



# Food, Fertility, and Faith: A Comparative Study of Ceremonial Eating Practices in Childbirth Traditions of Kerala and Karnataka

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**Abstract**— Ceremonial eating practices associated with pregnancy and childbirth constitute an important yet underexplored dimension of South Indian cultural life. This study examines the ritualised food traditions observed during prenatal, natal, and postnatal phases in selected communities of Kerala and Karnataka. Drawing on ethnographic observations, oral narratives, and cultural texts, the article analyses how specific food items, preparation methods, and consumption rituals function as symbolic markers of fertility, protection, and social transition. The study highlights regional variations while identifying shared cultural patterns rooted in indigenous medical knowledge, caste and community norms, and gendered domestic practices. It further explores how these ceremonial food practices serve as sites of intergenerational knowledge transmission and cultural continuity. In the context of rapid socio-economic change, medicalisation of childbirth, and shifting family structures, the article discusses the transformation and gradual erosion of traditional food rituals. The study argues that ceremonial eating practices not only reflect cultural beliefs surrounding motherhood and reproduction but also embody a broader system of social care, identity formation, and community solidarity in Kerala and Karnataka.



**Keywords**— Ceremonial food practices; Pregnancy rituals; Childbirth traditions; Kerala; Karnataka; Food symbolism; Maternal health beliefs; Cultural continuity

## I. INTRODUCTION

Food occupies a central position in the cultural imagination of all societies, functioning not merely as sustenance but as a medium through which social values, religious beliefs, and life-cycle transitions are articulated. In regions such as Kerala and Karnataka, food practices are deeply embedded in ritual frameworks that structure everyday life as well as special moments such as birth, marriage, and death. Among these, pregnancy and childbirth emerge as particularly significant cultural events, marked by elaborate ceremonial observances and regulated dietary practices.

Pregnancy is not perceived solely as a biological condition but as a socially and spiritually charged state requiring ritual protection, moral regulation, and communal participation. Food rituals associated with childbirth function as mechanisms through which communities negotiate anxieties surrounding fertility, maternal health, and infant survival. These practices are shaped by indigenous medical knowledge systems, religious beliefs, ecological availability, and long-standing gender norms that assign women primary responsibility for reproductive labour and culinary knowledge.

Kerala and Karnataka offer a productive comparative framework due to their shared cultural histories and geographical proximity, alongside significant linguistic, religious, and ecological variations. While both regions are influenced by Ayurveda, folk medicine, and agrarian food cultures, they also exhibit distinct ceremonial forms shaped by caste practices, coastal and inland ecologies, and varying degrees of ritual formalisation. This study seeks to examine how ceremonial eating practices related to childbirth operate within these two cultural contexts, highlighting both continuities and divergences.

The primary objectives of this research are threefold. First, it seeks to document and comparatively analyse ceremonial food practices associated with pregnancy and childbirth in Kerala and Karnataka, situating them within region-specific ritual frameworks such as *Seemantham* and *Valaikappu*. Second, it aims to interpret the symbolic meanings embedded in these food-centred rituals, with particular attention to fertility myths, notions of purity and auspiciousness, and the culturally ascribed properties of specific ingredients and methods of preparation. Third, the study examines the ways in which these ceremonial practices function as mechanisms for regulating reproductive bodies through gendered systems of care and ritual authority, while tracing their intergenerational transmission through kinship networks and female knowledge traditions. It explores how these practices are being reconfigured in contemporary contexts, as biomedical discourses, urban lifestyles, and changing social norms interact with, adapt, or challenge traditional understandings of food, fertility, and faith.

## II. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework drawing from cultural anthropology, food studies, gender studies, and medical humanities to analyse ceremonial eating practices associated with pregnancy and childbirth in Kerala and Karnataka. At its core, the study conceptualises food not merely as sustenance but as a culturally encoded medium through which fertility, bodily regulation, faith, and social order are articulated. Structuralist and symbolic anthropological perspectives provide the foundation for understanding food as a system of signs that communicates values, boundaries, and hierarchies within a given cultural context. Claude Lévi-Strauss's theorisation of food as a symbolic language and Mary Douglas's analysis of purity, pollution, and taboo offer critical lenses for interpreting dietary prescriptions, prohibitions, and ritual classifications surrounding

pregnancy, particularly in relation to notions of bodily vulnerability and moral order.

Ritual theory further informs the analytical framework, especially Arnold van Gennep's concept of rites of passage. Van Gennep's tripartite model of separation, liminality, and reintegration is particularly useful for situating pregnancy and childbirth as transitional states marked by social ambiguity and ritual attention. In both Kerala and Karnataka, ceremonies such as *Valaikappu*, *Seemantha*, *Appamangalam*, *Cheerani* and *Bayake* function as formalised responses to this liminality, employing food, sound, ornamentation, and collective participation to stabilise and protect the reproductive body. Victor Turner's elaboration of liminality and *communitas* (intense community spirit) extends this analysis by foregrounding the role of communal engagement, symbolic action, and affective solidarity in managing reproductive transitions. Turner's framework enables an understanding of how ceremonial eating practices create temporary moral communities that reaffirm social bonds while negotiating uncertainty and risk.

Feminist and gender-focused theories of the body are central to examining the gendered dimensions of ceremonial food practices. Pregnancy-related rituals are embedded within systems of reproductive labour and domestic knowledge that position women particularly as elder women as custodians of fertility-related cultural expertise. While these practices can be read as empowering forms of embodied knowledge transmission, they also reinforce normative expectations regarding female discipline, care, and bodily conduct. Drawing on gender studies and feminist anthropology, the study interrogates how food taboos, prescriptions, and ritual performances simultaneously enable care and regulate the reproductive bodies of women within culturally sanctioned frameworks of morality and responsibility.

The framework is further enriched by indigenous health epistemologies, particularly Ayurvedic concepts of bodily balance, digestion, and thermal classification (*ushna* and *sheeta*). These principles intersect with ritual and mythic reasoning in shaping food-related fertility beliefs in both regions (which formed part of Dakshina Kannada earlier) with distinct regional emphases; dietary restraint and medicinal balance in Kerala, and abundance, sweetness, and sensory auspiciousness in Karnataka. By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the study situates ceremonial eating practices within broader systems of cultural meaning, social organisation, and embodied knowledge, enabling a nuanced comparative understanding

of how food, fertility, and faith are ritualised and reinterpreted across regional and contemporary contexts.

### III. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach to document and analyse ceremonial eating practices associated with childbirth. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with elder women, mothers, and caregivers in selected rural communities of Kerala and Karnataka. These interviews focused on personal experiences, remembered rituals, and perceived changes in food practices over time. Participant observation formed a key component of the methodology, allowing for direct engagement with ceremonial events such as pregnancy rituals and postnatal care practices.

A comparative framework was adopted to examine both convergences and divergences between Kerala and Karnataka, with particular attention to variables such as communal affiliation, ecological context, and linguistic traditions. Ethical considerations remained central throughout the research process, especially in view of the intimate and sensitive nature of reproductive practices. Efforts were made to ensure that documentation and interpretation were guided by cultural sensitivity, and, owing to limitations in data collection, the study was confined to participants sharing comparable religious practices and belief systems.

#### **Ceremonial Eating Practices During Pregnancy and after Childbirth**

Ceremonial food practices begin early in pregnancy, often marking conception or the confirmation of pregnancy through subtle dietary shifts and ritual observances. In both Kerala and Karnataka, specific foods are prescribed to promote fertility, protect the foetus, and maintain bodily balance. Simultaneously, certain foods are avoided due to their perceived potential to cause harm or imbalance.

Rice, as the staple grain, holds symbolic significance as a marker of sustenance and continuity. Coconut, abundant in Kerala, is associated with purity and fertility, while jaggery symbolises sweetness and abundance. Ghee is valued for its nourishing and strengthening properties, believed to enhance digestion and foetal development. Herbal preparations, often derived from locally available plants, are administered to alleviate discomfort and strengthen the maternal body. Food preparation during pregnancy is typically a communal activity, involving elder women who guide younger mothers in dietary choices. These practices reinforce familial bonds and establish hierarchies of knowledge, positioning elder

women as authoritative custodians of reproductive wisdom.

Advanced stages of pregnancy are marked by elaborate ceremonies such as *Valaikappu*, *Seemantha*, *Appamangalam*, *Cheerani* and *Bayake* in Kerala and Karnataka. These rituals publicly acknowledge the pregnancy and invoke blessings for safe delivery and healthy offspring. Food plays a central role in these ceremonies, both as offering and as communal meal. Specially prepared dishes rich in ghee, milk, and grains are served to the expectant mother, symbolising nourishment and protection. The act of feeding becomes ritualised, transforming everyday eating into a performative affirmation of social support. Songs, blessings, and ritual speech accompany these practices, embedding food consumption within a broader symbolic narrative of fertility and continuity. These ceremonies also negotiate the public and private dimensions of pregnancy, bringing a traditionally domestic condition into the communal sphere while maintaining gendered boundaries of participation.

Within the Tuluva community of Dakshina Kannada, a region that culturally intersects parts of Kerala and Karnataka, the customary practice of bringing a hen chick from the maternal home is observed as part of an agrarian symbolic system. This practice is understood to promote poultry rearing, with the hen functioning as a marker of productivity and sustenance. The chick, once brought to the paternal household, is carefully nurtured; however, until the birth of the child, the incubation of eggs laid by the matured hen is ritually proscribed, indicating a culturally embedded regulation of reproduction that parallels human fertility practices.

The period surrounding childbirth is governed by strict dietary regulations rooted in concepts of bodily heat, purity, and vulnerability. Foods prepared immediately before and after delivery are selected for their medicinal properties, often classified as “hot” to restore bodily balance and aid recovery. Post-delivery diets are typically restricted, focusing on easily digestible foods such as rice gruel, herbal decoctions, and spiced preparations. These restrictions are not merely nutritional but symbolic, reflecting beliefs about pollution, protection, and controlled reintegration. Elder women and traditional birth attendants play a crucial role in administering these diets, reinforcing gendered systems of care.

Postnatal food rituals extend over several weeks, marking stages of purification and gradual reintegration into daily life. Lactation-related foods are emphasised, including preparations believed to enhance milk production and maternal strength. Ritual meals often coincide with ceremonies celebrating the newborn,

reaffirming social bonds and communal responsibility. These practices highlight the gendered division of labour, with women assuming primary responsibility for caregiving while also receiving temporary exemption from domestic duties. Food rituals thus function as mechanisms of social support and emotional care.

### **Food, Fertility, and Mythic Reasoning in Kerala and Karnataka**

Before examining the ritual specificities of *Seemantham* and *Valaikappu*, it is necessary to situate these ceremonies within the broader mythic frameworks that govern food and fertility in the two regions. In both cultural contexts, fertility is not understood solely as a biological condition but as a state requiring ritual regulation, moral discipline, and divine mediation. Food myths play a central role in this process, operating as symbolic systems through which reproductive bodies are disciplined and safeguarded within culturally sanctioned norms.

In Kerala, food-related fertility myths are closely aligned with Ayurvedic principles of bodily balance and temple-centred ritual practices. Traditional beliefs categorise foods according to their perceived thermal properties, with certain items considered potentially disruptive to foetal stability if consumed during pregnancy. Myths surrounding foods such as papaya, pineapple, and sesame seeds frame them as substances capable of inducing miscarriage due to their *ushna* qualities, while rice-based gruels, coconut preparations, and herbal infusions are mythically associated with nourishment, uterine strength, and ritual purity. These beliefs are reinforced through oral traditions and domestic rituals overseen by elder women, positioning dietary discipline as both a moral and spiritual obligation. Food offerings to fertility-associated deities further venerate these practices, transforming everyday consumption into an act of faith and ritual observance (Douglas; Turner).

In Karnataka, fertility myths exhibit a stronger emphasis on abundance, auspiciousness, and sensory symbolism. Food traditions associated with pregnancy frequently privilege sweetness and plenitude, reflecting agrarian values tied to prosperity and lineage continuity. Mythic narratives surrounding prenatal well-being often emphasise the consumption of jaggery, ghee, millets, and sweet dishes, which are believed to invite benevolent forces and ensure reproductive success. Unlike the restraint-oriented dietary codes of Kerala, Karnataka's fertility myths foreground communal celebration and sensory engagement, where food consumption is integrated with sound, ornamentation, and performative ritual elements. These mythic associations frame fertility

as a socially shared condition rather than an individually regulated bodily state (Van Gennepe; Lévi-Strauss).

Taken together, these region-specific food myths establish the ideological foundations upon which ceremonial practices related to pregnancy are constructed. They reveal how culinary symbolism functions as a cultural language through which fertility is imagined, protected, and ritualised. It is within this mythic and symbolic landscape that *Seemantham* and *Valaikappu* emerge as formalised ritual expressions, translating abstract fertility beliefs into structured ceremonial acts. The following comparative analysis examines how these two rituals embody and enact the distinct yet intersecting food-based fertility ideologies of Kerala and Karnataka.

A comparative reading of the *Seemantham* and *Valaikappu* ceremony reveals both shared South Indian ritual frameworks and regionally inflected cultural meanings surrounding pregnancy (Kumar 112; Narayanan 58). In Kerala, *Seemantham*; often performed during the seventh or ninth month of pregnancy functions as a ceremonial affirmation of maternal well-being and foetal protection, with ritual emphasis placed on nourishing foods, blessings by elder women, and symbolic gestures intended to ward off malevolent influences (Menon 94). The foods offered during *Seemantham*, typically prepared using locally available ingredients such as rice, coconut, and medicinal herbs, reflect agrarian ecology of Kerala and Ayurvedic traditions, underscoring the belief that diet plays a crucial role in regulating the pregnant body (Varier 201).

In contrast, the *Valaikappu* ceremony of Karnataka foregrounds sound, ornamentation, and embodied symbolism through the ritual act of adorning the expectant mother with glass bangles (*valai*) (Raghavan 77). The resonant sound produced by the bangles is believed to stimulate the foetus and ensure positive sensory development, while the use of bright colours and metal signifies fertility, prosperity, and continuity of lineage (Srinivas 163). Food rituals in *Valaikappu*, though present, occupy a complementary rather than central role, often involving sweet preparations and communal feasting that reinforce social solidarity (Iyer 129). While *Seemantham* privileges dietary regulation and maternal nourishment as ritual focal points, *Valaikappu* emphasises sensory engagement and material symbolism as mechanisms of reproductive care.

Despite these differences, both ceremonies function as culturally encoded systems of reproductive governance that situate pregnancy within collective female knowledge and kinship networks (Foucault 139; Jeffery and Jeffery 41). They serve as sites where traditional understandings

of the pregnant body intersect with social expectations, ritual authority, and communal memory (Ortner 86). In contemporary contexts, however, both *Seemantham* and *Valaikappu* exhibit adaptive transformations, as biomedical discourses, urban lifestyles, and changing gender roles reshape ritual practices without entirely displacing their symbolic core (Nair 214; Donner 97). This comparison highlights how regional childbirth rituals in Kerala and Karnataka negotiate continuity and change while sustaining culturally specific interpretations of fertility, care, and maternal embodiment.

Despite regional variations, Kerala and Karnataka share core symbolic patterns in childbirth-related food rituals. Both regions emphasise nourishment, protection, and balance, drawing on Ayurveda and folk medicine. However, variations emerge in ingredients, ceremonial forms, and linguistic expressions, shaped by ecology, caste practices, and religious affiliations. Cross-border cultural continuities are evident in shared ritual structures and symbolic meanings, reflecting historical interactions and shared agrarian traditions.

Ceremonial food practices are transmitted primarily through oral instruction, ritual speech, songs, and proverbs. Women function as key agents of this transmission, embodying and reproducing cultural knowledge through practice. Language plays a crucial role, with ritual terminology reinforcing symbolic meanings and cultural identity. Contemporary changes such as medicalisation of childbirth, nuclear family structures, and changing food habits have significantly impacted traditional practices. Institutional childbirth often marginalises ceremonial food rituals, while modern health advice may conflict with indigenous beliefs. As a result, many practices are either adapted or abandoned, leading to gradual erosion of ritual knowledge. Despite these challenges, ceremonial food practices continue to offer valuable insights into systems of care, emotional support, and community cohesion. They hold relevance for contemporary maternal health discourse by foregrounding holistic and culturally embedded approaches to care.

The ceremonial eating practices associated with pregnancy and childbirth in Kerala and Karnataka operate as complex cultural systems in which food functions simultaneously as nourishment, symbol, and ritual instrument. Through a comparative analysis of *Seemantham* and *Valaikappu*, the article has shown how regional ritual traditions translate deeply embedded fertility myths into structured ceremonial practices that regulate reproductive bodies through culturally sanctioned knowledge. While the ritual framework of Kerala foregrounds dietary restraint, medicinal balance, and ritual

purity, the practices in Karnataka emphasise abundance, sensory auspiciousness, and communal affirmation. These differences reveal not merely regional variation but distinct cultural logics through which fertility is imagined, protected, and socially governed.

The ceremonial food practices are inseparable from gendered systems of care and authority. In both regions, elder women, kin networks, and ritual specialists act as custodians of reproductive knowledge, transmitting beliefs and practices across generations. Food taboos, prescriptions, and ritual offerings thus emerge as mechanisms through which female bodies are disciplined and supported within collective moral economies of care. At the same time, these practices provide symbolic reassurance in contexts historically shaped by reproductive uncertainty, reinforcing faith-based understandings of fertility alongside embodied experience.

### **Modernity and Transformation in the Changing Cultural Landscape**

In the context of rapid socio-economic transformation across South India, traditional ceremonial food practices associated with pregnancy and childbirth are undergoing significant reconfiguration. Processes such as urbanisation, increased female participation in formal employment, nuclearization of families, and the growing influence of biomedical discourses have collectively altered how reproductive rituals are perceived and practised in both Kerala and Karnataka. The medicalisation of childbirth marked by institutional deliveries, standardised prenatal nutrition guidelines, and professional obstetric care has gradually displaced community-centred knowledge systems that once governed maternal diet and ritual observance (Jordan 59–62). While biomedical interventions have undoubtedly contributed to improved maternal and infant health outcomes, they have also marginalised indigenous food practices embedded within culturally specific understandings of fertility, bodily balance, and spiritual protection.

In many communities of Kerala and Karnataka, ceremonial eating practices during pregnancy and the postnatal period traditionally functioned as more than nutritional interventions; they were symbolic enactments of cultural values surrounding purity, transition, and reproductive continuity. Structuralist and symbolic anthropological perspectives conceptualise food as a system of signs through which societies communicate moral boundaries and social order (Lévi-Strauss 36; Douglas 44). Prescribed foods such as medicinal porridges, herbal preparations, ghee-based dishes, and specific grains were believed to regulate bodily heat, enhance

lactation, strengthen the reproductive body, and safeguard the mother and child from malevolent forces. These practices reflect what Mary Douglas identifies as the cultural logic of purity and pollution, where dietary rules serve to maintain symbolic and social coherence during liminal life stages such as childbirth (Douglas 96).

Shifting family structures have further contributed to the transformation of these traditions. The decline of joint families and the increasing physical distance between generations have reduced the role of elder women, particularly mothers-in-law and grandmothers who historically functioned as custodians of reproductive food knowledge (Jeffery, Jeffery, and Lyon 112). In urban and semi-urban contexts, younger women increasingly rely on medical professionals, digital media, and commercial nutrition products, leading to the selective retention or abandonment of ritual food customs. As a result, ceremonial eating practices are often reduced to symbolic gestures performed on specific occasions rather than sustained systems of care embedded in everyday life.

Despite these changes, ceremonial food practices continue to hold cultural significance as markers of identity, belonging, and moral order. Feminist anthropological scholarship emphasises that reproductive rituals are crucial sites where gendered identities and cultural values surrounding motherhood are produced and reinforced (Van Hollen 18). In both Kerala and Karnataka, food rituals surrounding childbirth articulate deeply rooted beliefs about womanhood, fertility, and the sacredness of reproduction. They reinforce social bonds by mobilising kinship networks and community members who participate in food preparation, ritual feeding, and collective observance, thereby sustaining community solidarity even amid social change.

Moreover, ceremonial eating practices embody a broader system of social care that extends beyond the individual mother to encompass collective well-being. By regulating the reproductive body through culturally sanctioned foods, these rituals construct motherhood as a shared social responsibility rather than a purely private or medicalised experience (Mintz and Du Bois 109). While Kerala and Karnataka display distinct culinary traditions shaped by linguistic, religious, and ecological contexts, both regions share a cultural logic that situates food at the intersection of fertility, faith, and social cohesion.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the transformation of ceremonial food practices should not be viewed solely as cultural loss but as part of an ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity. However, the gradual erosion of these rituals

raises critical concerns regarding the disappearance of indigenous knowledge systems and the narrowing of cultural frameworks through which reproduction is understood. By foregrounding ceremonial eating practices as sites of meaning, care, and identity formation, this study highlights the importance of documenting and preserving these traditions as integral components of intangible cultural heritage in an era of accelerating socio-cultural change in Kerala and Karnataka.

By situating ceremonial eating within broader anthropological theories of ritual, purity, and liminality, this research contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations in cultural anthropology, food studies, and gender studies. It highlights how food-centred rituals continue to mediate the relationship between tradition and change, even as biomedical discourses and modern social transformations reshape reproductive practices in contemporary South India. Future interdisciplinary research drawing on ethnography, medical humanities, and feminist theory can further illuminate how ceremonial food practices adapt, persist, or are reinterpreted in the negotiation between cultural continuity and modernity.

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