



Dining for Women

***Making Connections
Preview Edition
March 2007
Tamil Nadu, India***

We last visited India in September when we supported the work of Matrichaya in the central Indian state of Jharkhand. This time, we're in southern India, in Tamil Nadu, a culturally and historically rich area that has seen more than its share of tragedy, most recently in the Tsunami that devastated its coastline. The Tamil women served by CWDR share some of the challenges faced by women in Jharkhand, yet they do so in a very different part of India. This month's *MC* aims to introduce our members to this distinctive region and its women.

What to Expect in this Month's MC

1. The "other" India: Tamil Nadu (TN) for centuries has been the home of people of Dravidian heritage—a racial, cultural, and language group (according to varying definitions) distinct from the Aryan-Indian peoples who primarily occupy northern India. Among the largest of the Dravidian groups is Tamil. *MC* will contain a brief overview of Tamil culture, especially as it relates to women. In the *Cultural Focus*, *Dining with Women*, and *Voices* sections, we'll examine several aspects of Tamil tradition.
2. *FYI* will focus on the Tsunami and Women, especially women in two socio-economic groups: fisherwomen and *dalit* women (women of the lowest castes). Please read the FACT SHEET, especially its introduction to the work CWDR and tsunami relief among women. *FYI* will add further context related to the importance of that work.
3. A *Cultural Focus* section (a some-time feature of *MC* for those of you who are new) will examine *shakti*—women's power. It's an ancient concept associated with Hinduism and certainly not unique to Tamil Nadu. It is, however, distinctively celebrated there in local goddess traditions, Tamil literature, and even popular contemporary film. But do *images* of female power translate to power for *real* women? Again, this is a question not unique to Tamil culture, but we'll examine its unique and fascinating manifestations.
4. In *Voices* this month, we'll offer examples of women imaging and imagining themselves in Tamil fiction and poetry and claiming self-empowerment as they do.

Ideas for Chapter Meetings

1. All of the places we visit are extremely complex. I think that India can seem particularly overwhelming—the infinitely sophisticated religious traditions, just the

numbers of people, the LONG history, the LONGER names! I'm always struck by its *vividness*—the bright colors, the sounds, the smells of the spices. Try to expose members to its color, but don't worry too much about trying to understand or explain everything you show. Over time, we'll learn more, but we can already appreciate the richness of south India's heritage even if we can't fully grasp it.

2. So, images are important. You'll find multiple images of the goddesses I'll discuss in the cultural focus on-line or in books. Inexpensive devotional images can usually be obtained as well from Indian groceries or Hindu temples or Vedic Centers—don't hesitate to contact one in your area. I've done quite a bit of fieldwork in Hindu Temples in the United States and always found a hospitable welcome when I've explained that I'm trying to learn about Indian culture and religion. One very good resource for both images of goddesses and photos of real women, their villages, and daily activities is the website of cultural anthropologist Chantal Boulanger, who tragically died while doing fieldwork in 2004. I highly recommend that you visit the site—which is extensive—and use some of the images in your meeting. There are many photos of village life in Tamil Nadu, of fishing (recall that the many of the women supported by CDWR are fishing people), of the daily work of women in cooking, cleaning, etc. I'll list several links at the end of *MC Preview*, but you can just jump in anywhere on her website. Be sure to look for images marked “Tamil Nadu” or “Tamil,” “TN,” or related to the districts of Kanchipuram (one of the areas where CWDR works), Kalavai, and Chettinar (all in TN).

3. Ms. Boulanger was an expert on the intricate art of the sari. If you've ever tried to wrap one around yourself, you'll understand! One of the most fascinating aspects of the sari tradition is just how different it is from place to place, tribe to tribe. At the end of this preview edition, I'll list some links to Ms. Boulanger's website specifically on saris, with very good photos (many from Tamil Nadu)—and if you are very interested, you can buy her book with a companion cd rom or download it from

<http://www.devi.net/saribook.html>. Or, you can view a detailed exhibition about saris and her research at <http://www.cbmphoto.co.uk/cbm.html> (Sometimes this link mysteriously opens her photography site instead—just click on “web site on saris” about halfway down the page). If you happen to know an Indian woman who might be willing to show your group how to drape one, that might be fun. Just keep in mind that unless your friend is Tamil, her sari may be a bit different from the ones there. (There are many southern Indians in the United States, but more come from the southwestern state of Kerala than TN.)

4. Smells and Textures. In the September Preview edition, I suggested that you might do a display of common Indian spices and other food items. Try it now if you didn't earlier. Some important ones for Tamil cuisine: cumin, coriander, turmeric, cinnamon, fenugreek, cardamom, and asafoetida powder (that one, however, smells quite like it sounds—fetid). Three other important components you might display: tamarind (sometimes Whole Foods and other health-minded stores as well as Indian groceries carry the whole tamarind pods, but paste will do), dried coconut (“copra”), fresh curry leaves (available at Indian stores), and *toor dal* (sometimes called misleadingly “red gram dal”—it is a type of yellow split pea), and banana leaf (which south Indians use as for plates and cooking vessels).

5. Tasting. Our format centers on “saving” our dining out dollars to “dine-in” for women. Once again, I'll recommend a menu of typical (but modified!) dishes. However, this time,

I'm going to suggest something of a DFW heresy. If there are south Indian restaurants in your area, you might consider asking members (especially ones who don't cook!) to "take-out" some typical dishes to the meeting. Or, you might call ahead and inquire about getting dishes "catered" or staging a cooking demonstration. Also, many Indian women in the United States supplement income by making wonderful savory pastries, desserts, and breads to sell in Indian groceries—you might ask in a local Indian grocery about the possibilities. I'm making these suggestions for two reasons: 1) unless you cook a lot and use an abundance of spices and Indian foods, you'll save money that you can contribute to DFW because purchasing dishes from Indian restaurants will most likely be cheaper and less wasteful 2) some of the most typical dishes of Tamil Nadu are just a bit difficult to make – especially if you've never tried them and don't have any idea what they should be like. I'm thinking particularly of the "pancake" dishes idli (delicate small rice flour cakes) and dosa (very thin "crepes" with a variety of fillings). An expert dosa or idli maker in action is a wondrous thing to see (and her results to taste). Nevertheless, a great way to learn about Indian culture to visit an Indian food store, buy ingredients, and give it a try. As for those large bags of dal and spices, perhaps the cooks in your group could share ingredients—many are repeated in the recipes I've supplied. A word of warning: South Indian food is generally quite hot, but most restaurants are willing to tone down the heat if your group doesn't consist of chili-heads. Same warning applies to recipes you might find in books or on the internet.

6. Imagining and discussing. There's been much press lately about images of women and girls in our culture—particularly the mixed messages involved with the "princess" and "Brittany" types marketed to girls. As you discuss the images of women in Tamil culture, you might also reflect on how they compare to our cultural images of women. We, too, have powerful female "types"—but what does "power" mean in those symbols? In the Voices section, you'll hear from Tamil women "in their own images." What can we learn from their ways of seeing themselves and of reacting to the images thrust upon them?

Recommended Book

Although the caste system has been illegal in India for decades, it still exists. Those from the lowest castes still find it well nigh impossible to rise from the poverty that has characterized—indeed been considered a natural part of—their existence for centuries. Even those who do manage to get an education and move into professional work often suffer social stigma. Being a dalit woman has meant being the lowest of the low, unheard as well as "untouchable." Until recently. "Bama Faustina" (pen-name) was born into a dalit tribe in southern Tamil Nadu – you'll recognize the name: *paraiya*. Educated in a Catholic convent (some dalit groups converted to Christianity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, thinking their lives would improve), she now gives voice to dalit women through her well-received autobiography (*Karukku*) and fiction. The recommended book this month is her novel, *Sangata* ("Events"). Nothing really happens in *Sangata* – except daily village life as experienced by dalit women. Narrated by a precocious young girl, *Sangata* unfolds the perspectives, stories, and strategies for survival of women the world ignores. It's straightforward language, details of village life and customs, and surprising perspectives on women's place in Tamil society (Who is "free"—a dalit woman who can walk in the street or a Brahmin woman who can't?) make for a fascinating and enlightening introduction to Tamil women's lives. *Voices* will include some excerpts

from the novel, but I encourage you to seek it out—it's a short book and the chapters easily stand on their own. **Bama Faustina, *Sangati (Events)*, translated by Lakshmi Holmström (Oxford University Press, 2005).** Available from amazon and other sources (please order through the DFW website). Note: Some library catalogs and booksellers erroneously list the translator as author—note the translator as well as author if you request it through interlibrary loan. And for further confusion, the author is often listed only as “Bama.” Best to include the ISBN number: 0195670884.

Dining with Women

See the September 06 *MC* for an overview of Indian food. In this month’s *MC*, I’ll include more information on south Indian foods. This is not the food you’ve encountered in most Indian restaurants in the U.S.; you won’t find the meat and dairy based curries, for example. Most Tamils are vegetarian by cultural tradition or necessity. The food tends to be fiery—so adjust chile amounts to whatever you can take comfortably (recipes below have been adjusted). Tamil cooking almost always involves a process called “tempering”—quickly sauteing a few spices that become the base of (or are added to) most dishes.

Tamils (and most south Indians) follow an eating pattern that is a different from that of northern India as well. Rice, as in most of north India, is the basis of the meal. It is served, however, with three basic types of accompaniments. In this order, a Tamil meal would include rice served with a *sambar* (a rather thin curry, often made with tamarind—see below); *rasam* (a tart and spicy soup—really, almost a drink); and finally “curd” or yogurt (plain or mixed with vegetables or fruits). Other drier types of curries, chutneys and pickles, and Indian breads might round out a meal. Tamils love milk-based desserts such as *payasam* (thin, soup-like puddings often based on rice or thin noodles). This despite the fact that most south Indians of Dravidian descent are lactose-intolerant! Some nutritionists speculate that since meals almost always include yogurt as well, the lactose in the desserts is offset by the good enzymes and bacteria in the yogurt.

Of course, most poor Tamils sustain themselves with a little rice or *ragi* gruel and maybe a rasam and some yogurt. *Ragi* is a red grain grown in south India. When I asked an anthropologist friend of mine who lived in South India about it, he did not recommend that we try to recreate it. Having eaten it a lot himself, he warned that it can cause severe digestive problems, especially for those unaccustomed to it. You can find finely-ground *ragi* flour (commonly used in India rota breads) in Indian stores. The *ragi* consumed by poor Indians is generally much coarser.

A note on South Indian ingredients:

Tamarind is the date-like fruit of a large Indian tree. Indian groceries will usually carry tamarind pulp, which contains seeds. Tamarind pulp must be soaked in hot water, which is then strain to remove the seeds, before use. You can also buy tamarind concentrated, seedless tamarind paste. You add it to hot water and stir to dissolve before using in recipes. Neera’s is good brand that is widely available in gourmet and health food as well as ethnic stores. I use 2-3t of tamarind paste per 1c of soaking water called for in recipes. Tamarind is quite sour; lemon juice can be substituted when called for in tiny amounts. Asofoetida (“heeng”) usually comes in powder form and is made from a dried resin. It is very, very pungent and on its own not very desirable. It’s one of those things like

anchovy (think Worcestershire Sauce) that rounds out dishes and is indistinguishable in judicious amounts. You would only use a pinch in most dishes and you can omit it. Some cooks use a little garlic as a substitute.

Toor Dal are split and spinned pigeon peas, sometimes confusingly called “red gram dal.” They are yellow. Toor Dal is a central ingredient (adding body) in sambars and rasams. Cooking it in water is the first step in making either. I find that toor dal takes about 30-40 minutes to cook to a very soft state necessary for these dishes, although time may vary. You should be able to mash it easily with a fork. In Tamil recipes, you do not drain the dal before adding it to sambars and rasams.

Whole Spices and Dried Coconut and Legumes are often ground to make pastes that season and thicken south Indian dishes. If you use a recipe that calls for a paste containing these ingredients, be sure to grind them very, very finely—otherwise the texture won’t be very pleasant. I’ve adapted the recipes here so that you don’t need to worry about this.

Ghee is clarified butter from which the milk solid have been removed so that it can be used for frying. (Milk solids in butter burn at a relatively low temperature—think about how fast butter browns—thus making whole butter a poor frying medium.) Ghee is sold in Indian stores and many others, but process is easy to do and you’ll find directions easily on the internet. For the recipes I’ve included, whole butter will work fine as long as you are careful with your cooking temperature and watch it carefully.

Curry Leaves are small and flavorful but have nothing to do with curry powder (a spice blend). They are used in tempering. Fresh are best and many Indian stores will carry them. If you can’t find them, however, don’t worry.

Sambar and Rasam Powders are spices mixes, just like curry powder. You can make your own or purchase the mixes in Indian stores. They vary by brand and by cook, but generally contain the same basic ingredients. Below is a sambar powder I concocted for the sambar recipe given here:

1 T coriander seed

1 t each peppercorns, cumin

1/2 t red chili flake

1/4 t each fenugreek seed, brown/black mustard seed, ground turmeric and ground cinnamon.

Heat all but the turmeric and cinnamon in small skillet until the mustard seed and cumin begin to pop. Add all the ingredients to a spice grinder and grind finely (but not necessarily to a powder). Use 1T for the sambar recipe.

Tamil Menu

Appetizers: Vengaya (Onion) Bhaji—see weblink below

Pappadam and Chutneys (see MC Sept. 06)

Main Course: Lots of cooked long-grain Rice

Kuzhambu (Mixed Vegetable) Sambar

Elumichampazha (Lemon) Rasam

Salad/Relish: Pachadi (Cucumber-Herb Yoghurt)

Dessert: Semiya (Vermicelli) Payasam

South Indians would eat everything (except perhaps the rasam and payasam) on huge banana leaves, with their fingers. The main dishes are on the spicy-sour-thin side to balance the rice and served hot. The pachadi (which would be eaten along with the mains and rice) and dessert round out the meal with cooler, richer, sweeter, and “calmer” flavors. South Indians not only like this meal pattern but also believe it to be healthy and make for sound digestion.

All the recipes here have been adapted from *Dakshin: Vegetarian Cuisine from South India* (HarperCollins, 1994) by Chandra Padmanabhan, who is a food writer and publisher in Chennai (formerly Madras, home of CDWR). I highly recommend it for its authentic recipes, beautiful photographs of the dishes, and information about south Indian cuisine and ingredients. The recipes are a bit complex for the average cook and involve a lot of ingredients. If you enjoy cooking and especially learning ethnic cuisines, you’ll enjoy using the book, but anyone might enjoy looking at it. I’ve adapted the recipes here to make them more user-friendly. You’ll find links to others below as well.

Kuzhambu (Mixed Vegetable) Sambar

This makes at least six servings—think of it as more of a gravy for rice than the main dish itself. It can be made ahead and reheated before serving—don’t add the cilantro until you are ready to serve.

1/2 c toor dal, picked over and rinsed

2 c water

2-3 t tamarind paste dissolved in 1c hot water

2 c. mixed vegetables (potatoes or eggplant in small cubes, green beans chopped in small pieces, and frozen green peas are good options)

1/2-1t jalapeno, minced, or to taste

1/2 c water

salt to taste

1/2 t ground turmeric

1T sambar powder (see note above)

2 T chopped fresh cilantro

For tempering:

1 1/2 T vegetable oil

1 t brown/black mustard seeds

pinch asofoetida powder (opt)

1/2 t each: fenugreek seeds, cumin seeds

five or six fresh curry leaves (opt)

--Bring the dal and 2 c. water to a boil. Turn down to a simmer, cover partially and cook until done (see note above), 30-40 minutes. Add more water if it dries out before it’s done.

--Tempering: Heat the oil in a large saucepan (that has a lid—foil will do). Add the tempering ingredients and cook a minute (until seeds sputter).

--Add the tamarind water plus the other 1/2c water, the vegetables, turmeric, salt, and sambar powder. Mix well and bring to a simmer. Cover and simmer on low heat until vegetables are tender. Remove cover, add the dal and cook five minutes or so. This makes a thin curry, but if it seems too thin you can continue cooking to reduce it or add a slurry of 2t cornstarch mixed in 1T cold water and boil a couple of minutes to thicken. Garnish with cilantro and serve over rice.

Elumichampazha (Lemon) Rasam

Good stuff for a cold and considered a general cure-all in south India. If you chop the tomatoes very finely you can serve this in small cups as a drink or add a little cooked rice and serve as a soup. Servings should be very small—a couple of oz. This should serve at least 8. It can be made ahead but should be served hot with the cilantro and garnishes added just before serving.

1/4 c toor dal, picked over and rinsed

1 c water

1" piece of fresh ginger, chopped finely or grated

1 t minced jalapeno

1/2 t cumin seeds—or equivalent amount of powder

3/4 t black peppercorns, crushed, or equal amount ground pepper

1 1/2 c water

3 plum tomatoes, finely chopped

1/2 t turmeric

salt to taste

juice of 1 large lemon

1-2 T chopped cilantro

julienned strips of lemon rind to garnish (opt)

For tempering:

2t butter or ghee

1 t brown mustard seeds

1/2 t asofoetida powder (opt)

a pinch red chili flakes

five or six fresh curry leaves (opt)

--Bring the cup of water and dal to a boil, partially cover and simmer until done—about 30 minutes. Don't allow to dry out.

--In a food processor, make a paste with the ginger and jalapeno—use a little water if necessary. Grind the peppercorns and cumin seed (or use equivalent amount already ground).

--Put the undrained cooked dal in pot (at least 1 1/2 quart-size). Add the 1 1/2c water, tomatoes, turmeric, salt, and the ginger paste. Slowly bring to a boil.

--In the meantime, heat the butter in a small skillet. Add the rest of the tempering ingredients and heat until the seeds sputter. This shouldn't take more than a minute, but watch that the butter doesn't burn. Add to the rasam and mix well.

-- Turn off the heat. Add the lemon juice, cilantro and garnishes if using.

Pachadi

This is more of an ingredient list than a recipe. Feel free to adjust amounts and to leave out one or more of the vegetables or jalapeno. What is crucial is the quality of the yogurt. It should be full-fat (whole milk, 4%), thick, and stirred very well. I highly recommend the Greek yogurt sold in many stores called FAGE (sometimes PHAGE). If all you can find are the typical commercial brands, drain the yogurt for several hours. If you make this ahead, drain off any liquid that collects and stir well before serving. It can be served cold or at cool room temperature.

2 c yogurt, well-stirred

1 small cucumber, peeled and seeded, chopped finely

1-2 plum tomatoes, seeded, chopped finely

1T minced onion or green onion (If your onion seems “hot,” soak it in cold water for half an hour, drain, and dry well before using)

a pinch of minced jalapeno (opt)

1-2T finely chopped cilantro or mint

Mix all the ingredients together. Encourage diners to use a tablespoon or so of this “on the side.” South Indians might mix it into their rice at the end of the meal.

Semiya (Vermicelli) Payasam

Payasam is consider food of the gods in south India. If you made the soup in the Iraqi menu in December and have vermicelli left over, here’s a good way to use it. If not, you can sometimes find vermicelli that is already cut into small pieces in the Hispanic section of grocery stores. Cappellini or very thin spaghetti work too. This requires a little patience, but can (should!) be made ahead and if you like rice pudding-type desserts, you may agree about the divine origins of this simple but good dish.

8 c whole milk

1/4 c butter or ghee

2-3 T raw cashews, in pieces (found at health food and Indian stores)

1-2 T golden raisins

1 c (6oz) vermicelli, broken in small pieces (1 1/2”)

1/2 c sugar

4 whole green cardamom pods, crushed lightly (try to avoid the seeds escaping—if they do, remove them before serving)

a pinch of saffron threads (scant 1/2t)

--In a small (preferably nonstick) skillet, carefully heat half the butter and sauté the nuts and raisins for a minute. Don’t allow the butter to brown. Remove and set aside. Wipe out the skillet. Add rest of the butter and the vermicelli and sauté until it begins to turn reddish-brownish, watching that the butter doesn’t brown. This takes just a few minutes. Set aside.

--In a heavy large saucepan, stir the milk constantly while bringing it to a boil. Turn it down slightly to a fast simmer and continue to stir until it’s reduced to about 6 cups.

--Add the contents of the skillet to the milk, which should still be energetically simmering. Continue to cook, stirring, until the vermicelli is completely done. Add the sugar, cardamom, and saffron. Stir well. Add the raisins and cashews at the end. Place in a serving bowl or plastic container. Place plastic wrap on the surface of the

payasam to prevent a skin from forming on top. Refrigerate several hours or overnight. Again, this is a soup-like dessert, not as thick as rice pudding. It should serve 6-8.

I haven't tried all the recipes, but here are some links to reliable sources that include south Indian recipes:

--Another adapted rasam recipe can be found at

<http://www.soupsong.com/rrasam.html>. (Note: the author calls for "orange lentils"—I believe she means *toor dal* although our common split red/orange lentils would probably work in this recipe.)

--Several recipes from U.S.-based Indian food authority Madhur Jaffrey are included in an article on Madras (now Chennai—where CDWR is based) cuisine at

<http://www.saveur.com/saveur-travels/asia-and-pacific/the-spice-and-color-of-madras-49153.html> .

--One of my favorite Indian food blogs is "One Hot Stove," produced by a newly-minted St. Louis-based Ph.D. named Napur. You might check her index for other south Indian fare, but here are links to two recipes. Another dessert payasam is at

<http://onehotstove.blogspot.com/2007/02/c-is-for-carrot-cashew-payasam.html> . And I highly recommend Napur's Bhaji recipe at <http://onehotstove.blogspot.com/2005/12/o-is-for-onion-bhajji.html> (you might want to reduce the quantity of chile she calls for, however—I use one). It's a good example of the snack foods (or appetizers) that Indians across the continent enjoy. It's a staple party food at my house and always a hit. I serve it with Cilantro Chutney and Mountain Jam (recipes in the September 06 MC). You might also serve them with a purchased tamarind chutney (that's the sweet-tart brown sauce you often get in Indian restaurants). Bhaji can be reheated in a warm oven, but are best soon after they are made, even at warm room temperature.

Links to Photos by Chantal Boulanger

General gateway link to categories of photos (you can also click on "index"):

<http://www.cbmphoto.co.uk/India/villagelife.html>

Women: <http://www.cbmphoto.co.uk/India/women.html>

Village life in Tamil Nadu: <http://www.cbmphoto.co.uk/India/villageTN.html>

Fishing (mostly from Karnakata but some TN):

<http://www.cbmphoto.co.uk/India/fish.html>

Cooking in Kanchipuram: <http://www.cbmphoto.co.uk/India/cook.html>

Goddesses: <http://www.cbmphoto.co.uk/TVgoddess.html>

and <http://www.cbmphoto.co.uk/India/Vgoddess.html>

Saris: <http://www.cbmphoto.co.uk/saris/phsariBEST.html>

Saris of TN: (Kanchipuram and Chettinar):

<http://www.cbmphoto.co.uk/saris/phsariTN.html>

Look for ***Making Connections*** sometime the week of March 4 and as always, feel free to send questions or ideas to corrienorman1959@yahoo.com .