



IMPORT AND CULTIVATION OF CENTRAL ASIAN AND IRANIAN FRUITS IN MEDIEVAL INDIA

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on India's import of fruits from Central Asia and Iran during the medieval period. India produced a large variety of tropical and sub-tropical fruits in the period under discussion. However, the ecological inability to produce fruits of the temperate variety along with the ruling elite's desire for exotic food products led to imports of fruits from Iran and Central Asia via overland routes.

KEY WORDS:

Cultivation , Central Asian , Iranian Fruits .

INTRODUCTION:

There are references to imports of fruits from Central Asia during the period of the Delhi Sultanate (1205-1526 A.D). The fourteenth century poet and writer Amir Khusrau informs us that fruits of Khurasan were available in Delhi. Ibn Battuta, the famous fourteenth century Moroccan traveler records that since it was not possible to bring fresh melons from Khwarizm due to the long distance, the fruit was cut into strips, dried in the sun and then packed in baskets for export to India. The fruits were regarded as a luxury in India and were sold at high prices. Batutah also mentions dried plums of Waknaba, a place near Bukhara being transported to India. The imported fruits were distributed by Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq (1325-1350 A.D) among his favorites. Al Umari noted that people bringing Bukhara melons for the Sultan were handsomely rewarded. On one occasion, a person brought two camel loads of melons for the Sultan. But most of the melons were spoiled during the journey. Only twenty two melons were fit enough to be gifted to the Sultan. The Sultan was still happy with the present and rewarded the individual handsomely.

The volume of fruit imports underwent a significant increase with the establishment of the Mughal dynasty in the sixteenth century. Central Asian and Iranian fruits were very popular with the Mughals. Babur's nostalgia for the melons and grapes of his homeland is well known. He was probably the first person to make an attempt to introduce their cultivation in India. A specialist from Balkh was invited to Agra to raise melons. Babar also had grapes grown in Agra. Expressing his satisfaction at these efforts, Babur remarked, "To have grapes and melons grown in this way in Hind filled my measure of content". At the same time Babur ensured a supply of fruits like melons and grapes from Kabul. He also informs us that the apples of Ghazni and Farmul were of good quality and were transported to India. Pomegranates of Ala sai were also sent to India even though they were not 'first rate.'

Emperor Akbar (1556-1605 A.D) made horticulturists from Iran and Turan settle in India in order to improve the quality of fruits. Describing the result of these efforts, Akbar's court chronicler Abul Fazl noted that the 'melons and grapes have become very plentiful and excellent; and water-melons, peaches, almonds, pistachios, pomegranates, etc are everywhere to be found'. Fazl goes on to claim that the fruits grown in the Empire were as good as those obtained from Iran and Turan. The provinces where the fruits were cultivated were Agra, Delhi and Lahore. . The conquest of Kabul and Kandahar facilitated imports of

fruits from Central Asia and Iran leading to the markets being well stocked. From Badakshan came musk melons during the winter while apples and pears were imported from Samarkand. Apples, grapes, cherries, seedless pomegranates and other fruits were obtained from Kabul. Akbar's son and successor Jahangir (r.1605-1627) noted that fruits were imported in greater quantities during the reign of his father. Several varieties of grapes like the Hussaini, the habshi and the Kishmishi became available in the cities of India.

Emperor Jahangir (1605-1627 A.D) had a liking for Central Asian and Iranian fruits. He frequently received large supplies of pomegranates from Yezd in Iran and melons from Kariz. In his view these fruits were superior to the varieties obtained from Kabul and Badakshan. The fruits were imported in large quantities and were shared with officials at the court. Jahangir regrets that these varieties were not available during the life time of his father who was very fond of fruits. Once while he was in Gujarat, a supply of melons from Kariz was sent to him. He records:

At this place some melons came from Kariz which is a place dependent upon Herat and it is certain that in Khorasan there are no melons better than those of Kariz. Although this is at a distance of 1400 Kos and Kafilahs take five months to come, they arrived very ripe and fresh.

Jahangir also mentions receiving grapes from Kabul while he was in the Deccan. He was happy to note that they were fresh in spite of having taken three months to reach him. The love for Kariz melons was shared by his son Shah Jahan who once went so far as to prohibit the entry of Iranian caravans into India after hearing that the export of the fruit had been disallowed. It was only after being informed that a crop failure was responsible for the interruption in supply that he changed his decision and permitted the arrival of Iranian traders. During his tenure on the north-west frontier, Prince Aurangzeb ensured that these priced melons were sent to his father. Central Asian fruits were so readily available at the court that they were distributed daily to courtiers.

The liking for imported fruits was not restricted to the Mughal rulers alone. The ruling elite consumed large quantities of imported fruits. In the early seventeenth century, Pelsaert noted that fruits were imported into the capital city of Agra from Kabul. Bernier noted that 'an immense quantity' of fresh fruits like apples, grapes and melons came from Bukhara, Balkh and Samarkand in the winters while dried fruits like almonds, raisins, plums and apricots were available throughout the year. Describing the fruit market of Delhi, Bernier wrote:

There is indeed, a fruit market that makes some show. It contains many shops which during the winter are well supplied with dry fruit from Persia, Balk, Bokara and Samarkande; such as almonds, pistachios, and walnuts, raisins, prunes and apricots; and in winter with excellent fresh grapes, black and white, brought from the same countries, wrapped in cotton; pears and apples of three or four sorts, and those admirable melons which last the whole winter. These fruits are, however, very dear; a single melon selling for a crown and a half. But nothing is considered so great a treat: it forms the chief expense of the Omrahs, and I have frequently known my Agah spend twenty crowns on fruit for his breakfast.

Bernier's contemporary, the Italian Niccolo Manucci, who spent around fifty years in India writes that several camels loaded with melons, pears, raisins, seedless pomegranates and dried fruits used to come to India from Kabul, Balkh and Bukhara. The list of fruits imported from Central Asia included apples, pomegranates, pears, melons, quinces, grapes, different kinds of raisins, almonds, filbert and pine nuts. The Mughal state derived much revenue from the sale of these products. Chardin observed that Central Asian fruits were sent to Surat. Apart from fresh fruits, preserved fruits brought from Iran also sold well in India.

Like the Mughal rulers, the nobility made attempts to cultivate imported varieties of fruits in India. According to Pelsaert, 'Great and wealthy amateurs have planted in their gardens Persian vines which bear seedless grapes, but the fruit does not ripen properly in one year out of three'. The nobility also imported melon seeds from Iran and had them sown in their orchards. Melon seeds from Central Asia were available in the market of Agra. These seeds could be used for seven years after which the fruits lost flavor.

Fruits continued to be imported from the north-west during the eighteenth century. In the 1770s, Comte Du Modave mentioned that merchants of Kabul used to bring several types of fruits like raisins, pears, prunes, apples, etc during winter. Grapes used to come packed in small boxes made of wood. The fruits arrived in a fresh state in spite of a long journey of three to four months. These were sold in Delhi, Agra, Allahabad, Lucknow and Faizabad. Dried fruits like apricots and pistachios that were grown in and around Kabul were also imported to meet the great demand for these products. Modave also noted that melons of Kandahar were available in Delhi. The Kabul merchants would return after buying cotton cloth for the home market.

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