Mango and its Wild Relatives

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Mango – aka ‘Aamra’ in Sanskrit, ‘Mankai’ or ‘Mangai’ in Tamil, ‘Aam’ in Hindi and Bengali, ‘Keri’ in Gujarati – there are umpteen names of this popular fruit in several vernaculars of our vast country and in several countries of Southeast Asia.

There is one popular saying in Bengali, it goes, “Phaler rājā Aam”. Yes, indeed, there is no second opinion about it. Mango is unequivocally the ‘king of fruits’. It is literally ‘India’s gift to the world’.

We have hundreds of different varieties. Almost every part of India has some proud possessions. Just to name a few, we have ‘Alphonso’ of Ratnagiri district, Maharashtra; ‘Badami’, ‘Ratna’, ‘Sindhu’, etc. also from Maharashtra; ‘Langra’, which means lame in Hindi; Golden ‘Dasehri’ from Northern India; ‘Mankurad’ from Goa; ‘Mulgova’ from Kerala; ‘Neelam’ from Southern India; ‘Fazli’ and ‘Himsagar’ from Eastern India; ‘Gundu’ from Salem district of Tamil Nadu and ‘Kesar’ from Gujarat.

Etymologists presume that the English word ‘Mango’ was derived from the Portuguese word ‘Manga’, which in turn was borrowed from the Tamil words ‘Mankai’ or ‘Mangai’. Literature reveals that Portuguese traders picked up this name when the local porters were loading the baskets-packed-with-mangos on their ships from the ancient ports of Tamil Nadu.

Rataul, a place in Uttar Pradesh possesses the wonderful creations of a humble gardener Sheikh Mohammad Afaq Faridi, whom Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, honoured with the title ‘Mango King’. The grafts that Faridi created are marvellous e.g. ‘Angur-dana’ smaller than a walnut while ‘Jam-E-Jam’ weighing more than two kilograms.

Botanists, or plant scientists, believe that mango, Mangifera indica of Anacardiaceae family (i.e. Cashew family), had originated in the Himalayan foothills of Eastern India. Seafaring Portuguese people, the extraordinary traders of the past moving around the world with their merchant ships, took this juicy fruit to Africa and then Brazil.

By the end of the 16th century cultivation of mango became popular almost in every tropical and subtropical region of the world. Here are some names of international varieties too e.g. ‘Kensington’ from Australia, ‘Tongdum’ meaning “Black Gold” from Thailand, ‘Florida mango’ from the USA and ‘Tommy Atkins’ from South Africa & Mexico.

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mangos on their ships from the ancient ports of Tamil Nadu. An eminent botanist and a former Director of the Botanical Survey of India, Rev. Fr. H. Santapau (1903-1970) had very aptly said that, “I shall only say that this fruit (i.e. Mango) for us in India is the real Theobroma, in the sense of the original Greek word, meaning the food of the gods.”

There are a pretty good number of wild plants, some of which are even genetically very close relatives of Mango plants, belonging to the same genus Mangifera and there are a few though not closely related to mango plants but the fruits of these wild plants are also used by the locals as subtle substitutes of mango.

The first wild mango, named Mangifera sylvatica, is one of the genetically closest species to Mangifera indica. Most wild mangos are small-sized fruits having a large kernel in relation to other Mangifera indica varieties, which provides significant nutritional and medicinal advantages that can contribute to nutrition and health of the local people.

One may ask why we should bother about these wild species and think of conservation of these wild mango species. The answer would be, if we don’t in that case sooner or later such little known wild species may become extinct in the future.

Let us know some interesting facts about these wild mango species. Mangifera sylvatica fruit kernels produce a butter which can be used as an alternative for Cocoa Butter. ‘Kwini’ or Mangifera odorata is a wild mango species that is native to tropical Asia. The fruit is light orange in colour. It’s juicy and sweet when ripe. This wild mango tree emits a fragrant resinous smell.

The next wild mango is Mangifera foetida (also called horse mango, malmut, limus, bachang and machang) found in wetland rainforest regions of Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. This wild-mango fruit is also edible. However, young fruits extrude sap that can cause blisters while the mature fruits have a strong smell.

Mangifera zeylanica, also called ‘Sri Lankan Wild Mango’, is a wild species of mango tree endemic to Sri Lanka. This stately tree is the tallest member of the genus Mangifera and one of the two tallest trees in the Anacardiaceae family. These wild mango fruits are edible and have an excellent taste. It is also called ‘Aetamba’ or ‘Wal Amba’ in Sinhala and ‘Kadu-ma’ in Tamil. The well-known British botanist and explorer Joseph Dalton Hooker first described the tree in 1876.

Mangifera laurina, another wild mango, is an evergreen tree with a massive, globose crown, and can grow up to 36 metres tall. The tree is found both wild and cultivated in Southeast Asia, where the fruit is widely appreciated and consumed.

The next wild mango, Mangifera andamanica is an endemic species in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Fruits of this wild mango are edible but small in size. The Field Gene bank of Jawaharlal Nehru Tropical Botanical Garden and Research Institute, Thiruvananthapuram, India is conserving this species.

Mangifera pajang is another species of wild mango plant, found only in certain regions such as Borneo, which belongs to the Brunei sultanate, in Kalimantan province of Indonesia and also the Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak. The fruit of this wild mango is known in Borneo with its strange native name, Bambangan.

Mangifera caesia is a wild mango species widely
Mangifera odorata cultivated in several areas of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Papua New Guinea and the Philippines. The fruit can be eaten with chilli sauce and/or dark soy sauce. It is an excellent ingredient for the creamy juices, also for making the spice base for preparing the oriental cookery called ‘sambal’, which is a relish made with vegetables or fruit and spices.

*Mangifera decandra* is a deciduous tree that can grow up to a staggering 50 metres tall. The characteristic straight tree trunk is usually free of branches for 15 to 20 metres with no buttresses. The tree is sometimes grown for its fruit in the sylvan ecosystems of Southeast Asia, Borneo of Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia. The raw fruit is a fleshy drupe, having edible sweet-sour whitish flesh and a thin skin only one millimetre wide.

Another wild mango is *Spondias pinnata* found in lowlands and hill forests up to 1200 m. It is probably native to Malaysia, the Philippines and Indochina. It has also been widely cultivated and naturalized in several countries of Southeast Asia.

Africa also has its own mango – not as big and tasty as the Mango – interestingly belonging to a very different family, i.e. Fabaceae. It is extremely rich in vitamin C and is sought after by many wild mammals, including elephants. Although *Cordyla africana* belongs to the legume family, the fruit is pod-shaped only in the very early stage. When mature, it’s drup-like, golden-yellow and glossy, with a soft, thin skin and having juicy mango-like pulp inside. This first name, ‘Cordyla’ is from the Greek word ‘kordyle’, meaning a ‘club’, which is an apt reference to the club-shaped fruit and its stalk.

The next one is the wild mango of Africa, *Irvingia gabonensis* aka African mango, bush mango, dika or ogbono. This tree bears edible mango-like fruits and are especially valued for their fat and protein-rich nuts. Until some years ago most of the dika products were harvested from scattered, wild trees. The fruits are processed into jelly, jam, juice and sometimes even wine. The pulp has also been used to prepare black dye for cloth colouration.

The next one, *Buchanania obovata*, is a small to medium-sized understory tree in woodlands native to Northern Australia. Yes, it’s true, in addition to ‘Kensington’, Australia too has its own wild-mango. Common names include green plum and wild mango. The fruit is traditionally eaten by the Aborigines. The plant also has traditional medicinal uses.

*Mangifera macrocarpa* is yet another wild species found in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. The World Conservation Monitoring Centre in the year 1998 considered ‘Mangifera macrocarpa’ a Threatened Species and thus it is included in the IUCN Red List. *Mangifera magnifica*, a tree found in Sumatra and Borneo is also a Threatened Species. *Mangifera casturi*, endemic to Kalimantan region of Borneo, Indonesia is now considered extinct in the wild.

In the future, due to the changing physical environment and drastically transforming socio-cultural scenarios, all these wild species would simply disappear. Every species of wild mango, mentioned in this article, is considered as a food for the wildlife. In addition, the locals also appreciate the taste and colour of these fruits and consume them. The unripe fruits of these little-known species are also sold to the pickle industry generating income during the fruiting season.

Therefore, urgent conservation initiatives are very much required to prevent the innumerable wild species of mango from going into oblivion.

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