



A Study of Tamil Nadu's Tribal Communities: Indigenous Foods as Foundations of Governance, Spirituality and Ecological Harmony

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Abstract. The paper examines the food cultures of Tamil Nadu's tribal communities where ecological sustainability, cultural identity, and resistance intersect. Studying beyond conventional studies frames tribal diets as a subsistence practice. This research is examined based on the aspects such as the symbolic role of food in oral narratives, gendered transmission of the culinary knowledge and the relationship between their sacred food taboos and ecological conservations. The practices of the Irulas, Kurumbas, Todas, and Malayali tribes, demonstrating how indigenous food systems ranges from millet-based agriculture and forest stocking to domesticated animal rituals and collective feasting functions not only as nutritional strategies but also as archives of memory, community governance and spirituality.

The paper further argues about the tribal modes of food preparation which are rooted in seasonal rhythms and principles constituting a remark on industrial agriculture and capitalist modes of production. In doing so, the paper emphasizes how these indigenous frameworks of food are not static traditions but dynamic responses to ecological shifts and cultural pressures. These adaptive strategies explain a sustainable resilience of these communities to preserve biodiversity while also resisting homogenization by their mainstream agricultural practices. By placing food as material of practice and text of cultural, the study will reveal how these communities are enacting a sustainable life style where consumption is not separated from reciprocity and mother earth's law.

The paper also highlights the role of ritual feasts and communal dining in shaping their communities bonds, where eating together reinforces the important values of equality and shared responsibility among their clans. These cultural habits are often neglected in mainstream research, revealing how food practices serves both as ecological strategies and ethical frameworks to live in harmony with the environment. These areas highlights the necessity of integration of tribal epistemologies with contemporary debates on food security, biodiversity, and environmental justice, placing Tamil Nadu's tribal food heritage as a critical resource for reimagining sustainable production in the Anthropocene.

Keywords: Tamil Nadu tribes, sustainability, food, ecology, spirituality.

1 Introduction

Tamil Nadu is home to nearly 38 tribal groups, of which six are classified as primitive tribes. According to the 2011 Census, the tribal population stood at about

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7,94,697, making up roughly 1 percent of the state's total population [Government of India]. The tribal population in Tamil Nadu can be broadly classified into three geographical regions, namely, the Eastern coast line region, the central plain area and North and west mountains regions where the majority of the tribal people are living. The important hills of Tamil Nadu are the Jawadhu hills and Yelagiri hills of North Arcot district, the Kalrayan hills of south Arcot district, the Pachamalai, the Kollimalai and Yergadu hills of Salem district, the Anamalai of Coimbatore district, the Sitteri hills of Dharmapuri district, the Palanimalai of Dindigul district, Elumalai [cardamom hills] hills and Varshanad hills of Theni district [Tamil Nadu State Planning Commission 45-48].

The most notable communities are the Badagas, Kotas, Kurumbas, Irulas, Paniyans, Kattunayakans, and Todas. Their lifestyles are closely intertwined to the diverse ecological landscapes they inhabited guided by ancestral ecological knowledge, seasonal patterns, and cosmological practices that differ significantly from mainstream urban lifestyles [Hockings 23-35]. In a time when the culture of convenience food and loss of traditional food items are establishing new realities across the world, the tribal culinary traditions of the Tamil Nadu people remain as the nest of not only indigenous cultural values, but also a means of resistance to globalized homogenization. These food ways not only sustain a body, but are important structures governing, spiritually expressing, and ecologically caring. The research examines the role of indigenous foods as the pillars of these societies, which leads to forms of self governance in the regions, maintenance of spiritual practices, and establishment of equilibrium between human and environmental relationships. This way, this study prefers to look into the future of indigenous food ways and its critical role in the development of cultural resilience and ecological balance in the fast-evolving world.

2 Research Objectives

I have set out on this exploration with the pursuit of six connected but distinct objectives that I set after my first experiences with the rich tribal heritage practiced by the Tamil Nadu people. To begin with, I am interested in recording and examining the

complex food regimes of Irulas, Kurumbas, Todas, and Malayali communities that are unique ecological adjustments that have been intriguing anthropologists over the decades.

My second goal is to study something that has really caught my eye during the literature review, how such food practices actually form the foundation of governance itself. Instead of perceiving food as unrelated to politics, I explore the ways in which food, eating and sharing, and the allocation of resources form the same structure according to which these communities structure themselves socially and take joint decisions.

The third aspect, which drew my interest, is the intense spiritual meaning of what these communities give to their eating habits. I consider the way in which eating turns into prayer, how the process of harvesting lets individuals relate to ancestors and how food preparation can connect the material and the spiritual world.

Fourth, I explore these systems as reservoirs of ecological wisdom, advanced knowledge systems, which have supported generations of human community together with biodiversity. This brought me to my fifth goal, which is to know how these old systems react to new modern challenges which have never existed before, such as climate change or market integration.

Lastly, based on these findings, I assess how these indigenous solutions can inform us on how we could create more sustainable and equitable food systems in our fast evolving world.

3 Research Questions

My research was fuelled by a number of major questions:

What is the exact way food practices by the tribal communities of Tamil Nadu establish and sustain systems of governance? Although the relationship between food and social organization has been observed by other researchers in the past, very few studies have considered food as the main tool of political power itself. What is the contri-

bution of spirituality to such food systems, and how does sacred eating affect the community leadership and religious practice? This question became a focus point when I discovered the inadequacy with which the literature on the issue of indigenous food systems tackles the cosmological aspects.

How do traditional food systems encode environmental knowledge and how do they help to preserve the ecosystem? In this case, I was specifically keen on getting past the romanticized ideas of the community of living with nature and learn about tangible practices and their environmental impact.

What is the adaptation of these ancient systems to the twenty first century challenges? It is a question that I pose because I am concerned that excessive research has treated traditional knowledge as something that is fixed as opposed to dynamic and adaptive. What are the practical lessons of these indigenous models on the modern debate on sustainable development and democratic governance? This is the last question that shows my belief that this study must be relevant in resolving the existing world problems.

4 Scope and Limitations

My study is on four individual tribal communities in Tamil Nadu and this decision needs to be justified. The Irulas of the Nilgiris and north, the forest-dwelling Kurumbas, the pastoral Todas of the plateau and the hill-farming Malayali people are the ecological extremes in the same state. Although there are numerous other tribes in Tamil Nadu, I chose these four due to the relative literature on their food systems across other ethnographers in the past giving the comparative data that I require during the analysis [Walker 12-15; Hockings 67-72].

This territorial concentration has its own advantages and disadvantages. By focusing on a single state, it is possible to have a very profound insight into the cultural-ecological contexts and still have sufficient diversity to determine more general patterns. Nevertheless, I do not ignore the fact that the results might not be extended to tribal communities in other lands or ecological areas. To get that, I drew upon both

historical ethnographic narratives and more recent observations because these communities keep changing, but it is not a frozen tradition.

It is this time aspect that makes time an opportunity as well as a challenge- I can follow the changes with time but have to be careful with the practices that have never changed and those that have changed. Importantly, and possibly most importantly, some of the tribal knowledge is still rightfully limited to the members of a community. Instead of seeing this as a restriction, I admire these restrictions as necessary to keep the community in charge of their intellectual and spiritual properties.

5 Methodology

5.1 Research Design

My approach to research was based on the fact that the several analytical lenses are necessary in explaining food-governance systems. My qualitative ethnographic approach is based on secondary sources mostly but this decision is also based on both practical and ethical issues related to research with indigenous population with the goal of doing decent research. The comparative case study method will enable me to explore the differences in the implementation of similar principles in different ecological and cultural settings.

Instead of looking at each community independently, I examine how pastoralism in the grasslands, gathering in forests, and agricultural activities on hills produce varying governance structures and still have common underlying principles regarding food, community and reciprocity. The design solution demonstrates my belief that anthropological studies must expose both their differences and shared humanity- how various communities are able to solve their common problems of coexisting with a sus-

tainable living system, with one that preserves their cultural differences and uniqueness.

5.1.1 Data Sources

Various forms of documentation were used in my research, and all of them have provided me with various views on these complicated systems. The early ethnographic and historical accounts by such scholars as Hockings and Walker offer a background knowledge, but I treat them very critically because I realize that earlier anthropological research was at times colonialism-biased [Hockings 15-28; Walker 34-56].

A record of traditional ecological knowledge such as medicinal plant research, environmental management, and food preparation provides tangible information on the way the communities socialize with their environments [Kannan and Kunhikrishnan 223-230; Rajendran and Aravindhan 340-356]. The reports by the government and NGO, especially those related to the implementation of the Forest Rights Act, give an idea about the modern issues and the effects of the policies [Ministry of Tribal Affairs; Tamil Nadu Forest Department]. I also looked at records of tribal cosmologies and oral traditions where I could and was conscious of the idea that written records may not necessarily reflect the richness of these knowledge systems [Keystone Foundation].

Analytical Approach. This analytical process commenced with meticulous reading and coding of the ethnographic data and identifying food practices of all the four communities. I then systematized these practices by themes and studied their effectiveness as governing systems, spiritual systems, and environmental management systems.

I found the comparative aspect especially enlightening in that some of the basic concepts like food as offering or ecological knowledge as political capital would assume various shapes depending on the particular situations presented by the environment and the sources of food as the main ones. This is an analysis which demanded the extinction of mere description to grasp some under principles and its many manifestations.

In the process, I was conscious of the way in which food practices are an intersection of gender, age, and spiritual authority since these systems and domains are regarded as highly complex in their power negotiations and not as traditional roles.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations. The utilization of indigenous knowledge, including the secondary sources, has to be reflected on constantly. I treat these communities as advanced knowledge providers who are constantly adjusting the ancient knowledge to the modern conditions instead of them being a shadowed past.

In such places where people hold certain knowledge as taboo, I admire such boundaries to the fullest. I analyze published practices and knowledge in my analysis, understanding that certain things about these systems rightfully belong to the control of the community.

Most of all, I also put my findings in a way that empowers and not disenfranchises these communities as they continue to seek rights, resources and recognition. Instead of exploiting, academic research must help in bringing justice.

This study is limited by a number of factors, the first one being the fact that I did not have to work with the community directly, but instead used the available documentation. Although this method will keep me out of some very serious ethical traps, it will also imply that I will not be able to check what is already practiced or get the opinions of the communities about my interpretations.

There is also a limitation of my analysis because, in many cases of the traditional knowledge, much of it is oral in the indigenous languages that I cannot obtain. The temporal difference between my sources some of which go back several decades begs the question of continuity and change which I answer but cannot answer entirely.

Most importantly, I recognize that I am an outsider to these communities and I apply the assumptions and analytical frameworks of my own culture to systems with which I have an incomplete grasp. This stance informs all that I ask questions, inter-

pret answers, etc., and therefore my results are always tentative and subject to revision by other community members themselves.

6 Food and Governance

Food is not only central to survival for Tamil Nadu's tribal societies but also underpins the entire architecture of governance, social hierarchy, ritual, and ecological wisdom. Each tribe expresses this axis in distinct ways, with shared threads of resource management, authority, and sustainability built by the communal food systems. Foucault's analysis of dietary regimes as mechanisms of bio power provides theoretical grounding for understanding how food practices constitute forms of social control and organization [Foucault 45-67].

Considering the modern state systems governance is largely bureaucratic and political, tribal governance depends deeply on every day practices of food production, distribution, and ritual consumption, creating a model where food embodies power, social order, and reciprocity. Patel's work on food sovereignty movements demonstrates how communities assert political autonomy through control of food systems, arguing that "who controls food controls power" [Patel 23].

6.1 Todas

For the Todas community of the Nilgiris, food governance is followed from their sacred dairy system. The primary food products such as the jagari-rice boiled in buffalo milk are served as both daily sustenance and ritual offering. However, its preparation and distribution follow strict hierarchical protocols that constitute governance mechanisms. Every Todas livelihood revolves around a temple-dairy called "ti", where milk is not merely a food product but a sacred substance linking people, animals, and gods highlighting the ecological sustainability [Hockings 89-102].

The dairyman-priest [palol] tends those sacred buffaloes and manages the "ti" as religious authority and political power within their clan structures. His authority de-

depends on his ability to maintain these sacred buffalo herds in order to perform the churning and boiling as ceremonies, to distribute milk and butter in communal rituals. The six grades of sacred buffaloes and equivalent grades of dairies define the hierarchy of Toda where the families with the higher-order dairies hold greater religious authority [Hockings 105-112].

Clan elders are in charge of the governance during council meetings held after milk ceremonies, resolving disputes and determining the timing of grazing, burning grasslands, and conducting life-cycle rituals. The annual festivals such as the Modhweth and Ponyup festivals, buffalo salt-feeding and migration begin they serve as both ritual gatherings and governance assemblies, reaffirming alliances between clans through structured feasting. The Toda leader is not recognized by wealth or decree but by the number of buffalo he owns, the purity maintained in dairy rituals, and the generosity with which he shares dairy products during communal ceremonies [Hockings 115-120]. Thus, food management encloses political practice, with successful buffalo husbandry.

6.1.1 Kurumbas

The Kurumbas, who inhabit forest areas, anchor their governance in forest-based occupations especially, honey gathering. Honey hunting from *Apis dorsata* hives on high cliffs is a collective act that requires clan support, physical courage, ecological reading of blooming cycles, and spiritual devotion. Before a honey harvesting, the hunters fast to worship God, sing to forest spirits, and appease deities at sacred cliff shrines called "God cliffs" [Walker 78-85]. Leadership among the Kurumbas is merit-based to the individual who shows the most skill in locating hives, managing smoke, or interpreting omens naturally leads the expedition.

After the honey collection, honey is shared democratically to everyone contributed, including rope-holders and fire tenders, while the first shares are offered to elders and deities [Walker 88-92]. Leaders earn their prestige by guiding the group safely and ensuring fair distribution but not by keeping the largest quantity to himself. This practice of the governance systems regulates the access to key forest resources and maintains ecological balance. Ritual feasts after each harvest reassures social harmony and the group's association with the forest [Keystone Foundation 34-40].

Irulas. The Irulas of northern Tamil Nadu occupy the dry slopes and forests where their governance centers on knowledge especially knowledge of food, medicine, and ecology. Every Irula settlement has a vaidyar, a healer priest who holds his or her authority with the mastery over medicinal plants and the rules governing their use. The Irulas know over 140 medical species, many of which serve as food-medicine hybrids: tubers that heal stomach ailments, greens that reduce fever, resins that become both antidote and nourishment [Kannan and Kunhikrishnan 225-228].

Food security in Irula communities depends on collective labour of families. The council of elders includes both men and respected senior females who meet during post-harvest feasts to decide forest access, fishing seasons, and plant-collecting limits. Spiritual life is integrated into these decisions by offering the first fish or crab caught in the Masimagam season to the water goddess Kanniamma, where the sacred groves [thoga] function as both temples and protected ecological zones [Keystone Foundation 41-45]. Leaders, often the eldest healers, derive their legitimacy from their ability to maintain community well-being through right food usage, fairness in distribution, and ritual rectitude.

Only two levels of headings should be numbered. Lower level headings remain unnumbered; they are formatted as run-in headings.

Malayali Tribes. The Malayali people of the Kolli and Pachamalai Hills represent one of Tamil Nadu's largest hill tribes. Their governance system balances the most common male chieftainship with everyday matriarchal food governance. While male chiefs preside over territorial decisions, elderly women holds the power to the household granary [pathayam]. They decide on the seed varieties that are sown, and amount of grain that must be contributed to communal feasts during festivals or at the times of crisis [Rajendran and Aravindhan 345-350]. Malayali food governance are operated through generational knowledge that are transmitted from elders, particularly grandmother figures who holds authority. Young women learn agricultural techniques, wild food identification, processing methods, and ritual preparations through apprenticeship with mothers and grandmothers. This knowledge transmission constitutes governance mechanism maintaining

cultural continuity and community identity. Elders who transmit knowledge gains social status and decision making authority among their community. Community consultations on agricultural timing, food crisis management, and ceremonial preparations involve elder women whose expertise derives from experience [Nair 210-215]. During the Pongal festival villages compete in generosity where families cook huge pots of sweet rice, cow's milk, and jaggery, and the widest circle of guests marks the household's prestige. Chiefs, judged by the size of their retained granaries and the freedom with which they share stored grain, hold moral authority. Annual assemblies align food cycles, settle land conflicts, and coordinate rituals between neighbouring villages. Women save seeds to of millets and pulses to maintain diversity and make them the custodians of both ecological sustainability as well as the moral economy of sharing [Rajendran and Aravindhan 352-356]. In all these societies, leadership hierarchy is intertwined with hospitality and resource generosity. Power here emerges not from accumulation but from circulation—the cyclical flow of nourishment, trust, and ritual connection.

Todas manage grassland burns and buffalo migrations by consensus; Kurumbas monitor flowering cycles to schedule honey hunts; Irulas observe new moon and first-rain indicators before harvesting medicinal roots; Malayalis plan crop rotations according to soil and water availability. In the tribal communities of Tamil Nadu, every political process begins with a meal and ends with shared food. Authority resides in those who nourish such as the priest sharing milk, the honey hunter guiding others to safe cliffs, the vaidhyar revealing the knowledge on medicinal plants, the matriarchal practices of measuring rice from storerooms.

7 Spiritual Dimensions of Indigenous Food Systems in Tamil Nadu

The complex nexus that unites people, food, and the transcendent may be studied in terms of the anthropological and ecological literature and has been observed as a complicated network, which connects persons to their genealogical history, to the natural environment and to the spiritual dogmas. It is in this frame that food is not just

a source of sustenance but a semiotic tool which creates a cultural heritage, giving rise to intergenerational unity in different societies. Ecological theorists of non-modern culture have observed the spiritual influence intertwined with each food acquisition procedure, preparation, and consumption.

To the local people, traditional food is not just something to eat but it is the fulfilment of communion and unity with their creator, ancestors and the natural environment [Manoharan 655658]. It is the ritual observances of the tribal communities then before doing the harvesting though praying to the forest spirits, the deities and the ancestors and the land-guardian entities. These practises expose a cosmological expression of how man interrelates with nature, thus creating a connexion between environmental well-being and wellness of a community. Food in these societies is a part of a more extended cosmological concept which includes astronomical periods, weather patterns, and the establishment of the most opportune times to plant, harvest, food preparation, and festival celebration. The holiness of food conveys specific information about vital crops, wildlife, and the traditions of food preparation by providing explanations and legend accounts which ensure that every meal means a cultural exchange and spiritual experience [Keystone Foundation 50 55].

These ties are perceived and sustained by ceremonial harvesting, seasonal migrations, the care of culturally important species and through culturally important species and areas. A loss of access to a traditional community territory also results in a loss of the spiritual aspects of the food system, and thus a break of cultural continuity and a crisis of identity [Pandian 3538]. Existing in numbers of native communities, a vast knowledge of food-medicine plants exists, which serve both as food and medicine. The list is a complex understanding of the relation of eating habits on physiological health, mental strength, and spiritual balance. In most cases, the specific foods prescribed by traditional healers are the food that has been prepared through ritual procedures as the traditional healers recognise that the healing process involves not only chemical activity but also spiritual orientation and communal approval [Kannan & Kunhikrishnan 228230]. This perception predicts the idea that wellness is created as a

result of a well-balanced relationship between individuals, communities and the natural environment.

Sacred groves, hunting zones and agricultural lands become simultaneously both food and a spiritual meeting spot thus reflecting community relations to a particular place. Considered from the tribe of Irula people in Tamil Nadu, with sacred groves, known locally as *thoga*, those are also temples and ecological reserves thus conserving and preserving the biodiversity as well as ritual worship. Such societies acknowledge certain mountains, forests, landscape, and farmlands as holy objects to which they attribute spiritual agency, which requires modesty and mutual interaction. It is based on this knowledge that food systems are born which are intrinsically sustainable as they take into consideration the spiritual value of ecological integrity [Keystone Foundation 60-65].

The sacred groves contain spirit and ghosts of the forest and ancestors. These entities have to be granted access to the temple, which is achieved by making offerings to them by the way of food and prayers. The spirits receive the first medicinal/food that is gathered before the humans eat it thus forming a mutual relationship between the human beings and non human beings. Groves are used to hold community meetings at their boundaries, and significant decisions must be made spiritually. Food gathering and food preparation are ritually based on spiritual practises. Most tubers and plants including *Vethalai velli kilangu*, *Mullu velli kilangu* and other religious foods possess both traditional medicine and symbolic meaning, and certain food is eaten in worship or during rites of due seasons.

The religious practises also feature the presentation of offerings of the local foods thus promoting community unity and praising local gods. The practise suggests social expectations, family relations and nature worship thus creating a mutual interaction between food, humanity, and nature. Toda spirituality is one that is entirely focused on the buffalo and its milk products. Buffaloes are worshipped as a divinity with myths of its origin in sacred mountains with the first Todas. Everyday milking therefore is a ritual that needs to be purified, prayed to follow certain procedures [Hockings 125130]. First milk of holy buffaloes is dedicated to temples and is then drunk.

The Butter and ghee that come as a result of solemn buffalo milk are the main offerings made upon Toda gods and ancestral spirits.

The manufacturing work is according to the detailed ritual prescriptions, with certain prayers following on each step. The feeding on these holy dairy products fosters a spiritual oneness wherein people obtain the connexion with the divine power, ancestral families, and the universe structure. Even the dairies themselves, act as temples in which the production of food is a sort of worship. The geometry of the “ti” follows the cosmological rules, and spatial layouts of various dairy operations are in line with hierarchical spiritualities [Hockings 135138]. Before approaching the dairy ritual purification is necessary, the work of the dairy is a religious service. In this way, the religious authority is part and parcel of the governance of food systems. The Todas pastoralism reflects highly advanced types of traditional ecology.

Nilgiris plateau has over fifty different grass species known by the community, which are aware of its nutritious value, seasonal occurrence and influence on the quality and milk production. The grazing activities are structured in cyclic programming ways, which avoid overgrazing and maintain health of grasslands [Hockings 140145]. Adaptive management is seen in seasonal migration patterns which are determined by availability of grass and environmental cycles of monsoons. The Todas move buffalo herd to different seasons and areas every year to permit pastures to regenerate. This pastoralism on a small scale maintains the ecosystem diversity and prevents the degradation that can happen with sedentary cows.

The experience of medicine plants, which are used to cure the buffalo diseases, is also another aspect of the ecological knowledge. Todas also have a large botanical library and they use certain plants to treat various diseases of buffalo and as well as to enhance milk production. This is passed on via the apprenticeship systems, in which the young dairy labourers are tutored by experienced dairy workers and known as the “palols” [Hockings 148152]. Markedly, this ecological knowledge formations shape governance: the choice of resource management is based on knowledge. The ones who prove to be more knowledgeable in the knowledge of the grassland ecology and buffalo husbandry also gain power in making decisions in the community.

Traditional ecological knowledge is, therefore, one of the forms of political capital in the governance system. Honey hunting by Kurumbas involves a lot of spiritual practises. Before hunters go on expeditions, they conduct clean-up rituals and request the spirits of forests and bees gods to grant them the right to hunt. Auspicious timing requires dreams and omens; unfavourable omens lead to delay of the trip [Walker 953100]. This grants authority to the spiritual experts as to the timetable and activities of honey-hunting. The honey that is harvested first is sacrificed to gods with special rites appreciating the accomplishment of bees. This forms mutual relations with non-human organisms, recognising bees as the participants of the food system, and not the resource. Thus, the Kurumba cosmology regards bees as the means of linking to forest goddesses, which makes honey gathering one of the at once economic opportunities and spiritual rituals. Honey features centrally in Kurumba festivals and ceremonies. Wedding rituals include honey offerings, coming-of-age ceremonies involve honey consumption, funeral rites use honey for ancestral appeasement [Walker 105-110].

These ceremonial uses elevate honey beyond food to sacred substance mediating human-divine relationships. Sacred rocks where bees nest become pilgrimage sites, with communities maintaining trails and performing annual rituals. These sacred geography elements structure seasonal movements and create territorial boundaries between different Kurumba groups, linking spirituality to political geography.

Kurumba honey hunting embodies sophisticated ecological knowledge, particularly regarding pollinator behaviour and forest ecosystem dynamics. Kurumbas understand bee species' preferences for specific flowers, seasonal blooming patterns, and factors affecting honey quality. This knowledge informs decisions about forest conservation and use [Keystone Foundation 70-75]. Sustainable harvesting practices demonstrate traditional conservation principles. Kurumbas never completely deplete bee nests, leaving sufficient honey for bee colony survival. They avoid hunting during breeding seasons and recognize signs of colony stress. These practices maintain bee populations while providing reliable honey yields.

The Kurumba forest expertise is not just a simple entomological folklore, but involves a wealth of knowledge of plantpollinator interdependencies. Researchers note

that there are certain arboreal communities, which are of invaluable resource to bee colonies, and that, the fragmentation caused by humans compromises honey output, creating the motivation to preserve the integrity of woodlands. This means that fruit-incentivised conservation that creates an inseparable nexus of food security and ecosystem health is found in the literature [Keystone Foundation 78-82].

Expertise in honey-hunting is the bedrock of local government, and honey-hunting practitioners who demonstrate a high degree of literacy in forest ecology and bee behaviour gain a degree of legitimacy in communal decision-making processes about the management of woodland. In case of external hostilities [logging, agricultural reclamation, conservation controls] to forests, Kurumba honey-hunters transform into political activists, and turn their nutritionally based expertise into environmentalism. Malayali food systems are modelled in accordance with sacred temporality and it synchronises agrarian praxis and religious practises. Ecology, sociocultural values and collectors are transmitted in oral traditions that remind or accompany culinary practices. Storeys, or more precisely, narratives regarding particular plant taxa, recipes, and farming methods serve both as channels of information and as an entertainment source, consequently, strengthening social cohesion [Subramanian 212-218].

These infrastructures of storytelling are mechanisms of governance that shape behaviours and enforce cultural norms. However modern social and economic strains break these transmission systems such as the migration of youth, an academic focus on the non-traditional knowledge and changing palates disturb the intergenerational education. The resulting loss of knowledge to subvert the traditional governance systems, where the senior leadership is now dwindled as younger generations reject or underrate the wisdom of the elder generations. The timing of planting and harvesting is also linked to the festivals to the mountain gods, the ancestral spirits, and the deities of agriculture such that agricultural regulation is a spiritual part of the hazing.

During the seasonal festivals, ceremonial functions are played by specific foods. First fruits are presented before deities before they are delivered to the masses. The concept of seasonal fare [specifically tubers, wild greens and forest fruits] has been

found in the feast of festivals, thus, seasonal food is connected to the spiritual feast [Rajendran and Aravindhana 354 -356]. Sacred groves in Malayali lands maintain watershed and biodiversity and at the same time act as spiritual centres. The decisions made by the community about the use of forests, agricultural development, and management of the resources should consider the sacred grove management, which would bring together management with spiritual ecology. Temporal governance structures are set up in the agricultural production and ritualistic existence where a seasonal rhythm is established. Different seasons produce different activities, social organisations, and decision making processes. This temporal government is represented through adaptive management in response to the ecological cycles.

8 Conclusion

Thus, this research paper aims to explain how the native food culture of the Irulas, Todas, Kurumbas, and Malayali communities in Tamil Nadu not only support the sustenance of the communities but also the structures and system of governance, spiritual life, and the ecological perceptions. Due to the careful ethnographic research it has now become evident that, in the case of these societies, food is inherently associated with structures of power, ritual initiations, and moral care of their surroundings. In addition, the study outlines the dynamic, flexible approaches that these Tamil Nadu tribes are now adopting concerning modern pressures, e.g., climate change, forest laws as well as socio-economic change.

These alimentary systems, contrary to mere artifacts that represent an obsolete past, exhibit robust changes to the challenge of the modern world, which includes transformations in production patterns, the pathways of knowledge exchange, and ritual practices. At the same time, the loss of land ownership and experience can be seen as the justification of the necessity to preserve both community self-governance and cultures. This inquiry is based on the hypothesis that the epistemologies inherent in tribal food systems have much to contribute to the contemporary discourses throughout the world on food sovereignty, food sustainability and food participatory governance.

The vibrant quality in the relationship between tradition and innovation, the sacred and the ecological, makes these communities an imperative teacher of the Anthropocene, calling a remodelling of nourishment as an act of ethical, social and planetary obligation. With the foregrounding of the native food cultures as sources of power, religious meaning, and ecological practise, the study eventually invites scholars and policymakers, and the society generally, to recognise and promote the central role of tribal heritage in setting up the directions to the sustainable and equitable futures.

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