

HEB

A Foray into the Tribal Kitchens of Karnataka

CASS

Dr.Kanakamalini M A

Associate Professor of English, Sri.D.D.Urs.Government First Grade College, Hunsur

*Address for Correspondence: editojohp@gmail.com***ABSTRACT**

Our perception of tribal food is a partial representation of tribal culinary skills limited to rough or coarse methods of cooking such as grilling and roasting the flesh and roots or tubers on hot charcoal. Our imagination fails to catch the details of the culinary skills of the communities from the remote areas of forest land. It is as limited as our understanding of the forest dwellers. Some of the medical studies only focus on the malnutrition aspects of the groups with very little focus on the rich repository of culinary knowledge replete with nutritional as well as community bonding patterns. These studies ignore the displacement and loss of natural habitat and cultural roots, the tribal people have suffered. This article makes an attempt to throw light on the unveiled factors associated with tribal open kitchens. It is an attempt to focus on the indigenous ways of living in harmony with nature, with the natural food habits exhibiting and comprising simplicity, nutritional significance, sharing and sustaining the resources.

Key Words: Tribal kitchen, natural and simple, indigenous method, sharing, community living, nutrition value, tubers, *aharamela*, displacement, resources and culinary skills.

Access this Article Online<http://heb-nic.in/cass-studies>

Quick Response Code:

Received on 20/02/2019
Accepted on 25/02/2019 © HEB All rights reserved



A FORAY INTO THE TRIBAL KITCHENS OF KARNATAKA

This study aims at throwing light on the meaningful and resourceful culinary representations we come across in the tribal belts of Karnataka, with special emphasis on the tribal belts in and around Mysore District. The writer of this paper works in Hunsur Taluk of Mysore District, around which many tribal rehabilitation centers are present. The writer has also studied some of the tribal women's autobiographies belonging to this belt while working on her thesis.

Certain parts of the world and certain communities are often associated with negative images in such a way that the positive aspects of culture are totally masked by the discourses of the dominant and the self-certified mainstream groups, which are blind to their rich, inner and self-sufficient intellectual knowledge resources. Dominant and mainstream communities have a well developed culinary history and one can find innumerable food blogging sites with mouth watering dishes, craved for and in demand by the food lovers all over the world. Chinese, Indian and western cuisine are explored and developed with great relish. With the arrival of the internet, Asian and African food systems are slowly making their mark on the popularity charts. In India, a land of variety and diversity, culinary systems are of great variety. Each state has a well marked culinary system. Only in the last decade, a little light has been thrown on the tribal delicacies. Usually, tribal food images are limited to some kind of coarse and un-refined, raw cooking images of flesh, tubers and seeds burnt on charcoal. Tribal life, of course, is associated with simplicity, and need based living. As such, an overt view of their life system is perceived and comprehended as under developed, meager and of deprived existence. Such an overview blinds all studies from looking into the deep wisdom and emotionally satisfied nature of tribal life patterns.

As James C. McCann, a specialist in African environmental history and cuisine, rightly says, "Africa is often associated with poverty, with hunger, with failures of food in a political and nutritional sense." (22). It is the same in the case of tribal communities all over the world. When we browse through articles on tribal groups, we come across projects highlighting malnutrition, starving and scarcity of food with numerous images of sick and starving people. Recently, Professor Amartya Sen released a study conducted by the Pratichi Institute and Asiatic Society, on the living conditions of the tribal people of West Bengal. The report revealed food scarcity in about 31% of tribal households (13). A survey conducted by Department of Anthropology, University of Mysore and Centre for Multi-Disciplinary Development Research, Dharwad in 2011, on the dietary status of *Jenu Kuruba* and *Yerva* tribal children, identified inadequate energy levels and low consumption of protein, and suggested urgent measures for providing access to nutritious food and balanced diet (161). All these studies do not lie as they are based on deep research and field surveys. What goes unnoticed is that these are the communities which have been colonized, brutally displaced and senselessly rehabilitated. As such, we see communities alienated from their roots, struggling to adjust to the new environment, with all their natural resources unavailable. This has resulted in the erosion of rich and natural cultural aspects including the culinary skills. In the forest, children never went hungry. They received the best nourishment in the form of wild berries, fish caught in the most ingenious ways, wild tubers dug out with patient efforts, wild honey and drank crystal clear water from waterholes. Adivasis use more than 150 varieties of tubers. Tubers have great shelf-life, high deposits of nutrients and are not vulnerable to pests as they have thick covers. Certain varieties of tubers have great medicinal value and are anti-cancerous. They are capable of sustaining in extreme weather conditions. Once yams were part of rural food but now they have vanished from the rural kitchens also.

The childhood memories of C.K. Janu and Jaji Thimmayya, belonging to tribal groups of Kerala and Karnataka respectively, substantiate the self-sufficient food status of tribal groups, before displacement:

"when young all of us children would go the ridges of the fields to pick chappa. Or the little stream to catch fish. or else to lure out the crabs hiding in the slush of the fields... or to pluck wild fruits like *karappayam*, *mothangappayam* or *kanjippayam*." (Janu 2)

"When quite young we used to catch fish in the stream gushing by while our elders toiled in the fields. or snare water snakes. or look for water fowls in the thickets of kaitha growing abundantly by the stream. and trap them. we caught fish with a makeshift net of worn cloth" (Janu 2).

Dr. R Balasubramanyam narrates an incident that highlights the indigenous knowledge. In a tribal makeshift school, he engaged the children with the task of getting a leaf from a tree to teach them counting. A tribal boy surprised him by bringing leaves from seventy different trees and gave information about the time of the leaf shedding, the power of attracting bees, of each tree and also how drinking honey from the *Taare* tree would lead to temporary insanity (67). The children had a thorough knowledge of their surroundings and needed no schooling at all. The culinary skill of the tribals in using bamboo as a one of the main ingredients comes with profound knowledge of bamboo plant.

In Karnataka, 50 caste varieties of Scheduled Caste tribes are found. The total population of all Schedule Rural Tribes is about 34,29,791 as per the 2011 census. In the Mysore belt it is 3, 34,547 and the prominent tribal group is of *JenuKurubas* with a population of 21,995. Soligas, *Yeravas*, *KaduKurubas* and *Hakkipikki* communities are the other prominent groups. *Yeravas* are the constituent parts of almost all the districts of Karnataka. Most of these groups followed hunting-gathering economy and for their meager needs used barter system. *JenuKurubas* gathered honey and sold them in the nearby markets in exchange of necessary goods. Development in the form of building reservoirs, railway lines, roads and encroachments by vested interests resulted in their repeated displacement. Being oral communities, they did not have land records to prove their ownership over the areas they lived for centuries. Land was never a commercial property for them and they worshipped the land as the land of their forefathers. When they were asked to move out of their natural habitats their condition became worse than that of beggars. They were denuded of all their resources. Some of the communities had to work as laborers on their own lands acquired by people from different areas. They did not know how to handle the newly bestowed ownership over rehabilitated lands and many turned alcoholic. Starvation, hunger, diseases, and addiction became the living patterns. Independent, ingenious and resourceful communities were reduced to parasitic existence.



Tribes of Karnataka



Displaced communities in alien surroundings.



***Soligas* in Magadi Taluk of Ramanagaram District engaged in making Lantana products.**

The tribal *haadis*, the rehabilitated hamlets, are marked by rows of poorly built houses, men addicted to alcohol and tobacco and children playing in dirt and dust. They are provided with rice, eggs, oil and pulses but most of it is sold in exchange for alcohol. Alienated from their wild roots, painted huts and natural plant and animal resources, they look lost and bewildered. Gradually, the rich cultural inheritance is lost and forgotten. Tribal Research Institute, situated in Mysore is striving hard to bring to light the tribal art, cuisines and medicinal system, since its inception in 2011. With their support, the tribal kitchens have marked their entry into the food *melas* organized during the world famous Dasara celebrations.

Dr.R.Balasubramanyam, a development activist, founder of Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement, who has been working for the welfare of tribal groups in and around H.D,Kote Taluk of Mysore District for more than two decades, is instrumental in creating tribal entrepreneurs. Women belonging to Jenukuruba, Kadukuruba and Yerava groups have started a factory manufacturing Raagi products in Jaganakote Haadi tribal colony on the fringes of the Bandipur Tiger Reserve in H.D.Kote Taluk. They launched their product in one of the crowded malls of Mysore (12).



Tribal cuisines of the *Yeravas*, *soligas*, *Jenukurubas* and the *Irulas* exhibit exemplary knowledge of plant resources, nutritional content, great culinary skills, spiritual attributes and emotional bonding. Their special cuisine system comprises starters like roast sweet roots and corns, a main course consisting of bamboo biryani, a fine blend of rice, vegetables and meat, dry cooked in bamboo containers, *raagirotti*, crab soup, bamboo rice payasam, a dessert, and herbal tea. Food served on leaves of *Muttugatree* blends finely with the desi pattern of life. At the 2014

DasaraAaharaMela, Bamboo Biryani prepared by the tribals received an overwhelming response.

In 2016, tribal people from BasavanagiriHaadi in H.D.KoteTaluk and HaralanahalliHaadi in HunsurTaluk prepared varieties of noregenasu, herbal tea made of makaliberu, green leaf dishes and biryani cooked in green bamboo containers. The tribal cuisine drew huge crowd. Special infrastructure needed for the cooking was set up and more than fifteen tribal youths participated in the cooking process (AaharaMela)..Every year the tribal delicacies are drawing more food lovers.

Preparation of Bamboo Biryani involves various culinary techniques. It also displays spiritual aspect, bonding and sharing. The process involves the following steps:

1. Invocation of deities in the form of worshipping the hearth and the bamboo plant.
2. Cutting bamboo reeds into ideal sized pieces.
3. Preparation of spicy content of chicken and raw rice and filling into the bamboo packs.
4. Sealing the ends of the bamboo containers.
5. Cooking using the specially set-up hearths.
6. Opening the bamboo packs and removing the spicy material.
7. Serving hot Bamboo *biryani* to the food lovers.

The dessert prepared from bamboo rice is an occasional delicacy and takes considerable period of time. A lot of patience is exhibited while cooking and food is consumed leisurely.

Preparation of Bamboo Biryani



Food as blessing of god.



Making of bamboo containers.



Stuffing bamboo containers with rice and spicy chicken.









Deputy Commissioner Randheer and other dignitaries savouring the tubers

Food is considered a blessing of god and the hearth and the bamboo reeds are worshipped before preparing the delicacies. All bamboo parts are not edible and some are highly poisonous. Bamboo shoots and bamboo rice are the edible parts of the bamboo plant. Here the tribal wisdom and knowledge of plant resources is finely exhibited. Cooking is not one man's work but involves all members of the community. Roasted pumpkin is another common food used by the tribal communities and when one analyses the nutrient composition of bamboo and pumpkin, one realizes their value. Bamboo shoots are the sprouts of the plant. This plant belongs to the Bambusoideae subfamily of grass. Bamboo shoots are rich in vitamin A, vitamin E, vitamin B6, Magnesium, Sodium, copper and Manganese. They are low in cholesterol and rich in dietary fiber. They are the fastest and tallest growing varieties of plants (Patil, www.organicfacts.net)

Pumpkin belongs to Curcubitaceae family and is a vine plant with orange colour outer surface. Other coloured varieties are also found. It has an inner seedy net like structure and smooth and light pulp. The seeds are edible and are rich in proteins, minerals, vitamins and omega-3 fatty acids. They are also fast growing plants with limited care needed for their cultivation. As such, consumption in bulk quantities is without the depletion factor. It is rich in anti-oxidants, minerals, vitamins but has very low cholesterol value (Walsh, www.shape.com). Roasting without using water or dry cooking preserves all their nutrients intact.

Food is not just one of the primary needs of man and it is characterized by the economic, geographic and cultural factors. Tribal food reflects on the traditional wisdom of indigenous communities, their harmony with nature, sustainable methods of using resources, sharing of resources and clear comprehension of nutritional values of food consumed. It is true that their cuisine did not evolve much in the way the cuisines of settled communities evolved. Most of their food needs were met with variety of fruits, edible seeds, nuts and need based hunting. They never treated the land as their property and never tried to own or possess lands and material goods. Similarly, they never stored or hoarded food. Their harmonious relation with the forest cannot be expressed better than in the words of C.K. Janu:

“No one knows the forest like we do. She is mother to us. More than a mother because she never abandons us” (5).

Gradually, all the ingenious and indigenous knowledge will vanish with the lopsided assimilation of the tribal communities into the mainstream society. Very rare patterns of cultural representations will get buried under the development process. The tribal culinary skills would also be part of that systematically eroded knowledge if not preserved and documented properly.

Caste list of the Scheduled Tribes of Karnataka

1. Adiyani
2. Barda
3. Bavacha, Bamcha
4. Bhil, Bhil Garasia, Dholi Bhil, Dungri Bhil, DungriGarasia, Mewasi Bhil, Rawal Bhil, Tadvi Bhil, Bhagaliala, Bhilala, Pawra, Vasava, Vasave
5. Chenchu, Chenchwar
6. Chodhara
7. Dubla, Talavia, Halpati
8. Gamit, Gamta, Gavit, Mavchi, Padvi, Valvi
9. Gond, Naikpod, Rajgond
10. Gowdalu
11. Hakkipikki
12. Hasalaru
13. Irular
14. Iruliga
15. JenuKuruba
16. KaduKuruba
17. Kammara (In South Canara District & Kollegal Taluk of Mysore District)
18. Kaniyan, Kanyan (In Kollegal Taluk of Mysore District)
19. Kathodi, Katkari, DhorKathodi, DhorKatkari, Son Kathodi, Son Katkari
20. Kattunayakan
21. Kokna, Kokni, Kukna
22. KoliDhor, TokreKoli, Kolcha, Kolgha
23. KondaKapus
24. Koraga
25. Kota
26. Koya, BhineKoya, Rajkoya
27. Kudiya, Melakudi
28. Kuruba (In Coorg District)
29. Kurumans
30. MahaMalasar
31. Malaikudi
32. Malasar
33. Malayekandi
34. Maleru
35. Maratha (In Coorg District)
36. Marati (In South Canara District)
37. Meda, Medari, Gauriga, Burud, Medara.

13. Walsh, Karla S. "7 Amazing Health Benefits of Eating Pumpkin". Shape Magazine September 26, 2018. Accessed on 19 January, 2019. www.Shape.com/healthy-eating/diet-tips/pumpkin-health-benefits.

38. Naikda, Nayaka, Cholivala Nayaka, Kapadia Nayaka, Mota Nayaka, Nana Nayaka, Naik, Nayak, Beda, Bedar & Valmiki
39. Palliyan
40. Paniyan
41. Pardhi, Advichincher, Phanse Pardhi, Haran Shikari
42. Patelia
43. Rathawa
44. Sholaga
45. Soligaru
46. Toda
47. Varli
48. Vitolia, Kotwalia, Barodia
49. Yerava
50. Siddi (Uttara Kannada District only (Karnataka state Tribal Research Institute 2011 Report))

References:

- “Aahara Mela” Feast on the tribal bamboo biryani. . . Deccan herald”
www.deccanherald.com. September 21, 2016. Accessed on January 19, 2019. 8.57 pm.
www.deccanherald.com/content/571551/feast-tribal-bamboo-biryani-dasara.html
- Associated Press, Ngaraparou. “Food bloggers bringing Africa's rich cuisines to the world”,
The Hindu, Monday, January 7, 2019. P.22.
- Balasubramanyam, R., I, the citizen. GRAAM Mysuru and Vision India Foundation,
New Delhi, 2015. pp 67.
- “A Path –breaking Transition”, Voices from the Grassroots. Star of Mysore, October
28, Saturday, 2017. PP.12.
- Janu, C.K., and Bhaskaran, translated from Malayalam by N. Ravishankar. Mother Forest. .Kali for Women and
Women Unlimited, 2004. P.2.
- Mother Forest..Kali for Women and Women Unlimited, 2004. P.6.
- Mouth watering tribal delicacies to be served at Dasara”, www.starofmysore.com. Accessed on January 2019. 9.4
pm.
- www.starofmysore.com//mouthwatering-traditional-tribal-delicacies-served—dasara-aahara-mela/html..
Mysore. Tribal Research Institute. Tribe wise Population 2011 Census Report. January 2019,
Brochure.
- Patil,,Kiran.. “Interesting bamboo shoots benefits”, on January 3, 2019. Accessed on January 20, 2019. 10.45am.
www.organicfacts.net/healthbenefits/...healthbenefits-bamboo-shoots.html.
- Prabhakar S C, Jai and Gangadhar M .R. “Dietary Status of Jenu Kuruba and Yerava. Tribal Children of Mysore
District, Karnataka”. Anthropologist, 13.2.2011. p.p. 159-161
- Raj, V.Gayatri. “indulge the gourmand in you, bite into tribal cuisine at Ahaaramela”,
www.deccanherald.com. September 26, 2014. Accessed on January 19, 2019. 8.57 pm.
www.deccanherald.com/content/432969/indulge-gourmand-you-bite-tribal.html.
12. Tubaid, Deepak. “Introduction”. Under Nutrition among Tribal Children. p. p 5-6.
www.researchgate.net/.../278312782-undernutrition-among-tribal-children.
www.deccanherald.com/content/432969/indulge-gourmand-you-bite-tribal.html.
- www.deccanherald.com/content/571551/feast-tribal-bamboo-biryani-dasara.html
- www.starofmysore.com//mouthwatering-traditional-tribal-delicacies-served—dasara-aahara-mela/html..
www.google.com .Tribal+ food +images. www.vijayakarnataka.indiatimes.com/soliga.html. www.kstrimysuru.in