

## The Portuguese and the Introduction of American Fruit Plants into India

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### Abstract

The European 'discovery' of America was followed by the dissemination of American food crops to different parts of the world. The Portuguese, being the earliest European nation to arrive in India, became the agents for introducing several American crops like maize, sweet potato and capsicums in the country. The Portuguese also introduced many 'New World' fruits like the pineapple, Papaya, Sapodilla, and the Guava which found acceptance and became part of Indian food culture. This paper looks at the introduction and cultivation of these fruit plants during the sixteenth and seventeenth century.

**Key words:** Portuguese, Pineapple, Papaya, Cashew nut, Sapodilla, Custard-apple.

Pineapple, a crop found in the Americas was brought by the Portuguese to India during the sixteenth century. The Dutch traveler Linschoeten, who was in India during the 1580s, provides a brief account of the introduction of pineapple in India. The Portuguese brought the fruit from Brazil to India. It was initially an expensive fruit but the rapid spread of pineapple cultivation in the country led to reduction in prizes.<sup>i</sup> Abul Fazl's *Ain-i-Akbari*, written in the 1590s, mentions the pineapple as one of the many 'sweet' fruits grown in India. Describing the fruit, Abul Fazl writes: Pineapples are also called *Kathal-i-Safari* or Jackfruit for travels because young plants, put into a vessel, may be taken on travels, and will yield fruits. In color and shape they resemble an oblong orange and in taste and smell, a mango. The plant is about a yard long, and its leaves have the shape of a hand. The edges of the leaves are like a saw. The fruit forms at the end of a stalk, and has a few leaves on its top. When the fruit is plucked, they cut out these leaves, separate them, and put singly into the ground: They are the seedlings. Each plant bears only once and one fruit only.<sup>ii</sup>

The distinctive shape and taste of the pineapple ensured that the fruit did not escape the attention of observers. In Edward Terry's opinion, the pineapple was the best fruit of India and its taste was 'a pleasing compound made of strawberries, closet wine, rose water and sugar, well tempered together.'<sup>iii</sup> Another observer described the fruit's taste as being 'between sugar and sour, but very pleasant, especially if peeld and put into sugar and water'.<sup>iv</sup> The Mughal Emperor Jahangir, well known for his fondness for Iranian and Central Asian fruits, described it as being of 'excessive fragrance and fine flavor.'<sup>v</sup>

The Pineapple was already being grown in some parts of Gujarat in the late sixteenth century<sup>vi</sup>. A seventeenth century traveler to Surat noted that the fruit was consumed by the Baniyas or traders of the port.<sup>vii</sup> By the end of the seventeenth century, pineapple cultivation had spread to other regions. Thousands of pineapples were grown in the Imperial orchard at Agra during the reign of Jahangir (1605-1627 A.D.).<sup>viii</sup> The Italian Careri noted pineapple cultivation in the Portuguese settlements of Daman and Salsette in the late seventeenth century. Careri also writes that the fruit was exported to Spain where it was 'highly valued.'<sup>ix</sup> Bernier and Thevenot, two French visitors to India observed pineapple cultivation in the province of Bengal. According to the former, the pine apple was also preserved.<sup>x</sup> The humid climate of Bengal suited the growth of the fruit, as the well-travelled Niccolo Mannucci observed.<sup>xi</sup>

Another fruit introduced in India was the Papaya. Linschoeten, who describes the fruit, wrote that the papaya came to India by way of Philippines and Malacca. It was initially highly regarded but it soon lost its novelty.<sup>xii</sup> Since Abul Fazl does not mention the fruit, it is certain that the papaya was not available in North India in the late sixteenth century. In 1623, the Italian traveler Pietro Della Valle came across the papaya in Portuguese Daman. He characterized it as being similar in taste and appearance to European melons but much sweeter.<sup>xiii</sup> Careri provides a description of the plant.

The Papayera is a plant that does not grow above twenty spans high, and the body of it is under a span diameter, but so soft that it is easily cut with a knife. The leaf is broad like that of a pompion. The Papayas it produces, hang like cluster of grapes about the top of the trunk, where they Ripen and grow bigger, one after the another. In the Portuguese dominions in India, they call these the Jesuit melons, because they taste like melons, and those Fathers like them so well, that they have them every day at dinner. They are shap'd like them the Berengena (a fruit well known in Spain but not in England) but twice or three times as big. As to Colour, they are Green or Yellow without, and Yellowish within, with little black Seeds or Stones in them, Like Elder Berries. This fruit grows all the year about.<sup>xiv</sup>

The cashew tree (*Anacardium Occidentale*) was also introduced by the Portuguese from Brazil to India. The earliest reference to its cultivation in India is from 1578 when a Portuguese traveler noticed it being grown in the gardens of Cochin.<sup>xv</sup> Linschoeten noted that the cashew nuts were eaten after roasting and were considered to have aphrodisiacal properties. Both the nut and the fruit were sometimes consumed with wine. Speaking of the distribution of the cashew tree, Linschoten recorded that it was found 'in great numbers all over India'.<sup>xvi</sup> Pietro Della Valle came across the

cashew in Daman.<sup>xvii</sup> In the 1660s, Thevenot noticed cashewnut cultivation between Surat and Aurangabad.<sup>xviii</sup>

While the pineapple, papaya and the cashew nut tree were introduced during the course of the sixteenth century, the guava, also an American species, was introduced slightly later. Abul Fazl does mention the 'amrud' in the *Ain-i-Akbari* but it is likely that he was referring to the pear as the word is used for both the fruits.<sup>xix</sup> The first mention of the fruit is in the account of the English Physician John Fryer who noticed the 'guivas, a kind of pear' growing in the English gardens outside the town of Madras in 1673.<sup>xx</sup>

There is debate on whether the custard-apple (*Annona Squamosa*), a native of Central and South America, was indigenous to India or was introduced into India from the Americas. Both Linschoeten and Pietro Della Valle omit a mention of the fruit in their list of new World fruits that were introduced by the Portuguese. The archeologist Alexander Cunningham believed that the custard apple was present in India since it was depicted on the ancient sculpture of Bharhut and Mathura. He also suggested that the Indian name for the fruit, 'ata' was derived from the Sanskrit word 'atipriya'.<sup>xxi</sup> Cunningham's views were not accepted and the fruit was believed to have been introduced into India by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century.<sup>xxii</sup> The discovery of custard apple seed remains at the Neolithic settlement of Tokwa, Uttar Pradesh, dated to the fourth millennium B.C. has complicated the issue and has led to suggestion of the existence of Asian-American contacts in ancient times much before the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus.<sup>xxiii</sup>

The Sapodilla (*Sapota*) and the Passion fruit are other American fruits that were carried to India. But their dates of introduction are not known. The Sapodilla or Sapota, as it is called in Hindi, came to India either via Africa or through Phillipines and Malaysia.<sup>xxiv</sup> The Passion fruit tree was growing in forests of India and Ceylon in the nineteenth century.<sup>xxv</sup> Both fruits were probably introduced after the seventeenth century since they are not mentioned in sources dating from the sixteenth and seventeenth century.

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