

Blushing golden apples

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Gilgit-Baltistan is a region where over 70 percent of the land is covered by high mountains and glaciers, leaving only about 1 percent available for agriculture. Despite this minimal area for agricultural activities, the region has significant potential for fruit production.

Its high altitude, cool climate, and fertile soil make it ideal for cultivating apricots, cherries, walnuts, and apples. The annual production of these

fruits is 61,188 MT of apricots, 4,500 MT of cherries, 4,177 MT of walnuts, and 6,606 MT of apples. These fruits are renowned for their unique taste, smell, high nutritional content, and juicy texture.

Fourteen varieties of apples are cultivated in GB, with the “Saspolo apples” standing out as the most prominent. Though there are various Saspolo apples, the most renowned variety is grown exclusively in the small village of Pari, located in the Kharmang district. Three additional apple varieties are grown in Pari, Samarqand, Naskhusho, and Wardgaff.

However, Saspolo variety stands out due to its superior taste and fragrance. In Pari, around 90 percent of households are directly involved in Saspolo apple cultivation, earning it the nickname “Saspolo Village”. These apples are famous not only for their exceptionally juicy texture and delicious taste but also for their distinctive aroma, which fills the air with a delightful fragrance.

The unique scent of Saspolo apples is their real forte and defining feature, helping them capture a large market share and serving as a significant driver of the local economy. These apples are also dried, and the paste is used by locals for medicinal purposes, in addition to serving as a valuable cash crop.

To further expand the market for Saspolo apples, the GB government invests millions of rupees in various fruit festivals organized by district administrations in collaboration with the agriculture department and NGOs. The district administration organizes the Saspolo Festival each year in mid-October, traditionally held in Pari village. Four annual festivals have already been hosted.

This year marked a shift as the fifth Saspolo festival took place at the renowned tourist destination, Manthokha Waterfall, in Kharmang district. While this move is beneficial for diversifying the market, local

farmers have raised concerns about being excluded from the planning process for the 2024 festival.

Such responses can erode the trust of growers and hinder the market potential for this valuable product. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure that events are organized in consultation with and with the involvement of the true growers of Saspolo.

This year the Pari village community independently organized the Saspolo Festival, funding it themselves. The two-day event at Pari Bridge, where despite most attendees being local, farmers managed to sell thousands of kilograms of Saspolo apples for over PKR 10 million.

Although the record sales highlight the strong market demand for Saspolo apples, this is merely the icing on the cake. The significant price fluctuations between different regions further reflect their high demand and market value. In Pari village, prices vary from Rs 350 to 400 per kg, rising to Rs 500-600 per kg in Skardu city, and reaching as high as Rs 800-1000 per kg in Islamabad. This underscores the economic potential of Saspolo apples.

The total apple production in GB is approximately 24,000 tonnes. Approximately 25 percent of apples are lost due to supply chain disruptions. Of the remaining apples, 50 percent are consumed locally, while the other 50 percent are marketed outside Gilgit-Baltistan.

Accurate and current statistics are not available, but assuming that Saspolo apples account for about 10 percent of GB's total apple production with an average price of Rs. 650 per kg, this variety alone generates an estimated economic value of approximately Rs 1.6 billion for the local community.

Despite the high prices of Saspolo apples in major urban cities of Pakistan, proper marketing channels or markets for these apples are

almost non-existent. In large cities like Karachi, Islamabad, Rawalpindi, and Lahore, Saspolo apples are primarily available through online platforms, requiring consumers to place orders online.

After payment, the apples are delivered to buyers. In reality, the absence of marketing channels and the challenges associated with the delivery of online orders is due to several hurdles.

The Karakoram Highway and Baltistan Highway connect GB to the rest of Pakistan, but both routes are highly susceptible to landslides and earthquakes.

Additionally, air traffic is heavily dependent on clear weather conditions. During October and November, many flights are often suspended due to unfavourable weather. Therefore, establishing an efficient supply chain is the prerequisite to unlocking significant economic benefits for local growers.

Farmers in Pari village face significant challenges due to poor road infrastructure, making it difficult to transport their Saspolo apples, which are grown at high altitudes.

As a result, a large portion of the harvest is lost because of the fruit's short shelf life. In the Kharmang district, the absence of cold storage facilities further exacerbates the problem, leading to even more wastage. Further, farmers continue to rely on traditional farming and marketing practices, lacking proper training in modern agricultural and marketing techniques.

While various international and national NGOs, such as IFAD and AKRSP, are actively engaged in agricultural interventions in the Kharmang district, their efforts have been largely restricted to constructing water channels and distributing wooden apricot dryers. These interventions

need to be expanded to focus on enhancing human capacity through technical knowledge about marketing, and packaging skills.

The GB government allocates substantial funds for the festivals, but the allocation of resources needs to be more strategic. Rather than channelling the majority of agricultural development funds into festivals, the real challenges faced by the local farmers should be prioritized. By equipping farmers in Pari village with modern techniques and improved marketing strategies along with the establishment of cold storage facilities, the production, and potential of Saspolo apples can be significantly enhanced.

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