

## ‘Kannadipaya’ – role of geographical indication in brand-making and conservation

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*This note illustrates the unique characteristics of ‘kannadipaya’ (specially woven bamboo mirror mat), the importance of conserving the traditional knowledge and skill inherited by tribal communities of Idukki district, Kerala, India, and the significance of geographical indication tag for this heritage product.*

For centuries, bamboo has been the species of choice for artisans and craftsmen, especially among indigenous communities in many parts of India, including the Western Ghats. Usually communities engaged in weaving mats from bamboo prefer thin-walled species, also known as ‘reed bamboos’ belonging to genus *Ochlandra*, of which ten species are endemic to Kerala, India. The Kerala State Bamboo Corporation, a Government of Kerala enterprise, since its inception in 1970 has been encouraging traditional bamboo weavers in using *Ochlandra travancorica*, a thin walled bamboo species available locally, for making value added products including bamboo mats<sup>1</sup>. However, a special type of bamboo mat woven only by a few tribal communities in Venmani, Idukki district, Kerala, called ‘kannadipaya’ (roughly translated as mirror mat) has captured the imagination of bamboo lovers due to its unique design, light refractive properties and extreme flexibility. The name ‘kannadi’ means ‘mirror’ and ‘paya’ means ‘mat’ in Malayalam. Till recently, it was considered to have been made from a species of *Ochlandra*. However, following the visit of a team of scientists from Kerala Forest Research Institute (KFRI), Peechi, Thrissur, India and collection and close examination of the flowering branchlets, seeds, clump and culm properties of the species have helped identify it as *Teinostachyum wightii* (Munro) Bedd.

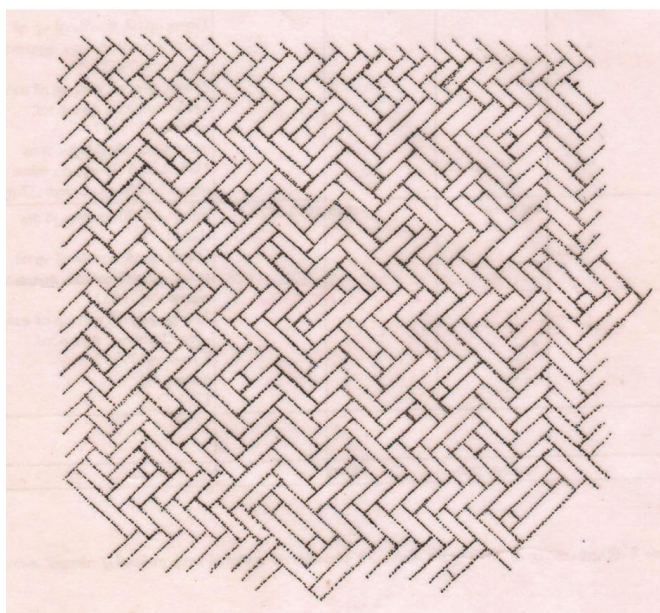
The ancient knowledge of kannadipaya weaving has been inherited by the Urali, Mannan and Muthuvan tribal communities of Idukki district. Anecdotes indicate that the tribal communities of Idukki district have been presenting this special shiny mat as a gift to kings and other state dignitaries on special occasions. The mat (0.75–1.0 m × 2 m) is so flexible that it can be rolled and placed inside a culm of bamboo of diameter less than 10 cm. These mats are considered as unique heritage products and also as traditional handicrafts.

The uniqueness of kannadipaya is because of its design, weaving method,

type of bamboo used and preference for the fourth peeling or sliver from the bamboo culm internode. The tribal communities have specialized in making these mats by taking inner slivers from the culm internode which is 1–2 mm thick and 4 mm wide, of a locally available bamboo called ‘Njoonjiletta’, which has been identified as *T. wightii*. This mat has a polished surface, which is smooth and reflects light like a mirror. Adjacent woven patterns of this mat are like a mirror reflection of each other (Figure 1). We consider this weaving as a traditional inherited knowledge of these communities. The other vernacular names of the locally available bamboo bioresource, e.g. ‘Muthuretta’, ‘Pannimookan’, ‘Karietta’ could possibly be variants or varieties of *T. wightii*.

Besides weaving mats, the tribal communities are also engaged in various works under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee (MGNREG) scheme, which is the primary

source of income for them, since weaving mats does not provide a regular employment due to difficulties in access and collection of the bioresource year round. Despite the high demand for this special mat, the younger generation has shown a distinct lack of interest in the weaving process due to its time-consuming and laborious nature. It is possible that unless supported by innovative schemes, this traditional knowledge may die a natural death. There are reports of decline in traditional knowledge base due to lack of documentation and conservation measures to augment and protect the natural resource base of bamboos<sup>2</sup>. Care has to be taken that kannadipaya also does not meet the same fate. For this, proper branding and geographical indication (GI) registration of the product is necessary. GI is an important tool for branding and conservation of traditional knowledge. The GI registration will also help prevent the misuse of traditional goods as well augment financial gains to



**Figure 1.** Illustration of ‘kannadipaya’ bamboo mat. Here in this four square pattern seen in mat, each square is a mirror image of the diametrically opposite one.

## COMMENTARY

traditional weaving communities through marketing this unique product to other countries<sup>3</sup>. According to the Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration & Protection) Rules, 2002, kannadipaya falls under Class 20 with respect to goods made from bamboo and Class 27 for handicrafts, mats, decorative and utilitarian items made with soft bamboo/reed. The primary aim of this note is to

emphasize the need for GI for this unique product, which is expected to preserve the traditional knowledge as well as recognition for it universally.

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2. Chandrashekar, U. M., Tikhile, P., Subbanna, S. and Viswanath, S., *J. Bamboo Rattan*, 2019, **18**(4), 64–73.

3. Kangabam, R. D., Medhabati, K. and Govindaraju, M., *NeBIO*, 2013, **4**(2), 5–58.

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