

# The Story of Sambhar by Padmini Natarajan

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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. Sambhoji was a great cook (the male clan members to note) and very fond of his *amti* 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. Sambhoji 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 Sambhoji 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 amti* that in time became *sambhar*.

The divide between the Tanjorians and the Pattars of Kerala was not more sharply delineated 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 *vettal 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, dhanias seeds, *heeng* and curry leaves with dessicated, 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 dhanias 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 Chennai, Bombay and Pune and then further north to Delhi. This was due to the lack of fresh coconut - remember again the Marathas and Gujjerathas 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 *powdervala* *sambhar* 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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