



# The Ethnic Foods Of Tamil Nadu: A Journey To The Traditional Cuisine

<sup>1</sup>Kandasamy P T, <sup>2</sup>Dr.J.Arul,

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D. Research Scholar, <sup>2</sup>Associate Professor,

<sup>1</sup>Department of English,

<sup>1</sup>CSI Bishop Appasamy College of Arts and Science, Coimbatore, India

**Abstract:** Life and food have long been intertwined. Tamil Nadu, India, boasts an extensive culinary heritage that stretches back thousands of years. A large portion of the food that is today popular throughout the world originated in Tamil Nadu. Tamil Nadu's ancient scholars held that eating healthily was the key to longevity and that cooking was a skill that was passed down through the generations via writing. Despite alterations in culture and the adaptation of different variations, the conventional method of measuring components still exists. Foods that one eats remarkably affect our bodies each day. Thiruvalluvar has beautifully elucidated how food is medicine and affirms the gap between every meal consumed. The Pathupaatu anthology has diverse instances of food consumed during ancient times. Every organ, including the heart that pumps blood and the brain and neurons that govern our body, depends on the nutrients that one acquires from the food one eats to perform their essential activities. The idea of food as medicine conveys the fact that even small food particles can have transformative powers. The nutrition one consumes has a direct impact on the health of every organ in our body. The appropriate sitting position for eating and the process of digestion is fully elucidated by the Tamil Writers. These scientifically acclaimed ideas had already been present in Sangam literature representing the heritage of our tradition.

**Index Terms** - Food, Heritage, Health, Sangam Literature, Recipe.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Food and life have always been inseparable. There is a vast array of food with a long history that dates back thousands of years in Tamil Nadu, India. Tamil Nadu is the birthplace of much of the cuisine that is currently popular worldwide. The ancient Tamil writers have always understood the importance of food and have beautifully reflected it in their writings. The genuine flavor of our tradition is the only taste to which our tongue can relate. A man's love of food is unbreakable, and examining its origins and evolution sheds light on the long history of taste. Furthermore, the importance of food, vegetarian meal options, and the idea that old techniques of preparation and consumption have influenced modern eating patterns illustrate the depth of knowledge passed down from our ancestors. The advancement in culinary arts is immense, and we are grateful to all the writers who have created this ideal combination of cuisine and proper eating technique. This paper will discuss Tamil Nadu's ethnic vegetarian cuisine, which continues to have an impact on the state's present culinary traditions while preserving its rich aroma and taste with love.

## II. THE TREATS FROM THE PAST

Tamil literature from the past has multiple references to the cuisine that is popular today. Great writers of the past have always expressed their admiration and affection for food. A mention of few of beverages that ancient Tamilians would have consumed, based on available sources. Buttermilk is mentioned in *Pathuppattu*, a collection of Sangam literature, buttermilk is touched upon. Buttermilk is still popular, not only in Tamil Nadu but also in India, where people enjoy it by adding coriander, green chilli, and other flavorings based on their personal preferences. Following in the footsteps of tradition, it still has its own audience who would prefer a large glass of buttermilk in the summer to that of any other soft drink. Not only does *Pathuppattu* mention buttermilk, but it also mentions milk, tender coconut, and other drinks.

The diets of our ancestors included a variety of rice kinds. In Malaipadukadam, there is a reference to bamboo and thina rice, which provides literary proof that other types of rice were once consumed.

“They’ll serve thee large fresh slices fried in ghee,  
With lovely tinai rice.” (Chelliah, 209)

According to a study, bamboo rice has a higher protein content than both wheat and rice. It also helps with back pain, rheumatic pain, and joint discomfort. Regular consumption of bamboo rice lowers cholesterol levels for persons with cholesterol problems. It also possesses anti-diabetic qualities. This demonstrates how healthily our ancestors had followed a diet and emphasizes the significance of the daily food choices we make, which have an ongoing effect on our bodies.

“The bamboo rice becoming ripe and fit  
For use stand motionless” (Chelliah, 208).

### III. EATING RIGHT AS THE SECRET TO GOOD HEALTH

Thiruvalluvar doesn't need an introduction because he is well-known for his brilliant couplets, which have helped the world attain noble values. Within his one hundred and thirteen sections called Athigaram in Tamil, he discusses on food in two sections. Under the heading medicine, he talks about the proper way to eat. The contemporary sciences have acknowledged his theories regarding digestion.

“If one-take food again, only after the earlier meal has been well digested,  
No medicine is needed to ensure good health” (Diaz, 942)

The above couplet means, no kind of medication will be needed to maintain the body's health if a second meal is only consumed after ensuring that the first meal has been completely digested.

“After digesting what has been eaten earlier, have  
Food again in right measure” (Diaz, 942)

This kural gives emphasis on the amount of food intake and gaps between meals. This serves as a reminder of the previous Kural, which states that one should only eat again when the prior meal has been thoroughly digested. Here, moderation in eating habits is discussed as the correct route to a long and healthy life, whereas previously this was stressed as the best approach to prevent needing to take any medication for good health. Thus, Valluvar has always insisted on a healthy lifestyle where food is not to serve the purpose but to serve the purpose of life.

The first recipe book

The art of recipe writing has brought literature and food together. A cook book is where taste meets words. Through the art of writing, cooking has been passed down through generations. During ancient times, people faced hardships in publishing a recipe book. Today, a diverse variety of cooking books are available, and the development of social media has made cooking possible for all. The credit for writing the first cookery book in Tamil belongs to Meenakshi Ammal, who wrote *Samaithu paar* in 1951. This served as the foundation for the revival of authentic vegetarian foods. This was later translated as *Cook & See* in English.

This Mango Soup recipe drafted below is from the fifth edition of *Cook and See*. To make 4 cups of this soup, add the ingredients listed below: Mango is the main ingredient of this dish. A tiny type of cucumber One half-sized coconut and some red chilies 6. Sour butter milk, fenugreek seeds, 1 teaspoon mustard Curry leaves, ¼ tea spoon of turmeric powder, two teaspoons of salt, and one cup. Scrape off the mango's skin. Cut into large pieces. Additionally, scrape off and chop the cucumber's skin into small pieces. 4 red chilies should be fried in some oil. Take out. Make a paste out of it and the coconut.

### IV. FOOD AS MEDICINE

Our bodies undergo amazing changes every day, caused by the food consumed. The vital functions of every organ, starting from the blood-pumping heart and the control system of our body, brain, and neurons, rely upon the nutrients that one gets from the food consumed. The concept of food as medicine embodies the message of how mere food particles serve as life-changing capsules. The food one eats is a crucial factor in determining the well-being of all organs in our body. The amount of food, the time of consumption, and even the posture while eating have to be carefully monitored because an error in any of the three can possibly affect the well-being of the systems in our body. Well, in this modern era, owing to various technological developments, people are able to identify and cure their ailments. The why and how habits influence one's health makes it really interesting in a way. The concept of healthy food led to a better life century ago, dwelling in the world's oldest yet legendary one. In Tamil literature, one can find an ocean of contents sung upon types of food, proper time of consumption, posture to be maintained while consuming foods, appropriate types of food for every season, medicinal values of food, treatments, and etcetera...*Tirumantiram*, written by Tirumular, has explored the themes of food as medicine. He also insists the importance of drinking water and

calls it the ultimate medicine. The below lines demonstrate that past generations understood the value of drinking water, and the subsequent sentences share same perspective.

“Drink of this divine-water  
A hundred pepper measure  
No medicine beyond this, know men” (Tirumular, 199)

The popular practices of mindful eating and eating beyond the limit are mentioned in *Tirukkural* by Tiruvalluvar. He skillfully pens in his couplet by stating the stomach of a human as fire. The exact translation of the word in Tamil has two meanings: one is fire, and the other means something harmful. The stomach's ability to digest food is what is ultimately meant by the fire stated here. Thirukural's lines that follow illustrate that

“The man who eats beyond the limit of his digestive powers,  
Will be subject to all kinds of ailments.” (Diaz, 946)

Theraiyar in his book *Pathartha Guna Chintamani* mentioned medicinal properties several plants with its uses for specific diseases. Some of them are as follows:

Properties of climbing brinjal also known as Thoothuvalai in tamil has highly acclaimed medical property. Its flower improves spermatogenesis, it's unripened fruit is used to neutralize vatha, pitha and kapha, its root is used to cure diseases of teeth. Bottle guard also known as suraikai in tamil has been used for several medicinal purposes. Its leaves are used as a remedy for anasarca and dysuria, it's stem is used to neutralize pitha. Woolly heart vine also known as naralai in tamil serves a major role in treating various diseases. Its leaves are used for curing ratha gunmam in women, its tuber is used as a powerful remedy for general disease, eczema, ulcer and hemorrhoids. The stem of the plantain tree is used to cure venereal diseases, its fruit relieves body pain and the unripened fruit aggravates vatha.

## V. THE NATURAL SOURCES OF FOOD

Throughout the world, various crops are grown in various locations. Plants are the gift from nature and stands the greatest natural source of food. According to literary sources, rice was the most commonly consumed food in Tamil Nadu, and this still holds true now. The ultimate occupation in India is farming, which is renowned for its lush, beautiful grasslands. With regard to Tamil Nadu's vegetarian diet, the paddy crop has acquired prominence in the region's rice production. In ancient India, there was an abundance of grains, including millet, along with rice. India has traditionally taken pride in its abundant flora. The land's rich soil produced plump fruits and vegetables in addition to grains. They were aware of both its exquisite flavor and nutritional content. The tranquil beauty fields of Madura belonging to the Pandayan kingdom are eloquently explained and elaborated in Ilango Adigal's work, *Silappadikaram*. This highlights the rich greenery that served as a food supply in ancient times during the Sangam era. A line from its translation quotes as follows.

“To the singing of birds in the suburban groves, in the tracts of shining water, and in the paddy fields bent  
with the weight of crops” (V.R. Ramachandra Dikshitar, 199)

## VI. MEAT-EATING

Meat eating is very popular in today's world, and people love the range of meats available and the ways in which they were cooked and consumed. Meat consumption is rising in India, where most people view agriculture as their primary source of income. India is the second-largest beef exporter in the world. Ninety-five percent of goat meat produced in India is eaten there. Religions have a significant influence on meat intake. For example, Muslims outlaw eating pork, while Hindus forbid eating beef. Meat is regarded as one of the healthiest animal meals and is now a staple of the human diet due to its abundance in essential proteins, lipids, vitamins, and minerals. Consuming meat is said to provide conjugated linoleic acid and omega-3 fatty acids, which are complex nutrients for human health. Likewise, most people appreciate and relish the numerous types of prepared meat. Not just about the crops; literature also mentions a variety of crop types and varieties. In addition to using natural resources, people in the past went hunting and consumed meat. *Kambaramayanam* serves as an example as Gugan presented fish to Rama, demonstrating the existence of meat consumption in earlier times.

“He spoke: then bearing in a dish  
A gift of honey, meat, and fish” (Griffith, 647)

## VII. FOOD IN REFERENCE TO DEATH

In Tamil literary works, the poems shed light in various disciplines of life and conduct and there were also facts about how food is used in crematory situation. The people used to offer pindam also known as rice ball, to the dead corpse as a form of respect.

“Across it spreads the jungle. Upon it thick spurge grows.  
There in broad daylight the owls cry out and demon women open  
their mouths wide. The cremation fires glow and clouds  
of smoke cover that fearful burning ground. Hot, white  
ashes on the earth littered with bones are quenched by tears  
of lovers, weeping, their hearts full of longing.  
It has seen the back of every human being, all the people  
living in this world as they go away,  
but no one has ever seen it turn its back and go away.” (Hart)

## VIII. CONCLUSION

Virigina Woolf quotes the importance of food as follows:

"One cannot eat well or sleep well if one has not dined well."

This line speaks about food and its importance in every man's life. Such a food has to be carefully chosen, keeping in mind that it should have some health-enhancing properties. It shouldn't possess any kind of deteriorating feature. The food habits followed in ancient times have completely changed as the modern era is full of fusion foods and junk foods. Though the change in food habits drastically changed, a lot of people liked such foods as they were filled with tempting flavors. But the food always accompanied a wide range of health issues, such as too much pastry, which gave rise to diabetes, and too much restaurant-bought food, which called for various health issues. The scientific and medical researchers succeeded in finding cures for almost all the diseases, but the upsetting part is that these medicines in turn caused a lot of side effects in the body. Interestingly, a wide range of topics on food measures and health care are clearly depicted in the ancient Tamil literature. We have already witnessed a glimpse of a few anthologies on food. We learn that every ingredient we add to our taste bud has an immense effect on each organ of our body. Tamils are particularly known for their ayurvedic and allopathic types of treatments, which encompass the use of natural resources for diseases. It is astonishing to find that the king of Lanka, Ravana, though portrayed as an antagonist in the Ramayana, is remarkably well known as a great scientific researcher of the time. He had a keen interest in the medicinal values of plants. The research shows that Ravana had probably written a number of books on plants and their medicinal values to cure human disease. It even included the treatment of coma. Though the book is now unavailable, a number of authors have quoted several medical treatments mentioned in Ravana's book (written in Tamil). The treatment given on the principles of the book is named "Sindhaamani maruthuvam," a popular one still practiced in Kerala. All these sources of information impart the crucial fact that food is an essential and inevitable factor in the life of any living organism. Such a food must be nutritious and life-giving. People should keep in mind that food is not the one that always tastes good but the one that always guides your body to a path of disease-free, healthy life.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Adigal, Ilango. *The Silappadikaram*. Trans. V.R.Ramachandra Dikshitar. Madras: Oxford University Press, 1939.
- [2] Ammal, S Meenakshi. *Cook and See*. Chennai: S.Meenakshi Ammal publications, n.d.
- [3] Devi SM, Balachandar V, Lee SI, Kim IH. *An Outline of Meat Consumption in the Indian Population - A Pilot Review*. Korean J Food Sci Anim Resour. 2014;34(4):507-15. doi: 10.5851/kosfa.2014.34.4.507. Epub 2014 Aug 31. PMID: 26761289; PMCID: PMC4662155.
- [4] Heifetz, George Hart and Hank. *The Four Hundred Songs of War and Wisdom*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.
- [5] S.M.Diaz. *Tirukkural*. Vol. 2. Coimbatore: Ramanandha Adigalar Foundation, 2000.
- [6] S.Pavith. [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) . january 2019.
- [7] Sharma, Dr. " Ravana : a great scholar and scientist." *Review* (n.d.).
- [8] Theraiyar. *Pathartha Guna chintamani*. Trans. P.Jeyarai. Chennai, 2009.
- [9] *This is why bamboo rice is good for you*. 26 April 2019. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/food-news/this-is-why-bamboo-rice-is-good-for-you/photostory/69042731.cms>
- [10] Tirumular, Saint. *Tirumantiram*. n.d

[11] Valmiki. *The Ramayan of Valmiki*. Trans. Ralph T.H. Griffith. 2008.

[12] Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of ones own*. Prabhat Prakashan publishers, n.d.

