipends for learners

TRIPS framework: India should push in WTO for stronger international GI enforcement mechanism (current TRIPS Article 22-24 protections are weak for products other than wines and spirits)

KVIC AND KHADI — NATIONAL PICTURE

Khadi: Hand-spun and hand-woven fabric — Gandhi made it central to India's independence movement as a symbol of self-reliance and employment for rural India.

KVIC (Khadi and Village Industries Commission):

Statutory body; Ministry of MSME

Established under: KVIC Act, 1956

Functions: Standards setting, financial assistance (rebate on khadi), marketing, khadi mark certification, employment generation in rural sectors

Khadi Mark: A certification seal guaranteeing authenticity of handspun, handwoven origin

Khadi industry data (2024-25):

Khadi sales: ~Rs 1.5 lakh crore (including village industries) — record high

Direct artisans employed: ~1.2 crore

Online khadi sales growth: 400%+ in 5 years (post-COVID)

Khadi Plaza stores and KVIC outlets: 7,000+ across India

UPSC RELEVANCE

Ponduru Khadi (Srikakulam, AP; KVIC GI holder; Valuga fish jawbone; Hill/Punasa/red cotton; 100-120 thread count); GI of Goods Act 1999 (in force 2003; GI Registry Chennai; DPIIT; CGPDTM); KVIC (KVIC Act 1956; Ministry of MSME); Darjeeling Tea (India's first GI, 2004); India GIs (600+; TN highest); Basmati GI (Indo-Gangetic; EU recognition 2023); TRIPS (Article 22-24; WTO; wine/spirit bias in protection); Khadi Mark (KVIC certification); Authorised Users (GI registration system)

MAINS GS-3:

“The GI tag creates legal entitlement but not guaranteed artisan welfare. Evaluate the gap between GI policy and ground-level outcomes for India's craft communities.” | “How can India leverage its over 600 GI tags to build premium export brands? What institutional changes are required?”

MAINS GS-1:

“Trace the role of khadi in India's independence movement and evaluate its contemporary economic relevance under the Khadi and Village Industries Commission.”

ESSAY:

“Intellectual property rights are instruments of the powerful. The GI tag can protect Darjeeling Tea or Ponduru Khadi — but only if the communities that create them have the power to enforce those rights.”

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

PONDURU KHADI:

Location: Srikakulam district, Andhra Pradesh; on banks of Nagavali River

GI holder: KVIC (Khadi and Village Industries Commission)

Thread count: 100-120 (finest handspun; can reach 200)

Cotton cleaning tool: Jawbone of Valuga fish (*Wallago attu*; freshwater catfish, AP rivers)

Cotton varieties: Hill cotton, Punasa cotton, Red cotton (all locally grown)

Process: Entirely hand-processed — cleaning → spinning → weaving

Why unique: Only textile in the world using fish jawbone in cotton processing

GEOGRAPHICAL INDICATION (GI) SYSTEM:

Act: Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999

In force: September 15, 2003

Registry: GI Registry, Chennai (under CGPDTM, DPIIT)

First Indian GI: Darjeeling Tea (2004)

Total Indian GIs: 600+ (as of 2026)

State with most GIs: Tamil Nadu (90+)

International framework: TRIPS Agreement (WTO), Articles 22-24

NOTABLE GIS (FOR PRELIMS):

Darjeeling Tea: First Indian GI (2004); West Bengal; Tea Board India

Basmati Rice: GI holder — Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA); EU recognition 2023

Kancheepuram Silk: Tamil Nadu; silk sarees

Tirupati Laddu: Andhra Pradesh; first religious GI in India

Pashmina: Jammu & Kashmir; Changthangi goat wool

Banarasi Silk: UP; UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage

KVIC — KEY DATA:

Full name: Khadi and Village Industries Commission

Statutory basis: KVIC Act, 1956

Under: Ministry of MSME

Khadi sales FY25: ~Rs 1.5 lakh crore (record)

Artisans employed: ~1.2 crore

Khadi outlets: 7,000+

WTO TRIPS ON GIS:

Article 22: General protection for GIs (against misleading use)

Article 23: Enhanced protection for wines and spirits (automatic protection without proof of misleading)

India's demand: Extend Article 23-level protection to all GIs (including agricultural/handicraft GIs)

Opposed by: USA, Australia, New Zealand (New World wine producers fear similar extension for agricultural products)

Sources: KVIC, PIB, The Hindu, GI Registry

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