

Rooting for the Dashehari, the debonair king of fruits

UP village fights to preserve heritage mango trees and their prized produce

N SHIVA KUMAR
Seated in the soothing shade of a 200-year-old massive mango tree laden with fruit, 74-year-old Radham appears at peace with the world. The tranquillity is broken only by the tweeting of birds sheltered snugly in the green canopy. Despite the day's scorching 42 degrees Celsius, it is markedly cool under the spreading branches, with hundreds of Dashehari mangoes dangling from them. The variety is named after the village in which this grand old tree — considered the variety's mother tree in India — is located.

With a toothless grin, Radham fondly recalls the tree's looming presence from his childhood days. Dashehari village is in Kakori block of Mallahabad tehsil in Lucknow district.

"This sleepy village with just about 200 households and 3,000 denizens has more mango trees than humans. During the last

count, there were about 9,000 mango trees, some nearly 100 years old, but most above 60 years," says Shrayan Kumar, principal of the local school Saraswathi Bal Vidyalaya. He laments that government authorities have failed to accord due respect or protection to these heritage trees.

In 2000 the Uttar Pradesh government planned to create a 90-acre dump yard in Dashehari. This meant that daily nearly 300 trucks would speed into the village with the trash generated by Lucknow city, 28 km away. Worried and angered by the scale of environment degradation this would entail, the villagers protested vehemently through a series of demonstrations and the project was eventually shelved.

Mallahabad is reputed to have one of the largest mango orchards in all of north India. Among the many different varieties of mangoes grown here, the debonair



Luscious legacy Septuagenarian Radham stands guard at the mango-laden, two-century-old 'mother tree' in Dashehari village, near Lucknow. **N SHIVA KUMAR**

Dashehari is the most popular. In a nod to its uniqueness, in September 2009, the entire region was registered as "Mango Mallahabad Dashehari" by the Geographical Indication Registry of India.

The "mother tree" in Dashehari was estimated to be about 170 years old, according to a publica-

tion brought out by the Department of Horticulture in 1974, making its age around 200 now. The Central Institute of Subtropical Horticulture (CISH), near Lucknow, says the tree has consistently yielded 79-189 kilos of mangoes over the last few years.

This strikingly sturdy tree ap-

pears free of any age-related problems, thanks to the rich soil and nutrients drawn from the nearby Gomati river.

The nearly 35-ft tree has a canopy spread of 70 feet and a trunk circumference (at chest height) of about 10 feet. The 12 major scaffolding branches radiate parallel to the

ground and are free from stem borer or termite attacks.

"The mango tree, with its botanical name *Mangifera indica*, is indigenous to the Indian subcontinent. Indian markets are currently flooded with mangoes in a variety of splendid colours, flavours and shapes; the juicy fruit can even prevent sunstrokes in the hot Indian summer," says Shailendra Rajan, Director, Indian Council of Agricultural Research — CISH Kakori. The Dashehari is the most widely cultivated variety in north India, he says. Referring to the historical and cultural importance enjoyed by mangoes in the country, he points out that maharajas and nawabs once promoted the planting of the best varieties.

The Lakhi bagh (one lakh plants) planted by the Mughal emperor Akbar in Bihar is a well-known example of this.

Today, at ICAR, more than 750 varieties of mango have been conserved at its field gene bank. Under an exhaustive breeding programme underway for the last 38 years, about 6,000 varieties have



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been developed and they are constantly evaluated. Rajan says there are hundreds of mango trees in the country that are more than 100 years old.

Their heritage worth needs to be recognised much like any other antiques that command a high market value, he insists.

The writer is a photographer and wildlife enthusiast based in Noida.