

Literariness Journal

A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly
Journal of Literature and Cultural
Studies

P-ISSN: 3108-1614
E-ISSN: 3108-172X

LiterarinessJournal.org

Vol. 1, Issue. 3 June 2026

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A Literariness.org Project

Curating the Mango in Cultural Space: The Indian Spectrum

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Abstract: Food, culture and space possess close bearings to one another as food is produced, consumed and symbolically packaged within a specific cultural and spatial context. The nature of this interconnectedness makes possible the demonstration of how people perceive, live, experience and make sense of reality. Food within the realm of culture exceeds its utility as a simple product for nourishment; it becomes a symbol of identity, tradition, etiquette, hospitality and affordability; food becomes literally consumable, symbolic and politicised. Culture, with food as its crucial aspect, emerges out of a space; space acts as the apparatus through which and within which all cultural phenomenon take shape. The paper aims to explore the cultural spaces of India, with mangoes as its central component of analysis. It aims to explore the mango-centred spectrum of culture through an in-depth dissection of India's urban and rural spaces. Within the context of urban spaces, the International Mango Festival 2025 held in Delhi is taken into account. Within the rural spatial context, RK Narayan's fictional rustic village of Malgudi becomes the point of exploration. The theoretical framework of the paper constitutes of food studies, cultural studies, literary spatiality, Edward Soja's Thirdspace theory and Jean Baudrillard's concept of Hyperreality and Simulation. The paper establishes the relevance of mangoes as a food/fruit that exceeds beyond a savoury delight and translates into a symbol and becomes politicised. Moreover, it establishes the role of space in the meaning-making process of the human mind, induced by material reality and subjective psychological perceptivity.

Keyword: *Food Studies, Spatiality, Cultural Studies, Identity, Urban and Rural Landscapes*

Introduction

The summer season in India turns the country into a seasonal mango landscape; the arrival of mangoes extends beyond a simple, savoury fruit consumption ecstasy into a cultural phenomenon that binds together society, economy and heritage. With the beginning of mango harvest (Alphonso variety) in Maharashtra and its circulation throughout the country, mango consumption becomes central in bringing together families during evening hours, office employees during lunch breaks and children during playtime indulging in mango plucking games. The savoury treat of mangoes lay at the core of cultural rejoice, light-hearted and deep conversations, work break dialogue exchanges to de-stress, exchanged laughs, created memories and strengthened bonds especially between children. On an economic level, the vogue for mangoes boosts financial opportunities for farmers and retail shopkeepers and charms people into these markets during leisure hours.

Firstly, the paper aims to explore the centrality of mangoes within food studies, as a marker of quintessential Indian identity and culture and the problematics involved within. It dives deep into the euphoria around the mango as food/fruit whose fascination extends beyond religion, ideology and caste. Mangoes create a strong sense of unified belonging to the Indian homeland beyond human constructs, belief systems and taboos. Moreover, mangoes stir a sense of nostalgia for migrants abroad that are reminded of the sweet, mango dipped Indian summers and immigrants back home that have moved out of lush golden, mango laden village landscapes. Further, it critically analyses the dynamics of accessibility, privilege and elitism centred around the food/fruit. Even though mangoes stand as a poignant cultural symbol, they are expensive and naturally the discourse around them gets entangled into discriminatory class realities. The economic dimension of the fruit foregrounds the problematics of who has the 'privilege' to consume and who does not.

Secondly, the paper attempts to apply theories of spatiality/literary spatial criticism to analyse the nature of relationship between people, perceptions and space. Physical infrastructure and its purpose, people and their perceptions, all interact with one another in a particular space and it is through this interaction that generous amounts of rich culture emerge. The paper aims to study the impact and transformation of space/landscape brought about by the arrival of mangoes. In more specific terms, it analyses the new markets, fests and festivals centred around mangoes in terms of their physical infrastructure, its purpose and utilization and

the manner in which it impacts people, perceptions and memories. Further, it dives deep into the way these mango centred spaces may be analysed as hyperreal simulations.

The theoretical framework for the study constitutes food studies, Edward Soja's third space theory/living space within spatial studies and concept of hyperreality within postmodernism. The way landscape is transformed through physical infrastructure and is perceived in the minds of people differs from space to space. The study analyses these interactions and how they take shape within different spaces, particularly the city and the village. Urban and rural spaces provide a direct contrast in terms of their physical mapping and related perceptions and thus provide a wide spectrum for analysing mango-centred spaces. Within rural spaces, the mango season centred farming activities, family economies and ecological knowledge make possible the analysis of village lifestyle, agrarian income, community based mango centred activities as simple as children playing under mango trees, mothers and grandmothers making aamras {mango shake}, aam ka aachar {mango pickle} or kairi ki chutney {raw mango pickle} or aam panna {raw mango drink} and farmers, their mind maps, emotions and experiences dependent upon harsh harvesting conditions to provide for themselves and their families.

When the mango enters the urban landscape the narrative around becomes further complex; within cities especially metropolitan spaces the mango is celebrated through festivals, fests and a wide supply of mango related products. While the villages witness the toil of the actual harvest, the stories of farmers, narratives of hardship and love, homemade mango products and the way they bring people together; the city witnesses the arrival of the mango season in a slightly different manner. It packages, advertises and commercialises the mango beyond its purpose as a savoury delight into mango centred festivals, fairs, perfumes, mango flavoured face masks and skincare products, cookies and cakes, mango-coloured/shaped garments, jewellery, crockery, furniture and even mango themed parties and family celebrations. While the curation of the mango in urban and rural spaces is enriched with contrasts, there is always scope for intersection and similarities. For the purpose of the study, the International Mango Festival held in the urban space of Delhi and R.K Narayan's fictional rural space of Malgudi will be analysed. The International Mango Festival of Delhi becomes relevant in analysing how the marvel around the food/fruit translates into a national marker of Indian identity. The primary source for the investigation into mango centred cityscapes will be DTTDC's official tourism website and vlogs, travel stories available on YouTube as they stand as strong representatives of popular culture in a world becoming irreversibly intertwined with technology especially social media.

RK Narayan's short stories set in Malgudi become pivotal to understand the role of mangoes in creating memories, lifestyle, habits, experiences and thought patterns of village folk especially children. The International Mango Festival is held in Dilli Haat, an actual space in the city, one of the famous open-air markets for Indian heritage goods and handicrafts. The rationale behind the selection is that Dilli Haat as a space itself imitates a traditional Indian bazaar {marketplace] in a metropolitan setting; and the Mango festival held within it further turns the imitated space into a rustic mango landscape representing the authentic village experience through mango themed stalls, décor, songs, folk performances and contests. Further, Dilli Haat as a hyperreal space becomes a hotspot where the interaction of physical space, its purpose and perceptions can be intricately analysed, as put forth by Edward Soja in his concept of the thirdspace. Further, the selection of Malgudi as an imagined identified locale provides insight not only into the rural spaces within the country but also the way they are perceived and represented in literature. Literary analysis through descriptions of village spaces provides insight into the way narratives of identity, rural life and memories are presented, projected or distorted. The selection of a real hyperreal space and a fictional literary space provide a wide spectrum for critical analysis of metropolitan and rustic spatial transformation induced by the arrival of the mango season.

Raunak-e-Delhi: An Urban Culturalscape of Complexities

The study specifically focuses on The International Mango Festival 2025, held in Dilli Haat, Janakpuri, New Delhi. The festival, in terms of spatial positioning, exists as a space within a space within a space. In order to conduct a well-rounded analysis, it becomes crucial to deeply explore the three-layered spatial dynamic within which the summer season mango spectacle takes form. The paper aims to look into the spatial dynamics of Delhi, Dilli Haat and the Mango festival within it. To develop a critical lens to understand the spatial and cultural intricacies of the Mango Festival, it becomes pivotal to look into the spatiality of the spaces within which it takes place i.e. Delhi and Dilli Haat.

Edward Soja in his work, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, remarks "Thirdspace is an-Other way of understanding and acting to change the spatiality of human life." Soja's theory provides three distinct levels of achieving a well-rounded understanding of any given space. Within the theory, the Firstspace represents the material or physical dimensions of space; which in the context of Delhi can refer to its monuments, metros, markets and slums. Secondspace acts as a representative or conceived space created through ideologies and representations inspired by media, maps, city plans,

government development programmes and architecture. Thirdspace acts as an amalgamation of the first and second space, a lived, constantly contested space where the physical attributes, their purpose and representation, human beings and culture, all come together to create a complex yet enriching multitude of realities. The city becomes more than just an infrastructural layout and transforms into a vibrant living space where infrastructure, perceptions and people all collide and bloom. It is through such a collision that a city moves beyond the realm of being an inanimate objective reality and transforms into a living cityscape with a heartbeat.

As Khushwant Singh in ‘Delhi: A Novel’ points out, “Delhi is not a city. Delhi is a habit.” Or Ahmed Ali in ‘Twilight in Delhi’ states, “The city of Delhi was no more merely a city; it was a dream.” Soja remarks, “Thirdspace is simultaneously real-and-imagined”; this becomes central in understanding Delhi as it contains reminiscence of being both a planned, immaculately maintained city as well as a lived, improvised city. While Old Delhi with monuments such as the Red Fort and markets such as Chandini Chowk stand as proud symbols of history, tradition, narrow yet beautiful streets, dense housing and street food culture; New Delhi with its spacious, well-ventilated residential colonies and magnanimous malls represents bureaucratic power, capitalistic influence and imperial geometry. Within the heart of New Delhi lies the open-air, traditional market of Dilli Haat engulfed with hustle-bustle, laughter and cultural events throughout the day.

The term ‘Haat’ itself means ‘weekly markets’ that are traditionally found in villages and rural landscapes. However, Dilli Haat only imitates a traditional village marketplace, as it is situated at the very heart of a well-developed and modernised metropolis. It is a carefully planned, packaged and sanitized space created, keeping in mind commercial dynamics of trade and tourism. Jean Baudrillard in his work ‘Simulacra and Simulation’ remarks, “Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.” Dilli Haat, does not imitate a typical region-specific marketplace built simply for the purpose of providing utilities and keeping the demand-supply chain going. It transforms into a hyperreal space that promotes, packages and sells the very idea of an authentic, cultured rural India but without the presence of actual village sand and vegetation, the smell of hay and cow dung, the sight of over-worked skinny farmers, fresh breathable air, village animals or nourishing home-made food. The point being, Dilli Haat becomes a simulation of reality that presents itself and is perceived as more real than real, hyperreal.

On one hand, such a space allows small scale farmers and small-businesses to grow, become an important tool of representing Indian identity on an international scale, become a sweet and delightful tribute to the rural world of the country and provide a means for city folk to witness the beauty of rustic life. However, it is equally important to point out that the hyperreal space of Dilli Haat creates and deliberately maintains a romanticised version of Indian village culture, an exotified and distorted fantasy that captures and solidifies in the human mind through its physical infrastructure, traditional food items, ethnic clothes and folk performances. In other words, Dilli Haat celebrates village identity and culture but also romanticises it through the interaction of material infrastructure (stalls, food shops, games) and the sensory and emotive psychological makeup of human beings.

VS Naipaul in his work ‘A Million Mutinies Now’ remarks, “India is a country of a million little worlds.” Similarly, Delhi contains within itself millions of little worlds or sub-spaces with their own intricacies and cultural uniqueness. But the present study most specifically focuses on the Mango Festival held within this Delhi of complexities.

Aamras: Mango Festival Blended into Cityscapes

The International Mango Festival 2025 was organised from 27-29 June in Dilli Haat, New Delhi. The festival is organised by Delhi Tourism and Transportation Development Corporation (DTTDC). The official website describes the festival as:

Delhi Tourism & Transportation Development Corporation Ltd. (DTTDC) is a pioneer in organizing Mango Festival as a regular annual event for the last 32 years. This festival has been established as one of the leading events in Delhi. In this festival, about 500 varieties of mangoes grown in India besides mango based products are displayed for viewing by the public for 03 days. Interesting activities like Mango variety competition, Mango Eating Competition, Mango Quiz, Slogan Competition and Cultural Programmes are organized for entertainment of the visitors. A large number of Govt. agencies and private orchard owners/individuals are regular participants in the festival.

As DTTDC proclaims, the legacy of the Mango Festival has been a celebratory affair for the past 32 years. Time plays an important role in creating cultural norms, identities and conventions. Mangoes are deeply rooted into the Indian cultural tradition; they have been celebrated as a symbol of cultural pride and national significance and its centrality solidified with passing time. Within the discipline of Food Studies, food extends beyond a simple product

for consumption and nourishment and turns into a symbol representative of history, tradition and identity. The festival celebrates and transforms mangoes into a trademark of culinary nationalism, where food/fruit becomes a strong signifier of the vibrant and sub-tropical Indian way of living and being.

Further, the Mango Festival does not simply make available mangoes to the public but packages them into a cultural exhibition and authentic summer experience. As Roland Barthes states in his work, *Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption*, “Food is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behaviour.” Through the culturally centred representation of mangoes in the Mango Festival, the fruit exceeds its own utilization as merely a product and translates into an emblem/symbol for summers, colour, liveliness evoking feelings of warmth, nostalgia, belongingness and euphoria. As stated above, the festival showcases about 500 different varieties of mangoes which strongly points to the fact that the festival packages mangoes not just for savoury pleasure of the tongue but for an overall sensory experience, a treat for the eyes, nose and tongue alike. Mangoes become a priceless ecstasy that delights the very senses of the attenders through its strong cultural exhibition of specific varieties such as Amrapali, Mallika, Fazli, Rataul, Husnara, Ramkela, and Haathijhool.

The exhibition turns the food/fruit into a food spectacle, celebrating the age-old, village-rooted tradition of the country. The transformation of mangoes into a food spectacle is further strengthened through the mango-themed activities, events and competitions such as mango eating competitions, mango quizzes, cultural performances, folk dances and kids’ activities. The mango-centred events turn the food/ fruit into a cultural performance, entertainment escapade and pleasure inducing sensory display.

The physical space/layout of the DTTDC website also becomes an important component of analysis as it is deliberately designed not just to promote the mango festival but to present an image of India as a land of diversity, hospitality, culinary abundance and historical significance. On the front page, the website showcases three logos: Utsav: India, the land of festivals, Travel for life and Incredible India. They become extremely relevant in analysing the Mango Festival as they present an image of the fruit that communicates into cultural identity, tourism commodity, national branding, and experiential consumption. Utsav: India, the land of festivals, dispenses an image of the country that celebrates and rejoices its identity, from fruit harvest to national fruit representation and from simple household level occasions/

achievements to national accomplishments be it social, economic or cultural. The Hindi word ‘Utsav’ literally translates as celebration or festival; and within the discipline of food studies the notion of festivals attains a central stage as mango-eating becomes ritualized, performative, communal, and symbolic.

The logo, Travel for Life, highlights the tourism dynamics of the Mango Festival by connecting it to cultural exploration, lifestyle, thought patterns, niche social habits and behavioural patterns beyond the conventions of a simple, one-dimensional travel. The visitors don’t just consume mangoes but they consume regional identities, agricultural diversity, and curated version of Indian culture and food/fruit translates into experimental consumption. The visitors are served the delight of mangoes for their anatomical as well as mental and emotional appetites. Incredible India, becomes relevant in the analysis of the Mango Festival as the slogan stands as a part of India’s national branding project. It globally marks India as a cultural and diverse entity, laying special emphasis on its exoticism, spirituality, heritage, and spectacle. As a result, the Mango Festival with the slogan attached to it becomes an intrinsic and exquisite part of the country’s social image-making parameters. The 500 mango varieties become a symbol of abundance, biodiversity, regional richness, and cultural multiplicity; and mangoes turn into a symbol of soft power, cosmopolitan cultural display and culinary nationalism.

The website also displays a map of Dilli Haat to make the spatially located Mango Festival conveniently accessible to public and tourists. Even though maps act as important sources of understanding and accessing any give geographical space, conventional, popularised, government produced and virtually displayed maps may present a colonised cartographical version of the landscape. Government websites, Tourism pages and maps (google maps etc) may present magnanimous amounts of organised information about any given festival, event or geographical space. But there is another dimension to understanding spaces and the culture that emerges out of it, through informal channels such as vlogs, social media, podcasts and YouTube channels. While official websites such as DTTDC with its maps and photographs cover the Mango Festival from a fact-oriented, information centred and promotional point of view; unofficial and informal modes of understanding the festival become equally important.

Virtual media such as YouTube, Instagram or Twitter provide an insight into the mental landscapes (mindscapes) of the visitors, emphasising their emotional, personal and psychological imagination. The way people navigate and explore the space of Dilli Haat during the Mango Festival may include the mango-based food items they try, simple festive mango-

themed games they participate in, the folk performances they rejoice in and even the interactions that sellers and consumers indulge in. The mango cultural exhibit invokes a range of emotions, unique or mutually experienced, by the visitors, spectators and the sellers. The visitor's experience and perceptions may be, half built by personal life experiences, half induced by the physical space of Dilli Haat and partly inspired by the excellent packaging of mangoes as a delightful product for consumption, as a symbol of summers, sweetness and warmth and as a representation of the curated rustic aesthetics of traditional Indian culture. The multiplicity of unique, subjective realities experienced by the visitors while being in the same spatial location, if represented on a map may create a decolonised cartography of the mango landscape (mango festival, Dilli Haat) beyond what a conventional, authorised map could present. While conventional city maps may present the physical layout of a landscape, important monuments and tourist destinations; it is only through personal experiences, memories and subjective individual psychology that a space can be understood in its entirety.

The paper analyses the subjective dimension of understanding a space through a YouTube vlog that covers the Mango Festival of 2025. The rationale being, the vlog does not just bring forward the experience of a single individual (vlog maker) but it engages in a constant dialogue with fellow visitors, farmers and folk dancers; while providing a virtual tour of the entire festival. The vlog is uploaded on the YouTube channel called, My Travel Run, operated by an Indian travel enthusiast, Naveen Oberoi.

In terms of spatial criticism, the virtual tour of the festival can be analysed by implementing Soja's theory of the thirdsapce. He describes the firstspace as, "the directly lived and physically perceived space." The vlog strongly documents the firstspace of the Mango Festival through a vibrant display of selfie zones, mango jam stalls, mango displays curated by farmers from all over the country, food counters, competitions, and performances. These are visible, material and real features of the firstspace, through the experience of which the visitor's imagination enters a realm of a mango induced ecstasy. The vlog opens at the entrance of the Mango Festival, decorated with ginormous hoardings and posters of mangoes alongside the national flag, emblem and slogans such as इस गर्मी आए दिल्ली के सबसे रसीले उत्सव में, जहाँ होगा आम का स्वाद, मस्ती का तड़का और यादों की मिठास, (This summer, come to Delhi's most delightful festival, where you'll enjoy the taste of mangoes, a burst of fun, and the sweetness of memories.) The slogan itself proclaims the intricate connectedness between the summer season of mangoes, as a source of nourishment, entertainment and creation of memories. The vlog displays a wide

range of similar mango-centred slogans printed on posters, banners and hoardings that form a part of the real/material/objective firstspace.

As the vlog continues, there can be seen multiple selfie zones with depictions of mango farms, lush green mango trees and village landscapes. It charms the visitors into clicking and uploading pictures on social media platforms, which further increases the reach and popularity of the festival. At the same time, it translates the literal mango landscape (Mango Festival) into a virtual mango landscape for the viewers. The Mango Festival as a hyperreal space contains within it several sub-spaces such as selfie zones, photobooths, mango stalls and gaming zones. In the context of the secondspace, Soja states, “Secondspace can be thought of as conceived space, the space of planners, urbanists, and social engineers.” This become relevant in the context of the Mango Festival as it is organised by DTTDC, an official government body. The spatiality of the Mango Festival is manufactured based on the conceptions and worldview of DTTDC; it carefully curates and packages the mango into a culturally authentic Indian summer experience.

A large proportion of the vlog focuses on snapshots of the various varieties of mangoes that are displayed by proud farmers in decorated wooden baskets. Farmers from all around the country participate in the festival and further extend the conceived imagination of the secondspace. Different mango varieties from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Bengal are assembled into a curated national secondspace.

The thirdspace, as Soja states is the culmination of the real and imagined, the first and secondspace. He claims, “Thirdspace is a way of understanding and acting upon space that is radically open, inclusive, and always becoming.” The mango festival is not merely experienced by visitors and sellers as a marketplace for fruit purchase; people connect and associate the displayed mango spectacle with pangs of warmth, nostalgia and belongingness inspired by own individual childhood and life experiences. The vlogger indulges in conversation with multiple farmers, employees from different agricultural institutes, official bodies, nearby and far off village folk, visitors from delhi, from other states and abroad. The nature of interactions reveals how the Mango Festival is perceived in the imagination of the farmers, families, children and tourists. The farmers are filled with pride, joy and optimism as they describe to the vlogger the varieties of mangoes they have cultivated. Certain visitors make emotive remarks such as, “We didn’t just eat mangoes. We grew up with them” or “This festival brings that warmth back to the city.” The Mango Festival as a thirdspace/lived space closely captures the intersection of the material infrastructure, institutes involved in its production and the manner in which people

connect with the entire physical space and experience euphoria, nostalgia and passion. The thirdspace of the Mango Festival transforms it into lived cultural memory.

Mangoes of Malgudi: Literary Rural Landscapes

Rasipuram Krishnaswami Narayan, as one of the prominent Indian English writers, created the fictional town of Malgudi for his literary works. Narayan himself was a resident of Chennai and his rustic locale of Malgudi itself was inspired by real life places like Mysore, South Indian towns and Narayan's everyday surroundings. His works have gained such widespread popularity that the setting of Malgudi has become a dominant literary representative of Indian rural life in general. Malgudi appears as an authentic representation of rural India in novels, short stories and even television adaptations. The study analyses the story of 'Swami and Friends', to understand how mangoes become the centre of rural spaces during the warm months of summer.

While describing the rustic aesthetics of Malgudi, Narayan says, "Mangoes, yellow and sweet, lay piled in baskets in the market." Through the lens of food studies, it can be noted that Narayan does not exoticize or commodify mangoes, but connects them naturally and authentically to the rural landscape, marketplace and family houses. He invokes gustatory pleasure in the readers through his simple yet realistic description of 'sweet' mangoes. He even plays with colour (yellow) to paint an aesthetically situated image of mangoes.

Soja's thirdspace can be applied to understand the spatially positioned centrality of mangoes within the fictional village of Malgudi. In the thirdspace/lived space of Malgudi there is a harmonious coexistence of material reality, imagination, memory, and lived experience. The village of Malgudi is spatially detailed (markets, roads, school, wells), imaginatively constructed, emotionally lived by characters, and highly symbolic in terms of culture. Mangoes become important contributors to the Thirdspace of Malgudi as they connect the physical fruit markets (Firstspace), cultural meanings of summers in rural India (Secondspace), and Swami's lived emotional childhood experiences (Thirdspace).

Conclusion

India, in terms of its spatiality stands as a proud, vibrant and multilayered cultural space. From highly developed metropolitan city spaces to simple, self-sufficient rural spaces, the spectrum of Indian cultural diversity looms large. When culture becomes a component of analysis, it becomes relevant to take into account its culinary dimensions. Food in the literary context moves beyond its primary purpose as a source of nourishment and anatomical fulfilment. It

becomes a symbol of identity, history and heritage; a product that can be commodified/ commercialised internationally, with its roots into capitalism and as a translation of human emotion invoking feelings of nostalgia, love and belongingness. Culture varies from space to space and goes through tremendous variations depending on the particular space. While urban spaces such as the Mango Festival in Delhi, highlights the commercialisation at a grand level, while also promoting the rural Indian identity, through its celebration of the summer fruit on a massive level. Rural spaces, such as the Malgudi of RK Narayan’s literature, highlight the simple, joyous yet toil-filled life of the village folk especially farmers.

The problematics involved within the interconnected saga of mangoes, dialogue and urban and rural space, becomes yet another important aspect that the paper has explored. While being a symbol of cultural identity and a delight for appetite, mangoes are relatively expensive and thus become entangled in the food politics of affordability and class prejudices. Even though the Mango Festival demands no fee for entry and naturally increases accessibility; the gaming zones, varieties of mangoes and mango-related products still remain comparatively expensive and inaccessible for some visitors. Further, in rural spaces mangoes also act as a symbol of elitist richness and are regularly consumed by the ‘haves’ of village society or farmers who themselves cultivate them.

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