

Food Patterns of Tamils in Tamil Literature

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Abstract: *The major objective of the research is to explore the food patterns of Tamils as found in Tamil literature. This research is designed in a qualitative approach. The library work is used for this study. The findings show that the food patterns of the Tamils such as Amudhu Charan, food and life, and fire and hunger have been investigated. This study is useful in teaching the younger generation about the the food patterns of Tamils found in Tamil literature. The research claims to be the first such attempt to do a study regarding the Tamil literature to examine the food patterns of Tamils.*

Keywords: Tamil Literature, Tamils, Food Pattern, Tamil literature, Tamil food culture, traditional food patterns, cultural heritage, food and society

1. Introduction

Food is the fundamental factor for the survival of all living beings in the world. Both sentient (*uyartiṇai*) and non-sentient (*akriṇai*) beings spend the majority of their time searching for food to sustain life. The body itself is composed of the five elements (*pañcapūtam*): land, water, air, fire, and space. From ancient humans to those in the modern scientific era, no one has been unaware of the importance of food. Plants, vines, birds, and animals all obtain the food suitable for them from nature. The human race, which once lived in harmony with nature, has gradually drifted away, consuming synthetic food and losing both its inherent self and well-being, leading to the miserable state we see today. If food is the foundation of health, both the body and mind will thrive. When the body and mind are healthy, one's actions and their results will be refined. If human health is essential for societal progress, then the various types of nutritious foods are what the human body requires. In this era where processed foods that do not spoil for months are visible on every street, the pathetic situation of struggling to find healthy food has increased. This article is structured with the objective of understanding how our ancestors approached their food habits compared to the current situation.

2. Research Methodology

This research is designed using a qualitative approach. The library research method (*nūlāyvu*) has been employed for this study. Relevant research papers, books, and articles have been selected for this library research, and data has been collected using an explanatory analysis method.

2.1. Analysis of Research Data

The research data has been analyzed under the categories of Offering Food (*Amudhu Padaithal*), Food and Life (*Unavum Uyirum*), and Hunger as Fire (*Pasi Enum Thee*).

3. Offering Food (*Amudhu Padaithal*)

The proverb “Excessive indulgence makes even nectar toxic” (*Alavukku minjinal amirthamum nanju*) is a well-known

saying. Verses from *Tamilviduthuthu* serve as evidence that “nectar” (*Amudham*) refers to the food consumed by celestial beings:

“Oh, sweet Tamil! Because of you, I have lived; even if offered the nectar of the gods, I do not desire it.”
“Irunthamizhe Unnaal irunthen Thevar
Virunthamizhtham endraalum venden”- Thamizhvidu Thoothu

In the later period, the poet Auvaiyar prays to Lord Ganesha, offering him a delicious dish made of four ingredients- milk, honey, jaggery, and lentils- and requests that he grant her the “Three Tamils” (*Muthamizh*): literature (*Iyal*), music (*Isai*), and drama (*Nadagam*). This is illustrated in the following verse from *Nalvali* (Invocation to God):

“I shall offer you a delicious mixture of milk, clear honey, jaggery, and lentils;
in return, oh elephant-faced lord, grant me the three branches of Tamil literature.”
“Paalum thelithaenum paakum paruppum ivai
Naalum kalanthu unakku naan tharuvaen – kolamsey
Thunkak karimukath thoomaniye nee enakku
Sangath thamizh moondrum thaa” – nalvazhi, kadavul vaazhthu

Vadalar Ramalinga Swamigal states that while singing the *Thiruvacakam* authored by Manikavasagar, the experience is as sweet as consuming a mixture of fine sugarcane juice, honey, milk, and delicious fruits. The following lines by Ramalinga Swamigal illustrate this:

“Oh Manikavasagar, you who are blended with the heavens,
when I sing your verses,
they taste as sweet as a mixture of
fine sugarcane juice, honey, milk, and luscious,
ripe fruits—
blending into my very flesh and soul, providing an
unceasing sweetness.”
“Vaankalantha maanikkavaasak ni vaasakaththai
Naankalanthu paadungaal natrkaruppanjaatrile

Thaenkalanthu paalkalanthu sezhunganiththeenj
suvaikalanthu
Oonkalanthu uyirkalanthu uvattaamal inippathuvae”
“The rice I eat, the water I drink, and the betel leaf I
chew—
all these are the Lord Krishna, my Great One,”
(declaring)
“Unnum soru parukuneer thinnun vetrilaiyum ellaam
Kannan emperumaan endru endrea kankal neer malki”
(Thivaaimozhi)

Thus, my eyes well up with tears. The verses of Nammalvar from *Thiruvaimozhi* also elevate food to a divine state and revere it.

4. Food and Life

Although there are various reasons for the functioning of the human body, food is the most primary. Keeping this in mind, the poet Kudapulaviyanar, while addressing the Pandya king Nedunchezhiyan (who won at Talaiyalanganam), stated:

“For this body that cannot survive without water,
those who provide food provide life itself.
The physical body is fundamentally composed of food,
which is the result of land and water.
Those who provide water and land [for agriculture]
here are the ones who create both the body and life.”
(*Purananuru* 18:18-23).

“Neerindru Amaiya yaakkaikku ellaam
Undi koduththor uyirkoduththorae
Undi muthatre unvain pindam
Unavenap paduvathu nilaththodu neerae
Neerum nilanum punariyor eendu
Udampum uyirum padaiththisi noarae” – Puram 18: 18-23

This verse makes the importance of food clear to us. While the creation of life is divine, food is the fundamental cause for the created life to persist. Tolkappiyar also places food in a position next to the divine in his work:

“The divine, food, flowers, birds, beasts,
the way of the instrument, and
other such things are described as the 'root' (*karu*).”
“Deivam unaavae maamaram pulparai
Seithiyazhin pakuthiyoadu thokai-yi
Avvakai piravum karuyena mozhipa”
(*Tolkappiyam, Porulathikaram* 364).

It seems that he (Tolkappiyar) placed food at a status next to the divine in his verse.

5. Hunger as Fire (*Pasi Enum Thee*)

Feeding those who come hungry is considered the greatest of all charities. It is worth remembering the proverb, “Remember those who provided you with salt [food] as long as you live.” (Upittavarai ullalavum ninai) Another proverb, “When hunger strikes, ten things will flee,” (Pasi vanthidap paththum paranthu pogum) is also in practice. These ten things- dignity (*manam*), lineage (*kulam*), education,

generosity, wisdom, charity, penance, high status, nobility, and desire- will vanish in the face of hunger.

Auvaiyar states:

“Dignity, lineage, education, generosity,
wisdom, charity, penance, high status,
nobility, and desire for honeyed words—all ten of these
will flee

when hunger strikes” (*Nalvali*, verse 26).

“Maanam kulam kalvi vanmai arivudamai

Thaanam thavam uyarchi thaalaanmai – thaenin

Kasivantha solliyarmael kaamuruthal paththum

Pasivanthida paranthum poam” – nalvazhi, 26

Furthermore, Auvaiyar describes the agony of hunger:

“If I tell you to skip a meal for one day, you refuse;

if I tell you to skip for two days, you refuse.

Oh, my stomach, that knows nothing of my plight,

it is difficult to live with you” (*Nalvali*, verse 11).

“Orunaal unavai ozhiendraal ozhiyaai

Irunaalukku yael endraal yaelaai – orunaalum

Ennoavu ariyaai idumpaikoor envayirae

Unnodu vaazhthal arithu” – nalvazhi, 11

Adding weight to Auvaiyar’s words, Sittalai Sattanar, the author of *Manimekalai*, says:

“It destroys good lineage, kills excellence, abandons
the great education acquired, ruins the jewelry worn
and natural beauty, and

puts one behind women with adorned breasts—
this sinner called the 'disease of hunger.'

Those who cure it will not be able

to measure their fame” (*Manimekalai*, 11:76-81).

“Kudi pirappu azhikkum vizhuppam kollum

Pidiththa kalvip perum punai vidoom

Naan anikalaikum maan ezhil sithaikkum

Poonmulai maatharodu purankdai niruththum

Pasippini ennum paavi athu theerthoar

Isaisol alavaikku en naa nimiraathu” – manimekalai,
11:76-81

Even when hunger torments us, the amount of food to be consumed is limited and specified. Auvaiyar says,

“One *nazhi* (measure) to eat,

four cubits to wear” (*Nalvali*, verse 28).

“Unpathu naazhi uduppathu naanku muzham” – nalvazhi,
28

Similarly, Madurai Kanakkayar Maganar Nakkiranar
states:

“One *nazhi* to eat, two pieces to wear; all other things are just
the same.

The use of wealth is to give [to others];

if we think we can only enjoy it ourselves,

we will face many faults” (*Purananuru*, 189:5-8).

“Unpathu naazhi uduppvai irandea

Piravum ellaam oarokkummae

Selvaththupp payanae eethal

Thuippaem eninae thappunha palavae” – purananuru

189:5-8

Because food is the foundation of life, one should not obtain
it in a way that others would condemn. Even if a mother who

gave birth and raised us is hungry, one should not engage in an act that wise men would condemn to satisfy that hunger. Valluvar says:

“Even if one sees their own mother starving, one should not commit an act that is condemned by the wise” (*Thirukkural*, 656)
 “Eendraal pasikaanpaal aayinum seiyarka Saandror pazhikkum vinai” – *Thirukkural*, 656

The food we consume must be wholesome and provide health to the body. If one consumes food that does not cause harm, then there is no need for medicine to cure diseases in the body. Valluvar states this through the following *Kural* verses:

“If one avoids [incompatible] food and eats in moderation, there will be no harm to the body” (*Thirukkural*, 945).
 “maarupaadu illaatha undi maruththu unnin Oorupaadu illai uyirkku”
 “For a body that has digested what was previously eaten, there is no need for medicine” (*Thirukkural*, 942).
 “marunthuena vaendaavaam yaakkakku arunthiyathu Atrathu poatri unin”

6. Conclusion

Global awareness regarding food has increased significantly in recent times. Food is the fundamental requirement for all living beings, both sentient (*uyartiṇai*) and non-sentient (*akriṇai*). Regarding the classifications of food, *Pingala Nigandu* states:

“Food, sustenance (*valsī*), meal (*undi*), consumption (*nathane*), hunger-satisfying substance (*masinap-pathane*), and prey— these are the terms used to describe food” (*Pingala Nigandu*, 153).

Our ancestors led healthy lives by consuming food grown in harmony with nature, maintaining a deep connection with the environment. They possessed long lifespans and sound mental health. They revered food as being next only to the divine. They lived by the proverb, “A disease-free life is the greatest wealth.” In the current era, it is essential to move away from modern, processed food culture and return to the traditional, healthy food practices of our ancestors. We need quality, natural foods rather than advertised, processed ones. The education and scientific discoveries of today cannot compare to the experience and wisdom of our ancient Tamils, who knew what to eat and what to avoid.

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Author Profile

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