

NATIVE FRUIT TREES OF LIFE

Mrs Rajeshwari and Mr Parameshwar are a farming couple living in the village of Gonsar, located in the midst of lush evergreen forests, in the central Western Ghats of South India. Since the whole region is forested, local people are very much dependent on its forest resources, especially trees, and have been domesticating these in their farms, orchards and on other land types.

For the last fifty years, Mr Parameshwar and Ms Rajeshwari have been among the households involved in the domestication and conservation of many native fruit tree species and varieties. Some of these species are valued for making traditional recipes or for medicinal purposes, whereas others provide products for sale.



Mr Parameshwar in his mango orchard



Mr Rajeshwari about to process her mango



Garcinia gummigutta



Garcinia indica



Mangifera indica

Mr Parameshwar and Ms Rajeshwari stand out, however, for having domesticated more than one hundred species of native forest trees in their orchards and farms, including four species of *Garcinia* and at least 55 varieties of mango (*Mangifera indica*), ten of which are locally important and threatened varieties.

They manage over one thousand trees, among which there are 200 kokum trees (*Garcinia indica*), 30 uppage trees (*Garcinia gummigutta*), more than 500 jack fruit trees (*Artocarpus heterophyllus*) and 600 mango trees.

Identifying elite varieties of native fruit tree species in the wild and in their orchards, conserving them through grafting and other techniques in nurseries, sharing or exchanging these plant materials with fellow farmers—providing scions and grafting them free of charge—are all regular activities for these custodian farmers. Women's and men's roles in this process are well defined and complementary.

Women's and men's roles and skills in fruit tree domestication and conservation are complementary

Rajeshwari states that, "Men assist us in collecting the fruits [in orchards or in the wild] at the stage of mature or immature fruiting. However, processing, preserving, making of the recipes, serving them to the family and relatives, friends or even during special occasions is done entirely by myself and other female members of our family".

"We (women) do not have much role to play in raising the plants, purchasing mango plants or cultivating them. What we do is assist men in watering, sometimes weeding, and driving away the monkeys that come to eat the mango fruits when men are engaged in other agriculture activities in different locations. We do not help other farmers graft special varieties of mango; however we do exchange the fruits with other women from neighbouring households in the village."



Preparing Garcia indica fruit for sun drying

Gender-responsive research undertaken in Gonsar and surrounding villages has brought to light the gender-specific knowledge, skills, management and conservation practices related to native fruit trees.

Women's specialized knowledge of these species for domestic use and home gardening, as illustrated above, as well as men's knowledge of native fruit tree silviculture came to the fore in gender and age-segregated focus groups.



Older men doing a resource mapping exercise



Young women doing a matrix ranking exercise

Using a combination of participatory methods that promote collective learning, such as resource mapping, activity calendars and four cell analysis, women and men shared their knowledge about the current status of various native fruit trees, many of which are threatened species and varieties, and all of which need to be managed sustainably in the forest and on cultivated lands.

Conservation efforts must build upon these rich gendered knowledge repertoires and experiences.

The research demonstrates that traditional gendered knowledge of these species plays a crucial role in the conservation of the 25 native fruit tree species and of the numerous varieties of wild mango present in the study area. Hence, efforts to conserve these species must build upon these rich and diversified sets of knowledge and experiences.

Value addition and marketing of some of these species, based on women's traditional fruit processing knowledge, are now being supported to provide livelihood benefits and additional incentives for conservation.

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