

## South Indian Influences

When Kannaki cut the many green vegetables  
With a curved knife, her slender fingers  
Turned red, sweat dripped from her face,  
Blood rushed to her fair eyes,  
And she turned away from the smoking over.  
Then with the help of Aiyai who had lit the fire  
With straw, she cooked a good meal  
For her husband. Kovalan seated himself on a mat  
Cleverly woven from white palm leaves  
By a skilled woman. With her flowerlike palms,  
She sprinkled water from a clay pot  
And washed the feet of her husband. As if to remove  
The heat of Mother Earth, she sprinkled water  
On the floor, caressed it with her hands, spread  
A tender plantain leaf, and said:

Here, my lord,

Is your food! Please eat.'

*The Cilappatikaram of Ilanko Atikal<sup>i</sup>*

A. has the most lovely vegetable curries; plenty of boiled rice, with four or five little dishes of different sorts of curried vegetables. This, with fruit, forms or breakfast – at ten; and dinner at six or seven is much the same; with perhaps and added soup or side dish.

Edward Carpenter

*From Adam's Peak to Elephanta<sup>ii</sup>*

Especially in the (Tamil Brahmin) urban context, of which I have the greatest firsthand experience, there are three important daily meals. An early lunch, consisting of rice, lentils, a vegetable, yogurt (sic), and perhaps a pickle; a high tea, generally consisting of some freshly prepared savory and coffee; and dinner, the most elaborate meal, which consists often of two kinds of lentil preparations, at least one vegetable dish, a variety of accompanying condiments, yogurt, and, of course, the staple, rice.

Arjun Appadurai

*Gastro-politics in Hindu South Asia<sup>iii</sup>*

### Migration patterns from South India to Sri Lanka

While the origin story of the Sinhalese is of descent from the sole voyage of a single ancestral clan (Vijaya and his Bengali/Odissan co-banished according to the Mahavamsa), the evidence there is (and there is not a lot in the earliest years) of the origins of the South Indian (SI) communities of Sri Lanka indicates more diffuse engagement over time.

The Mahavamsa itself talks of Vijaya seeking a bride for himself and others of his men from Madurai in what is now Tamil Nadu in South Eastern India (SEI), along with several craftspeople and guilds. A group of megalithic burial sites in north-western Sri Lanka indicates South East Indian (SEI) contact by

Geological evidence indicates that Sri Lanka and India have been joined by a land bridge often as the sea levels rose and fell over the millennia, stretching from what is now the island of Mannar, off the North West coast of Sri Lanka, to Tamil Nadu. It's generally held that this provided access over time for the earliest humans to arrive in Sri Lanka. The last separation is dated to around 7000BCE.

The gap in archeological records, however, gives no certainty for migration patterns during the time of the land bridge, though it doesn't take much to see race knowledge of this in the Indian epic The Ramayana with its central tale of the capture of the goddess Sita by the demon king in Lanka, and her rescue by the god Rama and the monkey deity Hanuman facilitated by a bridge built by the latter between the two land masses.

There is archaeological evidence for the presence of Dravidian peoples by the second century BCE, though the evidence does not allow for any firm conclusion as to who these peoples were or how they came to be in Sri Lanka at the time. <sup>iv</sup> Inscriptions and Pali chronicles of that time have brief references to 'traders, political adventurers and mercenaries'. From around this time to the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD there were several incursions from SEI into Sri Lanka, and at least 10 times when Sinhala aspirants to the Northern kingdom thrones recruited SEI mercenaries. Evidence for settlement in Sri Lanka from any of these SEI groups is speculative. Siva temples at Matota (Tirukkettisvaram) and Gokarna (Trincomalee) suggest that there was settlement sufficient to warrant establishing permanent sites for worship. From the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD onward records of land grants are stronger evidence of permanent settlement.

The annexation of Sri Lanka by the Cholas in India in the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD further stimulated settlement, as did the practice of Sinhalese aspirants to the thrones of the northern kingdoms engaging SEI mercenaries in large numbers. By the 13<sup>th</sup> century, a Tamil kingdom was established in Jaffna, northern Sri Lanka. Tamils in Jaffna became brokers and agents in the significant trade Sri Lanka had with the Coromandel coast of India. <sup>v</sup>

When the former Dutch East India Company (VOC) territories in Sri Lanka became a Crown colony under the imposition of a dual control system between the British East India Company and the British Government in 1798, the Company was ordered to fill administrative posts in Sri Lanka with civil servants from Madras. <sup>vi</sup> The last of the waves of migration from South Eastern India was of Tamil indentured labourers to the tea plantation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. So large was this migration that between 1890 – 1900, the time over which tea was established as a successful plantation crop in Sri Lanka, the increase in the country's population through Tamil labourer migration was greater than the natural increase from in-country births. <sup>vii</sup>

While these are the bases for Tamil/Dravidian settlement in the north of Sri Lanka, from possibly the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD, and at least by the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD, South Western Indian migrants from Kerala settled in western and southern Sri Lanka, including possible Buddhists fleeing the increasing Hinduisation of southern India, with migrations continuing into the 16<sup>th</sup> century AD. Tamils from Batticaloa on the west coast of Sri Lanka claim Keralan ancestry. <sup>viii</sup>

The most controversial suggestion on migration patterns from Southern India has been put forward by Arjun Guneratne who contends that all Sri Lanka's population, the nominal Sinhalese and the equally nominal Tamils, come from Southern India, and that the Aryan-Dravidian divide is a classification system deriving from European philologists who privileged language over culture, particularly kinship structures, to construct a myth of dual races where none existed. <sup>ix</sup>

Whatever the ‘truths’ of origins, there is no dispute that Southern Indians have had a long history of settlement in Sri Lanka and no dispute either that there are recognizable affinities between some Sri Lankan foodways and those of Southern India, so let me turn now to the foodways of Southern India and look at the elements in Sri Lankan foodways that show their influence.

### **Foodways**

As in other parts of this guide, my principal source is the work of K.T.Achaya, who in turn draws on archaeological evidence, and also from Tamil and Kannadan written sources. For the first, he draws on material from Tamil poets over the period 300BCE to 700AD, particularly the *Perumpanuru* (about the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD). For the latter, he draws on the *Lokopakara*, the work of a Jain poet in 1025 AD, and the *Supa Shastra* of Mangarasa, 1516 AD, ‘an exhaustive work on cooking’.<sup>x</sup>

So what is gleaned from these sources?

There is archeological evidence from 2300BC of cattle herding, and given this was well before the introduction of Brahminic Hinduism, meat and milk products are likely to have been eaten. By 1800 BC there is clear evidence of agricultural practice with crops of cereals (ragi and paniculum species), horsegram, mung.

By 750 BC, in the megalithic cultures, rice has become a staple part of the diet and tanks (reservoirs) are being constructed for both domestic and irrigation use. Tanks became and remain the most significant feature of Sri Lankan agriculture and are discussed elsewhere in this guide.

From the Tamil poets we learn that among the foods eaten were coarse red coloured rice (perhaps the precursor species to Sri Lanka red rice that has recently become popular among health-conscious tourists), iguana, beans and millet cooked in milk, white rice, fowl, mango pickle, pomegranate cooked with butter and curry leaves, jak fruit, bananas, coconut water. Rice is eaten boiled, and also with fried aromatics sprinkled on, dressed with tamarind, sesame seeds, and also cooked with pulses, or with ‘fatted meat’. Tubers described include yam, water lily roots, and sweet potato, sometimes cooked with meat. Kadalai – chickpea – a favourite Sri Lankan street snack food, a tamarind infused soup similar to rasam, sesame oil, brinjal, bitter gourd, and unripe bananas are all mentioned, and green leafy plants are spoken of as food for the poor.

Spices/flavourings mentioned in the Tamil works include pepper (native to Kerala) ginger, turmeric, cloves, cardamom, tamarind and lemon. There were two sources of sugar, the sugarcane and palmyra. Sugarcane juice was a popular drink, as was young coconut water, fresh palmyra sap, tamarind and nelli, all still to be found in the kitchens, cafes and street stalls of Sri Lanka. Toddy is described made from the palmyra palm.

Beef, buffalo meat, wild boar, iguana, deer, domestic fowl, game birds (peafowl, quail, and even the parrot) were eaten, as were fish and other marine food. Cream, curds, buttermilk and ghee were used.

The *Perumpanuru* mentions making appam (Sri Lankan hoppers, bowl shaped pancakes of rice and wheat flour) taken soaked in milk, idi-appam (Sri Lankan string-hoppers, made from rice flour past extruded into long noodles and then steamed), and dosai. Idli, small pillow shaped steamed mixes of fermented dhal and rice, are first mentioned from the Kannadan texts in 920 AD.

Also from Kannadan sources we read of vadas in 1025 AD, papads in 1200 AD, pacchadis (a popular sambol/relish) in 1485 AD, and of jaggery, drumsticks ( Sri Lankan murunga - long bean shaped vegetable), grated coconut, chakkali (known as murukku in Tamil – another staple of Sri Lankan street food made of fried extruded rice-urud dhal batter ), puttu (a steamed mixture of grated coconut and flour), cooking using coconut milk and the curd-based sambols/relishes kacchadi and thambuli.

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<sup>i</sup> Parthasarathy 1993

<sup>ii</sup> Carpenter 1903

<sup>iii</sup> Appadurai 1981

<sup>iv</sup> Indrapala 2000

<sup>v</sup> de Silva 2005

<sup>vi</sup> de Silva 2005

<sup>vii</sup> De silva 2005

<sup>viii</sup> Obeyesekere 2002, Tambiah 1992

<sup>ix</sup> Guneratne 2002

<sup>x</sup> Achaya 1994