

Unveiling the Food Heritage: Traditional Food Systems and Transitions in *Malamuthan* Community

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Abstract

Traditional food systems in tribal communities are extremely important because of their intricate links with cultural identity, environmental harmony, and social cohesion. *Malamuthan*, an ethnic group, whose food traditions have not been thoroughly recorded, face the impending loss of both their rich cultural heritage and traditional foodways. This study investigates the traditional food heritage of *Malamuthan* community, highlighting their crucial role in maintaining social cohesion, ecological connectivity, and cultural identity. Based on ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, and in-depth unstructured interviews, the study offers an in-depth insight into how these food systems operate in their daily life and collective memory. It examines how these systems are evolving as a result of historical upheavals, government welfare schemes, and the Public Distribution System, rather than just modernization. Through the use of dietary intake charts and conducting comparative analyses of past and present food patterns, the research underscores important food transitions and the emergence of new reliance on external food supplies. It has been demonstrated that these changes impact not only health and nutrition, but also cultural continuity and community resilience. In light of these findings, the study proposes a framework for culturally aware policy that recognises the unique food heritage of the *Malamuthan* community. It advocates for development approaches that honor indigenous knowledge systems and work to safeguard culinary traditions, ecological sustainability, and the community's broader social fabric.

Keywords: Traditional food systems, Cultural Identity, Food practices, *Malamuthan* Community, Public distribution systems

INTRODUCTION

India, being a country that has rich diversity has 2000 distinct ethnic groups coexisting within its borders (Government of India, 2020). According to the article 342 of Indian constitution, some of these ethnic groups are categorised under the scheduled groups based on different criteria. Most of these groups work in traditional vocations that are compatible with their natural surroundings and live in fragile socio-ecological zones. This process which is completely in alignment with the natural settings provided an arena for moulding their traditional food systems. According to Kuhnlein and Receveur (1996), traditional food system refers to all foods within a particular culture, that are derived from local natural resources and are culturally accepted. It also includes the sociocultural significance, methods of acquisition and preparation, processing techniques, and the nutritional effects on consumers.

The traditional food system of Kerala's tribes is an essential aspect of their cultural identity, illustrating a deep human-environment connection. Adaptation to local environments have historically influenced identity, nutrition, and social cohesion. Each ethnic group possesses a unique culinary tradition shaped by their customs. However, modernization, characterised by technology, urban migration, and food standardization has posed questions regarding the viability of these systems. Convenience foods and international trends are replacing traditional diets as indigenous people shift from agrarian economies to urban settings. This change has been accelerated by PDS systems easy access to mainstream food items. It risks both community health and local resource management. This study explores the decline of traditional food habits, the role of habitat, and the impact of external aspects on the *Malamuthan* community in Nilambur, revealing the complex dynamics at play.

LITERATURE REVIEW (conceptual and thematic)

Traditional food systems encompass not only food-derived sustenance, but also the complex web of practices, knowledge, and rituals surrounding the production, sourcing, preparation, and consumption (Kuhnlein & Receveur, 1996). Confined in this system, the centuries old wisdom upheld by the tribal communities which is clearly mirroring their understanding of local ecosystems, traditional and sustainable agricultural methods, and seasonal variations. Traditional food habits are confined within the system of culture.

Bhalla et al. (2008) affirm that food habits are influenced by culture shapes food choices, and have an impact on biological functions. Although the body's nutritional needs are inherent, they are impacted by social, religious, economic, and political variables. Similarly, Tribal food habits are similarly shaped by these same factors. As Kuhnlein & Receveur (1996) note, food choices are a reflection of social and personal meanings, serving purposes in rituals, expressing identity, or representing acts of love, power, or rebellion. But for various reasons, traditional food habits are now declining for various reasons, resulting in significant cultural shifts. As Phillips (2006) notes, understanding cultural shifts in food systems involves examining how food is produced, processed, distributed, and purchased. Globalization has unified cultures but caused a sharp decline in traditional food systems. Access to industrial foods is gradually expanding... calorie-dense products such as sweets and soft drinks... are beginning to replace traditional diets (Sekhar, 2018). Education and media have also shaped tribal food choices, with schools and public programs promoting dominant culture foods—especially affecting children (Kuhnlein & Receveur, 1996). This underscores the urgent need for culturally rooted educational curricula.

Another major reason for the declining food systems is the public distribution systems (PDS), which prioritises dominant dietary patterns without considering indigenous preferences. According to Settee (2011), land degradation linked to industrial development is causing traditional foods, deeply rooted in indigenous knowledge to disappear. As a result, many tribal communities that depend on their natural environment have lost their ancestral territories, food sources, and cultural heritage. Moreover, TFS qualities have been lost and eventually reduced to the status of unsustainable products. Concomitantly, those features that are being lost are increasingly appreciated as a way of creating healthier and more sustainable food systems (Malhotra et al., 2021). Tribal habitats and health have suffered as a result of these changes which have also disturbed nutrition (M Kearney, 2019). The conventional social interactions, cohesion, and consumption of diverse, locally-produced foods from family agriculture are increasingly seen as vital for the future. The main challenge lies in maintaining these traditions where they exist and revitalising them where they have been lost (Edison & Devi, 2019). Thus, urgent documentation of traditional food systems and their socio-cultural value, along with thorough examination of their changes, is essential to reduce further loss of social, cultural, and ecological balance. For Malamuthans, food serves as a channel for ancestral knowledge, seasonal rhythms, and spiritual meaning. Amid changing structures shaped by state policies and market forces, this study intends to 1) Document traditional food heritage, 2) Analyse cultural and ritual significance of food, 3) Examine the effects of PDS on diets and food sovereignty, 4) Trace the transition from biodiverse to state-led diets, 5) Explore perceptions towards food loss and continuity; and 6) Examine the relevance of state food schemes to everyday ecological practices.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative approach to document the traditional food systems of the Malamuthan community. It also employs ethnographic methods, which includes participant observation, in-depth unstructured interviews, focus group discussions, to gather detailed and descriptive data from the community members. The fieldwork was conducted over a period of about 7 months from, 2 July 2024 to 5 January 2025. Palakkayam, Nayadampoyil, Kandilappara, Valamthode, Kakkad, Mankunnumal, Peruvampadam, Karachil, Thannikkuzhi, Vazhakkunnu, Kalluvari, Madam and Veetikkunnu are the different settlements that are chosen for the study and also comes under two major panchayaths, that is, Chaliyar and Mambad.

The study involved 70 participants chosen to represent the Malamuthan community. Data collection began with in depth semi-structured interviews with 40 individuals to understand personal experiences

related to their food system and heritage. This was succeeded by three focus groups with 13-14 participants. Additionally participant observation was carried out in selected households and community gatherings to document ingredients, dishes, and preparation methods. All participants were made aware of the study's purpose and gave written consent. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with participant's consent supplemented by notes, whenever necessary. Data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) through NVivo 12, and interpretations were validated through discussions with key informants.

Table 1. Features of study participants.

Age group	No. of participants	Male	Female	Features
18-30	16	8	8	Young adults who have exposure to modern influences, food preference shifts.
31-50	26	12	14	Middle aged, household decision makers and active decision makers.
51- 70	19	11	8	Elderly members, who has more exposure to the food practices and traditional food systems.
71 and above	9	5	4.	Community elders who are also oral historians and custodians of community knowledge.

Malamuthan and their Food Habits

The Malamuthan community, also known as Malakkar or Muthan is one of the major tribal communities living in the forested regions of northern Malappuram and eastern Kozhikode districts in Kerala. Though officially recognised as “Muthuvan”, this name also refers to another culturally unique tribal population in Idukki, with whom they have no lineage. According to the 2011 census, Malamuthans have been residing in Nilambur forest range for over a century, historically serving as labourers for Manjeri Kovilakom (the then rulers of the area) (p.24). When we analyse their ancestor's habitat, it's very evident that they completely relied on the forest resources, and they seldom went outside leaving the forest. It's crucial to take note of their customary consumption patterns before discussing about their food habits. The ancestors' and subsequent generations' mode of eating differ slightly. Their ancestors only had two meals a day, in the morning and at twilight, often omitting lunch. However, the subsequent generations eat thrice a day. Their breakfast commonly consists of black tea paired with leftover food, served between 7.30 and 10.30 am. After transitioning from caves to different settlements and starting to work outside, they adhered to taboo regulations, and avoided eating outside the community. As a result, meals were either transported from home or consumed upon return only.

The traditional food of Malamuthan consists of wide varieties of roots, tubers, seeds, leaves and fruits, roots and yams. Though there are 110 varieties of tubers consumed by them, they attributed a common name for all of them as *kaatkengu* (wild tuber). Some of the varieties includes *vennikkizhangu*, *noorakkizhangu*, *kattukizhang*, *kavuth kachil*, *kappakizhangu* (sweet potato) and *koovakkizhang*, *venni*, *peringan*, *kamala* and *kurand*. *Kurand* is different from other varieties, as it is hairy than others. They also consume a tuber variety called *chavalkkizhang*, which contains therapeutic value. It is consumed only twice a year as it aids in cleansing the gut. Malamuthan's preparation method of tubers are also different. Some of the tubers that they eat were ingested raw, while others were just boiled or steamed and yet others were well cooked. This method was followed for preserving their natural flavours and nutrients. Turmeric, ginger, and garlic are also used in the preparation of their food items additionally. Along with it they also consume yam and Colocasia.

Cereals, especially rice form the staple food. Rice varieties like *Aryan nellu* and *Kuttan nellu* are sown during August - November. During the monsoon, rice will be replaced by Raggi and Maize. Additionally, other grains like *Thomara*, *Cholam*, *Chama*, and *Thina* are cultivated. From these they prepare, cooked rice, porridge, rice gruel, usually eaten with fish, meat, vegetables, or raw chillies. Malamuthan's used to store various seasonal and wild fruits and other eatables obtained from forest. The principal fruits include *Kattu manga* and *Valli manga* (mango types), *Koorangapazham*, *Chalir*, *Nellikka*, *Ayanichakka*, and *Morattichakka* (jackfruit varieties), *Palakka*, *Kattuthalu*, *Paaramalli*, *Kavuth*, *Njaval*, and *Cocoa*. *Chakka puzhuuk*, *chakka upperi*, and *chakka thoran* are some of

dishes made out of jackfruit. Chakka puzhuku features boiled jackfruit flesh and seeds combined with chilli, turmeric, and salt. Sliced jackfruit is roasted in coconut oil, mixed with salt and turmeric, and then sun dried for chakka upperi, and chakka thoran is made out of unripe jackfruit, which is cooked with turmeric, salt, and red chilli.

They also consume wide varieties of vegetables as well. Despite consuming meat, the community exhibits a strong inclination towards vegetable vegetarianism. The subsequent generations after their ancestor's had greater varieties of these including spices as well, which enhances the flavours as well. Frequently used vegetables include *small onion*, *tomato*, *drumstick*, *pumpkin*, *kappalanga* (papaya), *kovakka* (ivy gourd), *cabbage*, *cucumber*, and *beetroot*. Vegetable curry and dry dishes are usually made with each of these. Curry leaves, onion, chilli, salt, turmeric, coconut flakes, mustard, coconut oil, and sliced cucumber, nripe banana, potato, beetroot, and yam are all added for making curry. And thoran involves, finely chopped vegetables sautéed with onion onions, chilies, mustard seeds, curry leaves, and grated coconut. The leafy vegetables that they used daily includes *cheera* (amaranthus), *muringa ela* (moringa oleifera), *mathan ela* (pumpkin leaf), *muthalakudam ela* (a type of leaf seen in forests), *kovakka ela* (leaves of ivy gourd), *thaava* and *churali*. They also prefer dishes made with spinach, and cabbage. Green leaves, particularly those belongs to Amaranthus species are often collected from paddy between August and December. Besides, various mushrooms were also consumed, such as *Puttakoon* (available year-round), *Mukkoon* (May-June), and *Tharikkoon* (October-November), the latter being white in colour. While *Mukkidikkon* (June to December) and *Panikkoon* (August to September) grows on decomposing wood. *Karadikkon*, another variety, which grows under trees, comes in black, brown, and yellow colours, appears after the first rain. Besides, the only variety they eat raw is *Mottukkoon* or *Modumbukoon*.

Malamuthan's are also skilled hunters who gathered food from the jungle. The animals that were hunted mostly were- *karinkurang*, *moolean*, *deer*, *wild goat*, *rabbit*, *pig*, *mullanpanni* (porcupine) *kezhaman* (Deer), (kattadu), *unumbuthenni*, *kooran* (a type of rabbit), (*kulambumuyal*), *udumbu* (Monitor Lizard), *malayannan* (Squirrel), *marapatty* (Banded Krait), *Kattukozhi* (Gray Junglefowl), etc. Also, they used to hunt birds like - *vezhambal* (Great Hornbill), *pigeon* and *ooghal*. They used *kavana* and *odakkuzhal* (implements) for bird hunting and trapping and used the method of *vaarikuzhi* for trapping huge animals like elephant. Traps and pit methods are used to catch *wildboar*, *malaman* (deer), *pulliman* (spotted deer), *kezhaman* (barking deer), and other species. Porcupines are caught by smoking their burrows. *Udumbu* (iguana) is a popular meat that is hunted using dogs. In the past the firearms were used to protect crops from wildlife and hunting. The methods of fish hunting, though it is uncommon due to seasonal drying of hilltop rivulets, include stupefying and bailing out water, after bunding, wicker traps, hook, and line. Along with it, they use the method of poisoning. *Nanjuela* and *odimban* are the poisons that they use to trap the fish. They eat varieties of crabs as well which are found in streams and wetland.

Food in Socio-Cultural Practices

Food has a profound and complex significance in Malamuthan's rites, ceremonies, and the occasions that they take part. More than just the food, it also acts as a link between the material and spiritual worlds, a marker of cultural identity, and also a method of promoting social relationships among the community. One of the most important religious rituals practiced by them is the *Maladaiva pooja*. It is conducted at chemmakaran's (headman) residence. In this they offer *Aval* (flattened rice), *Malar*, *Vellam* (water), Banana in *nakkila* (plantain leaves) to hill gods. *Thiyya kallu* (Toddy/Arrack) is an essential and most required item for *Maladaiva pooja*. It is basically served for the rituals and other ceremonies like this, which are connected with Maladaivam and other deities. The nearby thiyya population has historically provided them this arrack on a regular basis for conducting these practises, despite the fact that they are fully oblivious of the toddy tapping. Usually, thiyya people made it out of the jaggery. They perform it outside the house and the other people in the community carry rice and vegetables for this occasion. After the pooja, they get the offerings as *prasadam* (a consecrated food offered to the deity).

Avilidi is another important event celebrated after harvest. It entails boiling and pounding rice in a wooden mortar (ural) to create rice flakes. This is also an offering for Maladaivam and later will be shared to community members. A similar harvest festival, *Puthari Utsavam*, which involves other tribes of the area, which reflects strong intercommunity ties as well. This features *nellidi* (*paddy crushing*), *avilidi*, and communal feasting.

Evolving Culinary Heritage: Historical Contexts and State-Led Schemes

The Malamuthan's food heritage is closely tied to Nilambur's history, shaped by feudal rule, colonial forest policies, and post-independence development. The Nilambur Kovilakom, a feudal state, exerted control over entire forest region and brought Malamuthans into its economy through dependency. Once forest dwellers, they were reduced to labourers, hired for hunting, gathering, and collecting NTFP and later for plantation work, after significant deforestation occurred for teak and other crops. This shift disrupted all their subsistence life and desacralized the forest and thereafter, colonial rule further worsened this situation. This was compounded by the migration of Mappila Muslims into Nilambur's interior, a movement triggered by Portuguese disruptions along the coastal Malabar (John, 1985). As Mappilas seized the land, the tribal communities were forced to move into the forest interiors, depriving them of their traditional land and food sources. Forest regulations substituted shifting cultivation with paddy and monoculture. Shifting cultivation, once thought to be inefficient is now considered more sustainable. Furthermore, the introduction of pepper, cocoa, coconut, and arecanut, significantly altered their TFS. This area under the plantation crops, along with rubber plantations, which were previously absent, had spread across more than 80 km by 2022 (Nazeem & Biju, 2023). This conversion has transformed food consumption patterns, ushering in a new food system that left this community vulnerable to market fluctuations (Behera et al., 2015). Perhaps, it's already evident that the prioritization of monoculture crops for short term financial gains has only threatened the food security, nutritional well-being, and livelihood stability of Malamuthans, who relied on the resilient and climate adaptive cultivation methods (Bhardwaj, 2024).

Privatisation has played a key role in broadening the community's market reliance. Once self-sufficient in gathering tubers, wild mushrooms, and jackfruit from forests or community lands, they now depend on external market for their needs. Vegetables like chilli, pumpkin, okra, and leafy greens, once homegrown, are now purchasing from stores. Even traditional practices like chewing betel leaves and drinking black tea have evolved, with jaggery replaced by shop-bought sugar, reflecting the impact of mainstream dietary habits. Furthermore, tomato, onion, and masalas, which were not even part of their diverse dishes, are now central to cooking due to their ready availability in local markets. This transformation in food preference is not merely a matter of taste but a reflection of economic adaptation. With limited land access and diminishing opportunities for forest foraging, families now rely heavily on the cash economy. This shift has not been voluntary; rather, it is governed by necessity (Ghosh-Jerath et al., 2021). The rising cost of living and irregular income streams compel households to choose, fast, filling, and low-cost meals that are easier to prepare and more affordable to purchase. As one elderly respondent shared during the fieldwork, "we eat rice and pickle when money is tight. Who can make tapioca dishes every time?". Moreover, the relocation and disturbance of the community resulted in irregular income streams due to the breakdown of traditional, forest-based livelihoods. A sustainable livelihood includes the ability to cope with shocks while maintaining assets and capabilities (Natarajan et al., 2022). However, displacement disrupts access to forests, land, and communal systems that once ensured food and income security (Marowa et al., 2024). Munshi (2012) observes that tribal people derived 50–80% of their food from forest products, which also supported local trade. With relocation, such sources vanish, pushing communities toward unstable daily wage labour in informal sectors, often without contracts or consistent work (Lasgorceix & Kothari, 2009). Further, the loss of shared resource management weakens community safety nets, increasing dependence on unreliable cash incomes. As Settee (2011) emphasises, mere compensation is insufficient; structured livelihood support is crucial for recovery. Without integrating traditional practices into rehabilitation schemes, irregular incomes may lead to deeper poverty and exclusion (Shiva, 2000). In the past, rice and other provisions were given as rewards, and later on 335 rupees per day were given as labour charges. And this cash compensation combined with displacement, limited the ability of Malamuthan community to maintain their traditional food habits slowly altering their diet and weakening their connection to customary food culture. Besides this altered situations, Integrated Tribal Development Programme (ITDP), Block Panchayats, and other governmental bodies introduced several developmental and welfare initiatives to enhance household income, and to strengthen food security. Among the earliest of such schemes was the soil conservation programme introduced by

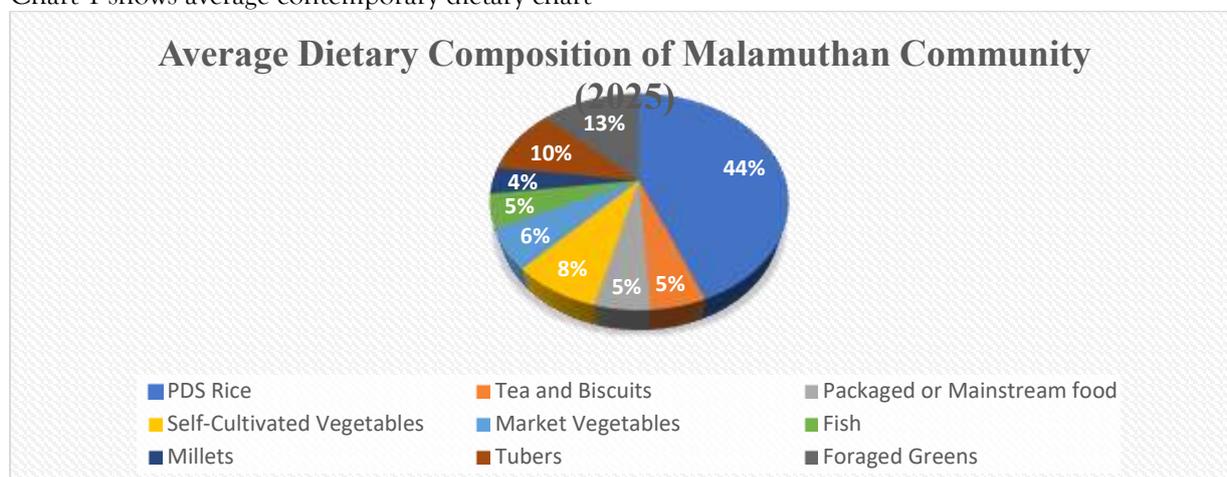
the Block Panchayat with a budget of ₹1,30,000 to prevent soil erosion in the region's steep and forested terrain. Later, the sericulture project, costing ₹50,000, aimed to introduce mulberry cultivation and cocoon rearing as a communal income-generating activity. Another notable intervention was the bee rearing programme for tribal women, with a sanctioned cost of ₹1,11,000, offering both equipment and training. The Malsya Kerala programme offered technical assistance to encourage small-scale fish rearing, promoting polyculture as a sustainable model. Other schemes distributed banana and cashew saplings and provided compensation for agricultural losses. However, these efforts were unsuccessful because, they overlooked the community's traditional lifestyle and actual needs, lacked follow-up support, and did not involve community members. Some initiatives compromised indigenous food systems by prioritizing external models over traditional foods like tubers and wild greens. As Sujathan & M.G (2023) note, food is more than sustenance, it's closely linked to identity, sacred order, and cosmological balance.

Table 2 shows the PDS provisions for tribes only

Items	PHH	AAY	Availability	Cultural Relevance
Rice	4 kg/ month	30 kg/ family	Regular	Low, displaces traditional grains
Wheat Flour	3 kg /month	2 kg/family	Irregular	Not part of TFS
Wheat	1 kg /month	5 kg/family	Irregular	Replaces traditional tubers
Sugar	Nil	1 kg/family	Regular	Used in black tea
Kerosene	1L/ 3 months	1 kg/family	Occasional	Not in rituals nor in their daily life.
Chick Pea	500gm/family	500gm/family	Festival	Not in TFS nor locally grown.
Black Gram	500gm/family	500gm/family	Festival	Low, limited ritual use.
Horse Gram	500gm/family	500gm/family	Festival	Medium, cultivated in the past.
Green Gram	500gm/family	500gm/family	Festival	Low, limited ritual use
Fenugreek	50gm/family	100gm/family	Festival	Low, non-indigenous use
Salt	500gm/family	100gm/family	Festival	Medium, used in daily cooking.
Coconut Oil	1L/family	1L/family	Festival	Low, replaced by forest sourced oils.
Vermicelli	150gm/family	1packet/family	Festival	Low, non-indigenous use
Raisins	5gm/family	1packet/family	Festival	Low, symbolising external influence
Cashew nuts	10gm/family	1packet/family	Festival	Low, symbolising external cultural influence
Spices	100gm/family	1packet/family	Festival	Medium, as some spices like chilly aligns with local flavours and dishes.

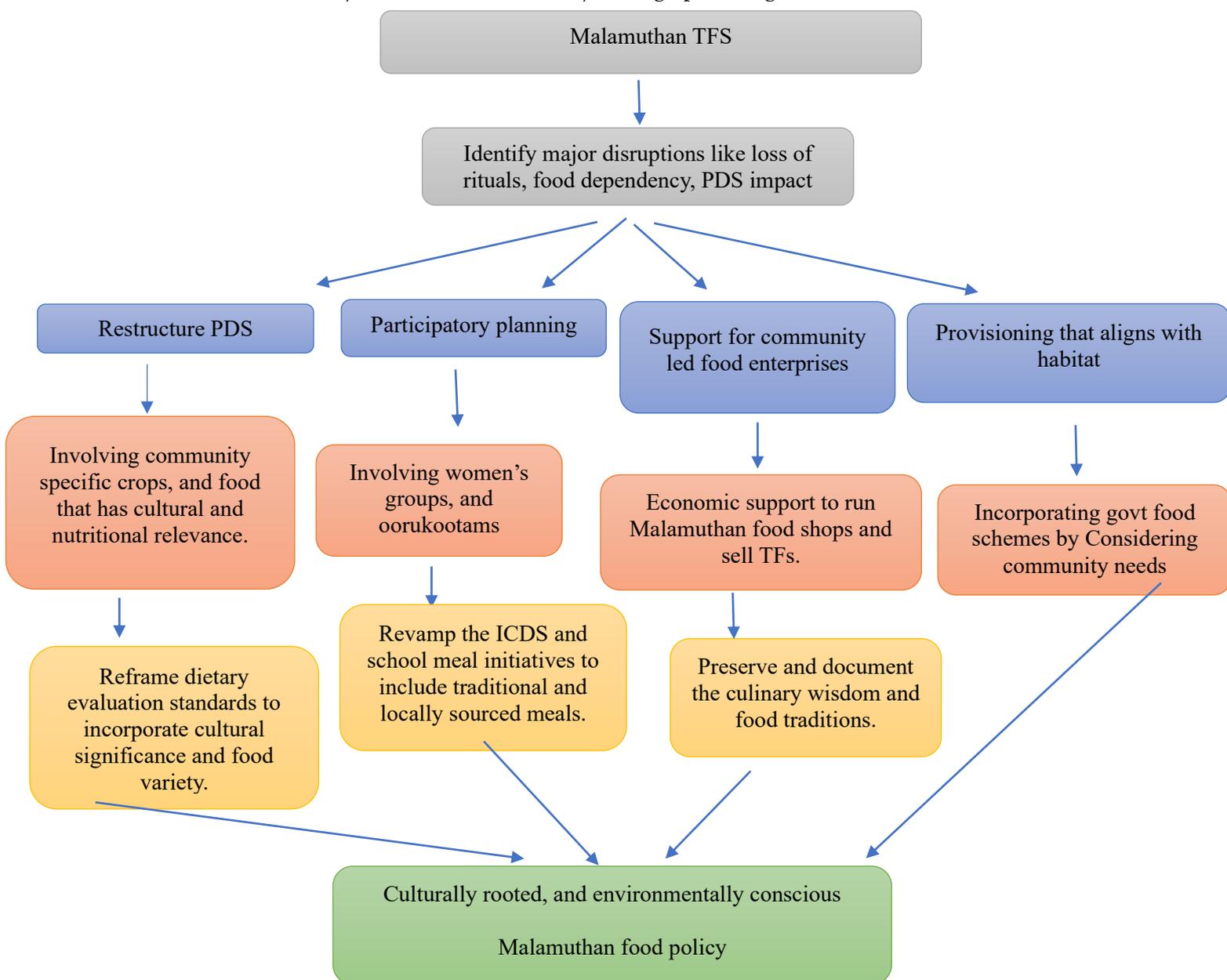
However, during the past three decades, this intricate food culture has also been disturbed by the Kerala model of welfare provisioning (PDS). Nearly 98% of the rural population was covered by the PDS, when it was reorganised and decentralised under the Kerala Food Security Enhancement Policy. All the scheduled tribes in Nilambur were automatically enrolled under Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) or Priority Household (PHH) categories (Nazeem & Biju, 2023). AAY (red card) and PHH (yellow card) beneficiaries are classified according to their financial conditions, with AAY designated for the most vulnerable and impoverished households, while CHH covers families with better financial position but still face limitations. From a state welfare perspective, this shift represented a victory over hunger and an innovative pro-poor policy. Kerala's this approach received widespread acclaim for making food access universal (George & McKay, 2019), reducing corruption through digital ration cards, and empowering local self-governments (Kerala Institute of Local Administration). However, despite its progressive outlook, field reports reveal several systemic flaws. The frequent criticisms regarding the underutilization of the PDS include the sub-par quality of grains stemming from contamination, bad odour, bug infestations, and stickiness when cooked as well as the unavailability of locally preferred rice varieties (Sathish & Gaonkar, 2023). Shanand (2019) pointed out that the PDF's main shortcomings also include poor quality, inadequate quantity, and erratic commodity availability, particularly in the first few weeks of the month. Nazeem & Biju (2023) added that people who carry AAY cards are experiencing more severe challenges indicating that the system frequently falls short in supporting the most disadvantaged people. Yet, beyond its functional inadequacies, the PDS has evolved into a venue of understated epistemic violence. As Kuhnlein & Receveur (1996) argue that the introduction of culturally alien, externally sourced foods into the indigenous diets, diminishes not only nutritious diversity but also disrupts deeply rooted social customs, ontologies, and ecological connections. In this light, what appears as food security at a policy level frequently translates into cultural erosion at the community level. Moreover, the dominance of white rice in Malamuthan households supplied through the same system as is shown in Table 2, is not a sign of nutritional advancement, but of cultural displacement. What used to be a diversified and ecologically balanced food environment, which was composed of tubers, millets and forest produce, has diminished into a monotony of calories approved by the state. This change is an instance of what Vandana Siva (2000) called a "nutrition monoculture", in which the variety found in TFS is subordinated to state's fixation or uniform provisioning. As one elder from Palakkayam settlement puts it, "Our ragi, mushroom, and tapioca varieties gives strength and satisfaction; rice is only softness without soul". In order to mask PDS inefficiencies, the government introduced Millet Reintroduction Scheme in 2022, whereas the uptake remained alarmingly low. Recent Malappuram district data indicate a mere 6.4% adoption rate among the community members and among other tribes (Asha, 2025). The challenges were structural, rather than cultural; insufficient irrigation, market assistance, and the persistent logic of PDS dependency. "We got seeds. But who is going to purchase our millet? And where can we find water?", a Malamuthan youth expressing concern during the field visit. Further, the introduction of fortified rice in 2023 made matters worse, as it was rejected because it violated the sensory memory of flavour and caused gastrointestinal pain,.

Chart 1 shows average contemporary dietary chart



The chart (1) provides a clear visual representation of changes occurring in Malamuthan food system. Interestingly while traditional food elements such as tubers, foraged greens, and minor forest produce, still holds a substantial role, brought and processed foods like packaged food, sugar-based items, and store-bought rice, now occupy a noteworthy portion of people’s diet. The change in Malamuthan youngsters also plays a vital role in this change as tribal hostel enrolment and literacy rates separated children from their TFS. The mainstream food systems that were followed in these hostels replaced seasonal, foraged options. Children are no longer taught to recognise wild edible plants or tubers, or honey, the skills that were once integral to everyday life. Though, some representing them prefers outside food, most of them are realising its significance and its impact on their life, as one informant said, “the more we consume outside food, the more we are becoming weak everyday”. Moreover, there are still instances of cultural resistance, where in rituals, elders still prepare tapioca, raggi, mushroom, and local greens. In 2024, kiosks operated by Malamuthan women started offering mango, and jackfruit pickles, jackfruit flour, and collective farming of spinach, banana, papaya, brinjal, ladies finger, bitter gourd, snake gourd, and tomato also initiated. Additionally, Asha (2025) in a study on organic farming in Kozhikode, notes that organic farming by each family resulted in becoming less independent on external shops.

Towards a Food Policy Framework Informed by Ethnographic Insights



This (chart 2), suggests a policy framework grounded in lived realities, seeking to bridge structural disparities through culturally aligned, community led strategies. The insights from community reveals that food serves not just as sustenance, but is embedded in seasonal, spiritual, and ecological patterns. The diagram illustrates a cohesive policy framework that begins with ethnographic contexts and traces the disruptions brought about by structural interventions such as PDS. Each arrow denotes a shift in epistemological perspective from deficit-based conceptions of nutrition and towards community centered systems of food knowledge, autonomy, and biodiversity. In order to revitalize traditional food ways, this flowchart emphasises the necessity of multi-tiered policy approach that integrates participatory planning, local economic support and nutritional shifts to restore TFS. This aligns with contemporary demands intersectional and habitat aligned provisioning in tribal settings. In order to combat cultural erasure, it emphasises the significance of tribal youth in maintaining and passing down the culinary traditions. This approach challenges the Kerala model's homogenizing food governance, which neglects tribal world views and material realities.

CONCLUSION

The TFS of Malamathan reflects more than mere subsistence; it embodies ecological wisdom, cultural continuity, and collective identity. Historically sustained through forest knowledge and seasonal cycles, external forces disrupted their entire food system and legacy. Food preferences, and cultural connotations associated with it have also shifted as a result of these changes, moving from a communal tradition into a more individualised and market-driven routine. Yet resilience remains. Aspects of traditional food practices continue to endure particularly through the work of elder women who serve as cultural keepers. Their experiential knowledge while less noticeable in daily life, acts as a silent declaration of historical continuity and identity amidst systemic changes. This study, however is not without limitations. It suggests an integration of ethnographic research with nutritional science for future research. There still exists a possibility for assessing the nutritional quality or health effects of the community's changing diet. Incorporating food quality assessments, nutritional profile, or dietary diversity metrics could enhance the findings and provide space for interdisciplinary collaboration. This approach would help guide more culturally sensitive public health and food policy initiatives.

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