

TRIBES OF TAMIL NADU AND THEIR DIVERSE FOOD CULTURE

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Abstract: The native people who live in our nation are known as the tribal population. They have been leading a basic existence centred on the natural world for millennia, and they have created cultural norms that are compatible with their social and physical surroundings. Even the literature on the ancient age, including works from the Ramayana and Mahabharata periods, makes mention of these tribes. According to census 2011 in India, Schedule Tribes comprised 8.6% of the total population. The primary concept of the paper is to focus of Tamil Nadu's tribes and their food cultures. They are dispersed over the Kanyakumari district, the Western Ghats, and the Nilgris. Kanyakumari and Tirunelveli are homeland to the Kanis. Thodas, Paniyans of Nilgris, Kotas, and Irulas of Jawadh hills and Malayalis of Kalrayan hills. The food habits of various tribes can provide insight into their respective lifestyles. Numerous tribes still rely on the food and nourishment provided by forest products. Fruits, spinach, millet, and tuberous foods like elephant yams have been common foods consumed by tribal people in southern India. Goat Meat, rats, cats, squirrels, fish, crabs, snails, and other creatures that are found in their habitat are also a part of the tribe food culture. There is a lot of variation across the many tribal groups, including the so-called primitive tribes, a subset of very vulnerable STs. Numerous policies and programs that were started in the tribal areas after Indian independence had far-reaching effects.

Keywords: food culture, forest products, habitat, lifestyle, Tamil Nadu tribes.

I. INTRODUCTION

The word "tribes" describes a group of people that occupy remote, undeveloped areas like mountains and forests which are quite from the most advanced contemporary society (Narain, 2019). They have a well-defined life with definite rules, morals, customs, traditions, language, and ways of worship (Sathiyarayanan et al., 2019). Throughout history, several terms have been used to describe the Indian tribal population, including Adivasi, forest tribes, hill tribes, backward tribes, primitive tribes, and indigenous people (animists). Since the indigenous people are the original or earliest known occupants of a given region, they are also referred to as first people, First Nations, aboriginal or native people, or autochthonous people in some places. This is because these groups have settled, occupied, or colonized the area more recently (Senthilkumar et al., 2020). Tribes are social groups of a simple kind, characterized by a common name, language, territory, culture, and a tradition of common descent. They are frequently recognized as a nation's indigenous people, leading simple lifestyles based on their natural surroundings as they develop rituals that fit well with their environment.

The food habits of various tribes may frequently provide insight into their respective lifestyles. Tribals, for example, have a dietary culture that reflects their connectedness to nature. Numerous Indian tribes still rely on the food and nourishment provided by forest products. Research on tribal societies' eating patterns has been spurred by the increased interest in sustainable living and environmental issues. Fruits, millets, and tuberous foods like elephant yams are among the staple foods consumed by tribal people in southern India, and each tribe has varied dietary habits.

II. TRIBES IN INDIA

India is the second-largest country with different tribal communities all over the world after Africa (Jaiswal, 2015). According to the 2011 census in India, the tribal population is 10.43 crore, comprising 8.6% of the total population of the country and 15% of the country area (Karibeeran, 2016). In the Indian subcontinent, there are 705 scheduled tribes (STs) and subtribes living, among them, 75 ethnic groups are classified as "particularly vulnerable tribal groups" (Gandhi et al, 2017). There are 570 distinct groups in India that make up the tribal people.



The majority of places inhabited by tribes have a low level of economic development. The 69 million tribal people who live in India's plains and hills are the subject of several studies and research projects, thus these programmes are extremely important to us.

Tribes in Tamilnadu:

The major tribes of Tamil Nadu include the Malayali, Toda, Kurumbas, Paniyan, Irular, Kattunayakan, Kanikkar, Palliyan, and Kadar. The Indian government has identified 36 STs living in 38 districts of the state. These tribes have unique social structures, occupations, and cultural traditions that have developed throughout time. These tribes have managed to maintain their characteristics and rituals within the varied cultural environment of Tamil Nadu, while encountering challenges in their socio-economic advancement (Nazeer, 2015).

Tamil Nadu has a rich history of tribal communities that have inhabited the region for centuries. The tribal population in Tamil Nadu is identified as the aboriginal inhabitants of the country, living simple lives based on their natural environment and developing cultural patterns suited to their surroundings. The tribal population in Tamil Nadu is relatively low compared to the general population. Tamil Nadu can be broadly classified into three geographical regions, namely, the Eastern coast line region, the central plain area and North and west mountains regions where the majority of the tribal people are living.

The important hills of Tamil Nadu are the Jawadhu hills and Elagiri hills of North Arcot district, the Kalrayan hills of south Arcot district, the Pachamalai, the Kollimalai and Yergadu hills of Salem district, the Anamalai of Coimbatore district, the Sitteri hills of Dharmabari district, the Palanimalai of Dindigul district, Elumalai (cardamom hills) hills and Varshanad hills of Theni district. According to the 2011 census, 794,697 STs were living in Tamil Nadu, of which 401,068 were male and 393,629 were female. The rural and urban population of ST is 660,280 and 134,417, respectively, and the percentage of ST population in Tamil Nadu is 1.1% of the total population (Senthilkumar et al., 2020).

Food Culture of Tribals from South India

Tribal food culture is heavily dependent upon the seasonal availability of various food items. Items such as cereals and mushrooms are usually consumed during the summer season. During winter, potatoes and yams are preferred. Also, during the winter season, people usually consume boiled food. Additionally, the tribal communities follow the tradition of consuming seasonal vegetables. While a lot of greens are gathered from forests, these communities also cultivate seasonal vegetation for consumption. Spinach is a popular food item amongst tribal communities of south India. It is a customary practice to include spinach in their daily food.

The tribal food culture also includes a lot of meat. Due to their dependence on nature, they have traditionally consumed fish, crabs, snails, etc., that are found abundantly in water resources. However, it should be noted that these food items have predominantly been for self-consumption and not commercial purposes, due to which wastage and overutilization of resources have been avoided, enabling these communities to practice sustainable living. One of the most popular and cherished food items in tribal culture has been honey. Many tribal communities like the Paliyars are involved in extracting honey from forests as their traditional occupation. In pre-globalized and neo-liberal societies, the extraction of honey was mainly for self-consumption, but now they are also sold commercially. Honey has a long shelf life and hence can be consumed over a long period of time.

This makes it a perfect preserved nutritious source of food. The tribal communities of south India, heavily consume honey. It is a regular part of their diet as it is believed that it has many medicinal properties. Spices too are a big part of the tribal food culture. Spices such as turmeric, cloves, cinnamon, mustard seeds, etc., are said to carry many medicinal properties and are hence consumed frequently. The tribal food culture is different from the mainstream food culture. It is centred upon food items that are believed to carry medicinal properties and are found abundantly in nature.

Health status of tribes:

One of the most essential efforts by humans to raise the standard of living, particularly for indigenous people, is health care. Tribal groups' health issues have been greatly impacted by a variety of social, cultural, educational, political, and economic activities. The primary contributing factors to their poor health include unhygienic environment, lack of knowledge and poor personal hygiene (Shankar and Manimaran, 2013).

Many Indian tribal communities who reside within or close to forests depend on the medicinal plants found there to treat a variety of illnesses, including colds, coughs, indigestion, dysentery, fevers, headaches, jaundice, joint pain, skin conditions, stomach ulcers, toothaches, nausea, female infertility, psoriasis, and wound healing (Savithramma et al., 2016). Additionally, a number of studies have discovered that tribal communities use contemporary health care facilities at relatively low rates due to variances in infrastructure, human resources, supplies, and spatial distribution (Sathyanarayanan et al., 2019).

Since these tribes have few medical facilities and easy access to medicinal plants in their immediate surroundings, traditional medicine is frequently the primary line of therapy for them (Kumar et al., 2020). These tribes are currently facing serious threats by modern medicine, preferring to neglect traditional healing because of contemporary care. Poverty, illiteracy, misunderstanding about the causes of sickness, a holistic environment, and inadequate sanitation all contribute to their suffering. As a result, they do not visit hospitals to receive contemporary medical care; instead, they prefer to receive treatment from natives using herbal or traditional remedies. This results in a lack of intervention for several diseases, including vector-borne illnesses, inherited genetic disorders, occupational diseases, communicable diseases, and noncommunicable diseases (NCD) (Brindha and Vidyalakshmi, 2013).

The prominent tribes in Tamil Nadu:

The number of tribal people of certain groups decreases or remains unchanged, they are called particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTGs). The rest of the tribal communities distributed throughout the country are called “dispersed tribes”. There are 36 groups of STs in Tamil Nadu, out of which six tribal groups, namely (1) Todas, (2) Kotas, (3) Kurumbas, (4) Irulas, (5) Paniyas, and (6) Kattunayakas, are characterized as PVTGs by the Government of India and they live mainly in and around the Nilgiris district (Gandhimathi, 2016). Table-1 given below reveals the different characteristics of six prominent tribes of Tamilnadu.

Table-1
Characteristics of six prominent tribes in Tamilnadu

Features of tribes	Todas	Kotas	Kurumba	Irula	Paniyas	Kattunayakas
Name	Toda is derived from “tud”- the sacred tree of the Todas (Magimairaj and Balamurugan, 2017)	Derived from the word “Ko” meaning “the mountain.”	The Betta Kuruba (Betta meaning ‘Hill’, Kuruba meaning ‘shepherd’)	The name “Irula” is derived from the Tamil root word “Irul” meaning the darkness of night (Senthilkumar et al., 2020)	The word “Paniyan” literally means a “worker.” It is a modified form of the Malayalam word “Panikkar” (laborers) (Ramachandran and Udhayavan, 2013)	The word “Kattunayakan” literally means “Chief of the forest,” which is derived from two words “kattu or kadu” which means “forest” and “nayakan” meaning “chief” (Gandhi et al., 2017)
Other names	Todas, Todar, Tudavans, Toras	Koter, Kotharu, Kothewar, Kohatur	Alu or Palu Kurumbas, Betta Kurumbas, Jenu or Teen Kurumbas, Mullu Kurumbas, Urali Kurumbas	Erlar (or) Poosari, Eralollu, Irulas, Shikari, Pujari, Iriligaru, Iruliga, Iruvan, Villiar	Kattupaniyar	Sikarinayakan, Kadu or Shola Nayakans, Golla, Irula, Korava, Thottiyar
God worship	Worship God “Shiva” and mountains, hills	Worship fire, moon and nature	Lord Shiva in the name of Bhairavan and worship animal s, birds, trees, rock hillocks, and snakes	Goddess Kanniamma	Kali and worship banyan tree	Lord Shiva in the name of Bhairavan and worship the Goddess Jakkamma and Mallaiyar
Language	Dravidian language family of Toda (Tamil and Malayalam)	Dravidian language family of Kota (Tamil and Kannada)	Dravidian language family of Kurumba (Tamil and Kannada)	Dravidian language family of Irula (Tamil, Yerukala, Sholaga, and other Tamil languages)	Dravidian language family of Paniya (Tamil and Malayalam)	Dravidian language family (Tamil and Telugu and Malayalam and Kannada)

Occupation	Practicing commercial agriculture, especially cultivating vegetables such as cabbage and potatoes (Singh and Mishra, 2015)	Pottery and carpentry; blacksmiths	Hunters and food gatherers; painting and witchcraft	Rat and snake catchers; fishing	Hunters and food gatherers	Hunters and food gatherers; collection of honey and wax
Food pattern	Mostly they are vegetarians. Their favourite dish is rice, boiled in milk locally known as "Jagari". They also prefer curd, churned milk, plain milk. Both the sex in this community are addicted to liquor and have a habit of smoking (Lagachu, 2020).	They are non-vegetarians and their staple food is ragi, but they also take samai, wheat and rice. The morning meal is tabettu, lunch tagu. Men use alcoholic drinks and are fond of coffee and tea (Chandramohan, 2018).	They eat flesh and drink liquor, a favourite beverage being prepared from ragi flour (Eleusine coracana). They subsist on wild bamboo seeds and tender terminal vegetative part of bamboo, called odaikuttu, edible yams and roots. They collect the roots and wild yams (Dioscorea), part of which they eat, and the rest they exchange with 22 farmers for grains. They prepare good food like higher caste people and relish the same (Chakravarty and Mukerjee, 1964).	The Vegetarian eat rice, ragi and all kinds of pulses. Groundnut and Palm oil are the cooking medium. Ragi, mustard, grains and pulses are the main food item. Non-Vegetarian take animal protein of Rat, Cat, Squirrel, Birds, and meats of chicken, goat, pig and fish are favorites. They cook once a day for supper is the non-vegetarian of Irulas Tribes (Bhavani and Nithya 2021).	They use edible roots, leaves etc. The major food items include tapioca, vegetables, animal flesh, fish etc. Besides drinking tea or coffee, they are addicted to drinking toddy and some varieties of alcoholic beverages (Baby, 2021).	The Kattunayakkar are non-vegetarian, who abstain from eating rice, millets and ragi are their staple food items. They consume all kinds of pulses, vegetables, roots, tubers, and fruits. They use either ground nut oil or coconut oil for cooking; both men and women consume liquor, especially of festival and ceremonial days. They consume milk and milk products. Men smoke beedis, cigarettes and cheroot. They view betel with tobacco (Ganesan, 2015).

III. CONCLUSION

Even though some Tamil Nadu's tribes have undergone significant modernization, they continue to adhere to their traditional ways of life. The eating patterns of the tribe differ from those of the general population. It revolves around foods that are available in nature and thought to have therapeutic qualities. Additionally, they consume other non-vegetarian foods. They take foods like snails, rats, crabs, and so on that are not often associated with common food. However, the fact that their food supplies are abundant in different nutrients and their dependency on plants and the natural world has impacted their eating patterns.

Their particular foods are the subject of several studies now being conducted in an effort to guarantee health advantages and encourage sustainable living. One example of such an endeavour is bamboo rice, a traditional food item among numerous indigenous cultures.

IV. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors sincerely acknowledges Indian Council of Social Science Research for providing grant for the tribal study and also be grateful to PSG College of Arts & Science for constant support rendered for the tribal study.

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