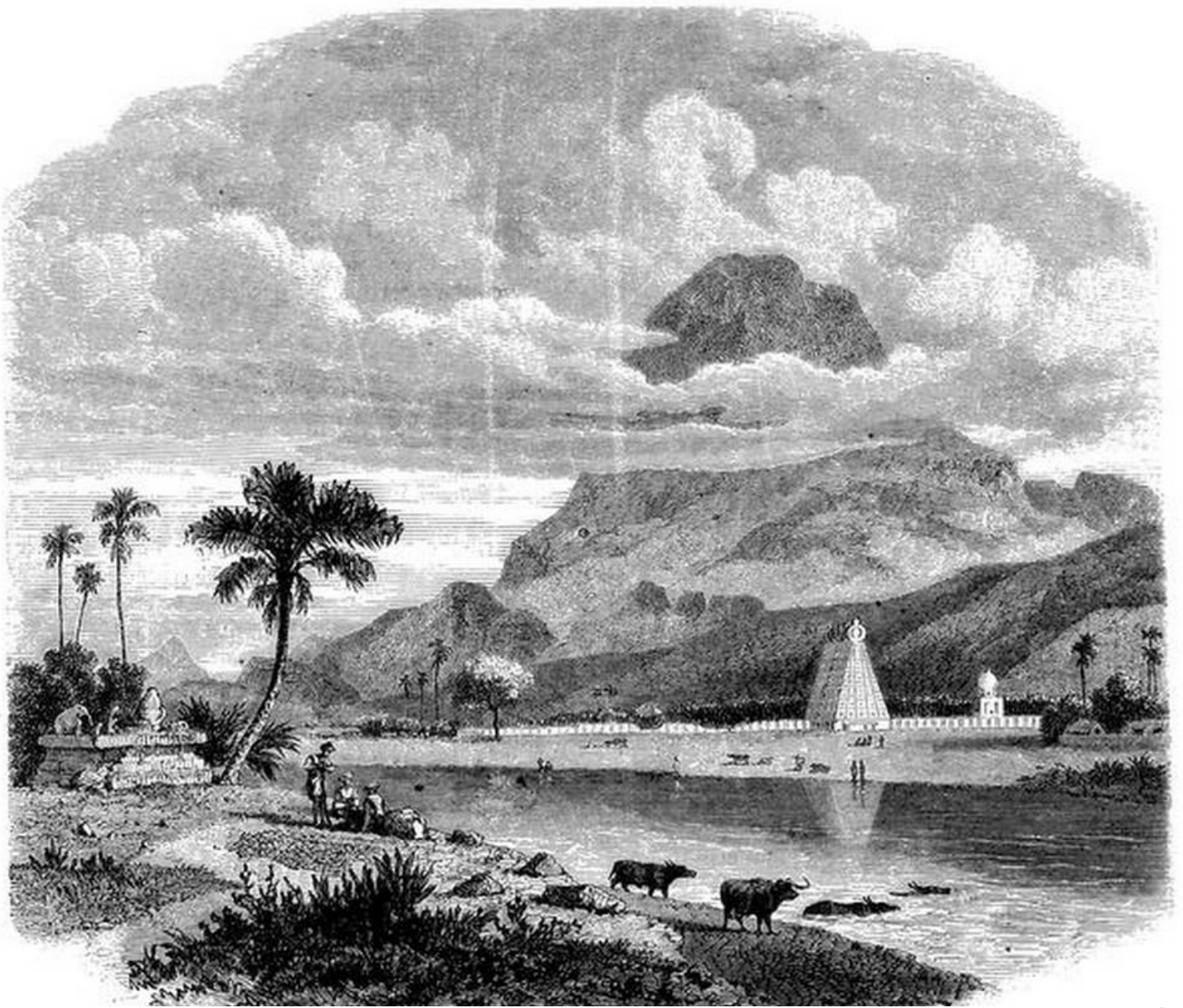


NOSTALGIA FOOD

Hot pongal by the Cauvery



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It was in December, the Tamil month of Margazhi, when all the action happened in the village where my grandparents lived

Even today, when the neighbourhood temple ladles out *venn pongal* as *prasadam*, time floats by on a candyfloss cloud and transports me across three decades to cold mid-December mornings on a certain street. The clang of temple bells, the strains of singing from the effervescent village bhajan mandali led by my grandfather, and the scent of hot,

ghee-drenched pongal sizzling as it landed on the poovarasan leaves plucked off the portia tree in the next compound complete the time travel.

Home was Coimbatore, but my heart lay in the agraharam in Paramathi Velur, as it was then called, in Komala Vilas, the palatial home rented out to my maternal grandfather by his dear friend Chinni. It was my only holiday destination every May and December, the place where I revelled in the fierce love of my uncle, aunt and teacher-grandparents. A home where books were loved and arguments encouraged, where you forgot all about city life, shampooed hair and 'Bournvita' frocks, and jumped headlong into oiled twin-braids and *paavadai-sattai*.

Fun in the sun

May meant fierce sunshine and prickly heat, but also tender palm fruit, slices of Neelam mango (which always had a beetle in its seed; a worm made an occasional appearance) and languorous baths by the Cauvery and later, in it. But it was December, or the Tamil month of Margazhi, when all the action happened. If Madras came alive with music and dance, Velur's agraharam was serenaded by a motley bunch of men, boys, and little girls who made up the bhajan mandali.

The morning air would be scented with the smell of fresh grass cut for the cows, and we would wake to 'Narayana Te Namō Namō', 'Bruhi Mukundeti', 'Khelethi Mama Hrudayae', the Thiruppaavai, and, the most loved of all, 'Vittal Vittal jai jai Vittal', the one song we could all sing along to.

Women woke early, competing with the self-appointed alarm clock that was the village cockerel, and cleaned front yards with cow dung-laced water before taking the help of a flickering lantern to draw elaborate *kolams* with chalk and rice powder. The temple priest would walk past as the women decorated each intricate pattern with brilliant yellow-orange pumpkin flowers.

The singers would begin from the Lakshminarayana Perumal temple, which sat on a street leading to the Cauvery. They would walk down the street, down the road that went past Sivagami doctor's home, past Chettiar Street and the small stream that flowed there, before returning to the temple.

Fields and groves

Beyond the Perumal temple was the Shiva temple, on the banks of the Cauvery, past fields rich with betel leaf and agathi greens, and bright green banana groves on the fringes of which resided plump crabs.

The bhajan group would be up by 3 a.m. and ready to start singing by 4. Those with good voices sang, others played the cymbal or gently hummed along. I would join the group, holding Balaraman *thatha's veshti*, sing along lustily if I knew the song, all the while

keeping an eye open for Dr. Sivagami's home. At that age, I could not look beyond her stern glasses, stiff hair bun, and the hands that pulled out a big syringe from among the many bubbling away in a sterilizer. Only later did I realise she had a lovely smile and wore the prettiest saris.

During its 90-minute serenade around the village, the group would grow in strength, before reaching the temple again. Seeing it come close, the children would quickly climb the *poovarasan* tree and pluck the leaves for the *prasadam*. The priest would hold a shallow brass vessel filled with the hot pongal and ladle out scoop after scoop. The leaves would singe when the hot pongal fell on them, and the scent that rose up was mesmerising.

At home, pongal is a slightly more elaborate affair, decked with fried cashews and ghee, but the temple version was a rough and ready preparation. Yet, it came up tops each time. What was it? The coarsely pounded pepper and cumin, the carelessly added salt and ghee, or something beyond human understanding?

Holidays are a blur of food memories. Every Tuesday, grandmother would light a lamp made of the upturned half of a lemon. The juice would be carefully squeezed into a tumbler. Till the puja was over, I'd look longingly at the tumbler; she would later add sugar, salt, and crushed cardamom, top it with and water, and hand it to me.

Then there was the weekly delicacy of wheat rotti. Grandmother would return from school, light the evening lamp, then sit on the floor in front of the kerosene stove.

She would make the dough for the rotti with wheat flour, then place handfuls of the slightly sticky batter on the hot griddle and pat it into shape. Roasted to a crisp, it would fall lightly on our extended plates, to be devoured with butter or ghee, and sometimes with the afternoon's pumpkin *hulipalya*.

It has been 10 years since Usha *avva* died, but she comes alive in the sweet and sour of a well-made lime juice or the scent of cooking wheat, while the clang of a cymbal or the sight of hot pongal on a leaf resurrects a grandfather who has been gone for nearly 16 years.

It's not easy to forget a childhood rich in music and food. And the unadulterated love of a couple who lived by the Cauvery.

SUNDAY RECIPE

Pongal (serves 2)

Ingredients:

1 cup raw rice

1/4 tsp cumin

1/2 cup yellow moong dal (split)

1/2 tsp finely chopped ginger

10 coarsely-ground peppercorn

1 tbsp ghee

A pinch of hing

A stalk curry leaves

Salt to taste

Method:

1. Dry roast the moong till the raw smell disappears; it should not change colour.
2. Add cumin to the rice and three cups of water, and place in a cooker. Atop it, place the dal in a separator with two cups of water. Cook for six whistles. (This way, the rice cooks just right, while the dal is mushy; makes for a pongal with texture and bite.)
3. In a kadai, add ghee, roast the cashew and fry the ginger till golden. Splutter some curry leaves, and add the pepper and hing. Then, add the cooked rice and dal. Add salt to taste, and stir. Top with more ghee. Eat the creamy pongal with coconut chutney or a tamarind-jaggery stew.

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