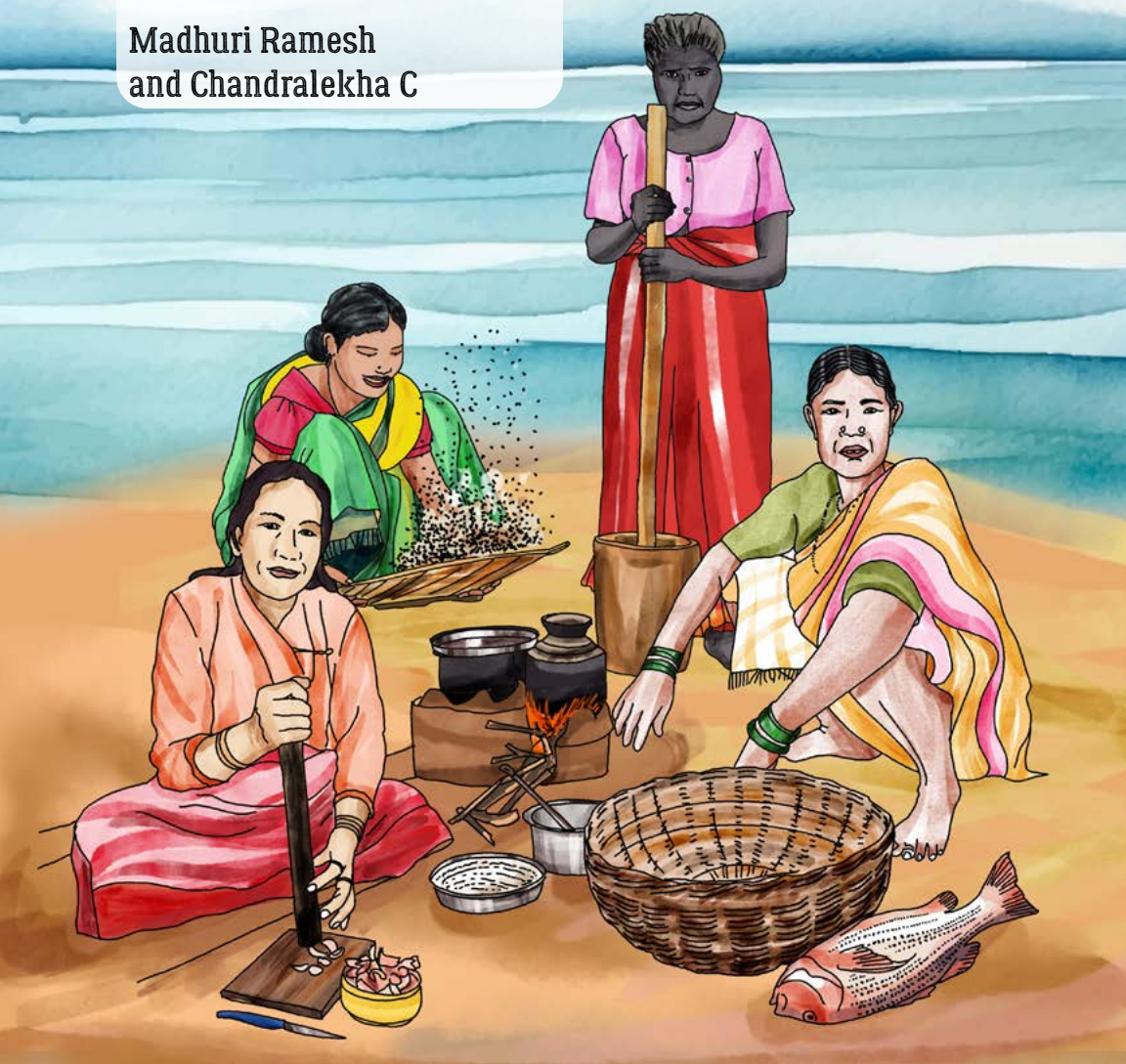
Azim Premji University

# From Sea to Surwa

## Recipes from Andaman Islands

Madhuri Ramesh
and Chandralekha C





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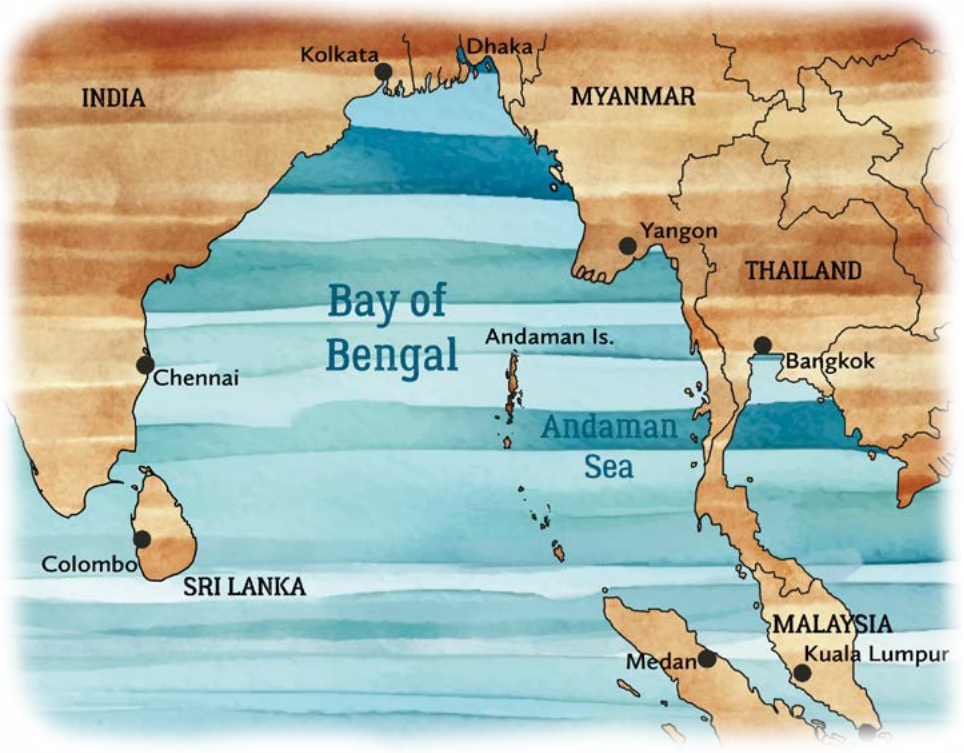



Figure 1. Map of the Andaman Islands

# Introduction

## The Andaman Islands

The Andaman Islands are an archipelago of more than 300 islands which lie about 2,000 km to the east of the Indian mainland. Along with the Nicobar archipelago, this Union Territory (UT) separates the Bay of Bengal from the Andaman Sea. Most of the islands of the Andamans are the ridges and peaks of submerged mountains while some, such as Barren Island, are volcanic. The terrain is hilly and there are few perennial rivers or sources of fresh water, hence only 28 islands are inhabited. However, there is a high diversity of plant and animal life both on land and in the surrounding waters. Hence, the Andamans are recognised as a biodiversity hotspot. The islands support a range of marine ecosystems such as mangroves, seagrass beds and coral reefs. Several marine species are consumed as food and traded as commodities, both with the Indian mainland and with other countries. For instance, there are dedicated grouper, crab and lobster fisheries that cater to markets in Southeast Asia. Most of the fishing is carried out by small-scale fishers using a range of gear such as shore seines, cast nets, gill nets, traps and spears.

According to the Census of India (2011), the population of this UT was around 3.8 lakhs, of which 60 percent were rural. Indigenous communities constituted only a small proportion of the population (8 percent). The overall population density was only 46 persons per sq km, i.e., much lower than mainland India where the density was 382 persons per sq km. However, as mentioned earlier, this might be due to the fact that only 28 islands of the Andamans archipelago have fresh water and are habitable. Both rural and urban literacy were high, at 85% and 90% respectively, but the indigenous communities of the Andamans are all Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (i.e., the Great Andamanese, Onge, Sentinelese and Ang/Jarawa).

## Some major historical events

| | |
|---|---|
| 1789: | First attempt to colonise the Andamans, by Lt Archibald Blair (East India Company) |
| 1857: | Transfer of power from East India Company to the British government. Establishment of a penal colony in Port Blair for prisoners from the First Indian Rebellion of 1857 |
| 1859: | The Battle of Aberdeen, fought between British troops and the Great Andamanese |
| 1879: | Francis Day studies the diversity and distribution of fish in the islands with the help of Great Andamanese guides |
| 1879-1900: | Anthropological studies of the Andamanese tribes by MV Portman, EH Man and others |
| 1896: | Construction of the Cellular Jail |
| 1901: | First population census conducted in the islands |
| 1908: | First mechanised fishing boat |
| 1918: | The Ranchiwallas begin to migrate from Chhotanagpur plateau |
| 1921: | Moplah prisoners from the Malabar Rebellion sent to Cellular Jail |

Figure 2. Some major historical events

| | |
|---|---|
| 1925: | Karen migrants arrive from Burma (now Myanmar) |
| 1938: | Andaman and Nicobar Fisheries Regulation passed |
| 1942-45: | Japanese occupation of the islands during World War II |
| 1947: | Remaining convicts freed by the British, islands transferred to independent India; Partition refugees arrive |
| 1949-55: | Arrival of Bengali refugees from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) |
| 1955: | Directorate of Fisheries initiates schemes to attract fishers from coastal states of the mainland |
| 1956: | Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Protection of Aboriginal Tribes) Regulation (ANPATR) passed |
| 1972-76: | Resettlement of Tamil families from Sri Lanka begins |
| 2004: | Andaman and Nicobar Islands Marine Fishing Rules; Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami |
| 2018: | Renaming of select islands (e.g.: Ross to Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Dweep, Neil to Shaheed Dweep and Havelock to Swaraj Dweep) |

# A brief history of settlers

The islands were first inhabited by indigenous groups we now refer to as the Great Andamanese, Onge, Sentinelese and Ang (or Jarawa). In 1857, these islands were colonised by the British in order to set up a penal colony for Indians who had participated in the rebellion of 1857. Since the convicts included both men and women, they were encouraged to marry and their children came to be known as 'local born'. These children were given free medical care and compulsory education. They were seen as the foundation of an island community. Hence, the British government encouraged all local borns to learn a form of pidgin Hindi so that they could communicate with each other and feel they were part of a single community. There was also a small sub-group of convicts known as 'self supporters'. These were people who had been granted a conditional pardon and could farm the land, keep livestock, set up shops or even be employed as domestic staff by government officials. The regular convicts, too, were expected to be productive and spent their time making bricks and gunny bags, cutting timber, draining swamps, planting fruit trees and so on. Overall, convict labour played an important role in the construction and economy of Port Blair (the capital) and its surroundings.

In subsequent years, other migrants from the mainland were offered government support (such as parcels of land to live on or some cash or cattle) if they agreed to settle in the islands and provide the labour required for the development of this region. Such policies continued during the postcolonial period as well (Figure 2). On the whole, these waves of migrants to the Andamans created a multicultural society with a common language and they are known as 'settlers', to distinguish them from the older indigenous communities. Today, the term 'islander' encompasses both settler and indigenous groups.

Although most migrants arrived in the Andamans under difficult circumstances, many describe themselves as pioneers - they are proud of how they (or their ancestors) cleared the jungles, began farming and fishing to build a new life.

This layered history makes itself felt even today, in the names of various places across the Andamans. For example, Baratang, Jirkatang and Adajig get their names from the Great Andamanese people; Port Blair, Ferrargunj and Mt Harriet from British colonisers; Wandoor, Calicut and Malappuram from Malayali settlers; Maymyo and Webi from the Burmese, and so on.

Other settlements in Southeast Asia were also shaped by this British practice of shipping out Indian, Chinese and Ceylonese people (convicts and free persons) to different parts of the empire to provide labour, especially after the British government abolished slavery in 1833. For example, Indian labourers were sent to other parts of Southeast Asia such as Moulmein, Singapore, Penang, Malacca and even further off, to places such as East Africa and the West Indies. In Southeast Asia, this largely forced migration added to the earlier connections made through centuries of trade across the Indian Ocean. Hence, cultural products such as textiles, craft or food preparations form a strong link across many of these places.

# Why study and share recipes?

Before we share detailed descriptions of who likes to cook what, and how, we would like to explain some terms that we use here, and why researchers are often interested in studying food.

The word 'cuisine' refers to food that is cooked and eaten in a particular regional or cultural style. It depends on the ingredients available as well as how those are gathered, prepared and eaten. A study of 'foodways' is the study of a community's cuisine as well its customs, beliefs and practices around food. This is of interest to researchers because food is a product of a community's culture and environment[1].

1 For an example of plant-based foods of the Andamans, see https://roundglasssustain.com/wildvaults/eating-wild-in-the-andaman-islands.

Therefore, changes in foodways are often good indicators of the social and environmental changes a community has experienced. Finally, food is a topic that even shy people enjoy discussing, so it offers a way to capture voices that are not often heard.

The foodways of the Andaman Islands raises interesting questions because it is a vast topic on which there are few studies. We know that most islanders originally came from different cultures and regions, therefore, they would have had their own cuisines. But now that they have all been 'islanders' for decades (if not longer), how similar are their foodways? What connections can we find today, between the cuisines of the Andamans and those of other parts of India and Southeast Asia?

As researchers who are primarily interested in marine ecosystems, we restricted our study to exploring the marine foodways of settler communities in the Andaman Islands. Moreover, we wanted to share some of the stories and recipes we collected because several studies of fisheries in the islands have mostly captured male voices and perspectives. We hardly know how the women use marine resources. This is important because we know from studies elsewhere that in many rural households, women are able to ensure nutritious food for the entire family even during difficult times *if* they have access to forest and coastal resources. A second reason is that we have heard many young islanders acknowledge that they know little about the place they live in. We hope this report will encourage them to ask questions and go exploring on their own. Although these reasons are applicable to the indigenous communities of the Andamans as well, access to them is highly restricted. Instead, from other studies, we have summarised what little is already known about their use of marine resources.

Given these reasons, the main focus of this report is the settler cuisines of the Andamans. We conducted interviews and interactions with women in different parts of the archipelago (Figure 3) between June to November 2023. We selected participants opportunistically, based on our own social networks and on who was willing to engage with us. Some gave us permission to use their real names and take photos or videos and we hope others will like the new names we have

given them. Overall, this study showcases how recipes reflect women's use of marine resources. It also offers a glimpse of the cultural, historical and ecological connections of settler communities of the Andaman Islands.

| Location | District | Community |
|---|---|---|
| Wandoor | South Andaman | Bengali |
| Junglighat | South Andaman | Telugu, Tamil |
| Bambooflat | South Andaman | Moplah |
| Guptapara | South Andaman | Bengali |
| Prothrapur | South Andaman | Telugu, Bengali |
| Nayagaon | South Andaman | Telugu, Tamil |
| Hanspuri | Middle and North Andaman | Ranchiwalla |
| Karmatang | Middle and North Andaman | Karen |
| Webi | Middle and North Andaman | Karen |
| Katchal | Nicobar | Sri Lankan Tamil |

Figure 3 Table of study locations

# Indigenous use and Consumption of Marine Resources

As mentioned earlier, access to the indigenous communities of the Andamans is highly restricted, hence, in this section, we summarise what is already known from other published studies on these communities.

To begin with, from the archaeological studies of scholars such as Zarine Cooper, we know that the early Andamanese occupied many islands in this archipelago around 2,000 years ago. They left behind shell middens – these are large heaps of shells that are created by human use of shellfish (usually molluscs) thousands of years ago. Careful studies of these middens indicate that at first, coastal species were used as food and later, the Andamanese began to exploit estuarine species as well. After extracting the edible parts, it appears that they also used the shells to cut and scrape materials.

When naturalist and surgeon Francis Day undertook a survey of the fish of the Andaman Islands in 1873, he used some Andamanese as local guides. He noted that they recognised some species clearly and those had different names in the Andamanese dialect. For example, the barramundi was known as *to-dah,* the yellow-spotted grouper (most likely) as *o-ro-tam-dah* and the checked snapper as *jeu-win-dah*. But Day does not mention their use or relevance to Andamanese culture.

However, we have direct observations of the Great Andamanese's use of marine resources from some of the later studies. For example, FJ Mouat, a British surgeon who explored the islands in the late 1800s, noted that this tribe wore a belt with a flattened nail (like a blade), which was used to open shellfish. He also reported

that once they were about eight years of age, little boys began accompanying their fathers on fishing (and hunting) trips. Later, a British anthropologist called EH Man carried out extensive studies of several tribes and found that many of them were divided into two clans: the *eremtega* (forest dwellers) and the *aryoto (coast dwellers)*. Adults of both clans ate two meals a day (*akaana* in the morning and *akangolajnga* at sunset) and sometimes snacked on grubs and fruits in between. The meals of the *aryoto* in particular included fish, turtle, crabs and shellfish but mullet heads seemed to be a favourite. He also noted that the Great Andamanese referred to cut fish as *cholke* and cleaned fish (i.e., without tail, head and innards) as *arwagke*.

Further, Man reported that they made four different types of arrows, to hunt different prey such as pigs, turtles and fish. The arrowheads were tipped with sharp fish bones or the serrated bones from the tail of the stingray. The Great Andamanese also made harpoons or spears (*kowaia loko dutnga*) to hunt turtles and large fish. These were typically 18 feet in length and consisted of a bamboo shaft with an iron arrowhead that was attached with the help of mangrove wood and cane. These were used only by the men. They also set up large nets (80 x 15 feet) at the mouth of creeks to capture large fish and turtles – they would beat the water with the shafts of the spears, to drive the fish or turtle into the net. Women and children on the other hand, often used hand nets woven from fibres of *Gnetum edule* to search for shellfish along rocky shores and tide pools.

Man also describes the different tools the Andamanese used to handle shellfish. For instance, clams were opened by inserting a bit of wood between the shells and forcing them apart. Then an arrowhead or blade was used to stab it. Mussels were simply placed on the embers of fire until the shells cracked open. Then the Great Andamanese used bamboo tongs called *kai* to extract the meat and boiled them in a pot (*buj*) for a few minutes. The shells were used to scoop out this soup. Man also noted that the Great Andamanese in the southern parts of the archipelago had stopped eating oysters by the late 1800s, probably because oysters can cause severe indigestion if they are undercooked. However, the clans in the Little Andamans region continued to consume oysters.

Here is an example of a Great Andamanese recipe we extracted from the works of this anthropologist:

- Cut a cylinder of bamboo and heat it gently over a fire to temper it
- Fill the warm cylinder with pieces of half-cooked turtle (green turtles were preferred but hawksbill meat was also used)
- Once again, rotate the cylinder slowly over the fire so that it does not crack open
- Once the meat stops steaming, take it off the flame, split the bamboo open with an *adze*
- Scoop out the turtle meat and consume immediately
- Otherwise, plug the mouth of the bamboo cylinder with a bunch of leaves and set aside. The cylinder of turtle meat can be reheated before it is consumed

# 1. Ranchi Recipes

## Middle and North Andaman District

In the early 1900s, a Divisional Forest Officer in the Andamans named Bonington requested the Jesuit missionaries of the Catholic Labour Bureau in Ranchi for a group of labourers skilled in forestry. They agreed to send a small group of Oraon and Munda families from the Chhotanagpur region because the men of these communities were seasoned and bold travellers – many had fought in Europe for the British Army during World War I. Therefore in 1918, the 'Ranchiwallas' came to the Andamans. The men were expected to help the colonial government construct jetties, buildings and roads in the islands while the women tended small homestead farms. Many of these families were also permitted to create settlements on forest fringes so that they could extract timber for the Forest Department. One of the interesting aspects of the Ranchiwalla migration is that unlike most other settlers who lost touch with their extended families on the mainland, this community sent money back home through the Chhotanagpur Mission Catholic Cooperative Credit Society, also known as the Mission Bank, which operated up to the 1960s. In later years, other Adivasi people such as the Kharia and Gond also migrated to the islands from eastern and central India, but in the Andamans, they are all collectively known as the Ranchiwallas.

Nilam knows her parents originally came from Jharkhand but as is common in the islands, she neither recalls the exact village nor has she ever been to the mainland. "But I remember my parents had to clear a patch of forest in Hanspuri before they could begin farming. They grew small amounts of *urad*, paddy and vegetables for our family." Every few weeks, her father would walk to the neighbouring Tugapur village (about 20 km away) to get provisions or to sell their farm produce. Nilam says, "It would take him two days to cover that distance and he used to carry a small tent along to sleep in. If we ran out of rice before one of his trips, we ate dried fish or dried venison with boiled

vegetables." But Nilam remembers that they were usually so careful with food that even rice water was never thrown away. Instead, "We would keep it aside and add salt to make it into a breakfast drink." Occasionally, her mother would fry a piece of pork in its own fat, with salt and some homegrown turmeric, and give Nilam a piece of this with (sugarless) tea. It was quite a treat in her childhood.

Nilam says her family often ate *maad dailo*, a form of rice porridge, with dried fish or fried prawns. The dried fish takes about two days to prepare – it is usually made with small fish. The fish is cleaned and spread out over a bamboo mat called *jharni*, which is suspended over embers of coal. She remembers her mother sometimes served it with *ngapi* too. Some Karen friends had taught her mother to make this fermented shrimp paste. Rice porridge or *kanji* is itself a strong link across many cuisines of eastern India and Southeast Asia.

## Maad dailo aur sukha machhi/ Rice kanji with dried fish

- After boiling rice in a pot, pour the remaining starchy water into a *kadai*
- Add a squeeze of fresh lemon juice
- Fry some shallots separately and add those too
- Bring the rice water to a boil
- Serve this piping hot, with dried fish, fried prawns or some *ngapi*

The next recipe has been shared by Roshni, whose parents came from Simdega district of Jharkhand. But Roshni was born and brought up in Hanspuri. She remembers her mother cooking *machhi surwa* with simple spices such as turmeric, coriander and chillies that they grew in their farm. However, Roshni wanted to show us how she makes *kekda tarkari,* with two large mangrove crabs (Green Mud Crab) that

her husband had caught that day. The crabs were rattling around in an aluminium vessel and tied together with a plastic cord. Roshni's spouse also sells crabs in the nearby Chainpur bazaar (3 km away) or further off, in Mayabunder (about 40 km away).

## Kekda tarkari/Crab fry

- Cut the crab into small pieces and wash it well with clean water. Set aside in a clean dish.
- In a kadai, pour some cooking oil
- Slice garlic and onions and sauté them

- Next, add some Sakthi mixed masala (a very popular readymade spice mix which includes pepper, fenugreek, fennel, tur dal and curry leaves).

- Add a pinch of turmeric and some chilli powder, too. Let them fry lightly
- Now add a little water and mix the spices, onion and garlic well
- After a few minutes, add the pieces of crab
- Add lots of tamarind water, some salt and boil well until the crab is completely cooked

Roshni explains, “Sometimes, I add ginger along with the onion and garlic and boil the tamarind water until it becomes a *gaada surwa* (thick gravy).” Other seafoods her family likes to eat are *laal bhetki* (Giant Sea Perch/ Humpback Snapper) and coral fish. Occasionally, she also cooks *magur machhi ka sir* (the head of freshwater catfish) in a gravy made with coconut milk. One of Roshni’s neighbours, Goroti, says. “Earlier people used sesame oil or even pork fat to cook and fry food.” They shifted to using sunflower, groundnut and other types of oil quite recently. Her husband Emanuel shares more details: “First, they would strip off the skin of the pig along with the fat underneath and heat it in a *kadai*. Gradually the fat would liquefy, and the mixture was strained to remove the pieces of skin. It would be cooled and stored in a tin.”

## Patthi mein parsa/ Grey mullets steamed in banana leaf

This recipe is often made with grey mullets and fed specially to nursing mothers because it is believed to help in the production of milk.

- Clean the fish well - if it is small, it can be cooked whole. Else cut into small pieces
- In a cup, add a few tablespoons of mustard oil
- Next, make a paste of ginger and garlic, add to the oil
- Add chilli, turmeric, coriander and cumin powder to the paste
- Finally, add a pinch of salt and mix well
- Coat the fish liberally with this paste and let it sit for a few minutes
- Tear a clean banana leaf into large squares, grease one side with mustard oil
- Now wrap the coated fish pieces in the banana leaves and cook it over the embers for 30-40 minutes

This dish is similar to a recipe the Bengalis refer to as *machher paturi* and the Parsis as *Patrani Machhi,* made with hilsa and pomfret respectively. Further east, in Cambodia, there is *amok trei,* which is made by steaming fish that has been coated with a special spice paste called *kroeung* and wrapped in plantain leaves.

## Sukha machchi surwa/ Dried fish in tamarind gravy

Sharmila spent her childhood in Karmatang village in North Andamans. Her parents had a small farm with chickens and pigs. "We also used to collect prawn and crabs from the creeks or go hunting for barking deer," she says. She came to Hanspuri after marriage. In Karmatang, she had Tamil neighbours who taught her to make *surwa* with dried *gobra* (grouper). This became her favourite preparation and she likes to make it for her daughters. The *surwa* can also be made with fresh fish whereas the Bengali version involves frying the fish before adding it to the masala. In Sadri, it is known as *kadong jhor.*

- Clean the fish well with water, remove the head, scrape off the fins and scales
- Slit it along the middle, add salt and dry it over a wood fire for 2-3 days
- In a *kadai*, sauté pieces of onion and garlic with a teaspoon of oil
- Meanwhile select as many pieces of dried fish as needed, soak them in warm water for 5 minutes and set aside
- Add turmeric, chilli powder, coriander and cumin to the *kadai*. Fry lightly
- Add a dash of water to the masala and mix well
- Now add the dried fish and let it cook for a few minutes
- Finally, add tamarind water, a pinch of salt and let it cook to a boil

Sharmila is not the only one who has been tempted by the tangy taste of fish cooked in a tamarind gravy. In Singapore, fish heads cooked in this style represent a fusion of Chinese and Indian cuisines and they are so popular that they are often called its 'national dish'. They are believed to have been first introduced to Singaporeans by an MJ Gomez from Thiruvananthapuram, who set up a small eatery there in 1928. The main difference between the Singaporean and the Andmans' surwa is the use of coconut milk and sugar in the former, which tones down the tamarind and makes the gravy both sweet and sour. *Machhi surwa* is also a popular dish in islands such as Fiji, Mauritius and the West Indies. It was probably introduced there in the 1800s when Indian indentured labourers were shipped to different parts of the British empire.

Diya, another resident of Hanspuri, remembers her father describing how he, through a private company based in present-day Jharkhand, came to the islands for forestry work. Diya's mother-in-law mentioned that her father was also a wage labourer in the Forest Department and her mother collected frankincense to sell in the market. Diya's father-in-law adds, "In those days, Hanspuri had Burmese and Thai forest workers, too. When my parents migrated to the islands in the 1960s, they were given a pair of cattle, some tin sheets for roofing and tools... some axes and a few knives." He says his mother received even cooking utensils and a grindstone, along with rations, until the forest was cleared and their farm was functioning. Diya and her husband have now inherited this farm. They cultivate vegetables for their own use and some arecanut, which they sell in the market. Sometimes, they collect honey from the forest and sell that too. Diya regularly accompanies her husband to collect shellfish. She explains how they do this: "When we spot a *sippi* in the water with its shell open, my husband will insert his cleaver. The *sippi* will promptly close its shell around the cleaver and it can then be easily pulled out of the water." The term *sippi* is used interchangeably for clams and mussels.

## Kudali sippi ka lutur putur tarkari/ Semi-gravy of clam

- Remove the flesh from the shells and cut into small pieces
- Wash the pieces 2-3 times with clean water

- Heat some sunflower oil in a *kadai*, add mustard seeds and let them splutter
- Next, fry cumin, onion, ginger and garlic paste, and curry leaves
- Then add the masala – a mix of coriander, turmeric and chilli powder

- Now add the clam pieces and let them cook for a while
- Finally, add tamarind water and let it thicken to a paste (*lutur putur* in Sadri)

Diya says this preparation is often fed to anaemic people since shellfish is believed to improve the production of blood in the body.

## Badmash injo tarkari/ Shark curry

- Boil the shark well, remove the spines and pulp the meat
- In a *kadai*, heat oil, add mustard and cumin seeds
- Then fry onion, garlic and a pinch of Sakthi mixed masala
- Add the shark meat and sauté it for a while
- Add salt to taste

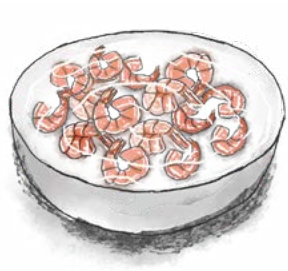
# 2. Moplah Recipes

## South Andaman District

Sura is in her 60s and lives in Kadakchang. She clearly recalls her grandparents' stories of life in the islands when they migrated here. According to Sura, "One of our relatives, Mannarghat Choudhury, was a Moplah freedom fighter who was imprisoned by the British and deported to the islands for participating in the Moplah Rebellion of 1921. Later, he became a self-supporter with a lot of cultivable land. Then he sent for the rest of his family to join him in the islands... that is how my grandparents came here." Sura's father was also a freedom fighter who was imprisoned in the Cellular Jail. She and her husband now have a farm where they grow coconut and arecanut. Sura says she avoids *'maya machhi'* (anchovies) since it causes gas and indigestion when consumed by elderly people.

Another woman we spoke to in Bambooflat, Naseem, claims that shark meat is considered to be good for health, especially for nursing mothers. But Naseem herself is allergic to it and has never cooked it. "It makes my skin turn red and itchy," she says. Instead, she describes three ways of cooking one of her favourite seafoods – dried shrimp larvae. The first recipe, *busi jhinga podi* is also made by Telugu women who refer to it as *busi jhinga yepudu* (and they add curry leaves).

## Busi jhinga podi/ Dried shrimp powder



- Soak the *jhinga* or shrimp in cool, clean water for a while; then throw the water away
- Clean the shrimp again, in warm water this time, and squeeze out all the water. Keep aside

- In a *kadai*, add some oil and fry the *jhinga* in it
- Add a pinch of chilli powder, turmeric and salt
- Pound the mixture to make a fine powder

Naseem points out that this is a quick and simple dish to make at the end of a long day and it can be eaten with rice. Sameera, who is a fifth-generation islander, mentions that she often adds a dash of coconut oil or lemon juice before serving the shrimp powder to her children because that helps cut down the spiciness. While Sura and Naseem learned their recipes from other women in their families, Sameera often looks up recipes on YouTube – she was in fact puzzled as to why we were interviewing her instead of doing the same!

Here are Naseem's further variations on how to cook dried shrimp:

## Busi jhinga chutney/ Dried shrimp chutney

- Soak the *jhinga* or shrimp and squeeze out the excess water as mentioned above
- Sauté the *jhinga* lightly
- Use the grindstone to make a paste of onions, green chillies, cumin and coriander seeds, and garlic. A small lump of tamarind can also be used
- Add a pinch of salt to this paste
- Add the sautéed *jhinga*, mix well and serve

## Busi jhinga gravy/ Dried shrimp gravy

- Soak the *jhinga* or shrimp and squeeze out the excess water
- In a *kadai*, add a tablespoon of oil. Fry onions and ginger-garlic paste
- Add chilli, turmeric, cumin and black pepper powders
- Mix well and add salt. Add some water and the *jhinga*
- Boil well and serve hot with rice

Rukiya's family likes to eat prawn biryani. She lives in Nayapuram with her husband. All her three children are "grown up and well settled", she says. She adds that she follows the recipes she learned from her mother and the only change she has made is that she does not use much grated coconut or coconut milk in her cooking now because it gives them stomach ache and indigestion.

## Prawn biryani

- Remove the shells and clean the prawn well
- Mix them with turmeric and salt, and shallow fry in a *kadai* with groundnut oil and set aside
- In the same oil, add chopped onion, ginger-garlic paste and whole biryani masala (or the readymade powder) and sauté lightly
- Add chopped tomatoes and sauté them as well
- Add some water, the cleaned prawns and some salt, mix well and boil for a few minutes
- Cook the pulao rice separately in a cooker. Some of this gravy can be added to the pulao to give it flavour

# 3. Telugu Recipes

## South Andaman District

Many of the Telugu families in the Andamans engage in commercial fishing and the women are often fish vendors themselves. However, they set aside a small portion of the fresh catch to feed the household. Nagaveni and Radha come from such families and have lived in Junglighat all their lives, though their parents are from Srikakulam. They shared a typical Telugu recipe with us.

### Methal tarmadu chor/ Fermented rice khichdi with fish

- Take some cooked rice in a pot and fill it with some drinking water
- Add some salt, keep it closed and let it ferment for 1-2 days
- In a *kadai*, take a tablespoon of oil and fry mustard, cumin, green chillies and chopped onions
- Then add potato, drumstick, brinjal, lady's fingers or any other vegetable, and sauté well
- Now add the fermented rice with some fresh drinking water and boil well
- Finally, clean and add small fish such as *maya machhi* (anchovies) or *katta surmayi* (tuna) and boil for a few more minutes

This dish is denser than the rice *kanji* made by the Ranchi women and makes for a filling morning meal. It is believed to cool the body during summer. *Teki tarmadu* is a similar preparation made with *shankar machhi* (all rays, including stingrays). This is believed to boost the production of blood in the body and is given to anaemic people. Radha adds that

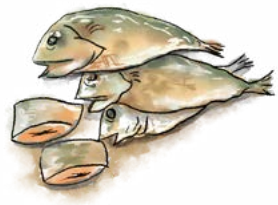
she often serves her children prawn or crab fry with *tarmadu*. On the mainland, *kanji* is a staple food of many communities along the east coast. Odia cuisine in particular has several types of *pakhala* depending on whether the rice is eaten along with curd, ginger, jaggery, cumin, etc.

The following mackerel recipe was shared by Devi, who grew up in Srikakulam and migrated to the islands when she married Diwakar. She has now lived in the islands for almost 20 years.

## Bangdi pitti/ Mackerel pitti

- Boil the fish well and clean it by removing all the spines. Mash it up
- In a *kadai*, take a tablespoon of oil and fry cumin, curry leaves, chopped shallots and ginger-garlic paste
- After 2 minutes, add chopped tomatoes and sauté them
- Then add chilli and turmeric powders and some salt
- Add the mashed fish to this masala and mix well

Laxmi's history is a little different from the others: "I grew up in Srikakulam and then I got married... my husband is an electrician. We moved here 30 years ago because my husband felt he could find work here." Laxmi's husband works in an appliance fixing shop in Prothrapur and they have three school-going children. She shares a recipe for rays.



## Shankar machhi surwa/ Ray in tamarind gravy

- Cut the ray into chunks and remove the skin
- Add turmeric powder and salt to the pieces, and mix well
- Add some tamarind water (*tarmanu saru*) to remove the frothy liquid in the meat

- After a few minutes, wash the pieces again in clean water and coat them once again in turmeric and salt
- In a hot *kadai*, add few teaspoons of oil and sauté mustard, cumin, chopped onion and tomato, ginger-garlic paste and curry leaves
- Then add a pinch of garam masala, add the fish and mix well

- After it has cooked well, add some freshly mixed tamarind water and cook again
- Add chopped coriander leaves before serving the dish

Laxmi says her Bengali neighbours enjoy her cooking, so she often shares a bowl of this ray preparation with them. She likes to serve it with a side dish of the local greens – *khatta baji* (used interchangeably for *shikakai* and *gongura* leaves), *sajna baji* (drumstick leaves) or *marsa baji* (*Amaranthus*).

# 4. Bengali Recipes

## South Andaman District

As indicated in the timeline (Figure 2), many Bengali settlers have parents or grandparents who migrated to the Andamans after Partition or during the creation of Bangladesh. They usually have arecanut or vegetable farms, many engage in marine fishing and some have small shops and businesses. Bappi hails from such a family and lives in Guptapara village. She was keen to share this recipe, which can be eaten with either rice or roti.

### Narkol diye jhinga machh chorchori/ Prawn in coconut gravy

- Shell and clean the prawns
- Add turmeric and salt
- Make a freshly-ground paste of mustard, poppy seeds, coconut and green chillies
- Mix the paste with mustard oil and add the prawns as well
- You can pressure cook this – one whistle is enough
- Add chopped coriander leaves before serving

### Maccher mather ghonto/ Fish head curry

The head of *surmai*/ seerfish, *kokari*/ trevally or *parsa*/ grey mullet can be used for this recipe.

- Chop 'watery' vegetables such as pumpkin and bottle gourd into small chunks and keep it ready
- Wash and fry the fish head with turmeric and salt, until it browns well. Then keep it aside

- In a *kadai*, add a tablespoon of oil and sauté cumin, coriander seeds, green chillies and some turmeric powder
- Add a little water and the fried fish head, and boil
- Add more salt if needed

Sadhana says she makes this recipe often but uses readymade *panch phoran* and green chillies for flavour. One of the observations many Bengali women shared is that some varieties of freshwater fish, such as *magur* and *singi* (types of catfish), are no longer as easily available. They believe that the fertilisers and pesticides that people now use in their fields has reduced the availability of such fish in paddy fields as well as surrounding ponds and streams. Among the marine species, the women feel that *surmai* (seerfish) and lobsters are no longer available locally because fishers prefer to sell them to restaurants that cater to tourists. Nevertheless, Maya Rani, who says with pride that she comes from a 'pre-42' family, shares a lobster recipe.

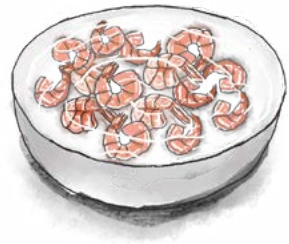
## Chingri macher bora/ Lobster pakora

- Cut and clean the lobster thoroughly. Set aside on a plate
- Make a paste on the grindstone, using coconut, onion, coriander leaves, turmeric powder and green chillies/ red chilli powder
- Rice can also be soaked overnight and then ground into this paste
- Add salt to taste
- Coat the lobster pieces well with this paste
- Heat some mustard oil in a *kadai* and fry the lobster pakoras

## Kochur loti bhaja/ Shrimp with wild colocasia

Maya says that this is made with *busi jhinga*, the small dried shrimp larvae that (in contrast to the lobsters) are easily available in local markets.

- Soak the *busi jhinga* in water for some time and clean it well. Set aside
- Clean the *guniya bel* (wild colocasia leaves) well and cut into small pieces



- In a *kadai*, add a tablespoon of oil
- Sauté some chopped onion, garlic, turmeric and chilli powder with salt
- Then add the *guniya bel*, *busi jhinga* and let it cook thoroughly for some time (otherwise the *bel* leaves will make your throat itch)
- You can add a pinch of sugar at the end if you like sweet curries

Meena also hails from a 'pre-42' family and lives with her husband, a bus driver, in Guptapara. Her parents live in Diglipur, a small town in the northern part of the archipelago. She spent all her time there while growing up. She laughs as she confesses, "I had not even heard of Guptapara until I got married and came here." Unlike most of the others, Meena has been to the mainland.

She spent six months in Kerala learning coir technology in the hope of finding employment. in the handicraft industry in the Andamans.

(That, unfortunately, did not happen.) Meena likes to cook and eat mangrove crabs (*khadi kekda*) in a potato gravy. She also likes fish cooked with *bhindi* (lady's fingers) or *lobia* (black-eyed peas). She tells us about a simple soup that is believed to be particularly good for nursing mothers.

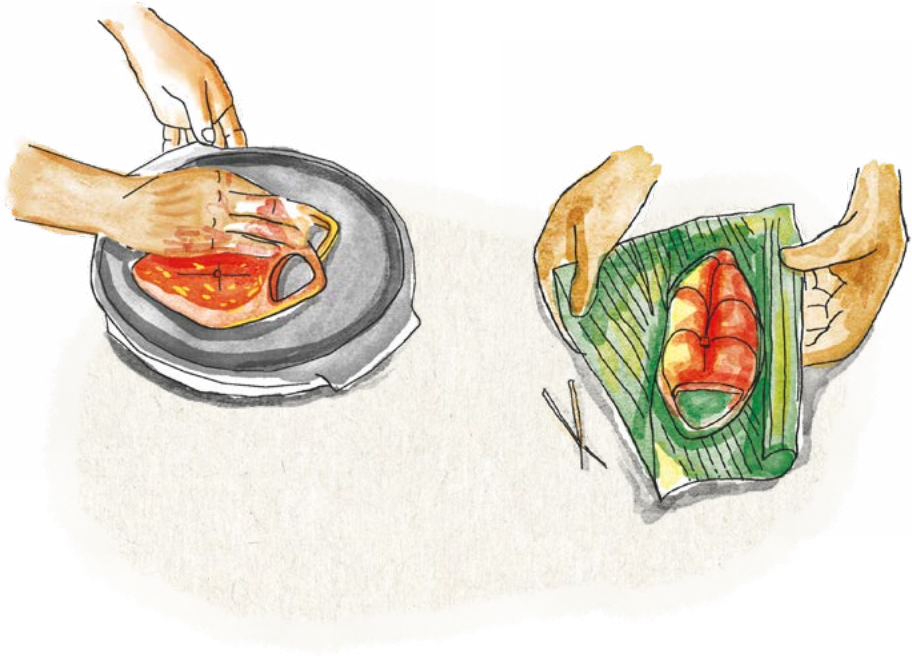
## Chanda machhi soup/ Ponyfish soup

- In a pot of clean boiling water, add ginger, black pepper, cumin and salt
- The fish is cleaned and added to this
- Boil for a few more minutes and serve

## Machher patha/ Fish cooked in banana leaf

Similar to the Ranchi recipe shared earlier, some Bengali women, too, cook fish wrapped in banana leaves. According to Soba Rani, *kokari* (trevally) tastes best when cooked like this.

- On the grindstone, make a paste of cumin, ginger, garlic, onion and coriander seeds
- Add a pinch of turmeric, Sakthi mixed masala and salt to the paste
- Then add some mustard oil and mix it all together
- Coat the cleaned pieces of *kokari* with this paste and wrap them in freshly cut banana leaves
- Keep on the coals for 1.5 to 2 hours and cook well



In contrast to the other women we spoke to earlier, Kajal works in a private firm and we met her in her friend's house in Prothrapur. (As mentioned earlier, many places in the islands are named after British colonisers – Prothrapur gets its name from a Major General Montague Protheroe. He was a senior administrator who got posted to the islands three times in the late 1800s.) Kajal, too, belongs to a 'pre-42' family, her grandfather was a refugee of the Partition and came to the Andamans with his wife and child (Kajal's father). Her grandparents cleared the jungle and set up a farm, her father eventually became a blacksmith in Wandoor. Kajal says, "I still follow my mother's recipes but I prefer to use a 'mixie' instead of the grindstone." But as is commonly the case, she believes masalas and chutneys made on the latter taste better. Kajal shares the following recipe which is made for solemn occasions, such as funeral feasts.

## Muri ghonto/ Fish head with lentils

- Measure out a cup of moong dal and fry lightly in a *kadai*
- Add some water and pressure cook for 2-3 whistles
- While the dal cools, fry the fish head well with salt and turmeric powder, and keep aside
- In a *kadai*, heat a 2 tablespoons of oil and sauté the spices - cumin, bay leaf, *panch phoran* and a paste of garlic and green chillies
- Add the fish head to this and sauté again
- Then add the dal, a teaspoon of *garam masala* and boil for some time

  (add a little water if needed)

*Muri ghonto* is also a part of Assamese cuisine, where it is known as *dailot diya mas*. It can be made with freshwater fish too and its distinctive taste comes from a strong souring agent, typically *modhuxuleng* leaves.

## Lobster paturi/ Steamed lobster

- Clean the lobster and cut into chunks
- Grind a paste of grated coconut, mustard, green chilies, ginger and garlic
- Add coriander powder, turmeric powder, salt and mix it all well with mustard oil
- Coat the lobster chunks with this paste and keep it in an airtight box and steam for several minutes. The box can even be placed in a bed of rice and steamed along with it. Or,
- Line a shallow vessel or *tawa* with a clean banana leaf

- Wrap the coated lobster in another banana leaf and place it on the *tawa*
- Cover the parcel with a lid and let it cook gently for some minutes

Shanta grew up in Tirur. Her grandparents came to the islands in 1949 and her father was old enough to join the islands' police force. She says, "He was given land in Middle Point – it was called Mountbatten then – but he didn't like it there and moved to Tirur. He encroached on some forest land and set up a farm." He died young and Shanta's mother brought up Shanta and her three sisters on the income from the arecanut crop and poultry on their farm. Shanta moved to Prothrapur after marriage and has two grown-up sons. She recalled a recipe she would make when her sons were children. "It is with raw papaya and shrimp, good for the coughs and colds that children get."

## Papita jhinga/ Shrimp with raw papaya

- Shred the raw papaya into strips
- In a tablespoon of oil, sauté cumin seeds, cumin powder, a pinch of *garam masala* and turmeric powder
- Add the dried shrimp and raw papaya to the spices, mix well with a pinch of salt
- This should be served with hot rice, for 2-4 days, until the coughing stops

# 5. Tamil Recipes

## South Andaman District

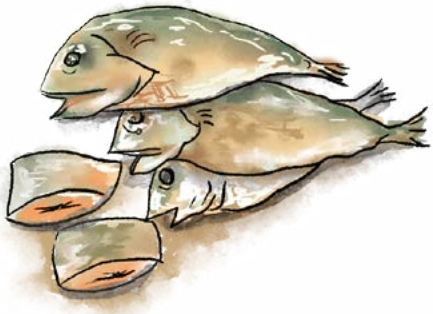
Almost all the women we spoke to came from the mainland, from places such as Ariyalur and Rameshwaram. They came to the islands after they got married to Tamil settlers here. These women mention making *machhi surwa*, usually with *tarni* (sardine) or *bangdi* (mackerel). Similar to the Bengalis, many of them also add vegetables such as brinjal, radish, potato and drumstick to fish gravies. Anjali and Kalaiselvi, who live in Nayagaon, share their recipe for the *surwa* or *kolambu* as it is known in Tamil Nadu.

### Bangdi macchi surwa/ Mackerel in tamarind gravy

- Clean the mackerel well and cut into big pieces
- In a *kadai*, heat 2 tablespoons of oil, fry fennel and cumin seeds
- Next add chopped onion, garlic and green chillies.
- Add chopped tomatoes after a few minutes
- Next, add chilli powder, turmeric, salt and a little water to make a paste. Let it cook to a boil
- Add tamarind water and pieces of mackerel. Boil until the fish has completely cooked

## Tarni murungakkai kolambu/ Sardine and drumstick gravy

- In a *kadai*, heat a few tablespoons of oil. Sauté fenugreek seeds, curry leaves and chopped onion
- Add chopped tomato and some salt, mix well. Then add turmeric, mixed masala, the chopped drumstick, sardines and a little water



- Cook on a low flame until the tomato turns into a thick paste and the oil gets separated
- Then add tamarind water and more salt if required. Cook to a boil

Mary's history is a little different – she is a settler who is married to a Tamilian from Sri Lanka. Her father migrated from Arakonam to the Andamans in search of work. He became a 'quality checker' of bricks for the Andaman Public Works Department while his wife worked as a domestic help. Mary and her siblings grew up on a farm in the Andamans. She studied up to Class 7 and then left school to look after her siblings and the farm. Mary says she used to particularly enjoy cooking for the family and milking the cattle. She shared a simple recipe for fried fish.

## Meen varuval/ Fish fry

- Clean the fish well
- Take turmeric, chilli and mixed masala powder in a cup
- Then add some salt and lemon juice to this and mix well. Marinate the fish in this for 20-30 minutes
- Peel some cloves of garlic and keep ready
- In a heated *kadai*, add some oil. Then add the marinated fish and garlic cloves. Fry well
- You can also add a few curry leaves in the end

# 6. Karen Recipes

## Middle And North Andaman District

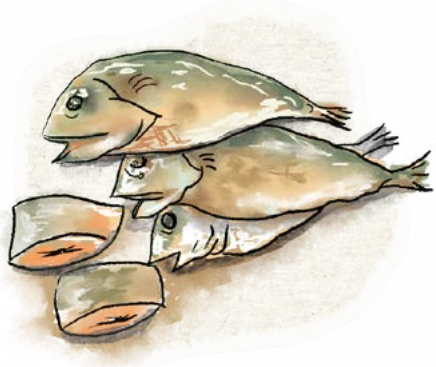
The Karen history of migration to the islands is well documented and well remembered by the current members of the community. It is similar to the Ranchi story in that here, the Chief Commissioner of the Andamans in the early 1900s, Lt Col ML Ferrar (after whom Ferrargunj is named), asked his cousin in Burma to send some landless but hardworking families to the islands. The cousin, a Reverend Marshall, posted an advertisement and eventually, a small group was selected. As Naw Annee tells us, "My great-grandfather came to the Andamans, we are the fourth generation here now. They came as a group of 12 families - there was a newspaper called *Morning Star* in Myanmar. That newspaper had an ad that the British government was taking people to the Andamans, it was around October 1924." They were led by Reverend Lyugi of the American Baptist Mission and Thra Sam Ba. Together, they created the first Karen settlement at Webi, in Middle Andamans. As is the case with many settler communities, most households cultivate their own food (including traditional rice varieties and forest gardens) as well as collect edible marine resources. Although Karens in Myanmar are mostly a hill tribe, in the Andamans they are known for being excellent fishers and divers. They also have a reputation for innovation, such as designing motorised planked canoes that can be used for fishing along mangroves as well as inter-island travel (the ubiquitous *dungi*; *khlee* in Karen) and making home-made goggles from glass bottles and cycle tyres to improve shellfish collection.

Naw Christina introduces herself very precisely; she says she was "sixty two years old and from a family that settled in Mayabunder 98 years ago". She makes garlands and bouquets with fresh flowers and also grows some arecanut and vegetables for the market. She observes that *machhi surwa* is a popular food in many Karen households - Naw Christina likes to make hers with small fish such as anchovies and garnish it with fresh Burmese coriander, *nga-kathu*,

from her garden. She makes pickles with the large fish such as *kokkari* (trevally), *dandus* (barracuda) and *gobra* (grouper). The pickle recipe is similar to the one shared by the Tamilian women but Naw Christina likes to add a dash of vinegar at the end to make it tangier.

## Talabaw/ Karen fish soup

- Clean and cut the fish into chunks
- Chop the onion and garlic finely, and make a paste using mortar and pestle
- Heat a tablespoon of oil, sauté the onion-garlic paste and some black pepper



- Add the fish and 2-3 cups of water, boil well until the fish is cooked
- When it is almost done, add the leaves of the drumstick or *shikakai* plant

- Some people also add watery vegetables such as bottle gourd and ridge gourd
- Cook for a few minutes, add 1-2 pinches of salt and serve

## Naw saw/ Fish balls in a thin sauce

- Clean and remove the spine, mince the fish finely, like *keema*
- Next, dry roast some raw rice in a *kadai* and grind to a powder in the mixer
- Make a paste of ginger and garlic, chop some onions into small pieces
- Now mix the fish mince with ginger-garlic paste, onion, salt and some black pepper. Roll small balls and coat with the rice powder. Set aside
- Next, make the sauce by heating a little oil in a *kadai*. Sauté onion and garlic
- Add water, a pinch of salt and turmeric. Let it simmer
- Mix a little of the rice powder evenly in a cup of water and add to the *kadai*

- Stir well to mix the ingredients evenly
- Finally, add the fish balls and cook for a few minutes. Serve with a bowl of hot rice

## Mohinga té/ Burmese banana shoot soup

This soup is to be eaten with rice noodles, known as *mohinga*. It is a hearty dish and often eaten for breakfast in Myanmar. The wealthier the household, the richer the soup is with pieces of fish and additional flavouring agents such as fish sauce or lemongrass and paprika. Some also serve the soup with a topping of boiled eggs.

- Boil the fish well, remove the bones and shred into small pieces
- Fry these in oil with some onion, ginger, garlic and turmeric
- Add water, freshly chopped banana shoots and some roasted rice powder to thicken the soup
- Let it boil, add salt to taste
- Serve this soup with a sprinkling of red chilli flakes, Burmese *dhaniya* leaves and a dash of lemon juice

Naw Khusaw is a fisher herself; it supplements the income she gets from her husband's pension. She also grows some paddy for the household. She feels quite shy talking; instead, she demonstrates how to make a fish salad. Naw Flossie told us that a similar salad called *nga-atho* can be made with fresh shark meat – it is boiled, the spines removed, the excess water squeezed out of the flesh and then it is finely shredded for the salad. As a child, she heard her grandparents describing how in earlier times, they had to make their own cooking oil by melting either pork or turtle fat. The meat cooked in the latter is called *kchli-nga-kadu.*

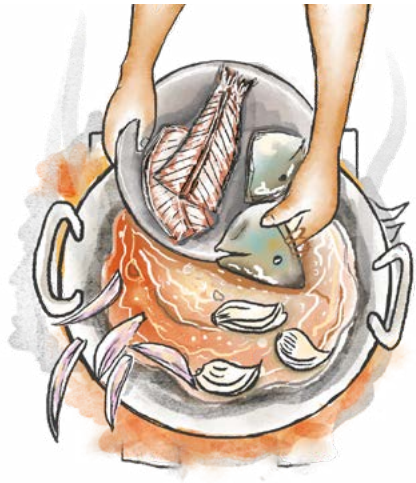
## Fish salad

- This should be made with fresh fish. Clean and marinate the fish with turmeric and salt
- Fry it well and then shred it, remove all bones. Keep the fish in bowl
- For the dressing, finely shred green chillies, onion and Burmese *dhaniya,* and add to the fish
- Crush a dried red chilli using a mortar and pestle, to make chilli flakes
- Sprinkle this on the salad and squeeze half a lemon as well

Naw Rosaline says that if she makes this salad with 2-3 fish, then she doesn't throw away the fish bones. Instead, she makes a soup (recipe given below). She is a tailor and belongs to one of the old Karen families in Webi. She knows several traditional recipes - for instance, *tandon-to-heh* is a salad made with prawns, after removing their shells and crushing the meat. She describes how her son and other Karen men catch crabs in the mangroves: "There is a long rod with a curved part at one end. This part is inserted into the crab hole and when the crab grabs it with its claws, they pull the crab out of the hole."

## Helen-jo/ Fishbone soup

- In a heated *kadai*, add a tablespoon of oil
- Add finely chopped onion and garlic to this, and sauté lightly. Add the fish bones and fry well (if you have some shredded fish left, add this too)
- Next, add a pinch of turmeric, a lump of *tadon ngapi* and some water. Mix well and boil



- The salt in the *ngapi* will be sufficient, so don't add it separately
- Finally, add a handful of fresh *khatta baji* (*shikakai* leaves) to make the soup tangy.
- Or you can add tender *geekadu* (cane shoot,slightly bitter) or *pannuhela* (jackfruit) leaves as well.

According to Naw Evelyn, this soup can also be made with dried (marine) fish or smoked freshwater fish. She says that the Karen believe seafood is risky for pregnant women and only freshwater fish is given to them. Later, the women are encouraged to drink *henga*, a soup made with smoked freshwater fish, because it is good for nursing mothers. Similar to other communities, crab soup is given to children suffering from cold and cough.

Another woman, Naw Khinlay, tells us a little more about *ngapi*, the fermented shrimp paste used in Burmese cooking. *Tadon ngapi* is made with shrimp and *nyayi ngapi* with fish. The *ngapi* can be eaten directly as a condiment or added to other dishes, such as the fishbone soup, to enhance their flavour.

A recent study on Karen foodways found that the community classifies shrimp into four types based on their colour, size and flavour: *tado gaw, tado wa, tado woh naw soo* and *tengo.* The best time for shrimp collection is November-December and the initial

processing is done in the mangrove forest or during the homeward boat trip. The study reported that many Karen believe that the lifting up of certain coastal areas after the 2004 earthquake has changed their hydrology and reduced the availability of *ngapi*. It also documented a story that Karens tell about themselves to explain their 'backwardness' but it indicates their cultural knowledge of fishery.

It goes as follows: In ancestral times, there were two Karen brothers. The elder brother Htaw Mein Pah was a skilled hunter and his sibling Sa Khai Khlo was a fisher. Htaw Mein Pah left the village, found fertile lands to cultivate and became wealthy. But his brother stayed behind and missed these opportunities because he was waiting for the shells of the molluscs he was boiling to soften (a futile task!). And Karens today are the descendants of Sa Khai Khlo rather than Htaw Mein Pah.

## Ngapi lemma/ Fish with ngapi

- Boil the fish first, remove the bones and fry the flesh with some salt until it turns dark yellow
- Dilute a small ball of the *ngapi* paste with water and add to the fried fish
- Add ginger-garlic paste, chopped onion, green chillies, a pinch of turmeric and salt
- Keep frying over a low flame, you can add a little more oil if you like
- Finally, add a little tamarind water and let it come to a boil

Naw Annee tells us about a similar dish called *barichaung,* which is made by frying onions with shrimp paste and some tamarind water. Like *ngapi lemma*, that too could be eaten with rice. The original Burmese dish appears to be *balachaung* – onions, garlic, ginger and red chillies are fried along with a lump of *ngapi* paste. However, it has no tamarind water, which is probably an Andamans twist to the recipe.

Closer home, the Goans make a sweet-and-sour paste called *balchao* and again, one of the main ingredients is fermented shrimp paste. The Portuguese are supposed to have introduced it to the Goans. But the Portuguese themselves may have learned about it from their other colonies in Southeast Asia, since fermented shrimp is considered an important condiment all over that region.

This leads us to the question, how exactly is *ngapi* made? Naw Namu has the answer because she and her husband make *tadon ngapi* once a year, for sale among neighbours and others who may want some. Naw Namu is in her 60s and still carries out this laborious process. She says, "We go to the jungle [pointing towards mangroves], catch lots of shrimp with a net and clean it in the jungle itself with fresh water. Then we crush it with a huge mortar and pestle, and dry it in the sun with salt, and crush it again – we have to do this alternately, till it becomes a paste. [The sun and salt aid the fermentation.] It is a week-long process." She also makes *nyayi ngapi* occasionally, with *bangdi* (mackerel), after soaking it overnight in brine. Finally, she shares two recipes that were last made by her mother's generation.

## Pa-son/ Fermented red-whiskered shrimp

According to Naw Namu, there are two types of estuarine shrimp – tiny white ones and slightly bigger 'red whiskered' ones.

*Pa-son* is made only with the latter. "It has to be fresh," she warns us.

- Clean the shrimp in hot water and dry it well in the sun
- Put this in a glass bottle, add salt and raw rice powder and mix it well
- Leave it undisturbed on a shelf for 5-7 days
- Use only a glass bottle, as it will spoil soon in a plastic bottle
- You can open it after a week and check, if there is a pungent smell, the *pa-son* is ready
- It can be eaten with rice

## Ngap-yan-yen/ Juice of shrimp larvae

- Clean the *busi jhinga* well, put it in a large tin and press it down with a lot of salt. Let this sit overnight.
- Next day, all the juice in the tin is collected and boiled well for 4-5 hours until it reduces
- This can be stored for a short time, it needs further cooking before it can be eaten
- In a tablespoon of oil, sauté onion, garlic, green chillies, red chilli flakes and some *khatta baji* (*shikakai* leaves)
- Then add the fermented *jhinga* juice and cook for a few minutes. If it is too salty, you can add a pinch of sugar

# 7. Sri Lankan Tamil Recipes

## Nicobar District

In the late 1800s, Tamils from southern India were hired by the British to work on the tea and coffee plantations in Sri Lanka (then Ceylon). After Sri Lanka became an independent country in 1948, its government granted citizenship based on origin alone and these Tamil plantation workers from the highlands became classified as migrants. However, they were not Indian citizens either because their forefathers had left the country a century ago. Finally, after discussions between the two countries between 1964 and 1974, around 6,00,000 Tamils were offered citizenship and resettlement in different parts of India including Little Andamans and Katchal. Many of the families that came to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands were those of plantation labour leaders known as *kangany.* They were first sent to Mandapam, a town on the coast of Tamil Nadu where they remained from anywhere between a few days to a year. Here, they came to know more about their final destination and the financial support they would receive from the Indian government. Some of them came to Katchal in 1975, after a voyage of two weeks or more. They were given temporary accommodation for some months and half an acre of land to set up kitchen gardens.

Meenakshi and her husband are one such couple who migrated to Katchal in 1975. They used to work in the government rubber plantation. Meenakshi recalls how her elder son would take care of his two siblings while she and her husband went to work. She said she had brought her earthen pots and iron *kadais* with her, all the way to Katchal, and still has one small *kadai* from those times. After her husband passed away some decades ago, Meenakshi began to live off her pension and she also cultivates some vegetables on a small plot of land. Meenakshi rattles off the names of various Sri Lankan foods that she used to make in the early days but later stopped. “Ceylon roti, which is made by mixing grated coconut with wheat flour, *eera pilaka* (breadfruit) chips and

*athira urundai...”* (the last is a thick pancake/ ball of fried rice flour, green gram flour and jaggery, known as *athirasam* in Tamil, in the mainland).

Thyagamani, another person who is in her late 60s, also has vivid memories of her early days in Katchal - “Indira Gandhi brought us here.” She says they had to clear the jungle and establish kitchen gardens in what later became Mildera. They also constructed a *kachcha* road to the nearest village, Kapanga, from where they would get provisions such as rice and milk powder for the children. They would carry the sacks and parcels on their head as they walked back to Mildera. Other goods such as onions and potatoes were available only if the ship from Port Blair had docked on schedule. Every Sunday, the women would wake up at dawn to extract cooking oil for the week, by processing 10-15 coconuts at a time. Thyagamani is another fan of *machhi surwa* and says *kappa tarani* (spotted sardine) used to be available before the tsunami in 2004 but has become rare since then. Here is a recipe from her that is food for chasing away a cold:

## Nandu rasam/ Crab in tamarind water

It is best to make this with small red crabs because the large mangrove crabs make it sweet.

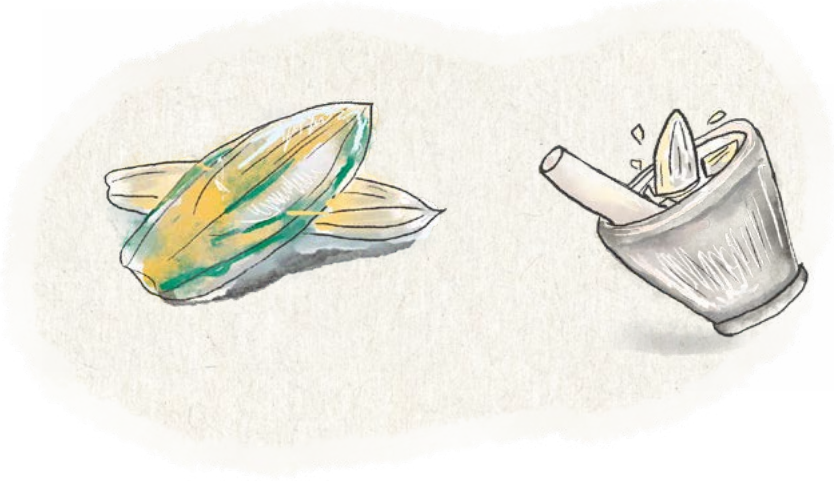
- Clean the crabs well and as you break them into small pieces, strain the crab juice into a cup
- In a *kadai*, lightly sauté cumin, fennel, garlic, dried red chillies and black pepper with some oil
- Then add a paste of tomato and onion, fry again
- Now add the crab juice, tamarind water and boil well
- Add a pinch of salt if needed

Jagadamba and her husband migrated to Katchal in 1975. She is not very fond of seafood but she cooks small fish such as *tarni* (sardines) and *dandus* (barracuda). She dislikes shellfish - "I don't eat *sippi* but if I find them on the beach, I clean them out to use as *diya* during *karthikai deepam* (a festival of lights celebrated by many Tamilians, similar to Diwali)." But she shared an exotic medicinal recipe that is used to cure earache.

## Kadal nora ennai/ Oil with cuttlefish bone

- Grind pieces of *kadal nora* (cuttlefish bone) into powder
- Mix it well with hot mustard oil and a pinch of turmeric
- Strain the mixture through a fine cloth and let it cool
- After it cools, add a drop or two in the ears, to cure earache

On the other hand, her neighbour Neelamani, whose husband is a migrant from Sri Lanka, enjoys eating *tarni* (sardine), *kokkari* (trevally) and spicy crab curry. She shares a recipe that uses fish roe.



## Meen mutta kebab/Fish roe kebab

- Make a paste of chilli powder, turmeric and salt with a teaspoon of oil
- Coat the fish roe in this and wrap in banana leaves, tie it into a packet with cotton thread
- Place the packet on the embers of the fire and cook

Another woman living nearby, Vijayalakshmi, describes how she makes sardine pickle.

## Tarni thokku/ Sardine pickle

- Fry *tarni* in oil with some mixed masala and keep it aside
- Sauté some ginger and garlic in a *kadai* with oil and grind into a paste
- Then add the fried fish, ginger-garlic paste to a *kadai* with some mustard oil and cook for a few minutes
- Next add tamarind water, some salt and boil until it all becomes a thick paste
- Let it cool well. Transfer into a bottle with an airtight lid.

Sollaiamma, who is in her 80s now, recalls a type of dried fish that was easily available back in Sri Lanka but is hard to obtain in Katchal. According to her, "it resembles the dried black horn of a cow when it is fully cured but if you cut it into pieces, it will be red inside". Sollaiamma says it is also available in Chennai and she gets some occasionally, when a family member travels all the way to the mainland. She was referring to dried tuna, which is known as *maasi karuvadu* in Tamil Nadu or *mass meen* in Lakshadweep or *umbalakada* in Sinhala. To make *maasi*, the tuna is cleaned, salted, smoked or buried in a sand pit for some days and finally dried in the sun. This method of preserving fish originated in the Maldives and it is often sold as 'Maldive fish'. *Maasi* is very flavourful and can either be used as the main ingredient or as a condiment.

Mary, also from Katchal, learned to cook *maasi sambal* by watching her mother-in-law. She points out that many Tamil settler families on Katchal began to go fishing only after 2004, when the Telugu marine fishers died in the tsunami – their houses were close to the shore and offered no protection from the sea.

## Maasi sambal/ Dried tuna sambal

- Dry roast two handfuls of fresh grated coconut with curry leaves and dried red chillies in a *kadai*
- Transfer this to the *ammi kallu* (grindstone). Add a shallot, small pieces of the *maasi*, a small lump of tamarind, a pinch of salt and grind to a thick paste

When we ask Mary if the dish requires any other ingredient, she assures us that it needs nothing more and "it is very tasty". *Maasi sambal* represents a two-fold cultural connection: as mentioned earlier; *maasi* is a typical Ceylonese form of dried fish while *sambal* is a spicy paste usually made with coconut. However, further east in Indonesia, *sambal* has shrimp instead of coconut but other similar ingredients include red chillies, ginger, shallots, a dash of lime juice and palm jaggery.

# Conclusion

We began our exploration of the foodways of the Andaman Islands with two questions in mind, i.e., how similar are the foodways of different settler communities? And do they have any connection to mainland India or other parts of Southeast Asia? From our short study, it appears that while a few aspects of the foodways of different settler communities are unique (such as the smoked fish of the Ranchiwallas, the *methal tarmadu chor* of the Telugus and the *ngapi* of the Karen), there is considerable cross-cultural influence resulting in a common 'islander' foodway (such as *machhi surwa*, prawn biryani and *kekda tarkari*). Further, as described in previous sections, many recipes share common features with recipes from the mainland and other parts of Southeast Asia. This indicates the persistent connection between the Andamans and these other regions – rather than imagining them as remote, backward or wild, we need to acknowledge these islands as an important part of the movement of people across the Indian Ocean region.

It is also evident from the diversity of recipes and memories presented here that exploring foodways can be an important entry point to recording women's lives and perspectives. These offer us a glimpse of 'history at the household level'. Another point we would like to make is that although many recipes involve a limited list of ingredients or basic food preparation techniques and they are narrated in a casual manner – a pinch of this, a handful of that – they signal the creativity and careful cooking habits of islander women. For example, their use of wild vegetables, different ways of cooking the same 'ordinary' ingredient such as *busi jhinga*, converting 'waste' such as fish bones into a nutritious and flavourful dish, and making home remedies for routine ailments that trouble small children.

Overall, these recipes emphasise the importance of marine resources to the nutritional security of many rural households in the islands – even if they own land, cultivate food crops or have other sources of income. Therefore, community involvement in the management and sustainable use of such resources will continue to be an important concern in the future.

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