

mango mania

So chance had it that my next assignment required me to take a sneak peek into mangoes, your surprise no greater than mine I assure you, and brood as I did for not being a foodie, no one seemed willing to change the topic for all my puppy glances were worth. Downright preposterous I felt, my 36kg self giving anything but hilarious insight into edibles. But there it appeared, a brilliant idea light bulb over my head, tingling sound and all. I am a Rajshahian, and offensive non-word I must admit, but I must have been born so for the sole purpose of making this article worth the read. Now then without further ado, let's get to exploiting my ancestry...

Since I'm already patting myself blue over my region of descent, that is exactly where I will begin being informative. Quality mangoes, I rightfully insist, are grown best in the northern parts of Bangladesh as well as in West Bengal. The main determinant for growing mangoes being alluvial soil, it is understandable why the fruit cannot be grown in the southern and eastern parts of the country where red soil is dominant. Rajshahi, or more precisely Chapainawabganj, is the centre stage for mango plantations where at least 50 different types of mangoes are grown. The involvement of Rajshahi's locals in the production of mangoes is such that for a minimum of 5 months a year, the lives of all people ranging from an average day labourer to the affluent estate owners are entirely centred around the business. Mangoes are the most important cash crops in the region and it is needless to mention how the income levels and livelihood of the general people are heavily dependant on the fruit.

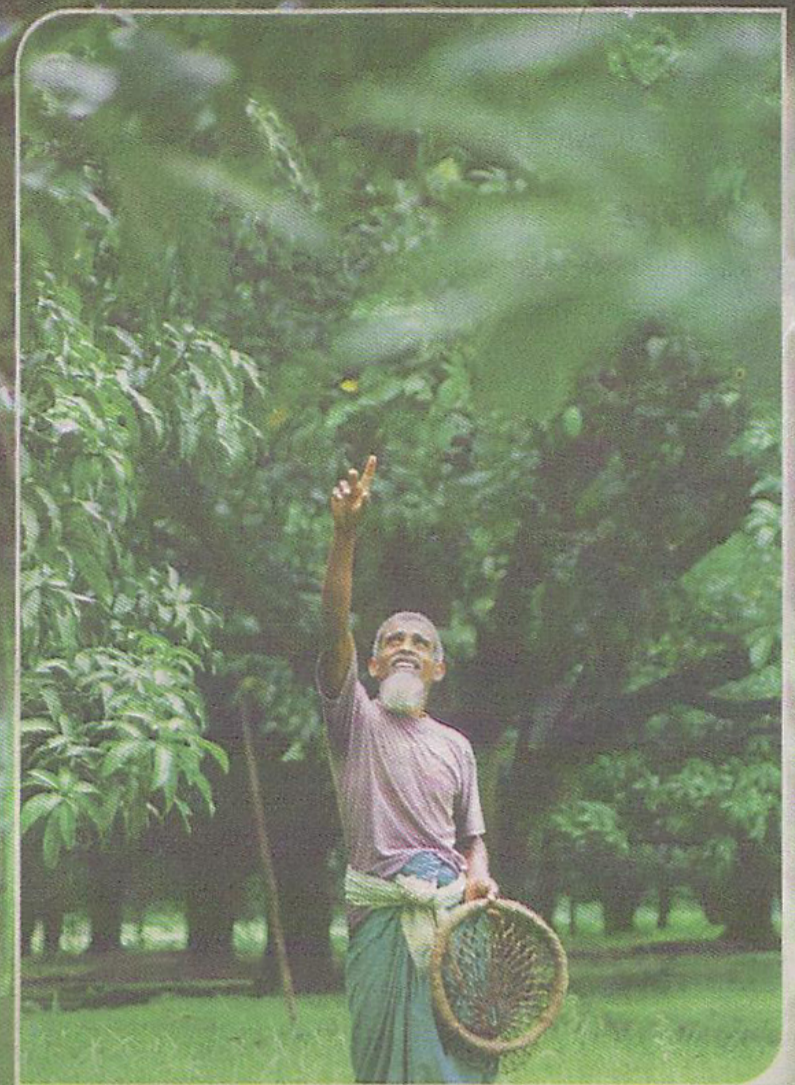
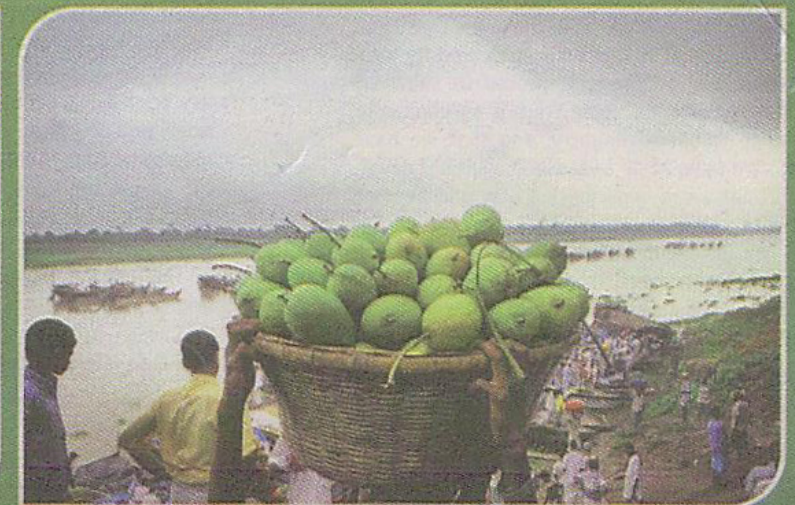
There are two main methods of growing mango trees namely grafting, where the trees are tied together for support or directly from the seed. Grafted saplings yield a more superior quality of fruit and are hence the best preferred option. Interesting to note however is the fact that most estate owners hold what is locally referred to as nilaam for their orchards whereby entire estates are leased out to middlemen for a period of 2-4 years. Under these terms, the middlemen become the owners of the actual fruits but possession of the trees is left unconditionally with the owners of the orchards. The middlemen are held fully responsible for maintaining the estates, ploughing the fields, applying insecticide and selling the fruit to different retailers. The fruits are plucked depending on maturity and a small portion of mangoes, known as khash aam, are left for the consumption of the owners. Fruits are borne by mango trees only after planting and the life span of each tree is approximately 100 years.

Although many more varieties are grown, the most popular types of mangoes in Bangladesh are fazlee, khirshahi, gopalbhog, langra and heemshagor. Current price levels are around Tk1000 per maan (40kgs) in Rajshahi but this figure is doubled when the fruits are traded in any other towns and cities.

Having delivered all the bookish knowledge I could muster, the most important aspect is yet to be considered. We move on to the reason for which all this time and trouble is taken and of course find ourselves drowned in the pleasures of eating the oh so heavenly fruit. Mangoes when they come, are nothing less than a festival in themselves. Featuring in every market, stored in every pantry (and unfortunately under my bed) and literally defining the word dessert for a couple of months, green and orange are definitely the hottest colours of the season. How one has it is an entire Lifestyle issue altogether but for the sake of our taste buds a few must be mentioned nonetheless. Be it the traditional aam-dudh, pickles or what is more fondly known as achar, my personal favourite of mango juice or merely having the fruit in its raw unprocessed form, it is a rage on more senses than one. We have little alternative but to succumb to its temptations and I choose to let loose and allow 'them' to consume me entirely (Yes! that is a more fitting statement than vice-versa).

I could ramble on considering the time and first-hand source of information available to me but word constraints and more importantly readers' patience limits oblige me to draw a conclusion. In a closing thought, I feel that whether you are food, or should I say fruit enthusiasts or not, surrender yourselves to the mango fever that has gripped the city for there are very few things our nation can indeed be proud of them, and this amazingly is one of them.

By Subhi Shama Reehu



Fruits of labour

SUMMER makes you think of ripeness and succulence. And if you are thinking of anything other than mangoes then you need a cold shower! Long past summer vacations spent at an uncle's village home were full of mango related memories. Sultry, hot weather under the shade of a big mango tree hoping for rain filled our hearts with excitement. It didn't matter whether the fruits were sweet or sour- the spectral shades of yellow and green filled the skies because all anyone could think of were the mangoes. Hanging temptingly from the boughs, the fruits seemed to beckon like the forbidden offerings of utopia.

Yes, it does bring back sweet memories just to think of them.

These mango trees were quite literally the treasure trove of a kingdom. A watchful eye preferably attached to a watchman's face had to be appointed to make sure no one came by to steal the precious gems. Those who have fruit laden trees in the city today have to resort to far greater security measures. You can see trees completely wrapped in nets to prevent anything from falling into the wrong mouths!

While our national fruit may be the jackfruit it is still the mango that captures our fancy in the heat. Even the unripe fruits can be made into lip smacking concoctions of pickles while the ripe ones can be ripped and ravaged right off the tree. It also makes a great gift. Newly weds send loaded baskets to impress the in-laws no matter how much they dislike each other. Even in politics, heads of states send basket loads to other political dignitaries. And they hate each other too most of the time!

Mangoes originated in the Asian subcontinent. The Mughal emperor Akbar was such a huge connoisseur that he had an extensive garden with one lakh mango trees. His successors continued this love affair with this delicious fruit and as a result mangoes became sought after throughout the food loving world. In our country the best mangoes come from Rajshahi, Chapainawabganj and Kushtia. This also happens to be a Mughal legacy that was continued by the British rulers. There were about 250-300 varieties of mangoes but the locals

always refer to them as 'chosha' or 'guti' mangoes. The markets sell varieties such as maaldohi, fazli, lengra, surma, mohon bhog, gopal bhog, brindhaboni, doodh kolom etc. Among these the fazli and lengra themselves are available in different variations.

This happens to be one of the best times to go to the mango producing places. In the markets too you will find rows and rows of stands on all sides filled with mangoes. People stop by in trucks, vans and even private vehicles to carry away baskets that have as much as 40 kilograms of the fruit. In fact, the baskets that these are stored in are quite an attraction themselves. Beautifully made out of bamboo, these require the employment of a troupe of men and women to be carried to and fro. They are available in different sizes with capacities of 10, 20 and 40 kilograms.

There are also different package tour programmes available that will take you to locations where mangoes are cheap and plentiful. Notably Parjatan And Bengal Tours Limited offer these services. It's a treat for those who love to travel and dine.

The mango is a much favoured local treat. Unfortunately its availability is at times erratic. One year there may be a bumper output while the next is followed by a meagre production that pushes up the price beyond the reach of the common people. Then there are the imports that come with wallet deflating prices. Add to that the immoral ripening techniques of some people who use harmful chemicals. A rosy glow is produced on the mango that can remove the rosy glow from your cheeks.

Despite all this, summer is incomplete without the image of a little kid sucking on a delicious mango seed letting the juice roll right down to his elbows. After all, that is the classic Bengali way to devour such a treat.

By Sultana Yasmin
Translated by Ehsanur Raza Ronny
Photo: Munem Wasif