



Star **LIFE** Style

Mangoes might feel like just another fruit, but to the people of Rajshahi and its environs, they are a way of life. It is no wonder that the love for mango permeates Bengali culture, as witnessed by literature that is replete with references to magnificent mango trees and the sweet, cool and deep shade under the bountiful boughs, enticing the weary travellers to stop a while. For people like me, enjoying the fruits of nature are an act of devotion.

# Where THE MANGOES thrive

Imagine if you will, a huge expanse of neatly spaced tall and regal trees as far as the eye can see, each different in its shape but also similar, covered in dense foliage, unbent under the scorching sun of Bangladeshi tropical summers—each tree with a distinct personality. Miles and miles of these trees picturesquely line both sides of the highway from Rajshahi to Chapai Nawabganj, and also the banks of every little pond and lake, bricked lane, narrow kutcha pathways, and the courtyard of small and large homesteads. Mango trees of all sizes are truly ubiquitous in the region's scenery.

Mango orchards begin harvesting mid-May, but the story begins much earlier. During winters, the Rajshahi and Rangpur regions are plunged into much harsher colds than the rest of the plains down south. The temperature affects the mango trees, and the orchards feel bereft, somewhat dry, the ground not as vibrantly brown or wet, the trees not as verdant, as if morose at the absence of the blazing sun. But as winter colds wane, the trees begin to come alive, and sprout blossoms. The farmers in the gardens then



tend to their trees with utmost care, nurturing every bloom for a fruitful harvest, all through spring.

As Boishakh arrives, so do the deadly nor'westers, and in some regions including the midwest, come tornadoes. These strong storm winds shake a lot of the blooms and baby mangoes off of the mango trees' branches. As summer reaches its peak, the mangoes, absorbing all the heat and humidity, start to come into their own, varied in shapes and size, growing big and juicy, ripening into a plethora of colours. Although the mango orchards are spaced out and look very systematically planted, not all trees in an orchard are always of the same variety. The locals, farmers, and of course the orchard owners know each tree and its fruit for their particular qualities. Some of these are branded stars. Like those bearing the best quality of Khirsapat or Lengra, but there are also 'guthi' mango trees in the hundreds. The difference feels a bit classist, for a guthi is borne of a tree that grew out of a mango seed, while the ones borne by trees that were grown from grafts of other mature trees get to carry the brand name, the



latter thus being more valuable. But there is truth to the variation in the quality of the fruits, so perhaps the trees don't mind.

Where everywhere else in the tropical Bangladesh, especially in the mid and north-west feels humid, stuffy and suffocatingly hot in the months of May through August, in a mango orchard, the abundance of the trees, with cool shade under their wide canopies, and sweet and rich aroma wafting through, it is pleasant as can be. Low-hanging fruit is not a colloquialism here, as ripe mangoes hang within the reach of a child's hand, the tree branches heavy with a bountiful produce, just soaking in the dazzling sun. Sometimes, the heavy boughs have to be propped up with the help of bamboos, to keep them from breaking or collapsing from the weight of the fruit.

The mid and north-west are not known for the frequency of rivers, but you will come across ponds and dighis every now and then. But none of these are inside the orchards... but there are wells, and in modern times, deep tube wells. Anybody who has enjoyed the childhood joy of hanging on to the handle of a tube well and see the water flow, will forever remember the delight. The tube wells sat in the middle of the orchards, nestled between gigantic trees with dense leaf cover and thus, the cool shade underneath, are a sure-fire way of reliving that joy. After indulging oneself in the deliciousness of the ripe mangoes, a long draft of the cold water from depths of subterranean aquifers, fresh and earthy, is just the right thing to cut down the heat. A perfect pairing of mother earth's simple yet timeless bounties. Those less scrupulous about public appearances are advised to douse themselves with the water too, it feels heavenly, believe you me.

To eat a perfectly ripe orange mango fresh off the tree, juice running down your hands, the environment wholly imbued with the sweet mango fragrance should be a bucket list experience for any mango devotee.

By Sania Aiman back from Chapai Nawabganj  
Photo: Sazzad Ibne Sayed back from Chapai Nawabganj

