



GI-Tagged Vegetables: Preserving Heritage, Protecting Farmers and Promoting Premium Markets

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India is a country of remarkable agricultural diversity, where vegetables grown in different regions often carry distinctive colours, shapes, flavours, textures and culinary traditions. From traditional brinjals cultivated in coastal Karnataka and Goa to speciality garlic grown in the hills of Tamil Nadu, many vegetables are closely associated with the places where they have been maintained for generations. These crops are more than farm commodities; they represent local knowledge, cultural identity and the long relationship between farmers and their environment.

At the same time, traditional vegetable types face increasing competition from commercial hybrids, changing consumer preferences, climate variability and the gradual replacement of locally adapted planting material. When a distinctive vegetable loses its geographical identity, farmers may also lose an opportunity to differentiate their produce from similar commodities sold through ordinary markets.

A Geographical Indication (GI) provides a formal way of linking a product with a particular geographical origin when its quality, reputation or other characteristics are associated with that place. In India, GI protection is administered under the Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999. For vegetables, this recognition can convert an ordinary-looking commodity into a product with a clear regional identity, traceability and market story.

GI recognition therefore has significance beyond legal protection. It can support the conservation of traditional vegetable diversity, strengthen producer organisations, improve product differentiation and create opportunities for premium and value-added markets. This article explores how GI-tagged vegetables can help preserve agricultural heritage while contributing to farmer livelihoods and sustainable rural enterprise.

Understanding Geographical Indication: When Place Becomes Identity

A Geographical Indication is not simply a label attached to a farm product. It establishes a recognized relationship between a product and a defined geographical area. The distinctive quality, reputation or characteristics of the product must have a meaningful connection with that location.

For agricultural products, the geographical identity may reflect several interacting factors, including soil, climate, local planting material, traditional production practices, farmer knowledge, harvesting methods and long-standing consumer recognition. These factors can give a regional vegetable a character that is difficult to reproduce elsewhere.

Unlike a private brand owned by a single business, a GI is a collective geographical identity. Eligible producers who comply with the registered specifications can participate in using the protected name. This collective character makes GI recognition particularly relevant to small and marginal producers.

Why Do Vegetables Need GI Recognition?

Modern vegetable production has understandably emphasised yield, uniformity, earliness, transportability and resistance to major stresses. However, these priorities can encourage the spread of a limited number of widely cultivated commercial types. Many traditional vegetables possess qualities valued by local consumers, such as distinctive taste, texture, aroma, colour or cooking behaviour, that may not be adequately rewarded in conventional wholesale markets.

GI recognition can bring these qualities into the marketplace by making geographical identity visible. The product can be distinguished not only by appearance, but also by its origin, history and recognised production specifications. This creates a foundation for value-based marketing rather than price-only competition.

GI-Tagged Vegetables: India's Living Agricultural Heritage

India's GI system includes several agricultural products associated with region-specific vegetables and traditional vegetable types. Brinjal is particularly illustrative because different regions have maintained distinctive populations with characteristic fruit shape, colour, culinary use and cultural importance.

Examples include Udupi Mattu Gulla Brinjal from Karnataka, Jalgaon Bharit Brinjal from Maharashtra, Ram Nagar Bhanta from Uttar Pradesh, Vellore Spiny Brinjal from Tamil Nadu and traditional Goan vegetables such as Agsechi Vayingim and Sat Shiro Bheno. Kodaikanal Malai Poondu provides another important example from the hill region of Tamil Nadu.



Fig. 1. Examples of GI-associated vegetable heritage: Udupi Mattu Gulla brinjal (left) and Kodaikanal Malai Poondu garlic (right).

GI-associated vegetable	Region	Major identity	Potential market strength
Udupi Mattu Gulla Brinjal	Karnataka	Traditional round green brinjal	Regional cuisine and speciality fresh market
Jalgaon Bharit Brinjal	Maharashtra	Brinjal linked with bharit preparation	Culinary differentiation
Kodaikanal Malai Poondu	Tamil Nadu	Hill garlic with strong regional identity	Premium fresh garlic and value addition
Vellore Spiny Brinjal	Tamil Nadu	Traditional spiny brinjal	Speciality vegetable market
Agsechi Vayingim	Goa	Traditional Agassaim brinjal	Local cuisine and cultural food markets
Sat Shiro Bheno	Goa	Traditional lady's finger	Regional speciality and direct marketing

Kodaikanal Malai Poondur: A Garlic with a Mountain Identity

Kodaikanal Malai Poondur is a useful example of how geography, traditional production and product reputation can come together in a GI product. It is associated with the upper hill areas of Kodaikanal in Dindigul district, Tamil Nadu. Its identity is tied to a specific production environment and a long-standing local cultivation tradition.

For growers, the importance of such recognition lies in differentiation. Instead of entering the market as anonymous garlic, the product can be presented according to its geographical identity. This can support more targeted branding, traceability and premium positioning when quality and authenticity are maintained.

Udupi Mattu Gulla: Preserving a Traditional Brinjal

Udupi Mattu Gulla Brinjal is a registered GI agricultural product associated with Karnataka. The official GI Registry records the Mattu Gulla Growers' Association as the applicant and identifies the product under the agricultural class. The registered product is closely linked with Mattu and surrounding areas, illustrating how a traditional vegetable can retain a strong place-based identity.

The value of Mattu Gulla lies not only in its fruit but also in the farming and culinary traditions surrounding it. Its distinctive appearance, local use and regional reputation provide a foundation for differentiated marketing. The GI identity can help distinguish authentic produce from visually similar vegetables entering the market from other locations.

GI Tags and Farmer Protection

In conventional vegetable markets, producers frequently receive payment mainly according to quantity, size and prevailing market conditions. A traditional crop may therefore be sold without recognition of the additional cultural or geographical value maintained by the farmer.

GI can provide a framework for differentiation, but registration alone does not automatically guarantee higher income. The economic benefit depends on farmer participation, authorised-user systems, product quality, collective marketing, traceability, consumer awareness and enforcement against misuse. When these components work together, geographical identity can strengthen the bargaining position and visibility of producers.

This is especially important for smallholder vegetable growers. Collective action through grower associations, cooperatives and Farmer Producer Organisations can make it easier to aggregate produce, standardise quality, package the product and approach higher-value markets.

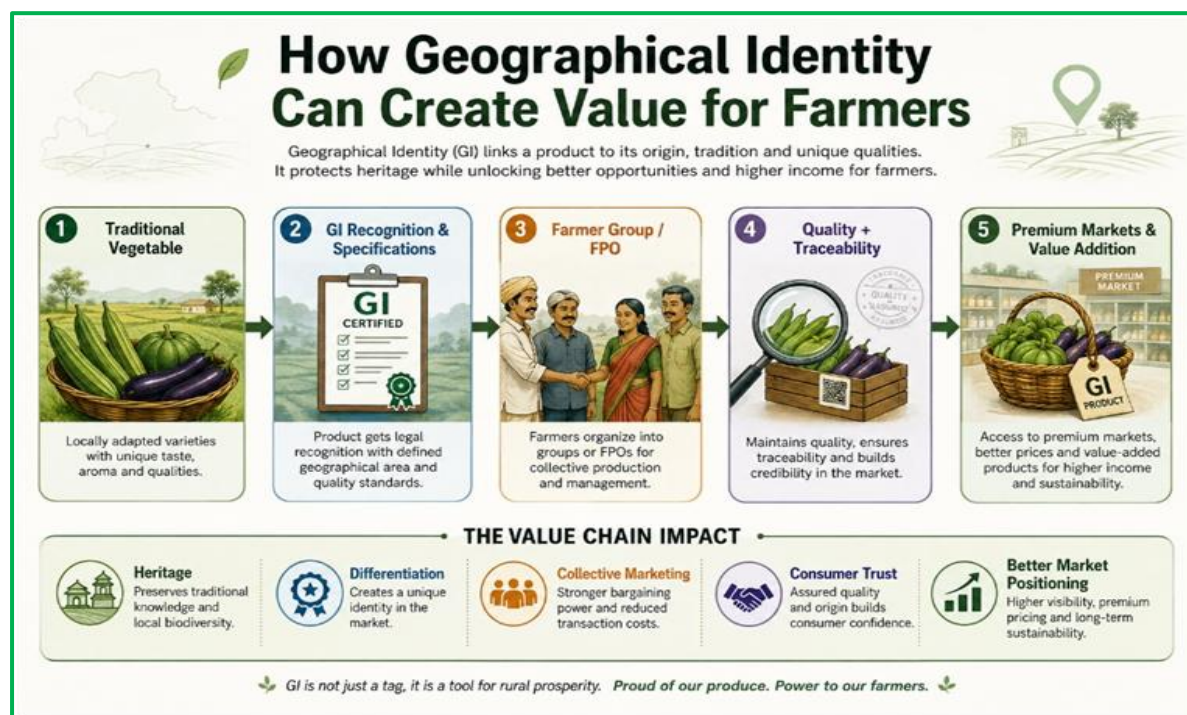
From Local Vegetable to Premium Product

The strongest commercial opportunity associated with GI vegetables is product differentiation. Ordinary vegetables generally compete mainly on price, whereas a GI product can communicate authenticity, geographical origin, traditional identity, distinctive quality and traceability.

This creates possibilities for premium retail stores, direct farmer-to-consumer sales, restaurants specialising in regional cuisine, farmers' markets, e-commerce and selected export channels. Where permitted by the registered specifications, value addition can further extend the market through products such as pickles, dehydrated vegetables, ready-to-cook foods, chutneys and traditional culinary preparations.

The key principle is simple: a GI vegetable should not be treated only as a higher-priced commodity. It should be developed as a differentiated product with a recognisable identity and a clear story connecting the farmer, place, crop and consumer.





Protecting Indigenous Vegetable Diversity

One of the less visible but highly important benefits of GI recognition is its potential contribution to agro-biodiversity conservation. Traditional vegetables are often maintained through farmer selection, seed saving and repeated cultivation under local conditions. If their market value declines, farmers may gradually stop growing them, leading to the loss of both genetic resources and associated knowledge.

Functioning GI system can create a positive feedback mechanism: traditional material receives recognition, recognition improves differentiation, differentiation creates consumer demand, demand provides an incentive for continued cultivation and continued cultivation helps conserve diversity. GI protection should therefore be viewed as one component of a broader conservation strategy rather than as a substitute for seed banks, breeding programmes or community conservation.

GI and Traditional Farmer Knowledge

The uniqueness of a traditional vegetable does not always reside entirely in its seed. Farmers may possess specialized knowledge about sowing time, planting material, field preparation, nutrient management, irrigation, pest management, harvesting maturity and seed production. Culinary communities may also maintain knowledge about the best ways to prepare the produce.

Such knowledge represents accumulated experience developed through generations of interaction between farmers and their environment. Supporting GI vegetables therefore means supporting the communities and knowledge systems that keep these products alive.

GI Tags and Climate-Resilient Agriculture

Traditional vegetable diversity can also contribute indirectly to climate resilience. Locally maintained types may contain useful adaptation to regional temperature, rainfall, soil and pest conditions. GI recognition does not mean that a product is automatically climate-resilient; rather, maintaining diverse traditional genetic resources keeps a wider biological base available for future adaptation and crop improvement.

In an era of increasing climate uncertainty, conserving regional vegetable diversity can therefore be viewed as a form of agricultural insurance. Traditional varieties may provide useful material for breeding programmes aimed at developing crops suited to future production environments.

Challenges in Converting GI Recognition into Farmer Income

Low consumer awareness: Many consumers are familiar with only a small number of famous GI products and may not recognize GI-tagged vegetables.

Weak branding and packaging: Fresh vegetables are often sold without clear origin information, making authentic GI produce difficult to distinguish.

Limited collective marketing: Small and fragmented producers may struggle to supply consistent volumes and uniform quality.

Insufficient authorised-user participation: The benefits of GI protection depend on genuine producers participating in the system and following product specifications.

Perishability: Vegetables require efficient grading, packing, transport and storage to preserve quality and market value.

Risk of misuse: Similar products from outside the designated area can weaken consumer confidence if the protected name is misused.

Building a Strong GI Vegetable Value Chain

GI registration is only the starting point. A successful GI vegetable needs a coordinated system around the product. Farmer organisations, research institutions, government departments, marketing agencies and entrepreneurs can work together to improve planting material, production protocols, quality standards, packaging, traceability and market access.

Digital tools can strengthen this system. QR codes and online product pages can potentially provide information about geographical origin, producer organisation, production practices and authenticity. Such traceability can help build consumer trust while making the GI story visible beyond the production region.

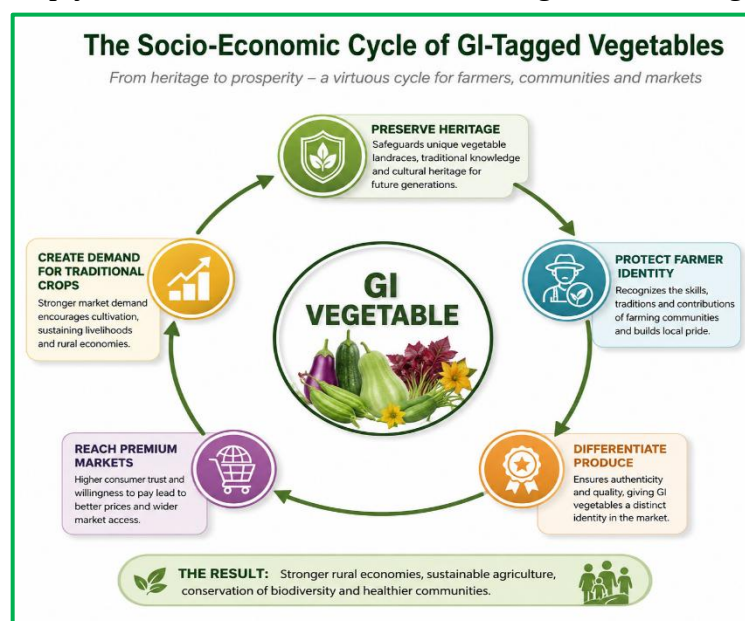
Role of Farmer Producer Organisations

Farmer Producer Organisations and growers associations can play a central role in converting GI recognition into economic opportunity. Individual farmers often have limited bargaining power, whereas organised groups can collectively plan production, aggregate harvests, grade produce, develop packaging, negotiate with buyers and explore processing or direct marketing.

The official GI record for Udipi Mattu Gulla identifies the Mattu Gulla Growers Association as the applicant, illustrating the importance of organised producer participation in the GI system. Similar collective approaches can help other GI vegetable communities move from registration towards stronger market performance.

The Future: From GI Tag to GI Brand

The ultimate objective should not simply be to obtain a GI certificate. The greater challenge begins after registration: creating consumer recognition and ensuring that genuine producers capture a meaningful share of the value created by the geographical identity. A strong GI vegetable brand can be built around a combination of GI protection, farmer organisation, quality assurance, traceability, attractive packaging, digital promotion, value addition and consumer education. When these elements are aligned, a regional vegetable can move from an anonymous commodity to a recognisable speciality product.



Consumers as Guardians of Agricultural Heritage

Consumers also form an important part of the GI ecosystem. Purchasing authentic regional products creates demand for the traditional crops maintained by farmers. Consumers can therefore contribute to agricultural heritage conservation through their food choices.

For a GI vegetable, questions such as 'Where was it produced?', 'What makes it distinctive?' and 'Who maintains this crop?' are more than matters of curiosity. They can help connect the consumer with the farmer and the landscape behind the product.

GI Vegetables and Rural Entrepreneurship

GI-tagged vegetables can stimulate rural enterprises beyond primary production. Opportunities may emerge in seed production, aggregation, grading, packaging, online retail, dehydration, pickling, ready-to-cook foods, culinary tourism, farm visits and GI-based food festivals.

This broader perspective is important because rural income growth does not have to depend only on increasing yield. Increasing the value obtained from each unit of produce through differentiation, branding and value addition can also contribute to livelihood improvement.

Conclusion

GI-tagged vegetables represent a meeting point between agriculture, culture, biodiversity and economics. They provide formal recognition to products whose identity is closely connected with a particular geographical region and can help transform traditional vegetables from ordinary commodities into differentiated agricultural products. India's region-specific brinjals, Kodaikanal Malai Poondur and other traditional vegetable products illustrate the diversity embedded within the country's horticultural heritage.

The greatest potential of GI tagging lies not merely in protecting a name but in creating an ecosystem in which farmers, consumers, entrepreneurs and local communities benefit from geographical identity. When combined with farmer organisations, quality assurance, traceability, improved packaging, value addition and targeted marketing, GI vegetables can enter premium markets while retaining their regional character.

At the same time, GI recognition can contribute to conserving traditional vegetable diversity and the knowledge associated with its cultivation. In an era of climate uncertainty and rapid agricultural change, maintaining such diversity is increasingly valuable.

The journey of a GI vegetable should therefore extend beyond registration—from heritage to protection, from protection to promotion, and from promotion to prosperity. With coordinated efforts from farmers, research institutions, government agencies, FPOs, entrepreneurs and consumers, GI-tagged vegetables can become powerful instruments for protecting heritage, empowering farmers and building premium markets for India's unique horticultural wealth.

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