

Sometime ago while in search of some information on usufruct rights for indigenous peoples, a rather colonial looking forester read out from some book that he refused to let me even look at, that the *amla* in the forests were for the deer and the wild mangoes should be left untouched for the bears and the deer. And I thought to myself, "I think so too, they were too sour for my taste anyway!" You could say a case of "sour mangoes!"

Having spent a lot of time with indigenous people and looking at their use of forest resources has given me the chance to work with the Kurumbas, Nayakas,



Paniyas, Irulas living in the forests of South India. Indigenous people have always been part of the forests and their lives are closely linked to the system around them. Each path, each tree and each herb is understood. It is a gross error on our part that we have not been able to integrate them in our conservation efforts.

It was first with the Chola naickans, a hunter-gatherer community of the Nilambur valley of South India that I did my research. It was here that I was introduced to the world of wild mangoes. I started my field work in the beginning of March '92. The people lived in the pristine ever-green forests of the New Amarambalm Reserve Forest, part of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve. They lived along river banks of rushing waters that flowed into the

Chaliyar. All along those rivers were tall stately trees of the wild mango, *Mangifera indica*. The fruits were small and hung down in clusters, yellow green

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when ripe and ready to fall with the slightest breeze. The forest floor around the trees would be covered with the fallen fruit. I wondered, weren't there enough children around, why were the fruits untouched? Until I bit into the first one! The seed of this little fruit was large and there was very little pulp, which was still sour when the fruit was yellow. Some of the trees had larger fruits but again sour when ripe. I don't think I ate any more mangoes from the forest; if I felt like eating one I bought it at the local market.

When I asked Chathi Beeran back at the settlement what they do with the mangoes, she told me they leave it behind for the bears and the deer. Five years later that was what the forester was telling me! But by then I was working with a Mullukurumba community in the Gudalur area of the Nilgiris and they made an excellent mango concentrate, as a substitute for tamarind from the pulp of the wild mango. The process is a tedious one and a lot of firewood was needed for the same. By then legislation had already come in, preventing any form of collection from the protected forest areas. I don't think that has stopped the Mullukurumbas from collecting the fruit and making the concentrate. Not many in the younger generation know how to make it and the people who do know have to dodge the officials when collecting the fruit.

Collections from the wild of many plants still happens and the indigenous people are the collectors. They receive wages for their effort and not the price for the product. Mangoes are harvested from the wild to supply to contractors who supply it to the pickling industry. The bark of the tree is used in indigenous medicine to cure skin disorders and the leaves for stomach disorders.

Forest dependent communities use many forest resources for subsistence needs, but when those resources are commercialized, excessive and destructive harvest methods affect the resource base. There is enough in the forest that can be harvested for trade but it needs to be assessed and harvest levels and methods need to be set based on scientific research involving the harvesting communities. In many fruiting trees in the forest one finds an alternating fruiting cycle, they fruit once in two years (observed in *Phyllanthus spp.* and *Mangifera spp.*) especially in the commercially harvested varieties.

The wild relatives of the *Mangifera indica* line the banks of the rivers; it is a dominant species of the riparian ecosystem. Anybody who has been to Ooty via Mysore would have passed through the Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary and driven past the banks of the Moyar. The dark green foliage of the trees stands out against the deciduous foliage of the forest. If one has driven through in March one surely will remember the bunches of fruit hanging down from the branches. Don't bother to stop to pick them, just remember they are more a treat for the eyes than a feast for the tongue.