



The tradition continues

Viji Varadarajan tells us how festivals remain part of her identity

I am a Tamil Brahmin who grew up in the heart of Madras, surrounded by temples, and festivals and traditions are part of my identity.

When I was growing up, the day of a festival, like any other day in South India, began with the ritual cleaning of the threshold. With a cool early morning breeze and the sky still dark, dried cow dung cakes were dissolved in a bucket of water and sprinkled on the smooth muddy entrance. After being swept away with a broom, the ground would be decorated with creative *kolam* (*rangoli*) patterns with flour made of rice powder and finely ground lime—an art that combines creativity with mathematical precision. I have watched fascinated as my grandmother, using her thumb and forefinger, drew fine lines with dots in traditional patterns bordered with *kaavi*, a thin paste made with red oxide powder, for a festive look.

This fascination continues till today. As I recall the *kolam*, the ritual oil bath that was washed away with whole green gram powder and powdered hibiscus leaves, the Kanjeevaram half-saris for girls and dhotis and *angavastram* for boys, jasmine flowers in our hair and anklets on our feet, I also smell delicious *satvic* food.

Festival cooking is more than just a collection of recipes; there is logic behind it. On Sri Rama Navami, *neer mor*, thinned salted buttermilk spiced with a dash of curry leaves, lime juice, asafoetida, and *paanagam*, a brown sugar and dry ginger drink are prepared—these are not just festive foods but coolants to beat the summer heat. There is also an effort to make optimal use of whatever you have. For instance, every part of the banana tree

(ubiquitous in Tamil Nadu), like the stem, flower and raw banana, is turned into an exotic dish, with the leaf being used to serve meals, especially on special occasions, including festivals. Once eaten, the leaf is taken back into the earth—a perfect example of eco-friendly living.

Like scores of other families, our family has managed to hold on to our traditions. We still celebrate our festivals with verve—I relate them to a resurgence of religious activities, vegetarianism, music and food. Despite the marked change in Tamil Nadu today with the popularity of North Indian cuisine and the pizza culture that has swept through our country, it is heartening to know that when there is a special celebration or festival, we turn to traditional meals. Even if it is tedious to prepare certain dishes, there is always someone supplying a traditional takeaway. Despite the many limitations of modern life, I was also able to teach my daughters the stories, beliefs and rituals that go with our festivals. A priest comes home twice a year to chant from Vedic texts on Ganesh Jayanthi

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and Saraswathi Puja. And the oil bath ritual continues—my daughters follow it too. Juggling between their professions and cooking, they have done a great job taking the cuisine and traditions with them to foreign lands, celebrating festivals with their husbands and my little grandchildren.

Of course, we can't deny that there are changes in festival celebrations today. Families or siblings cannot get together the way they used to as distance keeps them apart. People live in small apartments, not lavish homes; thus homes cannot be so elaborately decorated and *kolam* are now confined to interiors of the homes. Nevertheless, the spirit of the season remains as strong as ever and unites us all in a common bond of love and faith. 🍃

Chennai-based Viji Varadarajan, 56, has written several cookbooks on Tamil Brahmin cooking, including *Festival Samayal: An Offering to the Gods*