

## CULINARY HERITAGE IN THE SANGAM PERIOD – AN ANALYTICAL STUDY

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The documents of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. records that the history of ancient Tamil Nadu begins with the emergence of 3 prominent kingdoms i.e., Cheras, Cholas and Pandyas and this age between the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. and the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. is called as the Sangam age. (<https://ancient-indian-coins.blogspot.com/2018/07/sangam-period-coinage-300-bc-200-ad.html>). This Sangam Age is a significant chapter in South India's history. According to the Tamil legends, there were three Sangams (Academy of Tamil Poets) in ancient Tamil Nadu, popularly known as Muchchangamnds. These Sangams flourished under the Pandyas' royal patronage.

Records reveal that Gods and legendary sages attended the first Sangam held at Madurai, but there was no literary work available as far as this Sangam is concerned. The second Sangam was held in Kapadapuram. Reference to this is available only in Tolkappiyam, but for which, all the literary works had perished with the passage of time. Mudathirumaran founded the third Sangam in Madurai. A large number of poets participated in it, producing voluminous literature, but only a few survived. These are the only Tamil literary works that continue till date as the useful sources to reconstruct the history of the Sangam Age.

Due to lack of enough sources, most of the historians consider the First Two Sangams as imaginary as the traditional dates are mostly not in line with the Historical Dates and Each Sangam Age spanned around 2000 Years and the first Sangam Age according to the traditional dates started before 5000 or 6000 BC and at that time the four river valley civilization was in its nascent state or yet to be begun (<http://know-your-heritage.blogspot.com/2017/06/food-in-sangam-literature-2.html>). Hence, to record the diet practices and cooking methods of the Sangam people, literary sources like Natrinai, Akananooru, Purananooru etc. are the only available sources that throw a flood of light on their diet practices, climatic conditions, the crops cultivated, the economic condition of the people and the lands they lived and ploughed. (Bhuvaneshwar 2018, n.k.).

### ROLE OF CULINARY IN SANGAM AGE

Studying the heritage and food habits of the sangam era is an essential element in understanding the relationship between their surroundings and the society. This provides a distinct view pertaining to their culture. The study of Sangam literature provides sufficient evidence of their heritage and food/dietary culture to figure out the characteristic features of their variety of food. This is supported by the many literary and archaeological evidences and this article clearly shows that Tamil sangam generation ate both vegetarian as well as non-vegetarian cooked foods using high quality cooking techniques.

During the ancient Sangam age, the terms like *aṭicil*, *ayaṇi*, *aviḷ*, *kūḷ*, *conri*, *nimiral*, *pulukkai*, *punḱam*, *pom'mal*, *mitavai*, *mural* had been used to refer to various varieties of rice. These were prepared in various ways and consumed as food. The Tamil man who lived in harmony with the nature in the ancient times ate first vegetables and then fruits. Due to this healthy practice, human beings of this period who ate vegetarian diet lived without any illness (Bhuvaneshwar 2018, 62).

All the communities of the Sangam age has identifiable cuisine with a specific collection of cooking practices consisting of six tastes i.e., sweet, pungent, bitter, salt, sour and astringent. Over the years, the gastronomy of the Sangam Era has uniquely evolved considerably, using characteristic spices and the combination of unique flavors.

The culinary of the Sangam era consisted unique flavors; their recipes were had a tangy twist with plenty of vegetables. The gastronomy of the Sangam Age was dominated by leaves, rice, lentils, tamarind, coconut and curries. There were both vegetarians and non-vegetarians. Consequently, their food too had a wide range of both vegetarian and non-vegetarian delicacies (Kathiravan 2008, 41).

#### **TRADITIONAL EATING METHODS:**

Tamils used to sit on the floor and eat. They had a habit of eating food in 12 different ways. This classification is based on the nature and taste of the food they consume. Their diet is in fact a tradition of consuming a variety of foods in combination with emotions.

1. Consumption - Too little intake.
2. Eating - The intake of food
3. Absorption - concentrating the mouth and absorbing the water content.
4. Drinking - Eating aquatic foods (such as porridge) to lighten up hunger.
5. Treating - Consuming snacks.
6. Devouring - Tasting and consuming.
7. Licking - Intake of any food through tongue.
8. Ingestion - Absorb the whole mouth into one mouth.
9. Drinking- drinking water and other beverages
10. Mantel - Ingestion of large quantities.
11. Munching - To chew a heavy commodity.
12. Swallowing - Throat intake between tooth and tongue (<https://www.tamilmithran.com/article-source/NjEzNzQx/>)

#### **INGREDIENTS WIDELY USED IN THE SANGAM AGE**

Although rice was the Sangam Tamils ' main food, maize and millet were also commonly used by the people of the Sangam age (Ramakrishnan 1984, 4). The poor had very simple food. At times, they even ate without salt and satisfied with greens (Shrikumar 2018).

*Paratavar* (fishermen) consumed more fish whereas the people of the Mullai region consumed large quantities of milk products. Likewise, the Kurinji people took meat as they resolved in hunting. Many a times, they used various kinds of grains in many forms in their

dishes. They ate rice flakes with milk, honey, ghee and jaggery ([https://www.projectmadurai.org/pm\\_etexts/pdf/pm\\_0229.pdf](https://www.projectmadurai.org/pm_etexts/pdf/pm_0229.pdf)). The Sangam Tamils used salt, tamarind, pepper, etc. to cook the food deliciously. Ghee was used only by the wealthy people. They ate meals with vegetables and fruits. During those days, it was common to eat meat. People also ate the flesh of the ram, the deer, the hare, the fowl, the porcupine, the pig and the boar (Kesigan 2010, 204).

Although Tiruvalluvar condemned drinking wine and eating meat, the early Tamils involved in drinking *madhu* (Alcoholic beverages during festivals and functions. There are also references to women indulging in drinking (<https://www.valaitamil.com/thirukkural.php>). Manikkavasagar referred to the churning of curd in many places of his literary works (<https://learnsangamtamil.com>). They widely consumed *teral* or juice extracted from sugarcane (Kesigan 2010, 210). During the Sangam age, honey or toddy was preserved in the hollow space of bamboos ([https://www.projectmadurai.org/pm\\_etexts/pdf/pm0229.pdf](https://www.projectmadurai.org/pm_etexts/pdf/pm0229.pdf)) as their dietary practices were more healthy because they were quite good in the techniques of cooking.

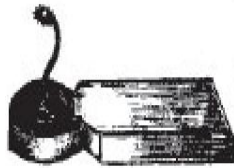
### HOME APPLIANCES USED IN THE SANGAM AGE

Sangam people used similar tools that are used today to do household chores. Some of the mostly used tools are

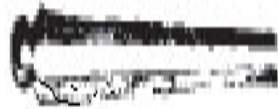
1. Veṭṭukkaruvikaḷ (Cutting equipments)
2. Aṭimaṇai (Chopping Board)
3. Kaṇicci (Peeler)
4. Nīr Mukakkum Karuvi-Water face tool
5. Mattu (Muddler)
6. Ural (Grinder)
7. Ulakkai- Plunger
8. Maṭpāṇṭāṅkaḷ- Ceremaic (Bhuvanesar Ka 2018, 16)



Ural



Aṭimaṇai



Ulakkai



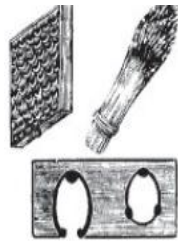
Mattu



Maṭpāṇṭāṅkaḷ



Nīr Mukakkum Karuvi



Veṭṭukkaruvikaḷ



Kaṇicci

(Venkatesan 2017)

**VEGETARIAN FOOD**

As far as the vegetarian food is concerned, along with the rice preparation, vegetables, spinach beetroots etc. were served in banana leaf and at times in other leaf too. Following Agananuru song illustrates that this was a common practice during the Sangam age.

*Pañnai venpaḷattu arici eyppa,  
Toḻimāṇ ulakkai ūḷiṇ pokki,  
Uralmukam kaṭṭiya curainirai kollai,  
Aṅkaṇ iruṅcuṇai niroṭu mukavā,  
Kaḷpaṭu kuḷicik kalaṭuppu erri,  
Kuṭavar puḷukkiya poṅku'aviḷp puṅkam*

(akam.393:7-12, [https://www.projectmadurai.org/pm\\_etexts/pdf/pm0229.pdf](https://www.projectmadurai.org/pm_etexts/pdf/pm0229.pdf))

This song elaborates that the inter-caste women having long ears used to take the *varagu* (one variety of rice) from backyard and pounded them into rice. This *varagu* rice was cleaned by using brooms and soaked in pot made up of mud. The water from streams was used to cook this rice and was consumed by the people as well. They also served this rice in leaves along with tubers and spinach to all the laymen who crossed their households (Ahananooru 393:7-12 [https://www.projectmadurai.org/pm\\_etexts/pdf/pm0229.pdf](https://www.projectmadurai.org/pm_etexts/pdf/pm0229.pdf)).

Various couplets in the *Sirupanatrupadai* corroborate that the people of the Marudham landscape ate white rice with a thick pasty curry made from crab flesh and ridge gourds. *Sirupanatrupadai* records about the consumption of white rice, beef, spinach, beans, puffed rice, pulses, cereals, legumes and pickle varieties as the staple food of their diet. Another literary source by name *Porunaratrupadai* also outlines how the Chola country's Kurinji people ate tubers and honey (Govindanar 1966, 164).

Malaipadukadam (an ancient Tamil poem in the Pattuppāṭṭu anthology of the Sangam literature), a literary work records about a *kozhambu* made from seeds of jackfruit, raw mangoes and tamarind extract eaten with bamboo rice and buttermilk. Yet another literary work *Perumpanatrupadai* also reports about a recipe in which they cooked together Varagu rice, lentils, tamarind pulp and large bean seeds (<https://learnsangamtamil.com>)

**FRUIT FOODS**

During the period of nomadic life before human society was civilized, fruits largely satisfied man's need and quest for food. Importance assigned to fruits during the Sangam age can be envisaged from the usage of the word *mukkani* – the collective name given to Mango, jack and banana. Innumerable references to these fruit eating habits can be found in the Sangam literature. For instance, in Ainkurunuru,

*Attap palaviṇ veyil tiṅciṟu kāy,  
Aruṅ curam celvōr,  
aruntiṇar kaḷiyum*  
(<https://ilakkiyam.com/iyal/1771-inguru>)

These above lines indicates that those who go to drought-stricken land of Palai, they ate jack fruit. Apart from this, various other fruits were also used by the people of the Sangam age. They were *Viḷāmpaḷam* – Wood Apple (Nattrinai.24, Akanannuru: 394:1), *Nellikani* – Gooseberry (Nattrinai:87), *Puḷiyāṅkaṇi* – Tamarind (Nattrinai:374), *Palaappalam* – Jack fruit, (Akanannuru:182, Nattrinai:213) *Nuṅku* – Fig ((Nattrinai:392), *Kaḷāppaḷam* – an indigenous Tamil Nadu fruit) (Akanannuru:394:1).

### PADDY PREPARATION

Rice consumption was quite rare amongst all the people of the Sangam age. Only the rich people could afford to eat rice. Others had to adjust and enjoy with either *Thinai* (Millet) or *Koozhu* (cumbu flour and broken rice).

***Uṅpatu nāḷi***  
(*puram.189:5*, Puliyur Kesigan 2010, 216)

From these lines, *Puraṇānūru* discloses that only limited quantity of food was eaten at certain times as the people of those times considered that excess consumption of food was a path that leads to health problems (<https://ilakkiyam.com/iyal/1771-inguru-nooru>). *Inainkurunuru* has a reference to the accumulation of paddy in the field (kalam) after being brought from the paddy field (Kesigan 2010, 210).

***Aivaṇac ciṟukili kaṭiyum nāṭa***  
(*Ainkuru.285:3* <http://www.tamilurangam.in/literatures/ainkurunooru/index.html>)

The above referred lines explain that Aivana paddy was cultivated for the consumption of people as food. Lines (7, 26, 60) in the song of Nattrinai clearly indicates that bamboo was used for rice cooking by the Sangam people (<https://ilakkiyam.com/iyal/1771-inguru-nooru>).

### Diverse Cooking Techniques

The Sangam age women many a times cooked Yam *porial* (fry) and Sennel (Rice) for the relatives as part of the offering of feast and this can be interestingly gleaned from the following lines of Nattrinai. 367:3

***Karuṅkaṅ karuṇaic cennel veṇcōru***  
([https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Jt01SY2TGvcHu\\_gq7OSER0\\_BGK3jyhpZ/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Jt01SY2TGvcHu_gq7OSER0_BGK3jyhpZ/view))

Along with Nattrinai, Kurunthogai too has references to the Sangam age feast as

***Muḷitayir picainta kāntaḷ melviral***  
***Tāṅ tuḷantu aṭṭa tīmpuḷip pākar***  
(<http://sangacholai.in/KURU-167.html>)

These lines indicate that the head of the womenfolk on the first day pours a cup of fermented milk, on the next day with her thin fingers, like a Gandhal flower makes little sour curd to her husband by adding a sweet-sour curry ([https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Q7r4JGp9V\\_z2bUjkFW2otVn3TtPRCA5w/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Q7r4JGp9V_z2bUjkFW2otVn3TtPRCA5w/view)). Also, curd rice was consumed along with ghee by the Sangam people and this is clearly explained in Akananuru-340 (<https://ilakkiyam.com/iyal/1771-inguru-nooru>) and Perumbantru padai-89-94 (Govindanar 1966. 154)

The Sangam brahmin women ate rice mixed with buttermilk. They also added it with pomegranate and curry leaves that are tossed in butter. These women added it with pepper powder and tender mango leaves that can be gleaned from the 306 and 307 lines of Perumpanatrupadai.

*Sedha narumōr veṇṇeyiṅ madhuladhodu  
uruppuṛa pacuṅkāyṭ pōloṭu karikalantu*  
(Govindanar 1966. 206)

The Sangam people enjoyed eating rice and yoghurt with a little bit of spicy and sour pickle and this became the most sought popular food for them. The author of Paṭṭiṅappālai in fact refers to wide roads and the flowing of *kanchi* (excess water while boiling rice) like a river on these streets in the city of Kaviripumpattinam. Similarly, food was also cooked at *Madapalli* and was sold for a low price to the public. These *Madapallis* acted as the Nutritional centres for pedestrians and the poor people. This makes it evident that from those early days itself, people were habituated to eat in public places many a times.

*Aram nilai'iya akan aṭṭil  
Chōru vākkiya koḷuṅ kañci  
Yāru pōlap parantu oḷuki*  
(Paṭṭiṅappālai.43-45 <https://ilakkiyam.com/iyal/1562-pattinapalai>)

Through the above lines, the author of Paṭṭiṅappālai refers to wide roads and the flowing of *kanchi* (excess water while boiling rice) like a river in the streets of the city of Kaviripumpattinam. Similarly, food was also cooked at *Madapalli* and was sold for a low price to the public. These *Madapallis* acted as the Nutritional centres for pedestrians and the poor people. This makes it evident that from those early days itself, people were habituated to eat in public places many a times. It is mentioned that

*Aruṅcel mākkal cōrupoti veṅkuṭai*  
(akam.121:12, <https://ilakkiyam.com/iyal/1562>)

From the above lines of Akananooru, it can be understood that *Annadhanam* (Free offering of food) was considered as the best charity when compared with any other kind of charity. This is why feeding those who seek them is traditionally considered the best practice. People who move from one place to another will carry a food in a whitish palm leaves folded in the shape of umbrella.

***Arucel mākkal cōrupoti veṅkuṭai***(akam.121:12, [https://www.projectmadurai.org/pm\\_etexts/pdf/pm\\_0229.pdf](https://www.projectmadurai.org/pm_etexts/pdf/pm_0229.pdf))

The above song depicts that the head of the womenfolk in the family, used a white-hot kiln, tossed the rice in the furnace, prepared mashed mango fruit mixed tamarind gravy, bittergurad curry, spinach leaves gravy and ate.

***Aṭumakaḷ mukanta eḷavā veṅṅel***  
***Toṭimāṅ ulakkaip parū'uk kurru arici***  
***Kāṭi veḷulaik koḷṭ'i nḷḷal***  
 (puṛam.399:1-3 Kesigan 2010, 210)

**FOOD PREPARATION MADE OF HONEY, MILLETS AND FLAKES**

The records relating to the Sangam age depicts that honey has been the most sought delicious food item for the human beings of the Sangam age. A reference to this delicious honey that was consumed by everybody right from the adults to the tiny tots can be clearly understood from the below given lines of Natrinai.

***Curumpu uṅa virinta karuṅkāl vēṅkaip***  
***Peruṅ ciṅaiṭ toṭutta koḷuṅkaṅ kirā'al***  
***Puḷḷurruk kacinta tīm tēṅkal aḷaik***  
 (Natrinai13:5-8 [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Jt01SY2TGvcHu\\_gq7OSER\\_BGK3jyhpZ/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Jt01SY2TGvcHu_gq7OSER_BGK3jyhpZ/view))

The above lines of *natrinai* explains that honey bees were nesting in the *Vangai* or kino tree. These honey bees circled around the kino tree with heavy sounds. The dead honeydew that used to fall into the rock below was collected and consumed by the children of the *Kuramagal* (Hunters) by hand. However, it should be placed here on record that today, honeycombs are rare, as forests are being destroyed and bees too are being destroyed with fire to collect the honey because demand for honey is quite high as it helps the babies to speak well and acts as a medi-care to cure many ailments (Kesigan 1980, 346).

During the sangam period, people ate cooked thinai rice and powdered thinai as part of their diet.

***Uṅaṅku tiṅai tuḷavum kai pōl***(Natrinai 44: 6 [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Jt01SY2TGvcHu\\_gq7OSER\\_BGK3jyhpZ/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Jt01SY2TGvcHu_gq7OSER_BGK3jyhpZ/view))

These Natrinai lines indicate that from the forest, *thinai* or rice was harvested, dried in hot sun and then cooked. The Sangam literature (Purnanaru. 143: 5, Aingurunooru. 285: 4 <https://ilakkiyam.com/iyal/1771-inguru-nooru>) states that they prepared milled *thinai* rice by using the equipment called Ural (grinding machine) and converted late into flour to consume.

### ARIVAR UNAVU (SAINT FOOD)

The three-sensed monk, known as the Arivar, went from one home to another for begging, collected cooked rice with butter and consumed. They drank hot water and used a copper bowl to collect food from various houses.

### KAIM'MAI MAKAIIR UṅAVU (WIDOW FOOD)

The widow women were called as 'uyavar peṅṅir' and 'kaḷikala makaiir' during the Sangam age. These women avoided consumption of ghee and ate only properly strained cooked rice mixed with sesame *thuvayal* (seasoning) and spinach cooked with tamarind in leaf. Some people ate *alli* (an indigenous rice from Tamil Nadu) rice.

### BRAHMIN FOOD

Brahmins consumed *maṛaiyavarkaḷ paṛcōru* (Milk Rice), *paruppuccōru* (Lentil Rice), *nercōru* (Steamed Rice), *miḷaku* (Pepper) mixed ghee pomegranate and mango pickle. They also enjoyed consuming jackfruit, banana and tender coconut water (Kesigan 1980, 143-44).

### THE METHOD OF EATING

During the Sangam period, people ate their food in banana leaf and teak leaf. They also preferred silver and gold plates. They had a practice of eating hot food. They munched the food properly before swallowing and this information has been depicted diligently in the below lines of Purananoru

*Nāttirām peyarppa uṅṅu*

(<https://keetru.com/index.php/2014-03-08-04-39-26/2014-03-14-11-17-85/18907-2012-03-08-05-01-30>)

### NON-VEGETARIAN FOOD

Sangam literature provides extensive information relating to the eating of Eel's meat, Murrel's fish, Mackerel's fish, Sword fish, Shark, Tortoise, Crab, Fowl, Quail, Partridge, rams, Veal, Ox, Bison, porcupine, pork, iguana, rabbit, venison etc. They cooked ghee and spices over the flesh. Sangam people dwelt in five diverse environments and so their eating habits were quite different as they were influenced by their diverse surroundings.

During those days, Ayars and Idayars enjoyed the dairy products. Uzhavars (farmers) ate roasted rams of meat, fowls, shrimps, crabs, etc. Fishermen ate fish and drank pottage rice and baby. Hunters ate venison, pigs and iguana. Ascetics and Brahmin favoured non-vegetarian diet and avoided alcoholic beverages, which makes it evident that during those days Sangam Tamils made no distinction between vegetarian and non-vegetarian food.

Sangam literature used several terms to refer to meat varieties: Un (meat), Thu, Thasai (flesh), Thadi (steak), Kurai (large meat / fish slice), Ninam (fat), Pulal (smell/dried salt-fish dried meat), Vidakkudai and Muri (flesh-removed bone) (Kesigan 2010, 216). Hence, it becomes evident from the Sangam sources that during the Sangam age food culture is not just about eating or to enjoy the taste. For them, the food has many scientific secrets hidden behind the eating habits.



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