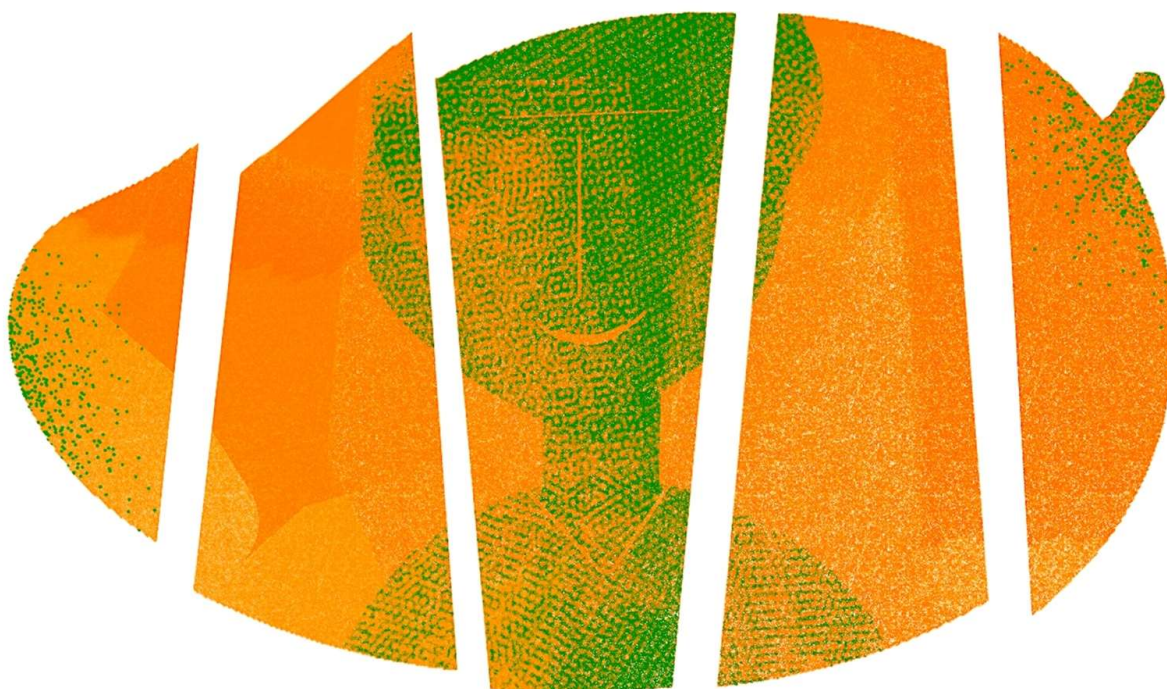


In this season of political heat, finding comfort in the many republics of the mango

I believe that Alphonso is the most overrated and overpriced mango, that UP-Bihar mangoes are unmatched, that Dashehri is great but predictable, that Langda is superior and that no mango comes anywhere close to Chausa

Yogendra Yadav



The part of Haryana where I was born and the corner of Rajasthan where I grew up produce no mango of any note. I like to picture myself, therefore, as a neutral umpire in the debates on best mangoes.

(Illustration: C R Sasikumar)

Why did the merciful God create the merciless Indian summer? This theological riddle has only one answer that I know: Mango. God rained heat so that mangoes could get sweeter and juicier. They could also be the answer to the current political dilemma. What to do in the face of the political heatwave that is sweeping across the country, from the Bay of Bengal to the Arabian sea? Have mangoes, of course. And read about mangoes, if you can.

And so I did this weekend, devouring a delicate selection of garden mangoes gifted by my friend Faheem Khan while reading *Mangifera Indica: A Biography of the Mango*, a magnificent book written by another friend, Sopan Joshi. Mango, he insists, “is to Indians what the weather is to the English. The more we talk

about it, the more it becomes our mirror. When people talk about the mango, they end up revealing something about themselves. Our mangoes define us.”

So let me put my prejudices on the dining table. The part of Haryana where I was born and the corner of Rajasthan where I grew up produce no mango of any note. I like to picture myself, therefore, as a neutral umpire in the debates on best mangoes. In my considered judgement, Alphonso is the most overrated and overpriced mango. Accordingly, I have been the life president of the All India Anti Alfonso Association of India, waiting for its second member. To me, Safaida was created to cater to mango-shake corners. Dashehri is like Lata Mangeshkar, great but predictable. Langda is a notch above and a little naughty, just like Geeta Dutt. And no mango comes anywhere close to the divine Chausa. No simile needed.

As I savoured my gift this weekend, I began a rethink. I wondered why I had never tasted Gulab Jamun before. No, I am not shifting this conversation to a halwai shop. I am staying with mangoes, the centre of my universe for three months every year, between May 18 and August 15. In case you are curious about the precise dates, it has to do with an enforced mango fast due to something called gestational diabetes when we were expecting our first baby. As it invariably does, the fast ended with a feast, a mango binge. As it sometimes does, that event turned into an annual ritual.

Let me come back to Gulab Jamun, the mango I discovered this weekend. This little green mango, which may pass off for a younger Langda, has a texture and flavour that surpasses its elder brother. You don’t use a knife on it. You just peel it off and sink your teeth in, just as Baburnama recommended five centuries ago. It is grown close to Delhi, in and around Shahjahanpur (not its namesake district but the cluster of 16 villages near Meerut settled by Mughal emperor Shah Jahan’s trusted aide), yet it has not made it to the Delhi mango market. Faheem tells me growers keep it for family consumption. Rataul is another fabulous variety, again from a village close to Delhi. But its famed fragrance is yet to find space on the rehris across the NCT. Ask any friend from Bihar, or any other mango-growing state for that matter, and you hear stories of that fantastic Biju mango they had as a child, something they don’t find any more.

Here is a story from my family. My mother spent her childhood in Allahabad, with and among mangoes. When she visited the place after her marriage, she and my father were served cut mangoes on a plate. My mother was both amused and perplexed. She did not know how to eat these. This captures how much has changed in our relationship with mangoes and with ourselves. The story of mango is the story of the triumph of table mangoes over sucking mangoes; of long shelf lives over short ones; of looks over taste; of traders over growers. It is a story of how modern markets transform both the product and its consumers.

Joshi’s deeply researched and beautifully crafted book weaves together such stories from all over the country — “a few slices from the lives of people who grow, sell, and eat mangoes” as he puts it. The author travels all over the country — not just to Lucknow, Banaras and the Konkan — to taste mangoes and sample the mango culture of all regions. You travel with him and taste not just the mangoes but experience the place itself.

Not all his journeys are fruitful. To my disappointment, the origins of my favourite Chausa remain unclear. But each journey yields a great story. The stories take him to history, ancient and modern. You discover why Gandhi called mango a “cursed fruit” and how Jawaharlal Nehru’s gift of a case of mangoes to the imprisoned Rammanohar Lohia got him into a spat with Sardar Patel. It takes Joshi to the labs and biographies of modern scientists in the fields of geology, genetics, ecology and agriculture. He uncovers the economics of mangoes by meeting retailers, middlemen, and exporters. That is how you understand

why, despite producing half the global output and surpassing everyone else in quality, Indian mangoes do poorly in the international market.

Above all, this book, with its inviting description of mangoes from all parts of the country, was the perfect antidote for bigoted mango nationalists like myself. A sobering and soothing read in this summer of bigotry and thuggery.

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