Food Culture and Sanskar in Indian Knowledge Tradition: A Sociological Study of Mango Heritage as Living Knowledge

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Abstract

India's food cultures are knowledge systems embedded in philosophy, medicine, and ritual practice, extending well beyond nutritional function. Among the many items woven into this tradition, the mango (Mangifera indica) occupies a singular position: invoked in Vedic literature, classified in Ayurvedic pharmacopoeia, embedded in life-cycle rituals, cultivated through the ancient science of Vrikshayurveda, and now formalised through Geographical Indication (GI) tagging. Yet existing scholarship treats the mango either as a horticultural commodity measured by yield and export potential, or as a botanical specimen catalogued through Linnaean taxonomy, rarely integrating food culture, sanskar, and epistemic tradition into a unified frame. This article asks: ***how does mango heritage operate as living knowledge at the intersection of food culture, sanskar, and Indian Knowledge Tradition?*** *Drawing on classical texts, Ayurvedic compendia, GI registration data, ethnobotanical literature, and cultural studies scholarship, the study demonstrates that the mango functions as a multi-layered cultural text: ritually embedded through Kalasha and Panch Pallava ceremonies, epistemically grounded in Vrikshayurveda's plant science, materially transformed through Karana Samskara food processing, and economically formalised through GI mechanisms that both recognise and risk commodifying heritage. The analysis contributes to the sociology of food, postcolonial knowledge studies, and heritage scholarship by showing how a single food item functions as an archive of interconnected traditions.*

Keywords: *Food culture; Sanskar; Indian Knowledge Tradition; Mango heritage; Living knowledge; Vrikshayurveda; Geographical Indication; Cultural materialism.*

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Introduction

Food in India has never been a matter of sustenance alone. The Taittiriya Upanishad declares *anna* (food) to be Brahman itself, elevating cultivation, preparation, and consumption to a cosmological plane, while the Bhagavad Gita classifies food into Sattvic, Rajasic, and Tamasic categories, linking dietary choice to ethical disposition (Chapter 17, verses 8–10). Across millennia, Indian civilisational thought has treated food not as biological necessity but as a knowledge system that integrates agricultural practice, medical understanding, ritual obligation, and philosophical reflection. Among the hundreds of foods embedded in this tradition, the mango (*Mangifera indica*) occupies an unparalleled position. India produces roughly 45% of the world's mangoes across an estimated 2.5 million hectares through over five million farming households (APEDA, 2024), with more than 1,500 named varieties documented, though only about thirty are cultivated commercially (ICAR, 2020). The fruit is invoked in early Indian literary texts, embedded in wedding, housewarming, and worship rituals as *amra-pallava* in the Kalasha, and treated in detail by Surapala's tenth-century *Vrikshayurveda*. More recently, several varieties — Dasheri, Langra, Alphonso, Banganapalli, Mankurad, Kari Ishad, Rewa Sunderja — have received GI tags that formally link terroir to varietal identity.

Yet a paradox persists. Agricultural policy treats the mango primarily as a commodity; heritage frameworks isolate its ritual symbolism from its material cultivation; botanical scholarship classifies it through Linnaean taxonomy, marginalising vernacular systems; and economic analyses foreground horticultural output without attending to the knowledge systems that produced the varieties in the first place. No existing study treats the mango simultaneously as agricultural knowledge, food technology, ritual material, and heritage object. This article addresses that fragmentation. Its guiding question is: **How does the concept of Sanskar, understood as both ritual transformation and food processing technology, illuminate the relationship between traditional knowledge, food culture, and mango heritage in India?**

Sanskar serves as the analytical pivot. In Dharmashastra it refers to the sixteen life-cycle rites through which a person is progressively refined; in Ayurvedic food science, the cognate concept of *Karana Samskara* denotes deliberate transformation of food through drying, fermenting, spicing, and cooking, altering its pharmacological properties. The article argues that this duality of sanskar as ritual refinement and as material transformation offers a uniquely productive lens on mango heritage as living knowledge.

Literature Review

Food as Knowledge System

Raymond Williams (1958) argued that culture is ordinary, insisting that meaning is produced in mundane practices such as cooking, cultivation, and consumption. Marvin Harris (1979) extended this materialist logic, showing that food practices are shaped by ecological and economic conditions and, in turn, generate symbolic and ritual systems. Recent sociology of food converges on the position that food systems encode ecological understanding, medical wisdom, and social norms, transmitted intergenerationally through what this article terms sanskar.

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Sanskar, Habitus, and Embodied Knowledge

Sanskar describes durable dispositions acquired through repetitive practice, ritual observance, and intergenerational transmission. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) theorised a parallel concept in *habitus*: internalised dispositions acquired through the social environment that guide perception and action without conscious deliberation. Both frameworks foreground knowledge as embodied and socially reproduced. Anthony Giddens (1984) adds a further dimension: social structures are simultaneously the medium and outcome of the practices they organise. Mango knowledge, transmitted through family kitchens, community rituals, and seasonal routines, thus operates as embodied cultural capital.

Indian Knowledge Tradition and Living Heritage

Postcolonial scholars have drawn attention to the epistemic violence involved in colonial reclassification of non-Western knowledge. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) argues that Western categories inadequately capture non-Western modernities, while Sandra Harding (2011) shows that what counts as legitimate knowledge is determined by historically contingent power relations. Vrikshayurveda contains systematic prescriptions for soil analysis, seed selection, propagation, pest management, and yield enhancement (Surapala, c. 10th century CE), and contemporary studies have validated several of them (PMC, 2024). Yet this tradition has been largely dismissed as folklore. The UNESCO Convention (2003) provides a framework for recognising such systems as living heritage actively practised and reproduced through community participation.

Mango in Cultural and Agricultural Scholarship

Scholarship on the mango in India spans several registers. ICAR (2020) has documented traditional cultivation practices, including organic manures, intercropping, and varietal selection. A single Melghat village maintains 102 named varieties through community stewardship (Vikalp Sangam, 2023), while the Malihabad region contains hundreds of Nawabi-era cultivars at risk from commercial monoculture. GI scholarship, however, has focused on intellectual property and trade, with limited attention to the knowledge systems that produced these varieties. No existing study integrates these strands by treating the mango simultaneously as an object of agricultural science, medical knowledge, ritual practice, food technology, and heritage policy. This article addresses that gap by using sanskar as an integrative lens.

Theoretical Framework

Five complementary perspectives inform this analysis. **Cultural Materialism** (Williams, 1958; Harris, 1979) grounds cultural practice in material conditions: monsoon rhythms, alluvial soils, and family labour shape mango cultivation, while generating the seasonal *ritu-charya*, regional specialisation (Alphonso in Konkan, Dasheri in Lucknow, Banganapalli in Andhra), and the ritual value of the first fruit. **Bourdieu's Theory of Practice** (1984) offers habitus as durable, transposable dispositions acquired through socialisation; this article treats sanskar as its Indian analogue, whereby mango knowledge operates as embodied cultural capital. **Postcolonial Knowledge Studies** (Chakrabarty, 2000; Harding, 2011) sensitises the analysis to the political character of knowledge classification, revealing how colonial botany displaced vernacular taxonomies encoding ecological, culinary, and medicinal information. **Intangible Heritage and Living Knowledge** (UNESCO, 2003;

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004) frames heritage as an active practice reproduced through community participation rather than a static relic. Finally, **Structuration Theory** (Giddens, 1984) highlights the duality of structure: Vrikshayurveda protocols, ritual rules, and Ayurvedic prescriptions are reproduced through daily practice, even as cultivators adapt them alongside modern extension services. Together, these lenses permit a multi-dimensional interpretation attentive to material conditions, embodied knowledge, power relations, heritage dynamics, and the recursive interplay of structure and agency.

Methodology

The study adopts an exploratory, qualitative design based exclusively on secondary sources, reflecting the breadth of an inquiry that traces the mango across multiple knowledge domains. Sources include classical and Ayurvedic texts (Taittiriya Upanishad, Bhagavad Gita, Bhavaprakasha Nighantu, Surapala's Vrikshayurveda), institutional and policy documents (ICAR, APEDA, GI registrations), peer-reviewed research on plant science and food processing (PMC, JETIR, Neuroquantology), and cultural-studies scholarship on ritual practice, heritage, and biodiversity. Thematic content analysis proceeded in three stages: (i) extraction of indicators on biodiversity, GI status, and ritual practice; (ii) coding of texts for motifs such as epistemic authority, sanskar, food transformation, and heritage; and (iii) integration of these motifs into four analytical domains that structure the findings below.

Empirical Context: Mango in Textual History, Biodiversity, and Ritual

The mango's presence in Indian civilisation is attested in the earliest layers of literary and material culture. It appears in Vedic and Puranic texts, in Buddhist Jataka tales, and in Kalidasa's poetry, where it functions as a signifier of abundance, love, and seasonal renewal. Mughal-era horticultural ambition found dramatic expression in Emperor Akbar's Lakh Bagh at Darbhanga, reported to have contained 100,000 trees (Swadeshi Mangoes, 2024). Portuguese introduction of grafting techniques in sixteenth-century Goa produced new cultivars, most notably the Mankurad, recently GI-tagged. Colonial botanical surveys later reclassified Indian varieties under Linnaean nomenclature, displacing the vernacular systems that Indian cultivators had maintained. Post-independence, ICAR led systematic varietal development, and GI tagging has emerged as the most recent institutional device, both recognising heritage and raising questions about its commodification.

Mango Biodiversity as Encoded Knowledge

Table 1. Selected national indicators of mango biodiversity and cultivation in India.

Indicator	Estimated Value
Named mango varieties in India	~1,500+
Commercially cultivated varieties	~30
GI-tagged mango varieties	8–10 (Dasheri, Langra, Alphonso, Banganapalli, Mankurad, Kari Ishad, Rewa Sunderja, etc.)
India's share of world mango production	~45%
Area under mango cultivation	~2.5 million hectares
Estimated mango-growing households	~5 million+
Varieties at risk of disappearing	Hundreds of undocumented folk cultivars

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Out of more than 1,500 documented varieties, only about thirty are cultivated commercially and fewer than a dozen have received GI recognition; the remainder persist in family orchards, community groves, and semi-wild populations without institutional protection. The Melghat mango village, where a single community maintains 102 named varieties, and the Malihabad heritage region near Lucknow illustrate the concept of living heritage — knowledge actively reproduced through community participation rather than passively preserved in institutional archives (Vikalp Sangam, 2023; ETV Bharat, 2023).

Mango in Ritual and Sanskar

Table 2. Mango in life-cycle rituals and cultural practices.

Ritual or Cultural Context	Role of Mango
Wedding ceremonies (Vivah Sanskar)	Mango leaves as torana (door decoration); mango wood used in havan
Housewarming (Griha Pravesh)	Mango-leaf bandanwar (festoon) hung at the threshold to mark auspicious entry
Worship (Puja)	Mango leaves in the Kalasha as amra-pallava; part of the Panch Pallava
Death rites (Antyeshti)	Mango wood used for the funeral pyre in certain regional traditions
Seasonal festivals	Aam Mahotsav celebrations; first-mango offering to household deity
Ayurvedic dietary practice	Raw mango for summer cooling; amchur as digestive aid
Seasonal food calendar (Ritu-charya)	Varieties mapped to specific weeks of summer per Ayurvedic principles

The Kalasha ceremony illustrates the depth of ritual embedding: the sacred vessel requires mango leaves arranged as Panch Pallava at its mouth, and without them the ritual is considered incomplete (AWGP, 2005). The Shalabhanjika motif recurs across temple sculpture from Sanchi to Khajuraho, embedding the tree in the material culture of sacred architecture (Varaha Heritage, 2024).

Findings

The findings are organised into five thematic axes corresponding to the four analytical domains identified above with the epistemic domain divided into agricultural (Vrikshayurveda) and medical (Ayurveda) science to reflect the richness of the evidence.

Knowledge Systems and Epistemic Authority

Surapala's *Vrikshayurveda* (c. 10th century CE) is among the world's earliest systematic treatises on plant science, containing prescriptions for soil classification, seed treatment, propagation (including grafting and layering), organic pest management, and yield enhancement. The

Upavanavinoda offers complementary guidance on garden management. Contemporary research has increasingly validated this corpus: a 2024 PMC study developed a Vrikshayurveda-based expert system for plant-disease diagnosis whose outputs align with modern plant pathology (PMC, 2024); JETIR (2025) documented the efficacy of its plant-nourishment methods; and reviews of ancient Bharatiya propagation techniques confirm that they correspond to methods modern horticulture has independently validated. The convergence does not require Vrikshayurveda to be legitimised by Western science; it demonstrates that multiple knowledge traditions can arrive at equivalent insights through different epistemic routes, echoing Chakrabarty's (2000) critique of the inadequacy of Western categories for capturing non-Western knowledge.

Amra in Ayurveda: Pharmacological Knowledge and Food Classification

Ayurvedic texts classify the mango (*Amra* in Sanskrit) with a sophistication that constitutes systematic pharmacological science. The *Bhavaprakasha Nighantu* analyses it through Rasa (taste), Guna (qualities), Virya (potency), Vipaka (post-digestive effect), and Prabhava (special action). This differentiation, deeply embedded in Indian culinary practice, remains largely invisible to nutritional analyses that treat mango as a single commodity.

Sanskar as Food Technology: Traditional Mango Processing

The Ayurvedic concept of *Karana Samskara* provides an indigenous theoretical framework for traditional food processing. Literally transformation through processing, it denotes deliberate alteration of a food's Rasa, Guna, Virya, and Vipaka through drying, heating, fermenting, spicing, and combining (Neuroquantology, 2022). Each embodies a distinct samskara adapted to local ecology, taste, and available ingredients, so that regional food geography is inscribed within a shared theoretical vocabulary — a dimension absent from analyses that treat mango processing as generic industrial food science.

Mango in Ritual Practice: The Sacral-Material Nexus

The mango's presence in Hindu ritual is structurally constitutive rather than decorative. Without *amra-pallava* at its mouth, the Kalasha is ritually incomplete, and the Panch Pallava signifies the five elements or five vital breaths (Grokipedia, 2024; AWGP, 2005). The Shalabhanjika motif ties the tree to fertility and to the axis between terrestrial and divine (Varaha Heritage, 2024). The philosophical grounding lies in Vedic and Upanishadic treatment of food: the Taittiriya Upanishad's Bhrigu Valli identifies anna with Brahman (Suradhuni, 2023), while the Gita's Sattvic–Rajasic–Tamasic scheme places dietary choice within an ethical framework, so that the ripe mango consumed in season becomes a Sattvic food linked to spiritual well-being. Cultivator, processor, and consumer are, within this framework, engaged in an activity that is at once agricultural, medical, ritual, and philosophical.

Biocultural Heritage: GI Tags, Varietal Diversity, and Conservation

India's mango diversity is a biocultural archive encoding centuries of selective breeding, terroir adaptation, and community stewardship. The GI tag institutionalises part of this heritage but raises the question whether a legal instrument designed for trade protection can capture the multi-dimensional knowledge systems that produced these varieties. Table 3 profiles three GI-tagged varieties that illustrate the range of narratives at stake.

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Table 3. Comparative profile of selected GI-tagged mango varieties.

Attribute	Goa Mankurad	Kari Ishad (Karnataka)	Rewa Sunderja (MP)
GI Tag Year	2023	2023	2023–24
Region	Goa	Ankola, Uttara Kannada	Rewa district, MP
Key Characteristics	Golden-yellow skin, honey-sweet, fibreless, low acidity	Small-sized, intensely sweet, distinctive aroma, premium	Low glycemic index, low sugar, termed diabetic-friendly
Historical Lineage	Portuguese-era grafting; name possibly from a Portuguese honorific	Temple orchards and local heritage in Uttara Kannada	Named after Rewa princely state; royal horticultural patronage
Cultural Significance	Integral to Goan identity and cuisine; premium export	Temple offerings; prestige variety in Karnataka	Health-conscious positioning; Ayurvedic metabolic claims
Approximate Market Value	Up to ~Rs 7,000 per dozen (premium)	Premium pricing; limited availability	Emerging premium positioning on health claims

Each variety encodes a distinct historical, ecological, and cultural narrative. The Goa Mankurad, of Portuguese-era hybrid origin, is today emblematic of Goan identity (BetterIndia, 2024; Grokipedia, 2024). The Kari Ishad is embedded in temple-orchard traditions of Uttara Kannada (BioLens, 2024). The Rewa Sunderja, with its low glycemic index, illustrates how traditional selection produced varieties with health properties modern nutritional science is only beginning to document (RIPA, 2024; BioLens, 2024). Community-based conservation, exemplified by the Melghat mango village and the inherited orchards of southern India, protects diversity that ex-situ programmes have not replicated (Vikalp Sangam, 2023; Alliance of Bioversity International, 2023). The GI framework covers only a fraction of this diversity; hundreds of undocumented folk cultivars that do not meet commercial thresholds remain unprotected.

Discussion: Sanskar as Integrative Concept

These five findings display a pattern that the duality of sanskar uniquely illuminates. In its Dharmashastra sense, sanskar refers to the progressive refinement of a person through the sixteen life-cycle rites; in its Ayurvedic sense, Karana Samskara refers to the progressive transformation of a raw substance into a form that is nutritionally, therapeutically, and culturally appropriate. Mango heritage operates through an analogous logic: the biological fruit is progressively transformed through agricultural, medical, culinary, and ritual sanskars into a civilisational artefact that encodes ecological knowledge, medical wisdom, social identity, and spiritual meaning within a single object. Cultural materialism is thereby extended: the mango is not merely a material object generating cultural superstructure but a nexus in which material and cultural dimensions are inseparable, because the knowledge tradition producing them does not recognise the distinction.

The analysis also validates Bourdieu's habitus through its Indian analogue. The farmer who identifies ripeness by scent, the grandmother who knows the precise salt-to-mustard ratio for

avakaya, and the priest who selects the correct leaves for the Kalasha all deploy sanskar as embodied, transposable, and durable knowledge a form of cultural capital eroded by urbanisation and industrial food systems. Finally, the heritage implications are direct: the GI tag addresses only commercial and trade dimensions, whereas UNESCO's living heritage framework offers a more comprehensive approach through community orchards, seasonal festivals, and intergenerational kitchen practice.

Conclusion

Mango heritage in India constitutes living knowledge: not a relic of the past but an actively practised, multi-dimensional system that operates simultaneously across epistemic, medical, ritual, culinary, and economic domains. Sanskar, understood as both ritual refinement and material transformation, provides the integrative lens that reveals how these domains connect within a single knowledge tradition. Vrikshayurveda supplies the agricultural science; Ayurveda the pharmacological framework; Karana Samskara the food-processing theory; Dharmashastra the ritual grammar; and the GI framework the contemporary economic recognition. Theoretically, the study extends cultural materialism, validates the sanskar–habitus parallel, and contributes to postcolonial knowledge studies by demonstrating the empirical soundness of a non-Western tradition. For policy, heritage conservation must move beyond museum-model preservation and intellectual-property instruments to sustain living practice — community orchards, endangered folk cultivars, ritual calendars, and the recognition of seasonal festivals and processing techniques as intangible cultural heritage. Limitations include reliance on secondary sources and possible overrepresentation of North Indian traditions; ethnographic fieldwork on intergenerational transmission, gendered kitchen knowledge, and the effects of commercialisation would enrich the analysis.

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