Appe Mango: Pickling the Cultural and Biological Diversity of Uttara Kannada district in the Western Ghats

Uttara Kannada, one of the forest-rich districts of Karantaka, is well known for its biological diversity, rich cultural heritage and a high level of awareness among people on issues related to conservation. What makes the people of Uttara Kannada tick for the conservation of biodiversity? How do they relate themselves with the nature? Is there any icon depicting the bond of people with the rich biological diversity of the district? The story, Appe Mango, answers all of these questions in one shot.

Appe midi, as it is known in Kannada, literally means the raw, unripened mango. It is a special type of pickling mango that is collected extensively from the wild, processed as a pickle, used as a commodity of commerce and relished in every meal by every citizen in Uttara Kannada on every single day. No meal is complete without the extraordinary aroma of the appe mango pickle in this part of the country. Because of this attachment, people have developed a special mental faculty to recognise, typify, cultivate and conserve dozens of varieties of appe mango in the district. These varieties are recognised by their aroma and taste in addition to their colour, shape, size, pulp content, shelf life, consistency and season of harvest. One can obtain an appe with an array of aromas ranging from that of Jeera (Cumin seeds) to that of camphor. As a matter of fact, the aroma of many of the varieties cannot be described verbally. It can only be relished with a wholesome meal.

Ananthabhotta’s appe is perhaps the oldest variety of appe mango identified and popularised a century ago in this district. The history dates back to the early 1900s, when a cultivator from Balur village by the name Anantha Bhat on the banks of Aghanashini river, identified and popularised a variety which became very famous quickly. It is named after him as he died while collecting scions of this material. Even today it is one of the leading varieties, much sought after by the farmers and the pickling industry. Unfortunately this clone does not flower in many locations, making it difficult to popularise. Other varieties include Malanji appe, Haladota appe, and Karpura appe. A range of culinary dishes are prepared and relished every summer with appe midi.

Pickling mango species are highly restricted to river banks and other swampy areas. It has evolved as a specialist to these unique habitats. It requires very high soil moisture conditions for its flowering and fruit set.

Commercially, the pickling mango is also an important Non-Timber Forest Product (NTFP). It is estimated that a mature Appe Mango tree on a river bank can yield 5,000 to 10,000 fruits which can potentially fetch up to Rupees 20,000 ($435) every year for a local collector. Hence this resource also relates to the livelihood of the local people. Unfortunately, there are no strict guidelines for the collection and marketing of this important NTFP. The confusion basically arises due to the fact that products arising from fruits that are harvested from forest lands and private lands can not be distinguished while marketing. Further, because of the high stake, pickling industries encourage large scale collection of the fruits. Consequently, indiscriminate and unscientific harvesting have set in, leading to depletion of the populations.

Fortunately, there is a great enthusiasm amongst the people to conserve, grow and...
There is an urgent need to scientifically characterise these varieties adopting modern molecular techniques, to standardise methods to get yearly and good blooming for developing sustainable harvesting techniques. A strict imposition of these rules is a must.

(Contents contributed by Dr R Vasudeva and Dr Bhuwon Sthapit)