

DIETARY PATTERNS IN NORTHERN KERALA AND KONGU REGION OF TAMIL NADU

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Introduction

We are what we eat. Our eating habits can make or break our health. Unfortunately, we usually eat what we get without considering the impact it has on our health. Even more unfortunate is that the entire environment around us is fashioned towards eating unhealthy food. Various forms of unhealthy foods are made available and sold to us through high decibel marketing. There is also an epidemiological shift happening from communicable to non-communicable diseases like diabetes, hypertension, and obesity. Our focus should be on promoting diet diversity and balanced diets, eliminating toxic industrial trans fats from food, reducing consumption of salt, sugar and saturated fats and promoting large-scale fortification of staples to address micronutrient deficiencies. It is seen that the prevalence of chronic diseases increases as countries develop and become more industrialised. These diseases include obesity, high blood pressure, CVD, type-2 diabetes, neoplasms and many more.

Dietary patterns play an important role in health and thus in the prevention of chronic diseases. Dietary patterns could provide a clearer, more accurate picture of a person's eating behavior. They represent the interaction of all food choices that form a complete food pattern. These patterns are influenced by many factors, such as climate, demographics, religion and culture among others. The World Health Organization (WHO) considers diet to have the most important role in the prevention of chronic diseases and to be one of the most important lifestyle factors, emphasizing the importance of understanding its relationship with chronic diseases.

Dietary pattern in Northern Kerala

Cuisine has an indisputable role in shaping the identity of a region. Food represents happiness, contentment and prosperity, apart from fulfilling its primary role of ensuring sustenance. The food habits of people are inseparably related to the socio-cultural and economic conditions of their region. The Malabar region of Kerala, constituting the districts of Palakkad, Malappuram, Kozhikode, Kannur, Wayanad and Kasaragod, has a rich variety of food that is unique to the region. Its culinary traditions were influenced and shaped by a number of factors—rural food practices, foreign influences that reached its shores through trade and invasions, and also internal and external migrations. Malabar cuisine comprises the food that exists among its different religious and caste groups - the Adivasis or tribal communities and other communities like the Gujarati, Tulu, Tamil, etc.

Mappila cuisine is a blend of traditional Kerala, Persian, Yemenis and Arab food culture. This confluence of culinary cultures is best seen in the preparation of most dishes. Kallummakkaya (mussels) curry, irachiputtu (irachi meaning meat), parottas (soft flatbread), pathiri (a type of rice pancake) and ghee rice are some of the other specialties. The characteristic use of spices is the hallmark of Mappila cuisine - black pepper, cardamom and clove are used profusely. Kuzhi Mandi is another popular item, which has an influence

from Yemen. Malabar biriyani is known as Thalasseri biriyani which uses keema rice for preparation and is called as Dum biriyani. Malabar biriyani originated from Thalasseri and spread to other places.

Numerous food items have found their place on the dinner tables of Malabar in the last one hundred years. Biriyani is an excellent example. The Malabari's, or the people of Malabar, have indigenised biriyani by incorporating native ingredients so that it has developed its own distinct flavour, different from its counterparts in other culinary traditions within Kerala. Likewise, many of the food items that have come to Malabar have been indigenised - for example, *alfams* (roasted chicken) and *kuzhimanthi* (a type of biriyani). From ancient times, the Malabar Coast had been a major trading centre in connection with the Middle East and other Arab countries. Blessed with unique riches—such as cardamom, cinnamon, ginger, turmeric and pepper—Kerala was the spice garden of the ancient world; for which traders from distant countries travelled great distances by sea. In those days, spices were highly valued and were also considered sacred by the Arabs and the Europeans.

In earlier days, a wedding would be followed by forty days of feasting. Such feasts would be festival grounds for varieties of *appams* (kind of pancake). It is the food culture of the upper-class mercantile aristocracy that has, in the later years, been represented as the unique expression of the Muslims of Kerala. Breakfast dishes served in Thalasseri for the bridegroom include *aripathiri*, *gothamborotti*, *ariorotti*, *kinnaorotti*, *neypathiri*, *muttasurkka* and *spancharapaata*.

The snacks include *unnakkaya* (deep-fried, boiled ripe banana paste covering a mixture of cashew, raisins and sugar), *pazhamnirachathu* (ripe banana filled with coconut grating, molasses or sugar), *muttamala* made of eggs (Sabhnani, Dhara Vora 2019) *chattipathiri*, a dessert made of flour, like a baked, layered chapati with rich filling, *arikkadukka*, and more.

Dietary pattern in Kongu region of Tamil Nadu

Kongunad refers to the area along the western regions of Tamil Nadu – the areas surrounding Coimbatore, Kangeyam, Tirupur, Pollachi, Salem, Erode and Namakkal. The soft-spoken Kongu make a variety of dishes equally soft on the palate. Some of the most popular dishes being Vazhaipoo Vada (deep fried lentil balls with banana flower), Makka Chola Vada (deep fried lentil balls with corn), KonguKaalanVaruval (mushroom fry), PallipalayamPaalkattiVaruval (similar to pannier fry), KonguThakkaliRasam (tomato soup) MurungaiKeeraiRasam (soup made with leaves of drumstick tree) and Pollachi Thengai Kuzhambu (golden brown coconut gravy cooked with badam nuts).

Kongu Nadu cuisine is predominantly South Indian with rice as its base and a collection of exotic recipes being created by the people residing in the Kongu region. As it is also native to an arid area, the cuisine includes cereals like Cholam, Kambu, Kezhvaragu, and different kinds of pulses and sesame. Food is served over a banana leaf. Eating on a banana leaf is an old custom and imparts a unique flavour to the food and is considered healthy. Idly, dosa, paniyaram and appam are popular dishes. KonguNadu cuisine does not involve marination of any raw material and as a result the food has a different taste and unique texture. The best quality turmeric is grown in the region and this is an important ingredient in the cuisine. Turmeric is added into curries, which gives the product a deep yellow colour and an aromatic substance.

Kongunad cuisine is also a reminder of the historic foods of the Tamils of western Tamil Nadu. Millets are used extensively, giving a flavour of the earth at the foothills of the Western Ghats. Tamarind too is used liberally, an antioxidant that grows in abundance in the area. A plethora of pulses and cereals are used in almost every signature dish of the Kongunad region. A specialty of the region is the Navathania Soup (soup made of nine grains). These combines are millets, corn, ragi, wheat, black gram, horse gram, green gram, chana dal, field beans, pepper, coriander and curry leaves to bring a

tasty and healthy soup to the table. Palmyra and coconut form the base for many sweets exclusive to the Kongu region of the state. It is impossible to resist the Pathaneer halwa (sweet dish made of palm fruit juice) and Elaneer Payasam (sweet kheer made of tender coconut) which are a couple of famous and mouth-watering specialties of the Kongubelt.

Conclusion

There is a marked difference in consumption of foods like processed foods, home cooked foods, vegetarian foods and non-vegetarian foods in different regions within India. Studies show that a reduction in the consumption of fatty non vegetarian foods have resulted in the reduction of many lifestyle diseases. According to studies, vegetarians usually have lower BMI, serum total and low-density lipoprotein cholesterol levels, and blood pressure; reduced rates of death from ischemic heart disease; and decreased incidence of Hypertension, stroke, type 2 Diabetes, and certain cancers than do non-vegetarians. However, vegetarian diets were found to cause deficiencies in vitamin B12, vitamin D, ω -3 fatty acids, calcium, iron, and zinc.

In Malappuram, there is a higher preference for fried foods and confectionaries and consequently a higher intake of outside-home food, non-vegetarian foods, fried foods and junk foods. A higher intake of red meat along with a higher frequency of consumption is seen in Malappuram. A large population in Malappuram use frying as a cooking method, while boiling is preferred in Salem.

References

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