

JACKFRUIT

Bangladesh's Forgotten Superfruit

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Every summer in Bangladesh, thousands of tonnes of ripe jackfruit rot under trees—unpicked, unsold, and ultimately discarded. Despite being our national fruit and a recognised superfood, jackfruit remains a vastly underutilised resource in our food system. This is not just food waste; it is a lost opportunity for nutrition, enterprise, and national pride.

Jackfruit lives up to its "superfruit" label with remarkable nutritional credentials: rich in fibre, vitamin C, potassium, and antioxidants. Green jackfruit is now used globally as a plant-based meat substitute, while the ripe fruit is a sweet, energising treat. In many Bangladeshi homes, particularly in rural areas, jackfruit buds are mashed or mixed with salt and chilli powder to create a simple yet flavourful snack—one that evokes nostalgia and childhood memories for many. Every part of the fruit is usable—seeds can be milled into flour, the rinds used as livestock feed, and the fibrous pulp processed into natural sugar. Even jackfruit leaves are sometimes used for packaging or decorative food presentation.

Yet in Bangladesh, nearly 45 per cent of our jackfruit harvest—about 500,000 tonnes—goes to waste annually due to poor storage and processing infrastructure, according to a 2023 report. This is a staggering figure in a country facing rising food insecurity and economic stress.

Why aren't we seeing the value? Part of the problem stems from a deeply ingrained mindset. Many Bangladeshis instinctively regard foreign products as superior, while undervaluing what is grown at home. This attitude—shaped by our colonial legacy and reinforced by the forces of globalisation—has gradually shifted food preferences away from traditional produce like jackfruit.

Scholars note that formerly colonised societies often internalise a sense of inferiority towards their own traditions and resources. In Bangladesh, this is clearly reflected in our treatment of food heritage: fruits such as apples or grapes are celebrated as symbols of aspiration, while jackfruit is too often dismissed as outdated, messy, or inconvenient.

Urbanisation has only deepened this disconnect. For many younger Bangladeshis, jackfruit is messy, difficult to eat, or simply outdated. They often gravitate towards packaged imports—perceived as more modern—despite their lower nutritional value. This perception gap has created a market disconnect that disadvantages rural farmers and domestic producers.

From neglect to innovation

Jackfruit's versatility makes it a prime candidate for food innovation. Young jackfruit can be canned, vacuum sealed, or frozen for global export as a plant-based



meat substitute or vegetable ingredient. Seeds can be roasted into snacks or ground into gluten-free flour for baking. The ripe pulp can be turned into spreads, dehydrated into chewy fruit strips or crunchy fruit chips. Moreover, the fibrous parts of the fruit that are typically discarded can be used to extract natural fruit sugar, which can serve as an industrial input in confectionery or beverage production. Even small-scale food processors can experiment with products—such as jackfruit pulp fruit leather, dehydrated chips, jackfruit-flavoured ice cream, or spiced seed snacks—that align more closely with local taste and culinary traditions.

In rural Bangladesh, jackfruit trees are plentiful but often overlooked for anything beyond personal consumption.

Unlocking commercial value requires investment—not just in trees, but in the ecosystem around them.

To achieve this, we must support the micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) working in food processing. Policy support and investment are crucial. Farmers and small processors need training in post-harvest handling, access to modern drying and storage technologies, and tax incentives to innovate.

Countries such as Thailand offer valuable lessons. Its One Tambon One Product (OTOP) programme supports local entrepreneurs in rural areas, helping transform fruits like durian, mangosteen, and jackfruit into international exports. In 2022, Thailand's fruit exports reached USD 5.88 billion, with processed jackfruit gaining a growing share.

Malaysia has tapped into the Chinese market with premium durian and jackfruit exports, creating distinct branding for local varieties. Vietnam, meanwhile, has heavily invested in fresh jackfruit exports—becoming one of the top suppliers to East Asian markets.

All three nations provide models of how coordinated marketing, rural entrepreneurship, and infrastructure investment can elevate a humble fruit into a high-value product.

We can do the same

Bangladesh does not lack potential. What we lack is a clear strategy to elevate jackfruit from a seasonal delicacy to a year-round economic asset.

The government can lead the way by:

- Providing training on post-harvest storage and processing, especially in district-level towns and rural areas.

- Subsidising rural infrastructure such



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BEYOND THE SNAKE CHARMS

The changing lives of the Bedes



Oval-shaped makeshift tents of the Bede community.

PHOTO: PHILIP GAIN

Qurbani Eid holds special significance for Bedes. The festival's importance stems from their self-identification as Muslims, although anthropological research reveals that their beliefs and practices are far from exclusively Islamic.

In conversation with Ranjana Biswas, author and researcher on the Bede community, about their history, struggles, and present realities.

The Daily Star (TDS): What do historical and literary sources reveal about the true origins of the Bede community?

Ranjana Biswas (RB): Researchers examining the Bedes' anthropological identity have often relied on colonial-era sources, particularly British accounts, which have fostered a misleading narrative. These records claim the Bedes arrived in Bengal in 1632 CE with Ballal Raj, allegedly from Burma, and misidentify his accompanying Magh soldiers as Bedes. Other accounts even suggest Arabian origins.

However, early religious and literary sources tell a different story. The *Brihat Dharma Purana* refers to the Bedes as *bish bauddho*, while the *Champaya Jataka* describes them as snake charmers extracting venom—an image later adopted in literature and film. This points to the Bedes being indigenous to Bengal, with traditions at

least a thousand years old.

TDS: What defines the Bede community's identity and traditions?

RB: The Bedes are divided into several subgroups, yet no official census has ever been conducted. The Institute of Mother Language recognises their language, Thar, which had around 40,000 speakers according to the 1991 census. While some community associations claim the population could be as high as 1.5 million, the actual figure is unlikely to exceed 400,000.

The Bede population is more concentrated in certain districts, with Savar being a notable example. Once the only place in Bangladesh to host a regular snake market, Savar has four villages with a high concentration of Bedes, making the community highly visible there. However, this market came to an end after the Wildlife

Management and Nature Conservation Division introduced new laws in 2012 banning the public sale of snakes. I personally witnessed the market operating from around 1997–98 until its closure in 2012. Beyond Savar, large Bede communities are also found in Lauhajang, Sunamganj, Natore, and the Agunmukha-Barishal region—areas where the Bedes remain most prominent in Bangladesh.

Historically nature worshippers, the Bedes began absorbing Islamic influences during the Mughal era, but their faith remains fundamentally syncretic. They continue to worship deities such as Manasa, Kali, and Jatadhari Shiva—rituals closely linked to their professional practices and cultural traditions.

Qurbani Eid holds special significance for Bedes. Unlike Eid-ul-Fitr, it is the occasion when Bedes from across

Bangladesh gather in designated locations, such as Savar. The festival's importance stems from their self-identification as Muslims, although anthropological research reveals that their beliefs and practices are far from exclusively Islamic.

TDS: How would you describe the current state of the Bede community? Are they experiencing major changes?

RB: The Bede community has undergone notable occupational shifts. Once defined by specific traditional professions, many have now taken up work similar to that of mainstream Bengalis.

For instance, many of the vendors selling bangles or earrings near Dhaka University are actually Bedes, particularly from the Sandar subgroup, which is primarily engaged in trade. Traditionally, the community's professional identity has been divided into three major groups: Mal Manta, Sandar Manta, and Bandure Manta, each with further subgroups. Among the Mal Manta are the Sapure (snake charmers), whose work involves catching snakes, extracting venom, and

performing snake shows. The Sandar group trades in bangles, toys, artificial jewellery, locks, and keys, while some also deal in ashes for gold shops.

The Mal Manta also specialise in preparing herbal medicines for ailments such as toothaches or dental worms, practising cupping therapy (singal), and performing "komorer bish chhara" (removing waist poison).

A small, more orthodox group within the community still lives on boats and continues ancestral professions, preserving their traditional lifestyle. Most others, however, have moved into new livelihoods. For example, Taiyab Ali Manta runs a tea stall in Savar, while his wife, Turuturi Begum, occasionally continues their traditional practice of kawala—travelling to villages to sell charms and herbal remedies. Their son has taken a completely different route, working as a tour guide for foreigners, earning enough to buy land and settle permanently.

TDS: What challenges do the Bede face in education and accessing government support?

RB: The Bede community remains far behind in education, with only a small number attending formal schools. As a nomadic, marginalised group historically excluded from institutions, access to education was nearly impossible for generations. Even today, while some settled families send their children to school, social stigma persists—many are still treated as "untouchable," leading to frequent dropouts and very few completing exams or progressing in their studies.

During the previous government's tenure, a special project was launched for the Harijon and Bede communities, providing housing on land across the Bongshi River and offering training to revive traditional crafts. However, the lack of voter ID cards—a requirement for any government assistance—proved a major barrier. Settled families were generally able to obtain them, but nomadic groups struggled.

The interview was taken by Priyam Paul.



Ranjana Biswas

