

THREAT OF THE FAKE ALPHONSO

Imposters are sullying the fair name and reputation of the famed Alphonso mango grown in the Konkan, forcing its cultivators to stamp their product with a unique encrypted identity

By DHAVAL S. KULKARNI

IF

the mango is the king of fruits, then the Alphonso has to be the king among kings. This mango variety, which is said to have derived its name from the Portuguese general Afonso de Albuquerque, was grafted by Jesuit missionaries in the 16th century, travelled across the Konkan, and came to be called the 'Aphoos' in Goa and the 'Hapus' in Maharashtra.

That royal status now seems to be coming under threat from a posse of pretenders who are staking a claim to the crown that rightfully belongs to the variety grown on Maharashtra's Konkan coastline. As the running joke goes, the quantity of Alphonso sold in the market today is several times higher than what is grown on Maharashtra's Konkan coastline.

You may not fool the true connoisseur perhaps, who knows

his Alphonso by its thin skin, distinctive aroma, and thick, fibreless pulp. But not the aam mango-lover, who may not be able to tell a Hapus from the Alphonso wannabes from other states—Valsad in Gujarat, Dharwad in Karnataka, or even Malawi in Africa—and pay a greater price for a lesser mango.

Pramod Mankoji Valanj, a 60-year-old retired state government employee, has 362 mango trees on his three-acre orchard in Wada in Devgad taluka of Sindhudurg district. Mangoes grown elsewhere but misbranded as the Devgad variety or cheaply-priced fruits mixed with the premium Alphonso are affecting their price and reputation, he says. Buyers would rather buy the Alphonso imposters for Rs 600-700 than pay Rs 1,200-2,000 for the original item. "I have to convince consumers that my mangoes are authentic or sell cheaper to stay in the market," says Valanj. Which is why the Alphonso cultivators of the Konkan are now resorting to technology—from tamper-proof stickers to QR codes—to save their illustrious produce from mangoes masquerading as Alphonso.

INSIDE ALPHONSO COUNTRY

In 2018, the Geographical Indication Registry bestowed GI status on the Alphonso. The move was significant, as Alphonso



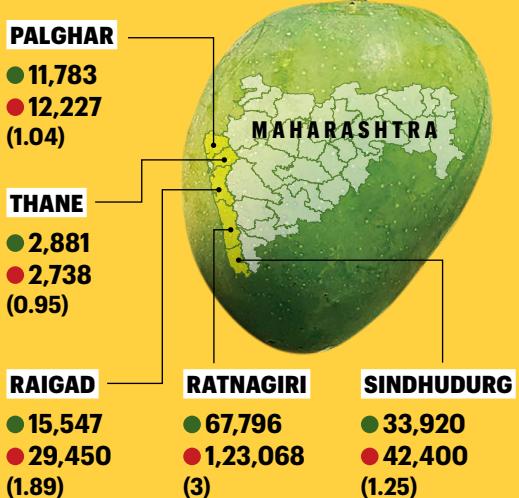
GOLDEN GOODNESS
Alphonso for sale at the Crawford Market in Mumbai

ANI



NO AAM MANGO

The five Maharashtra districts where the original Alphonso is cultivated



● Area in hectare ● Production in tonnes
Average production per hectare in tonnes in ()

cultivation and tourism are what transformed Konkan's money-order economy, where the men worked in blue-collar jobs in and around Mumbai and sent money home. Alphonso is estimated to be grown on 1.26 lakh hectares in five districts of Maharashtra—Sindhudurg, Ratnagiri, Raigad, Thane and Palghar. Of this, 14,920 ha. is in Devgad, producing around 50,000 tonnes of Alphonso every year. The harvesting takes place in three stages—February-end to mid-March, mid-March to mid-April and mid-April to May.

The Devgad cultivators are now clamouring for a separate GI registry. Says Ajit Gogate, former MLA and chairman of the Devgad Taluka Amba Utpadak Sahakari Sanstha Maryadit, "For years, mangoes from other parts have been sold as Devgad mangoes, but our mangoes have a distinct quality and taste." The hallmark Alphonso taste is a product of its geography, says journalist Sopan Joshi in his book *Mangifera Indica*, derived from the Konkan's rich iron-laden laterite soil.

Counterfeit Hapus are affecting the Devgad mango brand, says Omkar Sapre, board member and advisor to the Devgad mango growers association, and cultivators are suffering. "The younger generation is forced to migrate elsewhere and some local men are unable to get brides," he claims. The Devgad Taluka

A POTTED HISTORY

- The Alphonso is said to have got its name from the Portuguese general Afonso de Albuquerque. Grafted by Jesuit missionaries in the 16th century, it soon travelled across the Konkan
- This mango variety has a thin skin, distinctive aroma, a small nose, and thick, fibreless pulp. Its unique taste comes from the area's mineral-rich red laterite soil
- Besides the Alphonso, 14 other varieties have been given the GI tag—Marathwada Kesar (Maharashtra), Mankurad (Goa), Banaganapalle (Telangana and Andhra Pradesh), Malda Laxman Bhog, Khirsapati and Fazli (West Bengal), Kuttiattoor (Kerala), Gir Kesar (Gujarat), Rewa Sunderja (MP), Kari Ishad and Appemidi (Karnataka), Banaras Langda, Rataul and Malihabadi Dussehri (UP)



Amba Utpadak Sahakari Sanstha Maryadit, along with the Director of Research, Balasaheb Sawant Konkan Krishi Vidyapeeth, Konkan Hapus Amba Utpadak Ani Utpadak Vikrete Sahakari Sanstha and Kelshi Parisar Amba Utpadak Sahakari Sangha Maryadit, was given registered proprietor status by the GI registry.

THE DEVGAD MANOEUVRE

Faced with these challenges, Devgad cultivators have now taken some action. Starting this season, Devgad mangoes will come with a unique tamper-proof sticker with an embedded code. Using a dedicated WhatsApp number, customers will be able to verify if the mango is from Devgad, its cultivator, and the location of the mango orchard. The use of these stickers, says Gogate, will help consumers get authentic fruit, and ensure that orchard owners in Devgad get a good price. In the first year, the sanstha plans to cover 10 million mangoes meant for sale. Gradually, it wants to scale it up. Gogate says they were calling on mango farmers to register themselves with the sanstha for the stickers. So far, around 750 of the 5,000 Alphonso cultivators in Devgad have come on board.

Prashant Yadav, managing director of Sun Solutions, which developed the sticker, says the data in it is not only encrypted but also easy to read. Buyers have to tear off the sticker from the mango, which has nine open digits, and send a photograph to a dedicated WhatsApp number. They will then be prompted for the two hidden digits behind the sticker, after which they will be sent details about whether the product is genuine, the name of the farmer and the location of the orchard. These details will be seeded with the stickers in the database. Priced between Rs 1.5 and Rs 2, depending on the scale, these stickers will be single-use and pasted on each fruit. "We decided to paste single-use stickers based on patented technology on individual fruits instead of the box itself to prevent any tampering," explains Sapre.

Alphonso growers in other parts of the Konkan are also deliberating ways to protect the brand. "There is a genuine problem of adulteration when it comes to the Alphonso," says Dr Vivek Bhide, president, Konkan Hapus Amba Utpadak Ani Utpadak Vikrete Sahakari Sanstha, Ratnagiri. "The Alphonso has a certain value and charisma mangoes from other states

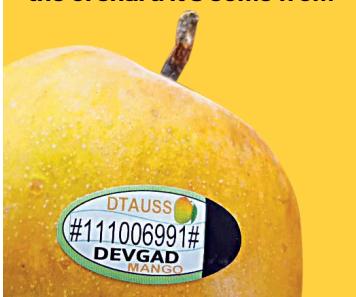
"For years, mangoes from other parts have been sold as Devgad mangoes, but our mangoes have a different quality and taste"

AJIT GOGATE

Chairman, Devgad Taluka Amba Utpadak Sahakari Sanstha Maryadit

ID PROOF

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- **Buyers have to tear off the sticker, take a picture of the nine open digits and send it to a dedicated WhatsApp number**
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- **They will then be told if the mango is genuine, the name of the cultivator and the orchard it's come from**



lack. This adulteration affects the brand value of the Konkan Alphonso and prevents farmers from getting a good price." Apart from mislabelling table fruits, he points out, less costly mangoes from other regions are also mixed with Alphonso pulp to make products that can be sold cheaper. This affects the mango pulp producers in the Konkan. Since last year, Bhide's society has urged farmers to use QR codes on fruits or boxes to enable consumers to identify the grower, location of the orchard and date of plucking. However, growers have been slow to adopt the technology due to the low turnaround time in harvesting and transporting the fruit to the markets.

IRON-CLAD IDENTITY

Alphonso cultivators are not too happy with the government either, blaming its laxity in implementing the GI regime for their current predicament. "The government has confined its role to issuing GI certification, doing little to enforce and implement the GI regime, promote GI products, upgrade them and crack down on violations," says Bhide. Mandar Desai of the Desai Bandhu Ambewale, Pune, thinks the same, and says enforcing the GI regime and checking and preventing violations and not promoting the use of stickers should be a priority. In fact, Desai, who is the fourth generation from his family in the business and has over 400 acres of mango plantations in Pavas in Ratnagiri, is against Devgad cultivators seeking a separate identity for their Alphonso, saying there is little difference in the mangoes grown in Devgad and Ratnagiri.

The overall sentiment in the community, however, is for enforcement of the GI norms. Doing so, says Mahesh M. Kulkarni, assistant professor in the department of horticulture at the College of Agriculture in Dr Balasaheb Sawant Konkan Krishi Vidyapeeth, Dapoli, Ratnagiri, would work in favour of the consumers. "It is necessary to make consumers aware. They pay for the taste (of Alphonso) and hence must get authentic products," he stresses. Advocate Ganesh Hingmire, founder and chairman of the Great Mission Group Society and an Intellectual Property (IP) enthusiast, says such initiatives will fulfil the purpose of getting GI tags by weeding out duplicate products, and serve the interests of both farmers and consumers. A win-win situation for all. ■