

# Tamil Traditional Foods, Customs And Values In Thwarting COVID-19

**Paramasivam Muthusamy<sup>1\*</sup>, Eswari Kunasekaran<sup>1</sup>, Rajantheran Muniandy<sup>2</sup>, Sillalalee S. Kandsamy<sup>3</sup>, N.Nadaraja Pillai<sup>4</sup> & Manimaran Subramaniam<sup>5</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Foreign Languages, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia., <sup>2</sup>Department of Indian Studies, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

<sup>3</sup>Department of Modern Languages, University Tunku Abdul Rahman, Kajang, Malaysia.

<sup>4</sup>Central Institute of Indian Languages (Rtd), Mysore, India.

<sup>5</sup>Department of Indian Studies, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Corresponding email: [paramasivam@upm.edu.my](mailto:paramasivam@upm.edu.my)

## ABSTRACT

In this period of COVID-19, the pandemic threatening the whole world, people are requested to increase their immunity power to prevent the virus attack. Unless and until a vaccine is invented, which may take time, people have to live with it and protect themselves from this virus. There are some traditional practices done by the Tamils around the world for protecting themselves from any attack of bacteria or virus, which may pave way for the understanding of the traditional medical system, followed and may help in finding out newer medicine to stop the virus.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Tamil traditions, turmeric, neem, tulasi, mango leaves, Lord Mariyamman

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## Introduction

The Corona Virus, known as COVID-19 pandemic has threatened and squeezed the whole world. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), as of 29 May 2020, the death figure caused by this virus has reached 360 thousands, and the number of infections 5.8 millions. This is a great nightmare for all nations and the human race (Thambu, 2019). Till today there is no vaccine is available/found out to treat this deadly virus. In the meantime, steps are being taken to curb this infectious disease. Although the option of lockdown is one step to break the chain of its spread, a variety of economic and socio-cultural problems have ensued throughout the world and people in general are still suffering.

The virus that causes COVID-19 is, mainly, transmitted through droplets created when an infected person coughs or sneezes. These droplets help in spreading the virus. A person can be infected by breathing in the virus when one is within close proximity of someone who has

COVID-19, or by touching a contaminated surface and then your eyes, nose or mouth. In this context of protecting lungs, throat, etc., and developing immunity there are traditional practices.

However, strangely, it is found that some cultural and religious values practiced among the Tamil community throughout the Tamil diaspora have had some effect in preventing infectious diseases such as Corona, Sars, Ebola and others. 'Food is the medicine' is the maxim of the Tamil society under the banner of Siddha medicine. In fact, it is believed that the same practice can be followed in preventing Covid-19 virus largely. Most of the data was collected from the elders of the Tamil community, who had rich experience in keeping the food healthy and practice certain habits which are essential to keep the diseases at bay.

## The Role of Turmeric

Turmeric, botanically called 'Curcuma longa' is a plant species in the ginger family,

'Zingiberaceae'. Turmeric root contains essential oils, curcumin and its derivatives, namely, 'curcuminoids', which are responsible for turmeric's yellowish color (Gunnars, 2018). In Tamil, it is called 'manjal' meaning yellow named after its colour. In Tamil Nadu, India, turmeric has been used for thousands of years and is even considered sacred and hence it can be seen using throughout the Tamil diaspora also. It is said that turmeric has many health benefits, such as the latent power to prevent heart disease, cancer and it is powerful medicine for anti-inflammatory and antioxidant (Manjula, 2018).

Siddha and Ayurveda, the Indian medicine systems suggest and use turmeric to help stopping breathing difficulties, liver disorders, rheumatism, diabetic wounds, cold and cough (Arumugam, 1971). This, as part of the ingredient in daily traditional food, is used as a remedy for strengthening the immune system, and preventing infections and respiratory diseases. These are the symptoms of corona also. Turmeric is commonly processed into powder and used. It can also be used as a coloring agent for a wide range of purposes, from food to ointments and creams.

Turmeric is very popular in Tamil cuisine, where turmeric root powder is used as a base ingredient in almost all the curry spice mixes and dishes consumed virtually all the three times a day. Turmeric not only stimulates digestion, but also has other health-promoting properties. Therefore, in their social life also the Tamils use it in many other ways. Consuming milk with turmeric powder is a routine practice to keep throat infection away. The medicinal properties in turmeric may be able to boost the immune system, even in people with immune disorders (Bachmeier, 2019).

### ***Yellow/Turmeric Water***

According to the Tamil Hindu cultural belief, turmeric water, a mixture of turmeric powder or paste and water, is considered sacred, and

sprinkling of this water kills bacteria and virus, thus preventing infection. It is widely used in many Hindu cultural ceremonies and festivals. Turmeric water is often used by the temple priests to sprinkle on the devotees, the prayer items, around the building and at places where the prayers are taking place. This is done to clean the environment of such unseen bacteria or virus, since it is believed that it is an antiseptic and antibacterial agent (Maninamaran, 2017). Thus, turmeric water plays an important role in safeguarding the devotees from various disastrous diseases and to keep the environment clean. Many Tamils, including Hindus and Christians (in some parts of Tamil Nadu) do the same in their homes too.

Similarly, now we understand why in Hindu festivals, especially after any festival or functions and ceremonies, there is a 'manjalniiraattam', where devotees play by splashing turmeric water at each other. The elderly people from the Tamil community used to say that if a devotee had an infectious disease got during the festival time; it would not affect others, if turmeric water were poured on them (Ang, 2018). Thus, the spreading is prevented.

Besides, turmeric water is also used during kaavadi prayers. The 'kaavadiaattam' is a ceremonial act of devotional sacrifice through dance. Devotees carrying a 'kaavadi', make the pilgrimage with bare feet, bearing food offerings on the kaavadi to Murugan temples of their dwelling area. This act of devotion of self-mortification and dance are performed by devotees during the festival of 'Thaipusam' in honor of 'Lord Murugan', the 'Hero of Tamil Culture' throughout the Tamil diaspora. Thaipusam is a festival celebrated on the full moon day of the 'Thai' month falls in January-February by the world Tamil community. It is believed that Thaipusam marks Murugan's birthday. The devotees pray to him to overcome the problems they face as he is the divine destroyer of evils. The festival day is normally declared a

holiday, especially in countries like Malaysia, Singapore, Mauritius, South Africa, Sri Lanka in addition to Tamil Nadu.

During the Kaavadi festival, yellow/ turmeric water is used to wash the 'Kaavadi', the devotees and all the devotional items with this water so that the ingredients in turmeric will kill any germs or bacteria and further give energy to the devotee to carry the 'kaavadi' to its destination. Throughout their pilgrimage turmeric water is used so that the devotees do not get infected because of the crowd, air, etc.

Pongal is the harvest festival in Tamil Nadu celebrated for 4 days. All the four days have their own importance as well as celebrations and rituals, focussing on showing gratitude to all those who/which helped the agriculturist in getting an excellent crop. Use of turmeric can be seen throughout these four days. The celebration starts with Bhogi, the day devoted for Lord Indra, the God of rain. This is the day to dispose of old and useless things by burning them, which is an act of purification of environment. The next day is the Thai Pongal day, which normally falls on 14<sup>th</sup> of January every year. This day is celebrated to show gratitude to the Sun. One can observe the preparation of 'Pongal', a sweet dish with new rice, jiggery and milk. This is done in the front yard of the house. The new pot is decorated with the plant of turmeric along with its tuber. Springing of yellow water during this festival is an important practice. The third day is 'Maattup Pongal', celebrated to show gratitude to the cattle which helped in farming. The oxen and cows are decorated and coloured with yellow paste, again an act of purification and stop infections. Fourth day, 'kaaNumpongal' is given importance to the worker, who helped in farming in the agricultural land. All the four days are celebrated with pomp and show with new dresses, yellow water or paste (Rajantharan & Manimaran, 1994).

Turmeric with its anti-inflammatory, antimicrobial, and antioxidant properties is used

for effective treatment of a variety of skin disorders, like acne, eczema, psoriasis. The practice of applying turmeric paste on the face, body and foot can be considered as a precautionary measure to stop skin disorders. This may be equated to washing hands with sanitizers. The turmeric tuber used for this purpose is called 'kastuurimanjal' a variety of turmeric (Nair, 2013).

Use of turmeric in the shrines of local deities in Tamil Nadu, which are situated on the periphery of the village and represents as village guardian or as protectors and saviors from epidemic diseases, is a common phenomenon. Hence they are called 'Uurkaavaltheivangal'. Devotees to these shrines use yellow dresses, or dresses dipped in turmeric water, apply turmeric pastes, tie yellow thread, giving turmeric powder or paste to wear on the forehead, sprinkling yellow water using neem leaves around the shrines to protect the devotees from bacteria and viruses. Another interesting practice is the representative of the local deities like, 'sudalaumaadan, panrimaadan, etc., called 'saamiyaadi', 'the person who dances and foretells while possessed by a holy spirit, goes around the village and people pour yellow water on him, especially on his feet as a form of honour. This, in fact, is to cleanse him from infectious diseases, which in turn, stops the spread among all the people of the village. One such famous deity is Goddess 'Mariyamman', a savior of people from epidemic diseases, who has found shrines throughout the Tamil diaspora. Mariyamman temples are associated very much to the use of turmeric abundantly as a sacred practice, which has many medicinal benefits (Sandhu & Mani, 2006).

### ***Yellow Strap***

Another protection to oneself practiced by the Tamils is 'kaappukadduthal' means 'tying protection band' – tying of a yellow strap at the wrist during a festival or function. Once the yellow strap is tied on the wrist, devotees are not

allowed to leave their home or village where the festival is taking place. On the other hand, the bride and bridegrooms on the day of their engagement are tied with a yellow thread on their wrist. Once this is done, they are not allowed to go away from the village. Obviously, to protect themselves from epidemic diseases.

This is done with the belief that one may be infected if one leaves the village and then joins the festival. It is similar to today's lockdown; where we are not allowed to leave our home, in order to stop the spread of the Covid-19 virus. All these practices have been implemented in the Tamil Hindu tradition for prohibition and safety of the devotees and others.

### **Yellow Clothes**

In the Tamil Hindu culture, yellow clothes are used during annual 'Kovil' 'Temple' festivals such as the Thaipusam celebrations, especially by those who carry 'kavadis' or 'paalkudam' milk pots or those who perform 'fire-walking' during 'Mariyamman' festival. It is believed these devotees are protected in this yellow cloth from any bacteria, viruses or social spread from other infected devotees, as the yellow attire prevents germs and it is also considered a sacred colour in Tamil Hindu culture.

The festivals are held in the Tamil month of 'Aadi' between late summer and early monsoon season of throughout Tamil Nadu. The worship focuses largely on bringing rains and curing diseases like cholera, chicken pox, measles that are predominant during this season. The word 'maari' meaning rain is very old and is attested in the literatures of Sangam period, which is considered approximately the period between 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC to 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. Maariyamman also called 'MuthuMaariyamman'. The Tamil word 'Muthu' means pearl. Another important practice is during the festival period, a decoration on the floor / soil with 'kolam', a design of line-drawing with a liquid mixer of rice flour and turmeric

powder is done throughout the village including the premises of the temple. During fire-walk practiced during this period also, the devotees use turmeric powder mixed objects. Use of lemon and neem leaf is also abundant during the period. The devotional practices include wearing yellow dress, applying turmeric paste/powder, using neem leaves/its paste, lemons, etc. It is to be remembered that the use of lemon, homey and turmeric is suggested to boost the immune system.

### **Tulasi Leaves**

It is a very normal sight to find *tulasi* or holy basil plant at mostly every Tamil house. It is considered as a sacred plant and normally planted in the centre of the central courtyard of the houses. This plant is also believed as an air-purifier from any forms of germs or bacteria from entering the houses. The *tulasi* leaves are extensively used in day-to-day lives of Hindus (Maninamaran, 2017).

*Tulasi* leaves or its syrup/ decoction in combination with turmeric powder, ginger and pepper relieves throat infection. It is to be recalled here that corona affects the throat first before entering into the lungs. This decoction soothes the throat and cures throat related diseases including cough. Hence, the decoction gets important.

This may be the reason why in 'Lord Vishnu's temples' the holy water with *tulasi* leaves is served to the devotees, which is immediately taken in with all the dedication (Srinivasan, 2003)

### **Veeppilai'**

*Veeppilai* or neem leaves is known for its detoxifying properties. It is used to treat eczema and other skin infections and normally can be found planted at Hindu houses. It is another plant believed to prevent air-borne germs from entering the environment of the house. The neem leaves have strong antibacterial properties. This is the reason why neem leaves are tied at temple or house entrances and along the hall ways during

festivals. That is the reason why these leaves are abundantly used in 'Mariyamman' temples. They believe it can detoxify the environment for the benefit of the devotees (Gowda et al., 2019).

A paste of 'veepilai' neem leaves and 'manjal' turmeric ground together is applied after the chicken pox starts drying. This indicates its value and importance in eliminating the bacteria or virus involved in the infection, which is highly contagious (Nallaperumal, 1962). It is also believed that this paste has to be applied so that it would not affect anybody else, that is, it stops social spreading.

Moreover, when somebody is mentally ill, they are beaten with a bunch of neem leaves to soothe their mind. Even the wind passing through is considered good for health.

Eating of tender 'veepilai' leaves in empty stomach in the morning increases the immunity power and hence the Tamils used to take the tender leaves in the morning to boost the immunity power. The leaves are essential ingredient in making medicine for many types of skin diseases.

It is believed that the alkaline property of neem leaves have the power to kill cancer cells. Further, it is suggested that if the neem leaf paste is taken along with pomegranate juice builds up immune system and there by prevents the attack. It is also prescribed that one has to take the tender neem leaves in the morning in the empty stomach keeps the lungs healthy and hence air borne breathing problems will be arrested (Sarkar et.al, 2015).

### ***Mango Leaves***

The hanging of mango leaves is a common sight near the entrance of temples and Tamil Hindu homes, which is known as 'thoranam' a festoon of the mango leaves. This system of tying thoranam is a common practice in many south Indian Hindu houses also (Sandhu & Mani, 2006). It is said that

Lord Murugan was the one who insisted people to tie the green mango leaves, as it symbolizes a fertile crop and for the general well-being. Since then the mango leaves are considered very auspicious and believed to be an air purifier for the houses. The twigs of the mango trees are used in holy fire or 'homam' to purify the air around. This is not only a belief, but proven scientifically too. In addition to purifying the air around, mango has other benefits too. For example, mainly, it boosts the immune system and cures respiratory problems (Nallaperumal, 1962), which are expected of from every one after the covid-19 break. Furthermore, it regulates diabetes, heals burns, helps in digestion, lowers cholesterol, etc. Hence the practice of using Mangoes by the Tamils can be adopted for the prevention activities.

Raw mangoes, on the other hand, if taken with a pinch of salt and pepper powder help in maintaining the water content of the body, boosts immune system. The potassium in the mangos helps in controlling BP, helps in maintaining good health of the digestive system. Since it contains vitamin C and antioxidant, it prevents virus attack and activates bile gland and its secretion, which heals and prevents from the attack of bacteria in the intestine, and a lot more. Mango is used in pickles so that its benefits are utilized in the off-season too.

### ***Garlic Ginger and Pepper***

Use of ginger, garlic, pepper as ingredients in the daily food preparations in the Tamil community has boosted the immunity power as well as helps in keeping bacteria and virus away. The properties of these three can be explained as follows.

Ginger has been use for a very long time in various forms in the traditional siddha and Ayurveda medicines and hence it is being used in the food preparations. It helps in digestion, in fighting the flu and common cold. Certain chemical compounds in fresh ginger help your body



ward off germs (Leech, 2017). Ginger is good in delaying the growth of bacteria and may keep viruses. Ginger is loaded with antioxidants. Therefore, it helps to fight off chronic diseases like high blood pressure, heart disease, and diseases of the lungs, etc. Gingerol, the bioactive substance in fresh ginger, can help lower the risk of infections.

Garlic has lots of vitamins and minerals like manganese, selenium, vitamin C, vitamin B<sub>6</sub>, and other antioxidants (Leech, 2018). The health benefits of garlic have been recognized for centuries in the Tamil community. A recent study reports that eating garlic may work to relax blood vessels and increase blood flow. Further, garlic helps boost the immune system and reduces the severity and length of cold and flu symptoms.

Black pepper is antibacterial in nature, and therefore helps to cure cold and cough. A teaspoon of honey with freshly crushed pepper does the trick (Nandy, 2017). It also helps to alleviate chest congestion caused due to pollution, flu, or a viral infection. It is rich in vitamins A, C, and K. Antioxidant vitamins A and C support immune function. It works as a good antibiotic.

Along with these three medicinal food items, use of cinnamon, cloves, cardamom, etc., in vegetarian and largely in non-vegetarian foods help building up immunity and in keeping diseases away (Sachan, 2018).

### **Rasam**

Rasam called 'milagutanni' in restaurants is an interesting and effective food item taken during lunch or dinner in most of the Tamil families and the Tamil owned hotels. It is a mixture of many spices. It is prepared with tamarind juice and the crushed powders of pepper, cumin seeds, garlic, ginger, etc., boiled in water. It is a very good decoction for throat infection, breathing problems, indigestion, gastric problems, etc. It is hoped now that rasam can prevent the infection if taken daily.

### **Homam Prayers**

'Homam' a holy fire set in a small square pit, a temporary construction made of bricks in the hall of a house or temples for a ritual in Hindu religion, in which offerings are made to 'Lord Agni' the lord of 'fire'. The fire is set with mango twigs. It is a prayer to God to put an end to all the sins and give a healthy life to mankind. When 'homam' is conducted at homes, a variety of traditional medical herbs, fried rice, , ghee, etc are used as the offerings during this. The smoke that emits out acts as an air purifier of the pollutants in the surroundings. It also has a variety of aromatic substances when used in the 'homam', a fragrance or scent emanates, which keeps the germs out of the house or where it is done (Maninamaran, 2017).

### **Burning of Incense**

'saampiraani' or gumbenzoin is burnt as incense and the resulting smoke is considered a killer of bacteria and virus in the air. Most Tamil Hindus burn this incense during prayers and smoke all rooms in their house as a form of purification at least once in a week; in some houses daily. The natural ingredients in the incense have such antioxidant attributes and this has been in practice for a long time among the Hindus (Maninamaran, 2017).

### **Banana Leaf**

The use of banana leaves is an important tradition among Tamils for serving as well as for wrapping foods and cakes. It helps in maintaining hygiene also. Hot food served on the banana leaves absorbs the polyphenols present in the leaves are said to prevent many lifestyle diseases. The food also has an aroma when served in banana leaves. They also have anti-bacterial properties that kill the germs in food.

Moreover, the leaf is used only once and hence and there is no chance of spreading any bacteria or virus. After the use, it is thrown into the bin, which becomes ultimately manure (Sarkar et.al, 2015).

### **Vanakkam Greetings**

*Vanakkam* 'good day' is commonly used by Tamils to greet each other, a gesture of raising the folded hands and bowing as a form of greeting, respect or obedience. The Tamil community always says '*Vanakkam*' while meeting friends, teachers, or the elderly. During this lockdown of Covid-19, we are practicing social distancing and we are encouraged to keep our hands folded while saying '*Vanakkam*' instead of shaking hands to avoid the contagious Covid-19. This form of warm greetings without touching the other person has been in existence for a long time among the Tamils and Hindus.

### **Cow Dung**

Cow dung is high in organic materials and rich in nutrients. It contains about 3 percent nitrogen, 2 percent phosphorus, and 1 percent potassium (3-2-1 NPK). In addition, cow manure contains high levels of ammonia and potentially dangerous pathogens. It is another form of detoxifying any forms of bacteria, as in many rural areas fresh cow dung is mixed with water and sprinkled on the ground. This is done, especially, by those who live in the dwellings that do not have cement flooring. In villages where mud floor is used in the house, the floor is tarnished or coated with a mixture of cow dung and water. Because of its chemical contents, no insects would come into the house. It is a form of insecticide used elaborately in the huts of Tamil Nadu villages. As a habit even the cement floors are coated with this mixture in some parts of Tamil Nadu (Ayyar, 2001).

### **Conclusion**

All the practices to fight any bacteria or virus by the Tamils from the ancient times have great values and actually have scientific reasoning in them, and they prohibit the spread of diseases. The Tamils have been practicing them consciously and have led healthy and infectious disease-free lives. Unfortunately, today's generation finds it difficult to practice them, with too much of ignorance in its views because of the modern allopathic treatments. Further, the upcoming young generation feels that these are blind beliefs and have no value added to it and hence shun them. Many have made jokes with these practices without realizing their benefits even in this modern world, which goes for naturopathy. With these food systems and practices, we may conclude that our ancient religious practices have been designed to protect us from the clutches of such diseases as the corona, for example.

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