South Indian food, people and culture are inexorably linked to a ubiquitous dish as in idli and sambhar, sambhar and rice and so on. Each state in the South prepares it with a typical variation, adapted to its taste and environment.

The genesis of this dish has an interesting tale linked to it. The Marathas were ruling Tanjore. Sambojhi was a great cook (the male clan members to note) and very fond of his antti with a handful of the tart kokum thrown in. In a particular season the kokum that was imported from the Maratha homeland did not reach the bare larder of the king’s kitchen. Sambojhi was cooking and the minions were shivering in their dhothis to tell him that his favourite dish could not be made that day. A smart Vidushak, who had been elected sous chef for the day, decided to solve the problem. He whispered in the king’s ears that the locals used very little tamarind pulp to gain a better sourness to the curry and that Sambojhi should experiment with this variation. Voila, the dish with the tuvar dal, vegetables, spices and the tamarind pulp was cooked and served by the king to his coterie. The court declared the dish an outstanding preparation (they had no choice with the king as Chef) and thus was born sambhoji’s antti that in time became sambhar.

The divide between the Tanjorians and the Pattars of Kerala was not more sharply delienated than in the making of the staple sambhar. The easterners as the Tanjorians were fearfully called by the Kerala Iyers - they would not give their daughters in marriage to a Tanjore family for fear of ill treatment of their daughters but welcomed the Tanjore daughter-in-law as she could be depended on to run the family with smartness and acumen - made the vettai kuzhambu more frequently. The price of dal was prohibitive for an ordinary family making its living by rituals and temple largesse. So a spoonful of dal, the paruppu at the corner of your banana leaf was served, labelled auspicious, and the rice was eaten mixed with the tamarind pulp, spices and rice-powder-thickened kuzhambu.

The pitlai, another adaptation from the Maratha kitchen, was the festive dish as was the puli kuthina koottu - the tamarind pulp added thick stew made with the ubiquitous white pumpkin, karela, yam, raw banana, avaraikka and pudalangai from the backyards of the village homes. The recipe was basically the same with sauteed chana dal, whole red chillies, dhania seeds, heeng and curry leaves with desiccated, roasted coconut ground on the stone and added to the vegetables. The variation was in the raw coconut or roasted coconut and choice of chana dal or urad dal that was ground to a paste and a few grains of til added. In this category the rasavangi (again the Maratha influence, vangi meaning brinjal in that language) also featured with the same basic spices but with the addition of soaked grams like kondai kadalai - the brown chana - or the karamani or chowri - black-eyed beans.

The non brahmins in Tanjore used a ready powder made from the same basic ingredients for their curries. They had one called malli powder which is a mix of red chilli and dhania seeds. The masala added powders were for their meat dishes. The canny Brahmins decided to adopt the powder concept especially when their scions and daughters migrated to Babu jobs in Chennaiappattinam, Bombay and Pune and then further north to Delhi. This was due to the lack of fresh coconut—remember again the Marathis and Gujjerathis used only Copra and not fresh coconut traditionally until our Nair landed with his excess baggage of coconuts.
The Keralites cannot cook without a wee bit of coconut, be it sweet, savoury, curry, chutney, dry or wet veggies, tiffin or meals. So the sambhar moved to Kerala. It was taken by the migrant Pattars from Tanjore to Kerala when the Travancore Maharaja invited the learned pundits to come to the Cheranaadu temples and live off the rice donations. The ground spice paste with coconut, roasted dhania seeds, chana dal, red chilli is till today the base for sambhar in a Kerala home. The inclusion of the coconut milk in their cooking was an adapted taste from the local Namboodiris.

The Karnataka people have a unique concept. They make one dish with the coarsely ground paste of pepper, dhania and jeera seeds, red chilli, dal and coconut or copra and made into a vegetable stew. The curry is made quite watery and allowed to sit after cooking. The liquid that floats is laddled out and used as rasam and the thick bottom portion of the curry is eaten as sambhar. I know that there may be strong objections to this tale but it is typical of the Mandayam and Hebbar Iyengars. The sambhar that they cook otherwise has a dash of cinnamon and clove added that gives it the special flavour-it is used in their famous Bisi Bela Huli baath. Authentic Bisi bela has only tuvar dal, rice, puli, spices and onions. The addition of vegetables is a later development.

The sambhar in Andhra is a Chennai export. They have a penchant for various dry and wet chutneys and powders followed by saaru or rasam. The pappu saaru is their main curry which is made with either tuvar or moong dal, onions, tamarind pulp, red chilli and dhania powder, heeng and a seasoning of mustard and methi seeds and curry leaves. The curry is thick and after tomatoes entered the Indian culinary list some families add it to the basic saaru.

The powdervalsaambhar has become extremely popular in many homes. Many families were at one stage pretty fussy about the proportion of ingredients and the strict control of the grinding only after rice is ground - to avoid any adulteration of other flavours including the horrendous sheekai, at specific maavu mills.

So the sambhar dons many avatars in the four states of South India. What is your recipe?

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