

Kara Pazham – A Forgotten Gem of Koramandel Coast

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Kara Pazham (*Corynocarpus laevigatus*), commonly called *Karaka* belongs to the family Corynocarpaceae, is an underutilized fruit tree of great ethnobotanical interest. It is originated from New Zealand and the Pacific Islands. It has spreaded throughout the koramandel coast region of Kerala, where it grows in homesteads and village borders. Its small greenish-orange fruits are less palatable due to their astringent-bitter flavor, have survived in folk traditions and rural childhood memories. In Kerala, Kara Pazham is remembered in proverbs and stories that symbolize life's bittersweet lessons. The tree is hardy, evergreen and ecologically valuable. While commercial cultivation is absent, its nutraceutical potential, biodiversity role and cultural associations make it a fruit worth rediscovering.

Key words: Kara Pazham, *Corynocarpus laevigatus*, Kerala, Minor fruit, Folk references, Biodiversity.

Introduction

Kerala, often celebrated as *God's Own Country*, is not only rich in scenic beauty but also in biodiversity. The state's homestead farming system has ensured that fruit trees both common and rare continue to be nurtured around households. While fruits like jackfruit (*Artocarpus heterophyllus*), mango (*Mangifera indica*) and banana (*Musa spp.*) dominate the local diet and market scene, there exists a hidden treasure of lesser-known fruits that are quietly rooted in culture and ecology. One such fascinating yet overlooked fruit is Kara Pazham (*Corynocarpus laevigatus*), locally called Karaka belongs to the family Corynocarpaceae.

The species has its origins in New Zealand and the Pacific Islands, where it is an important part of indigenous Maori culture. Over time, it spread to other tropical and subtropical regions, including parts of Kerala (Koramandel Coast), where it thrives in homesteads, temple surroundings and village landscapes. Unlike many exotic introductions that gained rapid commercial acceptance, Kara Pazham remained a minor, underutilized fruit, often remembered more in folk sayings and childhood stories than in markets.

What makes Kara Pazham interesting is not its commercial value, but its ethnobotanical (Study of the relationship between plants and people) significance. In Kerala's rural culture, every fruit had a role to play either in food, medicine or symbolism. Kara Pazham, though not sweet or juicy like mango or guava, was woven into everyday experiences. Children collected its bright greenish-orange drupes during play, while elders used it as a metaphor for life's bittersweet lessons in their proverbs and stories.



Fig-1 : Karaka

Physical Characteristics

The tree is medium to large with glossy, dark green leaves. It is evergreen, making it suitable as a shade and ornamental tree. The fruit is a small drupe, oval in shape turning bright greenish-orange to red colour when ripe. At first glance, Kara Pazham looks attractive, but its bittersweet, resinous flavour often discourages repeated consumption.

Inflorescence and Fruit characters

- **Flowers:** Small, greenish-white, borne in clusters.
- **Fruits:** Oval drupes with a single seed, fleshy but slightly astringent.
- **Season:** Late summer to monsoon months in Kerala.

Cultural and Folk Significance

Kara Pazham is remembered more for its symbolism than taste. In Kerala, elders often compare life experiences to the fruit:

- In a land where every fruit has value, even a Kara Pazham is not wasted.
- Life is like Kara Pazham – bitter at first, but beneficial in the end.

These sayings reflect the philosophical outlook of rural communities, where even a minor fruit was woven into wisdom. For children, collecting Kara Pazham was part of play, adding a nostalgic identity to the fruit.

Uses

Traditional Uses: Kaara Pazham was occasionally consumed fresh, particularly by children who plucked the ripe greenish-orange fruits during their playtime. Although the taste was not considered pleasant, households sometimes prepared chutneys and pickles by blending the pulp with spices. In certain folk practices, the seeds were also roasted and eaten and also used to make whistle, adding to the fruit's role as a survival food in rural settings.

Medicinal and Folk Remedies: In folk medicine, decoctions prepared from the pulp and leaves were administered in very small doses to ease digestive troubles. The fruit was also believed to act as a mild coolant for the body, especially during the hot summer months. Beyond its practical applications, Kaara Pazham carried symbolic meaning and was occasionally used in rituals as a representation of endurance and strength.

Ecological Uses: As an evergreen tree, Kaara Pazham serves as a valuable component of homesteads and agroforestry systems, providing shade and contributing to the greenery of village landscapes. Its fruits, though not widely consumed by humans, are eaten by birds and insects, thereby supporting biodiversity and ecological balance.

Nutritional and Pharmacological Potential

Although underexplored, Kaara Pazham fruits are thought to contain valuable bioactive compounds. Antioxidants present in the fruit helps to reduce oxidative stress, while other phytochemicals could provide anti-inflammatory benefits. In addition, the fruit may offer traces of essential vitamins and minerals, though detailed nutritional studies are still lacking. Further scientific investigation is required to validate its potential as a nutraceutical resource.

Challenges for Popularization

Despite its cultural and ecological significance, Kaara Pazham faces several challenges to gaining wider recognition. Its bitter and resinous taste limits consumer acceptance and discourages regular consumption. Younger generations are unfamiliar with the fruit, as it is rarely seen in markets and survives only in scattered homestead trees. Moreover, there is no organized commercial cultivation or dedicated horticultural research to promote its value.

Why Rediscover Kaara Pazham?

Even with these challenges, Kaara Pazham deserves renewed attention. Conserving such minor fruits contributes to biodiversity preservation and helps to maintain ecological stability. Beyond ecological benefits, the fruit is deeply tied to Kerala's food heritage, keeping alive folk wisdom and rural childhood memories. Its hardy nature and ability to thrive in marginal soils make it suitable for sustainable farming systems. With more research and promotion,

Kaara Pazham could emerge as a minor fruit with major potential, particularly in the fields of nutraceuticals and herbal formulations.



Fig-2 : Pickle prepared using Karaka

Is Karaka an environmental weed?

When karaka is planted outside its natural range it can become invasive, dominating areas and shading out other species both in New Zealand and also in Koramandel region, where it was deliberately introduced for reforestation purposes. Traits that likely contribute to its invasive ability include periodically high seed production, high seed viability and large seeds that give rise to fast-establishing, sturdy, deep-rooted and highly shade-tolerant seedlings. Karaka grows well in a range of conditions and creates deep shade in the understory, which can reduce both the number and diversity of other native species seedlings. Karaka seedlings are relatively unpalatable to grazing mammals, which likely gives karaka an additional advantage over more palatable native species. Trees readily resprout from cut stumps and from branches left on the ground.



Fig-3 : Karaka seedlings & Stump sprouting's

Conclusion

Kara Pazham may not rival mango or jackfruit in sweetness or popularity, but it stands as a living symbol of Kerala's forgotten fruit heritage. Its presence in proverbs, folk medicine and rural nostalgia makes it more than a fruit it is a cultural artifact. Promoting its conservation and studying its phytochemistry can unlock both scientific value and cultural pride. Rediscovering such minor fruits ensures that Kerala's food traditions remain as diverse as its landscapes.

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