

Eating with the Earth: Traditional Dietary Practices of the Malapandaram Tribes during Puberty, Pregnancy, and Lactation

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the indigenous food practices of the Malapandaram tribe of southern Kerala, with a focus on traditional dietary customs during the critical reproductive phases of puberty, pregnancy, and lactation. Drawing on ethnographic and documentary sources, the research elucidates how the Malapandaram's dietary habits are shaped by ecological resourcefulness, ritual knowledge, and gender-based taboos. The findings reveal a complex nutritional system wherein plant-based foods, wild edibles, and local preparations serve both medicinal and symbolic roles, while culturally ordained restrictions aim to safeguard maternal and child health. The study contributes to a broader understanding of how indigenous communities adapt nutritional strategies across life-cycle transitions, demonstrating the ongoing relevance of traditional knowledge in fostering nutritional well-being and cultural continuity amid changing socio-environmental landscapes.

Keywords- Malapandaram, Indigenous food, Puberty, Pregnancy, Lactation, Traditional nutrition.

I. INTRODUCTION

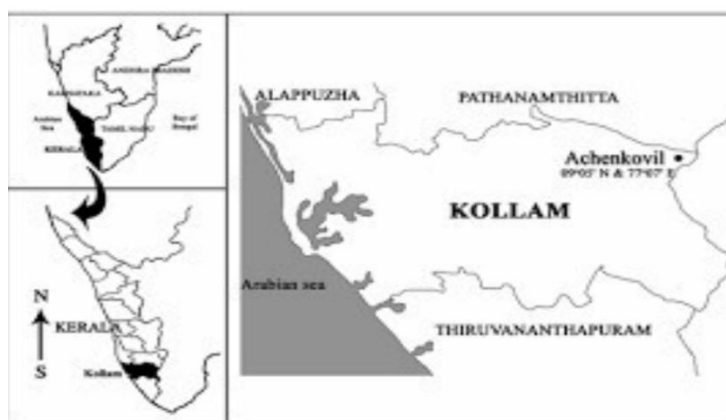
Human interest in plants traces back to the earliest stages of civilization, as plants have always been central to human survival by providing food, fodder, fiber, medicine, and materials for cultivation. Over time, extensive knowledge on various aspects of plant resources has accumulated through continuous human interaction with the environment. Among those who have preserved this traditional plant-based wisdom are the indigenous communities, particularly tribal groups, whose knowledge systems have been transmitted orally across generations.

India's tribal population constitutes about 8.2 percent of the national total, with Kerala accounting for approximately 1.14 percent. According to census data, Kerala hosts 484,839 indigenous individuals living in 119,788 family units, representing 1.43 percent of the state's population. The state's major tribal concentrations are found in Wayanad, Idukki, and Palakkad districts, where the tribal populations comprise 31.2 percent, 11.5 percent, and 10 percent respectively. Numerous ethnobotanicals and ethnomedical studies have been carried out across tribal regions of Kerala, particularly in Attappady (Palakkad district), Idukki, Kozhikode, and Thiruvananthapuram, focusing on traditional health practices and medicinal plant use.

II. STUDY AREA

Kerala is home to 35 officially recognized tribes distributed across the Southern Western Ghats. Among them, the Malapandaram form a distinctive group, primarily inhabiting the Pathanamthitta and Kollam districts. Numbering around 30,080 individuals, the Malapandaram were traditionally nomadic but have now largely adopted a semi-settled lifestyle.

Belonging to the Proto-Australoid group, they are characterized by dark curly hair, short flat noses, and brown skin tone, and they communicate in a dialect derived from Malayalam and Tamil.



Socially, they value gender equality and individual autonomy, with no hierarchically organized clans or territorial divisions. Their subsistence revolves around forest-based livelihoods—men primarily collect wild honey, while women gather edible forest plants, firewood, and prepare food. Marriage practices are generally loose monogamous, with a preference for both matrilineal and patrilineal cross-cousin unions.

Food is a fundamental element of identity and culture, intricately tied to the social and ecological fabric of every community. The dietary traditions of ethnic and tribal groups reflect unique worldviews shaped by local environments, belief systems, and historical experiences. Understanding these food practices, however, requires sensitivity to their cultural context and symbolic meaning, particularly in relation to women's physiological transitions. Within most traditional societies, women's bodies—especially during puberty, pregnancy, and lactation—occupy a sacred yet regulated space. Despite their central role in nurturing family and community life, women often face restrictions rooted in taboos, myths, and cultural beliefs that may limit their access to nutritious food, thereby affecting their overall health and reproductive well-being.

Food choices are largely influenced by cultural acceptability. Tribal communities exemplify remarkable diversity in this regard—their food systems are deeply interconnected with their ecosystems, seasonal cycles, and social traditions (Nair, 2012). The dietary patterns of these communities are not merely biological responses to hunger but complex expressions of cultural adaptation, reflecting a balance between human needs and environmental stewardship. Rooted in indigenous ecological knowledge, these food practices rely on local biodiversity, sustainable food-gathering methods, and traditional preparation techniques that ensure nutritional adequacy and environmental harmony (KIRTADS, 2017).

Kerala's tribal communities constitute a small yet culturally significant segment of the state's population. As per the 2011 Census, tribal groups represent around 1.43 percent of the population, inhabiting ecologically sensitive forest and hill regions. The preservation of their cultural and culinary heritage has become an urgent anthropological concern (Devika, 2015). Documenting and transmitting these practices to future generations serve not only as a means of safeguarding ancestral wisdom but also as a contribution to the evolving discourse on sustainable and diversified food systems (Vishwanathan, 2017).

Like many other indigenous groups, the Malapandaram tribals of Pathanamthitta and Kollam districts depend on forests and hilly terrains for sustenance. Their livelihood practices emphasize the use of locally available natural resources (Prabhakaran, 2014) and reflect adaptive strategies shaped by cultural beliefs, ecological constraints, and nutritional needs (Nair and Menon, 2020). Faced with changing environmental and socio-economic pressures, many tribal communities pursue livelihood diversification as a survival strategy (Bora and Mahanta, 2024). Despite these transitions, indigenous food systems remain significant for their nutritional richness and ecological resilience. For instance, traditional staples such as millets provide protein, fiber, vitamins, and essential minerals that combat malnutrition and diet-related disorders (Santhosh, 2017).

Moreover, indigenous food practices promote ecological sustainability, emphasizing low environmental impact, biodiversity conservation, and minimal dependence on chemical inputs. However, the erosion of traditional knowledge, changing food preferences, and restricted access to forest resources pose growing challenges (Jeevan, 2019). The encroachment of forest lands directly affects the availability of wild edible plants and animals' integral to tribal diets. Nevertheless, community-led conservation, agroecological farming practices, and indigenous food festivals have emerged as revitalizing forces for sustaining these traditions (Menon and Pillai, 2016; Nair, 2017).

This study explores the indigenous dietary practices of the Malapandaram tribe with a focus on nutritional customs during critical female life stages—puberty, pregnancy, and lactation. Through ethnographic inquiry and documentation, it aims to highlight the intricate relationship between the community's ecology, culture, and food. By recording and

contextualizing these practices, the research contributes to the preservation of cultural heritage while demonstrating the enduring relevance of indigenous nutritional wisdom in promoting health and sustainability.

III. FOOD HABITS OF MALAPANDARAM

The food habits of the Malapandaram tribe reflect their close relationship with nature and the forest ecosystem. Their diet consists largely of tubers, leaves, fruits, honey, and mushrooms, which they obtain through seasonal foraging and traditional knowledge passed down orally. Various tubers such as Narlu, Kuddha, Talpe, Nurank, Bethankank, and others are staples, mostly harvested during summer. Certain tubers like Chongkank, Kyamkank, and Nooradan are specifically collected between June and August. There are cultural beliefs tied to tuber collection emphasizing respect and rituals, such as avoiding touching one's nose with a knife during collection to ensure the tubers cook properly. The tribe also believes in a metaphysical connection between the tuber's growth and the person harvesting it, leading to restrictions on who may dig tubers based on body type. Leafy vegetables and forest leaves are essential in their diet, serving both nutritional and medicinal roles. Common edible leaves include Kierekiri, Chauthekiri, Otumkethevela, and Muringele. These are consumed in various forms such as cooked dishes and curries. Some leaves and bark have medicinal uses, for example, banana skin is used to soothe the toothache, and Kankekiri leaves act as a poultice for stomach pain. Their fruit and nut consumption reflects seasonal availability in forests; fruits such as Cheerapannu, Kotepannu, and Nellpannu provided early nourishment though wild fruits are scarcer today. There are traditional beliefs about spirits affecting fruit picking, urging caution and certain taboos when collecting from forests. Honey is another important natural resource, harvested from both inside and outside forests in various forms like Pitilthenu and Kirithenu. Honey is valued not only as food but also for treating ailments like jaundice, cough, and inflammation. Mushrooms found in rainy seasons, including species such as Akum, Manangkai Kumnu, and Pital Kumnu, complement their diet.

Puberty: Food as Medicine and Social Rite

The onset of puberty among Malapandaram girls is marked by a suite of specialized dietary prescriptions that function as both nurturing and symbolic practices. During this transition, nutrient-dense foods such as finger millet dumplings, dried ginger juice, sesame balls, wild edible spinach, agati leaves and flowers (*Sesbania grandiflora*), and rice flour with jaggery are emphasized. These foods fulfill dual roles: they support physiological changes—relieving abdominal pain, boosting haemoglobin, and enhancing bone strength—while also providing culturally validated forms of nourishment. Ginger and finger millet, in particular, are employed for their anti-inflammatory and fortifying properties.

The ingestion of raw egg mixed with gingelly (sesame) oil stands out as a custom believed to impart strength and vitality to adolescent girls, symbolically nourishing their transition into womanhood. In contrast, food items such as papaya, pineapple, jaggery, rice flakes, coffee, and tea are strictly avoided. These restrictions are based on communal wisdom that links these foods to health risks, such as increased bleeding or pain, and are underpinned by traditional explanatory frameworks rather than biomedical logic. Sour foods and rice are also restricted, the former to prevent “high bleeding” and the latter to relieve abdominal discomfort.

Pregnancy: Nutrition Shaped by Cultural Logic and Protective Taboos

During pregnancy, Malapandaram food traditions become especially pronounced, mixing dietary guidance with protective taboos rooted in folk beliefs about fetal health. Pregnant women commonly consume craving foods, wild greens, tubers, and roots—resources that are abundant in their forested habitats and believed to replenish maternal blood and sustain fetal growth. The inclusion of meat and ginger (when available) addresses the need for protein and oedema control, while an emphasis on light, easily digestible foods aims to prevent delivery complications.

Simultaneously, the list of foods to be avoided expands to incorporate papaya, gingelly seeds, jaggery, raw egg, pineapple, beans, black tea, wild yam, groundnut, potato, pepper, and pickles. The rationale for these prohibitions extends beyond nutrition: papaya and gingelly seeds are viewed as abortifacients, jaggery and raw eggs as contributors to abnormal fetal development or miscarriage, and black tea and wild yam as linked to undesirable skin color or fetal anomalies. Groundnut, potato, and spicy condiments are believed to cause adverse reactions, including itching, speech delay, red rashes on the infant's body, and even miscarriage. Thus, dietary rules in pregnancy are closely interwoven with indigenous theories of reproduction, fetal development, and maternal care.

Lactation: Diet for Recovery and Infant Wellbeing

In the postpartum phase, the Malapandaram emphasize foods that promote maternal recovery, induce lactation, and protect infant health. Dietary staples include palm sugar, ginger, pepper, drumstick leaves (often boiled with salt), fenugreek water, rice water, garlic, dried wild tuber, small fish, and tangy soups made with tamarind pulp and traditional herbs. These foods are thought to heal delivery wounds, facilitate milk production, and impart warmth, reflecting a keen awareness of postnatal vulnerabilities and the importance of restoring balance in the body.

Parallel to these positive prescriptions are explicit restrictions: egg, milk, pulses, hot foods, sour fruits, and tomatoes are avoided. Explanations for these taboos draw on both observation and cumulative ancestral knowledge—some foods are said to cause gastric distress or “coldness” in the baby, others to result in pain, dysentery, or even the cessation of breast

milk. The underlying logic here is preventative, designed to shield both mother and child from perceived risks during a highly sensitive physiological period.

By integrating plant-based knowledge, environmental resourcefulness, and communal belief systems, the Malapandaram dietary customs during puberty, pregnancy, and lactation provide an illustrative example of how indigenous communities adapt nutritional strategies for life-cycle events. While grounded in tradition and ecology, these food habits also signal the broader social and ritual dimensions that surround reproduction, health, and gender within the Malapandaram world.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study underscores the critical importance of respecting and preserving the diverse food traditions of tribal communities, specifically during formative life stages such as puberty, pregnancy, and lactation. The food habits of the Malapandaram tribe are deeply rooted in their ecological resources, cultural beliefs, and generational knowledge, reflecting a complex interplay between nutrition, ritual, and identity. Dietary customs not only guide individual and family health but also embody the community's adaptive strategies for sustaining well-being against socio-economic pressures and environmental change. Cultural beliefs and taboos play a decisive role in shaping eating behaviors, particularly among adolescent girls and reproductive-aged women, often mediating access to essential nutrition at crucial physiological phases. These practices, influenced by traditional wisdom and local resources, prioritize both the nutritional requirements and symbolic needs of the community, balancing health, spirituality, and ancestral heritage.

The study also highlights the impact of socio-economic factors, modernization, and migration, which increasingly challenge the survival of indigenous food traditions and the transmission of traditional ecological knowledge to younger generations. Preserving such dietary customs is vital—not only for maintaining nutritional security and cultural continuity, but also for protecting the resilience embedded within indigenous systems of food and health. Active documentation, awareness-building, and respect for traditional wisdom are essential steps to safeguard these foodways for future generations, ensuring that the nutritional, ecological, and cultural legacy of the Malapandaram tribe continues to enrich both their community and broader society.

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