

Origin of Sambar

By

P.R.ramachander

You would be all surprised to know that chillies entered India only 400 years back .So also tomato, potato and onion were introductions from our western settlers to India around the same time. Then the common sense question, which all of you should ask is how was Sambar prepared in South India before that and how were the North Indians preparing different Sabjis without Tomato and onion. I have been searching for an answer to this riddle for quite some time I was also intrigued by the name Sambar. No word in any of the south Indian language gave a meaning to that word. I was thinking it has to do something with Sambharam (Collection). But I was not able to connect this word to Sambar.

Before 400 years tamarind which is of south Indian origin was being used in all the south Indian states. The preparations were called by various names. It was Pulungari (dish with tamarind in Kerala), Huli in Karnataka, Pulusu in Andhra and Vattal Kuzhambu, poricha Kozhambu, Karai Kuzhambu, Pitlai etc in Tamil Nadu. Ofcourse, the traditional Kerala cuisine did not use chillies or tamarind but relied only on pepper for pungency and Buttermilk and mango for adding sour taste. In most of these cases the souring agent was tamarind and the thickening agent was cooked green gram dal, rice powder or ground coconut paste. Asafetida and Toor dhal which were not available in South India were not used in any of these dishes. The agent which added pungency to all these was still Chillies. Possibly before chillies came, they were using pepper powder .Then all of a sudden I realized that the preparations on the death anniversary days did not use chillies, asafetida as well as toor dhal. The main dish equivalent to Sambar, which was called Pitlai, was prepared using tamarind, pepper and green gram dhal. This must have been the precursor of the different Tamarind preparations mentioned above. When I was toying with this idea, I landed on the write up by Dr.Padmini Natarajan, which I quote Verbatim below: -

“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*”

Thus the modern Sambar which we use is named after a king of Tanjore called Sambhaji. Due to distance from his native place and difficulty in getting Kokum, he used Tamarind and possibly added Toor dhal, which is mainly grown in Maharashtra and Gujarat. He might have added Pure Asafoetida which was used as a spice in Maharashtra. From then on lot of research must have gone in, in getting to the modern version of several types of Sambar.

Still I am wondering how North Indian Sabji was prepared without onion and Tomato!