

## FOOD AND NUTRITION OF KERALA TRIBES

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### ABSTRACT

This research delves into the food and nutrition practices of tribal communities in Kerala, focusing on the Irulas, Kurichiyas, Paniyas, and Mudugas residing in the Western Ghats. Investigating historical, ecological, and socio-economic factors influencing dietary habits, the study aims to inform sustainable interventions to address health and nutrition challenges faced by these communities. Through participant observation, interviews, mapping, surveys, and historical investigation, the research unveils traditional diets rich in locally sourced, plant-based foods, supplemented by protein from legumes, pulses, and hunting. Culinary techniques preserving nutritional value are employed, yet modernization and socio-economic changes pose threats to traditional practices. Findings highlight the need for culturally sensitive interventions to safeguard the health and well-being of Kerala's tribal communities amidst ongoing transformations.

**Keywords:** Kerala tribes, food and nutrition, traditional diets, biodiversity, sustainable practices, cultural heritage, health challenges, dietary adaptations.

### I. INTRODUCTION

This research explores the intricate relationship between dietary habits and nutritional well-being within Kerala's tribal communities, situated in the Western Ghats. Focusing on tribes such as Irulas, Kurichiyas, Paniyas, and Mudugas, the study delves into historical, ecological, and socio-economic factors shaping their food choices, historically influenced by the lush biodiversity of the Western Ghats. This work is an outcome of research project undertaken to find out traditional knowledge system of tribes in aspirational district of Kerala. The project has been funded by Ministry of Tribal Affairs.

Understanding these dietary practices is imperative for various reasons. Firstly, it unveils sustainable strategies enabling these communities to coexist harmoniously with nature for generations. Secondly, the research aims to inform policymakers and healthcare professionals, guiding targeted interventions to address health and nutrition challenges, including limited access to healthcare and education.

The staple diet, intricately linked to the diverse flora and fauna, involves foraging for wild fruits, tubers, and leafy greens, supplemented by hunting and fishing for a protein-rich diet. Although traditional agricultural practices contribute, modernization, commercial agriculture, deforestation, and changing land use patterns

pose challenges, impacting natural resource availability, food security, and nutritional well-being.

The evolving economic landscape in Kerala brings an increasing intersection between traditional and contemporary lifestyles, influencing dietary choices. The prevalence of non-communicable diseases and malnutrition among tribal populations emphasizes the need for a nuanced understanding of their evolving food and nutrition landscape.

This research aims to unravel the intricate tapestry of food and nutrition among Kerala's tribal communities by examining historical contexts, traditional practices, and contemporary challenges. Findings aspire to contribute valuable insights for formulating sustainable and culturally sensitive interventions, safeguarding the health and well-being of these unique and resilient communities amid transformations brought about by modernization and economic development.

## **II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Achieving a profound insight into the everyday routines, traditions, and ceremonies of tribal communities requires a multifaceted research approach. This paper outlines a comprehensive methodology integrating participant observation and conclusion. The collaboration with local institutes and experts by employing these diverse techniques, researchers can cultivate a thorough comprehension of the customary knowledge systems, cultural customs, and socio-ecological processes pertinent to the tribal communities in Wayanad.

## **III. METHODS**

- **Participant Observation:** Engage in immersive participant observation to gain a firsthand understanding of the daily lives, rituals, and traditions of the tribal communities. This method allows researchers to witness and document cultural practices in their natural context.
- **Comprehensive Interviews:** Conduct structured interviews with informed individuals within the tribes, community leaders, and tribal elders. Utilize an organized or semi-structured approach to gather narratives and oral histories, capturing the customs passed down through generations.
- **Participatory Mapping and Visual Documentation:** Employ participatory mapping techniques to visually represent the geographic distribution of cultural landmarks, sacred locations, and traditional knowledge practices within tribal lands. Utilize visual documentation, such as photography and film, to capture artistic expressions and cultural rites.
- **Quantitative Surveys:** Utilize structured questionnaires to collect numerical information on specific facets of traditional knowledge, such as medicinal plants, agricultural practices, or cultural traditions. Analyze survey data to identify trends, patterns, and variances in the frequency and transfer of traditional knowledge among tribal communities.
- **Historical Investigation and Record-Keeping:** Access government papers, historical documents, and archive resources related to Wayanad customs and cultural heritage. Record and preserve pertinent historical knowledge to augment current ethnographic data.

**Observations:**



**The Adukkala (Kitchen) using Verak Adipp (Firewood)**



**Separation of Uzhunnu (Vigna mungo)**



**A Paniyan Family preparing food at Kavitalali Colony, Manathavady, Wayanad**



**Food served in Banyan leaf containing  
Salt, Matta (Red rice), Thoran, Pappad**

- **Thalu Curry:** Thal (Yam Stem) Curry is a delicacy of Wayanad (wayandu) tribal cuisine, stemming from the Malabar region (northern Kerala). A delectable method of preparing yam stems.
- **Kurumulaku Kanji or Pepper Porridge:** It is a delicious dish that is found its roots in Kerala's tribal cuisine. This preparation is usually prescribed to women after the third day of delivery, to be taken daily for a month.
- **Crab Curry/fry (Njandu Curry):** The rock crabs are usually collected from the cracks of rocks in the nearby rivers. It is called 'Njandu' in Malayalam. 'Njandu Varattiyathu' is a remarkable dish of the tribe.
- **Gandhakashal Ghee Rice:** Gandhakashal rice comes from the Wayandu region of Kerala. Gandhakashal rice is aromatic rice. It can be cooked in plain like that of normal rice and due to its aromatic property it can be used to prepare biryani or ghee rice.
- **Bamboo Rice:** Bamboo rice is special type of rice that is grown out of a dying bamboo shoot. In its last phase, it flowers into a rare variety of rice seeds, which are known as bamboo rice. Locally it is called Mulayari (Mula means Bamboo and Ari means Rice). Harvesting bamboo rice is one of the major sources of income for the tribal communities living in interior regions of Wayanadu.

Bamboo rice has a structural similarity to paddy rice and tastes more like wheat. It is slightly sweet in taste and generally cooked like any other rice, but it takes a little more time to get soaked. When cooked, its texture becomes mostly moist and sticky. It is chewy when consumed. One of the prominent dishes which can be made with bamboo rice is the Bamboo rice kheer/Mulayarippayasam. Bamboo rice like any other rice is rich in various nutrients including carbohydrates, fiber and protein. It is believed that bamboo rice has a low glycemic index compared to other varieties of rice, and is considered to be a healthier option for diabetics. The rice has low or no fat and is rich in vitamin B. The tribes in Wayanad/Kerala use this rice to cure joint pain owing to the presence of immense calcium and phosphorus content. Bamboo rice though tastes like wheat but is richer in protein. This rice is a rich source of vitamin B. It cures kapha and pitta dosha by helping remove

many toxic substances from the body. They are very beneficial for removing joint pains and easing rheumatic pain, controlling blood sugar and cholesterol.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

With the kind assistance of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, this study, “A Research Study of Traditional Knowledge of Tribal Groups: A Special Focus on Aspirational Districts of Kerala,” was made possible. The collaboration between Law Center-2, the Law Faculty, the University of Delhi, and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, which is dedicated to enhancing the quality of life for tribal tribes, is demonstrated by the project's success. Without the support of MOTA, we would not have been able to accomplish the successful end of this project. We're improving the lives of the indigenous communities because of the MOTA.

- **Traditional Diets:** The Wayanad tribals predominantly rely on locally sourced, plant-based diets. Staple foods include millets, tubers, wild greens, and forest fruits. Millets such as ragi and Jowar form the base of their meals, providing essential carbohydrates and fibers.
- **Biodiversity and Foraging:** The rich biodiversity of Wayanad's forests plays a crucial role in the tribals' nutrition. Foraging for wild edibles, including mushrooms, bamboo shoots, and medicinal plants, supplements their diets with vitamins and minerals.
- **Protein Sources:** Protein intake is primarily derived from legumes, pulses, and small game hunting. The tribals' traditional knowledge of edible insects also contributes to their protein-rich diet, showcasing a sustainable and ecologically sensitive approach to nutrition.
- **Culinary Techniques:** The Wayanad tribals employ traditional culinary techniques that preserve the nutritional value of their foods. Cooking methods such as steaming, boiling, and roasting help retain essential nutrients, ensuring a well-balanced diet.
- **Challenges and Adaptations:** While the traditional diet of Wayanad tribals is nutritionally rich, modern influences and socio-economic changes pose challenges. Shifts towards processed foods and changes in land use patterns threaten the sustainability of their traditional nutritional practices. Ongoing research aims to explore how the tribals are adapting to these challenges while preserving their dietary heritage.

This brief overview provides a glimpse into the intricate relationship between the Wayanad tribals and their food and nutrition practices. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for promoting sustainable development and preserving the unique cultural and dietary heritage of this vibrant community. Further research is essential to delve deeper into the nuances of their nutrition, health outcomes, and strategies for adapting to contemporary challenges.

#### V. REFERENCES

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## **VI. ANNEXURE: QUESTIONNAIRES**

### **General Information:**

- 1. Tribe/Community:** Adiyar, Kurichiyas, Kochuvelan, Malai pandaran, Hill Pulaya, Karimpalan, Kuruman, Kudiya and Aranadan
- 2. Location:** wayanad
- 3. Number of participants:** 29
- 4. Age range of participants:** 25 to 65
- 5. Gender of participants:** Male and female

### **Food Sources and Availability:**

1. What are the main sources of food for your community? (e.g., agriculture, hunting, gathering, fishing, purchased food)
2. What are the seasonal variations in food availability?
3. Are there any foods that are considered taboo or culturally restricted?
4. Do you face any challenges in accessing sufficient food? If so, what are the main reasons?

### **Food Preparation and Consumption:**

1. What are the typical meals eaten in a day?
2. How foods are traditionally prepared and cooked?
3. Are there any special foods or dishes eaten during ceremonies or festivals?
4. Do children, pregnant women, or elderly people have any specific dietary needs?
5. How food is typically shared and distributed within the community?

### **Nutrition and Health:**

1. Do you experience any common health problems in your community?
2. Do you think these health problems are related to diet or nutrition?
3. Are there any traditional practices or beliefs related to food and health?
4. Do you have access to any healthcare services or nutrition education programs?