

RICE DIPLOMACY

Cultural, Legal and Diplomatic Frontier for India



Rice is more than a basic food in Asia; it's a rich archive of culture, history, and, lately, diplomacy. Whether it be the fragrant Basmati from India, the soft Koshihikari from Japan, or the fragrant Hom Mali from Thailand, rice has emerged as a marker of both national identity and cultural assertion. In recent times, nations have been utilising their food heritage as a part of their soft power, effectively deploying cultural persuasion, geography, and food branding to persuade other countries to make economic decisions.

India's basmati is situated at the rare intersection of culture, commerce and diplomacy. It has been used time



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and again to create channels of economic cooperation globally by India. This strategic leveraging of using rice or other staple crops to create cultural legitimacy, economic clout and global influence can be termed as “rice diplomacy”. Beyond trade, rice diplomacy reflects how nations are developing identities and reputation based on what they produce, protect and share.

Basmati as Cultural Capital

Basmati has long been a part of North India’s cultural and culinary memory before it became a product of valued export. The long history of basmati can be traced through texts such as *Heer Ranjha* and *Ain-i-Akbari*. These texts have mentioned scented rice varieties, with Mughal chroniclers praising their fragrance and delicate grains. The name “*basmati*” itself is derived from the Sanskrit term “*vasmati*”, which means “fragrant”. This highlights the linguistic and cultural lineage of the grains. For centuries, the Indo-Gangetic plains of Punjab, Haryana and Uttarakhand have provided the perfect soil and climate conditions that define the aroma and texture of the rice.

Today, basmati’s importance extends far beyond the plate. It represents cultural and agricultural continuity, serving as a bridge between rural traditions and global taste. A similar instance can be seen with Japan’s Koshihikari or Thailand’s Jasmine rice, both of which serve as emblems of national pride. Despite this, basmati’s significance stands out in terms of scale and diplomacy as it is India’s most exported rice variety, accounting for over 4 billion USD in annual trade. This turns heritage into not just a livelihood but also a cultural soft power.

Law and Authenticity

Basmati’s global fame brings value but also vulnerability. To protect its identity, in 2016, India had registered Basmati rice under the Geographical Indication of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act 1999. The registration links the name to regions where the rice is produced. It includes the plains of Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Delhi, Western



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Uttar Pradesh and parts of Jammu and Kashmir. The framework allows only rice produced in this region to be sold as Basmati, preserving its authenticity and heritage. However, in practice, this protection is far from optimal. Mislabelled exports, blending with non-basmati varieties and irregular oversight continue to damage its credibility. Internationally, the situation is similar. India’s recent bid for GI Recognition for Basmati in the European Union has been challenged by Pakistan, which argues that Basmati is a part of their shared agricultural heritage.

This incident highlights how the legal framework, combined with national pride, acts. Strengthening domestic coherence between intellectual property, agricultural, and trade laws would not only support farmers but also enhance India’s credibility abroad.

Reforming The Roots

The varied challenges faced in the GI recognition of Basmati, calls for reforms which must begin at the roots. Strengthening the link between seed laws and GI protection is crucial. It is important that farmers have access to certified seeds that meet the official GI standard, ensuring genetic purity and consistency

across regions. Steps like DNA fingerprinting and quality mapping are being undertaken by certain institutions like the Basmati Export Development Foundation (BEDF) and the Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA). Digital traceability systems such as BasmatiNET and blockchain-based export tracking pilots are some steps which can be largely adapted to build a transparent farm-to-market chain.

The benefits of these technological advancements extend beyond efficiency to the realm of diplomacy as well. When India showcases such credible systems of verification, it also builds global trust. The capacity to trace every shipment of rice exported empowers India in trade negotiations and bolsters its standing as a trustworthy holder of heritage crops.

Reforming the roots, thus, means connecting farmers, scientists, and diplomats into one continuum, where every grain embodies proof of origin, proof of quality, and proof of national pride. In doing so, India uses agricultural reform as soft power, demonstrating to the world that authenticity can go hand in hand with innovation.

Grain Geopolitics

Tracing Basmati’s journey from Indian fields and pastures to the shelves of global markets is not simply about agriculture but also geopolitics. The aromatic grain has long been pinned at the centre of a quiet contest between India and Pakistan - each claiming historical and geographical prerogatives to its heritage. This contest has bubbled up into courts of trade and markets of consumer goods, most transparently in the European Union’s Geographical Indication (GI) negotiations and in the United States’ disputes over imports.

This struggle conveys how food heritage is intertwined with national identity and economic strategies. For India, to protect Basmati is not only about retaining access to markets, but maintaining cultural ownership and rural livelihoods. At the same time, as global consumer demand rises for authentic and traced products, Basmati’s story strengthens



India's soft power. This soft power is rooted in its rich cultural history that promotes images of craft, biodiversity, and tradition. It has managed to transform food into a frontier of diplomacy, a consequence of which has resulted in issues of shared heritage and equitable recognition emerging in South Asia, where cultures have long evolved through mutual influence.

South-South Cooperation

Given India's assertive posturing in its immediate vicinity, in which it sees itself as a regional leader, it could spearhead the concept of rice heritage as a collaborative platform. A Heritage Rice Network could be established based on South-South cooperation that connects rice producers to Thailand, Vietnam, and Myanmar. This Heritage Rice Network would facilitate exchanges on best practices of Geographical Indication protection, digital traceability, and branding for sustainability. Not only could this network support farmers regionally against market dilution from industrial agriculture, but it could also provide collective bargaining power by enhancing local

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farmers' negotiating positions with traders in both global and regional trading spaces. Also, the network could promote agricultural diplomacy and solidarity of culture via a platform of shared agrarian traditions.

Therefore, India can reposition its rice diplomacy as a mechanism of trade and a model for postcolonial agency to establish the value of its own traditions as a collective effort to innovate and protect heritage.

The Road Ahead

Rice diplomacy goes beyond simple trade or culinary preferences: it is rather about how countries represent themselves on the global stage. The case of

Basmati illustrates a broader problem for India: how to transform an authentic piece of cultural heritage into strategic capital. While technological interventions and legal protection can form the base of this transformation, true and lasting foundations will be constructed when the interests of farmers, the capacity of the state, and the intent of diplomacy are aligned. If India desires to assume the apex position in cultural diplomacy, the policy approach to India's heritage crops will have to shift from protectionism to partnership.

India needs more than simply to defend Basmati; it needs to present Basmati as a model for ethical trade, scientific transparency, and shared heritage. With stronger GI enforcement, farmer education on trade, and strategic policies for inter-state collaboration, one grain of rice can be rebranded as a symbol of trust and partnership. Diplomacy on rice is, therefore, not a figurative use of the term but a true, actionable sense of the word. It is the tangible demonstration of the possibility for culture, commerce, and ethical consideration to thrive alongside one another.

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