



Food manifested communication of traditional knowledge among tribal women in Tamil Nadu

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Every culture has its own traditional food practice. In the recent past, the traditional food practices and the transfer of knowledge have been in transition. A study was conducted among women tribes in *Kolli Hills*, *Pachamalai Hills* and *Pechiparai* in Tamil Nadu to assess the Traditional Food Knowledge (TFK) of tribal women and their transmission through generations. A total number of 66 women from these three tribal and hill areas were selected randomly for this study. This study explores unique traditional food knowledge, practices and their present day adaptations and how they had used their traditional food for communicating their indigenous knowledge. A self-structured questionnaire, FGD and in-depth interviews were conducted to understand the tribe's perception towards traditional food and communication. The results revealed that food practices in three different places were not the same and not consistent in Pachamalai. Impacts of modern food habits among the tribes were also seen in the results.

Keywords: Food manifested communication, *Kani* and *Malayali* tribes in Tamil Nadu, Scientific temper, Tribal traditional food and knowledge (TFK)

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Traditional Food Knowledge¹ TFK, is important to keep indigenous people's health and community living. This provides an individual with the capacity to prepare meals that are nutritious, safe and culturally relevant, and it is a product of generations of people, usually women, learning from each other and their environment about how to feed themselves². *Kani* and *Malayali* tribes are known for their knowledge on food and their delicacies of natural ingredients, exotic flavours and ethno medicinal capacity. This study needed to know the status of food manifested communication, traditional knowledge on food and ascertain changes in the present day environment. Food had a very important role in the development of the earliest forms of human communication³. It further adds that sharing food can mark entry into a community, making people an integral part of the same culture and putting them in communication with each other. Preparing a recipe of their choice and over on a plate of food form communication of knowledge of their sustainable living.

Malayali tribes are present in the *Kolli Hills* located in Tiruchirappalli and Namakkal districts and *Pachamalai Hills* which are spread over in Tiruchirappalli, Perambalur and Salem districts and *Kani* tribes live in the areas of *Pechiparai* in Kanniyakumari district. *Pachamalai* and *Kolli Hills* are located in the Eastern Ghats and *Pechiparai* belongs to Western Ghats. *Kani* tribes are known for their lores, rites and their ability of communication.

The theoretical and practical knowledge transmitted from generation to generation and involved in the elaboration of these foods are basic, since they define the What? (raw material to be used), How? (production techniques and processes), and Who? (person in charge of elaboration)⁴. Hence, searching, preparation, serving and sharing of food among tribes are forming the communication of traditional knowledge on food and that is passed to the next generations.

Kolli Hills, abound with herbs, has rich tradition as the region was ruled by one of the last seven philanthropist kings of Tamil Nadu, Valvil Ori around 200 CE, who is celebrated in several *Sangam* Tamil

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Classic Literatures. It is believed that the Dravidian eight hand deity *Kolli Paavai* rules the region by her traits of fierce and gracefulness. The idol of *Kolli Paavai* was created by Tamil *Siddhas* (Sages) and the mythological legends, tales, and oral narratives of the region have been transferred since many generations.

Malayali tribes living in *Kolli Hills* believe that they lived in plains earlier and have settled in the hilly region later. Therefore, *Malayali* tribes return to plain areas during the times of census with dress and manners as *Vellala* community whose profession is cultivation⁵. Their songs also represent this. The tribes call themselves as *Goundar* community. The food habits of *Gounder* and *Vellala* communities living in the plain areas are different from the *Malayali* tribes living in hilly areas. *Malayali* tribes in the *Kolli Hills* have been involved in the agriculture activities, *Malayali* women also engaged in the drudgery of agriculture and household chores. Hence, the natural living of *Malayali* tribes has been under stress, and they have been slowly drifting away from their original lifestyle of cultivating and consuming small millets and other produces in the hilly areas.

Pachamalai is named after its lush green colour of forests, and ruled by *Ilancherai Irumporai* during 150-171 AD. The name *Malayali* is derived from the word *Malai* (Hill) and *Al* (Person). Hence, it denotes the inhabitants of the mountains. *Malayali* tribes in both the hills worship various gods. During the field visits, it was observed that many of the *Pachamalai* tribes became labourers in the farms of cash crops. They have also been living amidst the development activities and construction of roads and movements of vehicles for the purposes of large business of agriculture including cashew nuts and vegetables.

The study was conducted in the area of *Pechiparai*, Kaniyakkumari District. *Kani* tribes have a very rich tradition of having varieties of food recipes and many of them are still in the practice. With first-hand experience of the medicinal benefits of arogyapacha (*Trichopus zeylanicus*) from *Kani* tribes, Dr. Pushpangadan discovered that the plant has anti-stress and immune-stimulating properties, also boosts stamina and activates the body's natural defenses and cellular immune system. The Jawaharlal Nehru Tropical Botanical Garden and Research Institute (JNTBGRI) in Kerala, named the product out of ayurvedic formulation from Arogyapacha as "Jeevani"⁶. *Kani* tribes have been engaged in agriculture activities and now they have come out

from their tradition and have been working in rubber farms. *Kani* tribes are known for their food and herbal knowledge. Other than the study area, the *Malayali* tribes also reside in Kalrayan hills, Shervaroyan hills and Jawathu hills of Tamil Nadu and *Kani* tribes have settled in other villages and in the parts of Western Ghats of Kerala.

Literature Review

Communication establishes the values and traditions of tribal community through their discourses during grouping and meeting. Understanding how food operates as a system of communication, and how communication theory and practices can be understood by considering food in this way⁷ is need of the hour. Among tribes, the system works from the collection of food until sharing the food with family and others.

Tribals source their food from their agricultural activities and from the natural resources in the forests. Tribal women are well experienced and they play a major role in utilisation of wild edible plants⁸. Tribes identify their food from the knowledge transferred from past generations. Regular practice and knowledge sharing through communication are the key elements in determining the sustainability of the Malay traditional food knowledge for future generations⁹. All the activities related to satisfy their needs of foods form discourses and communications. Agriculture and in particular to the nature of means production, for example, the hoe, the plough and the tractor. Not that these factors were the only important ones, and developments in the means of communication were also stressed¹⁰.

Botanical survey of India has reported that 46,214 plant species are found in India of global flora of these 17,500 represents flowering plants¹¹. Thirty seven of these are endemic and found in North-East of India. A project stated that about 7,500 medicinal plants, 3,900 edible plants, 525 fiber and cordage yielding plants, 400 fodder plants, 300 pisci-cides and pesticides were reported by all 24 research centres including BSI¹². In an earlier study a FGD was conducted with adult members to identify commonly consumed indigenous foods¹³. And they identified that the utilisation and ease of assimilation of indigenous foods into routine diets can be leveraged to address malnutrition in tribal communities. Further to using these plants as foods, the primitive and indigenous people have been using several plants for

combating disease for centuries and are finding wide acceptance in traditional medicinal use¹⁴.

Tribal people have a greater extent of knowledge to use these varieties of natural food resources. The advent of modern civilization has adversely affected the age-old tradition and thus the younger generations of tribal people of the region are not exposed to traditional practices¹⁵. *Kani* have been using 14 plants to cure skin diseases and 15 plants to treat poisonous bites¹⁶. In *Kolli Hills* of *Malayali* tribes 45 genera belong to 33 families to treat various diseases¹⁷. Discourses have been

There is a grave danger of traditional knowledge, on traditional medication of *Pachamalai Hills*, which is disappearing as the younger members of the tribe have no interest and knowledge of this form of medicine¹⁸. Researchers across the world have been reporting this as a threat. Tribes living in *Pachamalai* source their food from agriculture and market. Traditional knowledge of *Malayali* tribes there are in grave danger as their dietary change over the period of time. Food of tribes of *Malayali* in *Pachamalai* was recorded and found that the food generally comprises *kali* or gruel, their lunch is mostly gruel with greens and their night meal is mostly rice or gruel, which is prepared using ragi, jowar or maize¹⁹.

We know that the spices and other ready-to-eat foods available in markets are different from the traditional use of the tribal population. And many do not aware of the preservatives, emulsifiers, agents, synthetic, other permitted and non-permitted chemicals, usage of spices not only has an impact on their health, but also increased their financial burden and people used to be healthy in those days, uncertainty of getting proper food was a problem, making the count of starved people higher²⁰. Traditional local food was linked intricately with women's knowledge, access patterns, and socio-cultural institutions²¹. Several of Wild Edible Vegetables (WEV) based traditional foods/dishes, have a marketing potential and need popularisation not only in other tribal groups of the states but also in other parts of the world²². Many of the tribes should understand that their food is healthy. As advertisements and other media information on commercial foods communicate certain information to tribes, but the traditional knowledge on food can only be communicated by the tribal people while they share food.

Methodology

The Department of Communication, Madurai Kamaraj University, conducted a Research Project entitled, "S&T Communication on Drudgery Reduction, Health and Nutrition for Tribal Women in Tamilnadu" supported by Vigyan Prasar, Govt. of India. As part of the project, field visits, each two-day training workshops at three tribal locations, In-depth Interviews and observations were conducted in the areas of *Kolli Hills*, *Pachamalai* and *Pechiparai* in Tamil Nadu among *Malayali* and *Kani* Tribes. A total number of 66 tribal women took part in this study from the above three locations. Three different Focus Group Discussions were conducted in 2017 for tribes in each location. And also In-Depth Interviews were conducted in 2019 and after the project period the follow-ups and observations are made. This study explores unique traditional food practices and their present day adaptations and it explored how food enabled among them to share information through communication and data collected through a survey instrument.

Results

Kani tribes were able to describe the recipe of their remarkable traditional food "*Therali Appam*" (Bay Leaf Cake). *Kani* tribal woman Seetha from Pechiparai said that she tells the story whenever she prepares the food and serves it to her children and relatives. She described that the appetising snack is made by making a cone out of the bay leaf, and the cone is filled with *Salankai* flour (now rice flour), dulcified with sugar cane jaggery, honey and cardamom. It is a popular dish among them till now. The youth know about food and recipes through narrations when food is served to them during many occasions. When *Ayani* (A small variety of Jack Fruit) fruit is eaten, they also describe the oil making process from the seeds.

Kani tribes rarely use *Salankai* (*Cycas circinalis*) for making flour for preparing their foods now. Youth in the *Kani* area do only know through oral narration of elder *Kani* tribes. The preparation of the *Salankai* flour and its unique seven time hot water rinsing method, after soaking the broken grains for seven days under running water. This unique method had been used by them for generations. Without this traditional method, if one eats palatable *Salankai* flour, vomiting may happen and the taste will also be difficult to consume. The starch rich *Salankai* flour is now replaced with rice, wheat and atta flours. Many

of the particular types of Salankai palms were destroyed and replaced by the rubber plantations²³.

Seetha further described that she usually picks vegetables, tubers from hilly areas and now they don't find time to do it because of going for work and they don't find any more time to prepare *Therali Appam*. It is now made with rice flour not *Salankai* flour used in the earlier days. She told that, in the earlier days, flour of roasted *Thinai* - foxtail millet (*Setaria italica*) mixed with *Siruthen* - honey from stingless bees (*Apis melipona*), which is rich in aroma, sweet in taste and healthy food – that was given to the kings by the *Kani* tribes, with ripened single horned banana. Now it all became tales for the younger generations.

Kani tribes said that they discuss food while they prepare and eat together on several occasions. They share food along with information among themselves. Preparing foods with tubers, *Salankai* and *ayani* jack fruits have been discussed to younger generations. While searching foods, men have been informing young men about identifying tubers, greens, edible fruits and other food items.

Kani tribes used only castor (*Ricinus communis*) oil and *Ayani* (*Artocarpus hirsutus*) oil. *Malayali* tribes used castor oil, sesame (*Sesamum indicum*) oil in earlier days. The important finding of this study is that *Kani* tribes accepted that they never use *Ayani* oil in the present day cooking. The *Malayali* tribe informed that they use castor oil and sesame oil but later they started to use coconut oil and cow's ghee. In all the FGDs, both tribes informed that they predominantly depend upon the packed cooking oil available in the markets now.

Kani tribes said that the younger generation knows about the *Ayani* and *Salankai* foods from their elders during celebrations in the homes including marriages, puberty traditions and festivals. And they also said that whenever they liked to have the food, the discussion started with the elders and they communicated about the food and its taste, recipe and ingredients. *Kani* tribes and *Malayali* tribes consume different types of tubers even now. In Pachamalai, cooked tubers remained on the embers of the bonfire before shops accompanied black tea in the morning. In the *Kani* settlements, varieties of tubers were present in the homes. Elders in the community teach them and inform them how to identify tubers often they consume.

The wild type of paddy and *Kani's* culinary delight, named *Karanel*, now which is not grown for

harvesting. *Kani* tribes living in Western Ghats, follow their own tradition, but *Kanis* living in Pechiparai have more exposed markets and modern available food items. Hence, the intangible practice of *Salankai* flour and *Karanel* rice based traditional cuisines have now gone away from the *Kani* tribes' tradition in Pechiparai. Even though the tradition of cultivation of *Karanel* paddy has gone away, they accepted that the exchange of information about it continues among the *Kani* tribes, whenever they get time. Though these foods have been vanishing from the practices, the deliberations on food and preparations of food have still alive while they group together to collect food or share foods.

Manju, a *Kani* tribal woman from Pechiparai, said that we usually go work for rubber and farms of agriculture, hence, we cook rice and other dishes and whenever we find time only we cook our traditional foods. We also grow tubers in our home garden, but going hunting and fishing for fishes and mussels are rare nowadays. Thulasi, a *Kani* tribal woman from Pechiparai said that we cannot join together and share our traditional victuals together as it was usual in the earlier days. Now it has become rare.

Earlier, to add hot spice in *Kani's* food or marinate meat, they completely depended upon the *Kandhari Milagu* (*Capsicum frutescens*), a small 'bird's eye chilli'. But now *Kani* women said that they use other varieties of other chillies. This chilli has been still in their discourse on its ability of hot though it is very small in size. *Kani* tribes use fresh water fishes, crabs, mussels, goat and other meats but now they also use broiler chicken, once it was never a part of their food. They said their porridge in the earlier days contained tubers, grains, and cereals, but now this has become rare in their foods. They agreed that the practice of drinking Tea made with barks of *Ellootru* (*Pterospermum rubiginosum*) and eating of *Ottrai Moongi Vazhai* (*Musa* spp), a horn plantain variety of single finger in the entire banana bunch, are not in the list of their menu now.

In Pachamalai, most of the *Malayali* women participating in the FGD, were not able to recognize many of their traditional foods. They have a practice of drying the vegetables and meats and use them when they need to. They often use porridge, gruel, and millet foods in their regular foods along with rice, meat and vegetables. It is a significant finding that they accepted that their food habits are similar to the plain areas. In Pachamalai, Rajammal said that we eat vegetables,

cereals and other food items available in shops. As we are regularly going for cashew farm work and other works, we don't find any time to prepare our own food eaten by our ancestors. Kavitha said that she fries chicken and vegetables during free days and also uses broiler chicken, meats available to us. There is nothing unique in these types of meals produced by them. It shows the threat to the food manifested communication of traditional knowledge in Pachamalai.

Based on the focus group discussions, the significant outcome of this study is that all the tribes located in these areas started frying their foods in hot cooking oil. This is contrasting with their traditional way of cooking. They unanimously accepted that their past generations cooked their recipes only by boiling, steaming and roasting on open fire.

In Kolli Hills, *Malayali* women were better able to recognise their traditional foods than *Malayali* tribes living in Pachamalai. Kolli Hills women are able to tell their traditions of cooking Cereal Bunch Gruel with "*Karu Mochai*" (Black Butter Beans) along with other available food ingredients. During the Pongal Festival, the traditional information was shared among themselves. *Malayalis* in Kolli Hills said that the recipes, preparations and cooking information exchanged during their gathering on Pongal day.

In Kolli Hills, tribe women are engaged in agriculture fields, after their household chores. Latha said that she cannot concentrate on household work as they spend much time in agriculture labour. So, the traditional style of cooking and using ingredients are much changed to present day demands and to keep timing to go for work. Rajeshwari said that if we would have owned land, it would be better to focus on our own way of food preparation. Cooking gruel takes much more time than cooking rice but we used to have it whenever we like to eat. And men at home not lend their support in engaging the household chores. Hence, the work at home becomes difficult for women.

Kamalam told that taking water from pumps requires a lot of time, after that we have to prepare food and go to work. We both need to go to work in order to survive. Hence, we don't find time to get our own traditional food items directly from the fields.

Both *Malayali* and *Kani* tribes keep their traditional dishes made with greens even now. The fruits, cereals and millet based dishes are still present in their kitchen, but the recipes have been updated based on the present day requirements. It is significant to note that, *Kani* and *Malayali* tribes recognize the benefits and nutritious values of their indigenous,

traditional utilisation of their food systems. And they accepted that the oral transmission of traditional knowledge is declining day by day.

Results of survey

A detailed questionnaire was implemented among randomly selected tribal women in Kolli Hills, Pachamalai and Pechiparai and the results are listed in the [Table 1](#).

Table 1 — Traditional Food Practices and their responses

No. Questions	Valid	Frequency	Valid Percent
1. Are you aware of your own traditional food items?	All	29	43.9
	Partial	23	34.8
	Specific Recipe	14	21.2
	Total	66	100
2. Are you following your own traditional food practice?	Always	10	15.2
	Partially	18	27.3
	Occasionally	29	43.9
	Never	9	13.6
Total	66	100	
3. Do chemical and artificial foods affect our health?	Yes	56	84.8
	No	10	15.2
	Total	66	100
4. Do you think that you are following the indigenous food habit?	Yes	29	43.9
	No	37	56.1
	Total	66	100
5. Do you believe that traditional dietary supplements can naturally increase immunity?	Yes	56	84.8
	No	10	15.2
	Total	66	100
6. Do you use Packaged Food Products?	Always	9	13.6
	Partially	11	16.7
	Occasionally	28	42.4
	Never	18	27.3
Total	66	100	
7. Do you buy new type of goods which you have seen in Advertisements?	Yes	26	39.4
	No	40	60.6
	Total	66	100
8. Do you know Preserved /Processed food items?	Yes	37	56.1
	No	29	43.9
	Total	66	100
9. Have you eaten Preserved/Processed food items?	Regularly	6	9.1
	Occasionally	6	9.1
	Rarely	33	50.0
	Never	21	31.8
	Total	66	100
10. Do you follow oil frying in cooking?	Regularly	23	34.8
	Occasionally	30	45.5
	Rarely	9	13.6
	Never	4	6.1
	Total	66	100

The Table 1 shows that of the *Kani* and *Malayali* Tribes in Tamilnadu only 21% of them are remembering the recipes of their traditional foods and only 15% of them have been always following their traditional menu on their plates. But, 43% of them answered that they have been following indigenous food habits, as 86% answered that chemicals and artificial ingredients affect their health and also 84 responded that their traditional food habits immune their body. 27% of tribes of *Kanis* and *Malayalis* responded that they never use packaged foods in their life but remaining of them are using it at least occasionally. They responded that they buy new types of goods which they have seen in advertisements. Foods advertised on national radio, television, national magazines are available for purchase as well as the enhancing acceptability of new foods and social contact are the reasons for the acceptability of native and non-native foods²⁴. Only 6% of tribes have responded that they never fry their foods, all others using it for their food preparation. 56% of them informed that they know about the preserved foods and 50 percent of them told that they eat rarely. The results show that there are changes in their food practices, hence there are issues related to communication and transfer of traditional knowledge on food to the younger generation among the tribal population.

Discussion

Tribal women visiting for work at farm and agriculture have undergone drudgery and they find it difficult to prepare the dishes of their choice. Also they have interest in exploring new dishes and feel that if their men at home lend them their hand for them, it will be easy for them to cook in their own way. The cooking style and tradition have been changed and also the culture of gathering for eating together has also been changed. But whenever they gathered to share their food they accepted that they shared information on traditional food. The Pachamalai tribe is an exception from the continuation of traditional way of life. The traditional recipes were not known to many young women especially women in *Pachamalai* have come a long way from the traditional food lifestyle. The traditional foods modified by population dynamics, legislations on use of land resources, exposure to alternative foods through food markets, education, media and new demands on personal time and energy that reduce the time available for traditional foods events²⁵. In this

study the similar nature is also found. It is also found that they have come away from their regular traditional food style as they go for work regularly to find their survival. As men at home also go for work, they also rarely go their traditional way of collecting food for preparing their traditional food. Though they face all these issues, preparing gruel, cereals, greens apart from frying and using packaged oils. The rigidity of patriarchal norms of the plain land was also seen among men in the hilly areas, this is much contrast to their earlier status on the equity between the members of the tribal family. Apparently, this would have also contributed much on the side of selection of food which is not completely on the line with their tradition, along with drudgeries in home and in the agricultural fields and also impacted on the communication on traditional food and knowledge.

Conclusion

It is understood that the traditional knowledge of tribals have been communicated to generations by the way of preparation and presentation of food. It implies that food manifests communication among themselves. In this study it is found that various influences including lifestyle modifications, drudgeries, consuming the food items sold in markets, exposure to the media and visitors have been impacting on the transmission of this particular knowledge and these factors are a threat to the food manifested communication. Sharing of the food with neighbours during social gatherings has been noticed in a decreasing trend. Nowadays, *Kani* and *Malayali* tribes in Tamilnadu use frying cooking methods. It is also noticed that there is a threat for traditional knowledge as scope has been limited for the discourse on food. The time spent for collecting, processing and cooking is reduced hence the communication around it also has also been limited among *Kani* and *Malayali* tribes in Tamilnadu.

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Conflicts of Interest

All the Authors of this research article declare there is no Conflict of Interest to disclose.

Authors' Contributions

In this paper NS drafted the original manuscript and supervised Data collection and analysis, KDM conceptualized the idea, worked on funding acquisition. PN supervised the Kolli Hills and formal analysis of Data. PRS supervised the Pachamalai and formal analysis of Data. RMRA supervised the Pechiparai and formal analysis of Data. All the authors discussed the results and contributed to the manuscript.

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