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FOOD, MEMORY AND TRADITION: DOCUMENTING BHOGI PARCHU CULINARY PRACTICES AMONG THE CHETTI COMMUNITY IN MELAKA

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Abstract:

Bhogi Parchu is an important ancestral ritual celebrated by the Chetti community. Bhogi Parchu is also known as Parchu Nasi Lemak. It is a prayer for the deceased. This ancestral ritual is unique among Chetti communities with its cultural significance and the symbolic role of food during rituals. Thus, this study aims to understand the cultural significance of the Bhogi Parchu ritual, the symbolic role of food and investigate the transmission of cultural knowledge among the Chetti community. Qualitative data was collected through face-to-face interviews with seven key informants between May and June 2025. The data were analysed manually using thematic analysis. Five major themes were generated. They include food as cultural symbolism, transmission of food knowledge, traditional food practices, ritual taboos and assembly and reinforcement of familial bonds. The findings show that food extends beyond its function as a spiritual offering, serving as a medium for preserving cultural identity, strengthening relationships and transmitting cultural values across generations. The findings highlight the important role of food in sustaining the cultural heritage of the Chetti community. The continuous efforts to preserve and promote this traditional food practices are essential to ensure their

and Environment Management, 11 (45), 614-627. continuity amid the challenges of modernisation and cultural transformation.

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Chetti Cuisine, Bhogi Parchu, Food Practices, Symbolism



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Introduction

The Chetti ethnic group, referred to as Tamil Hindu Peranakan, is a small minority ethnic group in *Melaka* through the intermarriage between South Indian immigrants and local Malay communities (Leow & Padiachee, 2020). The presence of the Chetti community in *Tanah Melayu* began in the 14th century. Their arrival influenced the socio-cultural, economic, and administrative aspects of the local society. According to local beliefs, the Chetti are often associated with lenders or moneylenders (Muthusamy & Salleh, 2016).

Despite their small population, the community has preserved a distinctive cultural identity through language, attire, religion and cuisine. One example is their spoken language, known as “Baba Malay.” This is because their ancestors married Malays and adopted Malay as their mother tongue (Leow & Padiachee, 2020). In terms of attire, the Chetti also wear traditional Malay clothing during social events. Leow and Padiachee (2020) noted that in the past, Chetti women would wear the *kebaya* or *baju panjang*, while men would wear the *sarong*. When it comes to their cuisine, it has a variety of delicious delicacies and culturally significant dishes. For instance, *pindang ikan parang*, *pindang nenas udang*, *urap kulit timun*, and *lauk aram jada* (Mohd Fikri et al., 2021). Nevertheless, traditional foods also play important roles in religious ceremonies and festive celebrations.

The Chetti community practices Hinduism and celebrates major Hindu festivals, such as *Deepavali*, *Ponggal*, and *Navratri*. Among several cultural celebrations, Bhogi Parchu occupies a unique position because it includes ritual food preparation, communal participation, ancestral remembrance and food knowledge transfer (Leow & Padiachee, 2020).

However, rapid urbanisation, changing lifestyles and declining participation among the younger generation have increasingly threatened the continuity of traditional food (Lee & Ravindran, 2024; Mahendiran et al., 2021). As cultural knowledge is primarily transmitted through family rituals and food preparation, reduced participation may accelerate the loss of intangible cultural heritage (Zanzaizman et al., 2023; Zhang & Mace, 2021). Beel et al. (2017) highlight that to strengthen resilience in rural areas, communities must frequently organise heritage-related activities to promote unity and highlight the importance of local traditions. Gnana (2024) argues that limited job prospects are a big reason for individuals to move to the

city. Once in the city, they are less likely to preserve traditional values and practices due to their fast-paced lifestyle. This shift often leads to the abandonment of ancestral teachings.

Although previous studies have documented the history, identity and cultural practices of the Chetti community (Leow & Padiachee, 2020; Mohd Fikri et al., 2021). The existing research has primarily focused on describing the community's heritage, traditional cuisine and festivals. Limited attention has been given to understanding how food functions within the Bhogi Parchu celebration as a medium for transmitting cultural knowledge, preserving identity and strengthening family bonding. Addressing this gap is important for advancing knowledge on food heritage preservation among minority ethnic communities in Malaysia.

Therefore, this research aims to explore how food functions as a cultural medium during *Bhogi Parchu* among the Chetti community in *Kg. Chetti, Gajah Berang, Melaka*. This study contributes to broader discussions on heritage conservation, minority traditions, and socio-cultural sustainability. The *Bhogi Parchu* celebration holds potential for continued relevance in Malaysia's multicultural landscape.

Literature Review

Demography of the Chetti Community

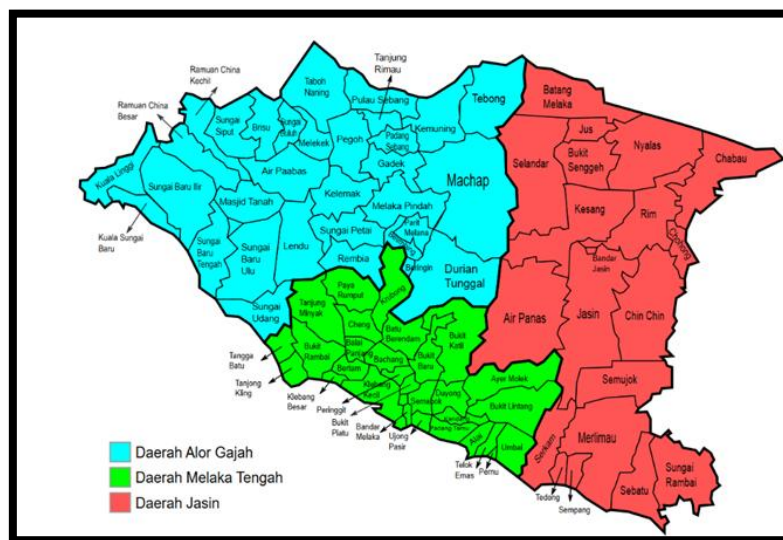


Figure 1: Map of Melaka District and Subdistricts

Source from Commons (2021)

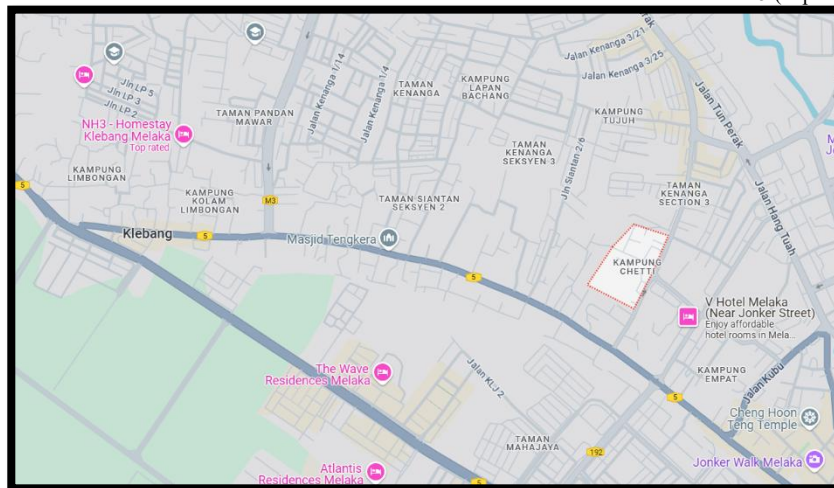


Figure 2: Location of Kampung Chetti

Source from Google Map (n.d)

The immigration of the Chetti community to *Melaka* began with South Indian traders engaging in the spice trade at Melaka's port as early as the 14th century, before the official founding of the State of *Melaka* by the Palembang Hindu prince Parameswara in 1400 (Leow & Padiachee, 2020). Today, most of the Chetti community in Malaysia resides in *Kampung Chetti, Gajah Berang*, located in the Central *Melaka* District between *Melaka* City and the *Klebang* subdistrict. The concept of “hybridity” between the home and host societies arises from immigrants’ transnational practices, which create new places of belonging and facilitate connections with the receiving society (Recupero et al., 2018). Having lived in *Tanah Melayu* for over 500 years, the *Melaka* Chetti Indians have successfully embraced Malay literary traditions and adapted them to form unique blended identities shaped by their worldviews and lived experiences. This highlights the similarities between their traditions and way of life (Adnan & Pillay, 2020). Despite this assimilation, the Chetti community has maintained their Hindu beliefs, particularly *Shaivism* (Lee & Ravindran, 2024). Some Chetti communities have migrated to other Malaysian states. Only the remaining communities in *Kampung Chetti, Melaka* are officially recognised as permanent Chetti communities by the Ministry of Tourism Malaysia.

Chetti Culture

The Chetti community culture is a blend of local Malay and Indian communities. They practise the Hindu religion. *Bahasa Melayu*, or Malay language, is their first language (Adnan and Pillay, 2020). They also embraced Malay traditions, mannerisms, and, most interestingly, literary forms. For example, the Chetti community actively engages in the poetic art of *pantun*, as demonstrated by Adnan et al. (2020). The wedding ceremonies are vibrant and unique. Many of the customs observed closely resemble those of the Malay community, for instance, performances of *dondang sayang* and the recitation of *pantun* by elders during weddings.

In terms of traditional cloth, traditional *Melaka* Chetti attire reflects a fusion of Tamil and Malay cultural influences. Chetti women typically wear the *Peranakan kebaya*, while Chetti men wear the *kurta* paired with the *kain pelikat*. Chetti jewellery also reflects intercultural blending, combining traditional Tamil and Malay elements (Ismail et al., 2023; Mohd Fikri et al., 2021). However, traditional Tamil attire, such as the saree, *chudidhar*, and Punjabi suit is

typically worn during festivals, family ceremonies, and religious events held at temples (Muthusamy & Salleh, 2016).

Chetti Cuisine

Previous studies consistently acknowledge that the Chetti community is influenced by strong Malay culture in terms of language, attire and cuisine (Leow & Padiachee, 2020; Adnan & Pilly, 2020). However, little attention has been given to understanding how these hybrid cultural elements are expressed through ritual food practices such as *Bhogi Parchu*. During the *Bhogi Parchu* celebration, a variety of dishes are prepared, including *terung ikan masin*, *lauk pindang*, *sambal telur ikan parang masak belimbing*, *betik muda masak lemak*, *ayam panggang*, *udang goreng*, *kacang goreng minyak*, *timun santan*, and *acar rampai*. These dishes are served on banana leaves, accompanied by *nasi lemak*, sliced cucumber, pineapple, and salted duck egg (Mohd Fikri et al., 2021). Vegetarian food is also commonly consumed by the Chetti community, as many practice vegetarianism—particularly on Fridays and during Hindu festivals. Dishes such as *payasam*, *pacedi (acar)*, *sambar*, *puttoo*, *vadei*, *thosai*, *idli*, *kesari*, *halva*, *rasem* (Indian soup), *kacang dal*, and *appalam* (papadam crackers) are typically served (Muthusamy & Salleh, 2016). Although some Chetti dishes share ingredients and cooking methods with Malay cuisine, Indian food remains an integral part of their culinary identity.

Bhogi Parchu Rituals

Tinson and Nuttall (2023) mention that group rituals serve as psychological tools for recognising group members, ensuring commitment, encouraging collaboration, and maintaining unity in communal life. *Bhogi Parchu* rituals, observed by the Chetti community, involve prayers dedicated to their ancestors (Lee & Ravindran, 2024). As with other national festivals, relatives return to *Kampung Chetti* to begin preparations for *Bhogi Parchu*. According to their beliefs, the ancestors are at their “weakest” during this time, as “the gates of heaven are open,” and they expect their ancestors to visit their homes (Nagappan, 2020).

After family members gather in the village before the *Pongal (or Ponggol)* festival, the Chetti people clean and decorate their ancestors’ graves with flowers as part of the *Naik Bukit or Sembahyang Kubur* ceremony. The *Bhogi Parchu* rituals then commence, starting with a cooking session. The main dish for the *Bhogi Parchu* rituals is steamed *nasi lemak*, placed on banana leaves, with the side dishes including *terung ikan masin*, *lauk pindang*, *sambal telur ikan parang masak belimbing*, *betik muda masak lemak*, *ayam panggang*, *udang goreng*, *kacang goreng minyak*, *timun santan*, and *acar rampai* arranged around it. The rituals continue with the preparation of the prayer setting, after which the prepared food is served. Once the prayer session is completed, the entire meal is eaten. The following day, the Chetti community celebrates Thai Pongal, which marks the first day of the Tamil month of Thai.



Figure 3: Preparation for Bhogi Parchu

Source from (Melaka, 2020)

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பெளர்ணமி

பொகிப் பண்டிகை

பெளர்ணமி

சக வருடம் 1946 பெளஷம் 23

திருச்செங்கோடு அர்த்தநாரீஸ்வரர் : கணவன் மனைவி ஒற்றுமை பலப்படுத்தும் திருத்தலம்.

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மாலை : 4.30-5.30	7.30-8.30	09.00	03.00	12.00	
கூலம் : கிழக்கு	தனுர் லக்கனம்	சந்திராஷ்டமம்			
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Figure 4 : Tamil Calendar

Source from (Calendar, 2025)

Unwritten Rules

Unwritten rules are practices relevant to both individuals and societies. They are not confined to specific environments. These habits can shape norms and behaviours in daily life (Lizardo, 2021). Within the Chetti community, unwritten rules are observed in specific situations. For example, pregnant women are to follow certain restrictions such as avoiding heavy work, not drying clothes, and avoiding cutting or knocking on objects. These birth-related practices have been passed down through generations. Similar customs are also observed among the Malay and Tamil Hindu communities.

In the seventh month of pregnancy, a ceremony, known as *valakappu*, or the belly-stretching ceremony is conducted to bless and protect the mother and child. Furthermore, when a death occurs in the household, the Chetti community removes all pictures from the walls and hangs a black cloth on the entrance door. These practices are believed to help ward off bad luck in the future (Loh & Velupillay, 2017).

Cultural Symbolism in Cuisine

Faith and gastronomy are inseparably connected as they are crucial components of cultural heritage, religious and spiritual matters (Aulet, S., Fernandes, C., & Timothy, 2021). Every dish presented during the *Bhogi Parchu* ritual carries a meaning deeply tied to compulsory practices and family traditions. For instance, one of the compulsory dishes for *Bhogi Parchu* is *Lauk Pindang Ikan Parang*. Respecting and maintaining ancestral traditions are vital for preserving the authenticity of the culture. Every time *Bhogi Parchu* is celebrated, the whole family is expected to prepare and serve this dish. Moreover, as the ancestor worship ritual nears completion, the head of the family chops the top off a young coconut and allows the water to splash out. This act symbolizes purity and cleanliness during the *Bhogi Parchu* (Loh & Velupillay, 2017).

Transmission of Tradition

According to Md. Sharif et al. (2012), the knowledge transfer through the incorporation of context, assessment, and individual differences has led to a better understanding of learning processes. Mothers teach their children the cultural significance and implications of certain foods as they grow. Thus influencing how the next generation incorporates traditional foods into their daily lives (Mohammad et al., 2022; Zahari et al., 2019).

The involvement of Chetti youth in preparing for the *Bhogi Parchu* celebration is a crucial element in the process of cultural knowledge transfer. Before the ancestor worship ceremony begins, young members of the community are encouraged to assist the elders in preparing the ritual dishes. This engagement introduces them to the required ingredients, cooking methods, taboos during food preparation, and traditional serving practices. According to Fan et al. (2024), knowledge and interest in participation significantly impact young people's engagement in promoting and preserving cultural heritage.

Methodology

A qualitative approach using a descriptive phenomenological design was used in this study. It aims to explore the lived experiences and meanings that members of the Chetti community in terms of cultural practices during the *Bhogi Parchu* celebration in *Kampung Chetti, Gajah Berang, Melaka*. A descriptive phenomenon approach was considered appropriate. This is because the study sought to understand how individuals interpret the cultural significance of food within a traditional ritual. Meanwhile, able to describe the phenomenon as experienced by the informants (Lim, 2025). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This allowed the informants to share detailed narratives about their experiences, beliefs and cultural practices. An interview protocol was developed based on established qualitative research guidelines. This was to ensure consistency while allowing flexibility for probing questions (Goodell et al., 2016; Lim, 2025).

Sampling and Participants

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit rich information from participants who possessed extensive knowledge and direct experience of the Bhogi Parchu celebration. Participants were required to be among the Chetti community residing in Kampung Chetti, Gajah Berang, Melaka, aged 40 years and above and have actively participated in the Bhogi Pharchu celebration. Individuals who had never participated in the celebration or were unable to provide detailed information regarding the cultural practices were excluded from the study.

A total of seven key informants participated in the study. The participants consisted of community members who had substantial experience in preparing traditional foods and participating in ritual activities. They were recruited through the assistance of community representatives and met the inclusion criteria and possessed extensive knowledge of the celebration. Moreover, most residents in the village are elderly and possess extensive knowledge and experience in the preparation of *Bhogi Parchu*.

Table 1: The Characteristics of Informants

Participants	Gender	Age	Role in Bhogi Parchu
Informant 1	Female	46	Traditional cook
Informant 2	Male	61	Community Elder
Informant 3	Male	82	Community Elder
Informant 4	Female	73	Traditional cook
Informant 5	Female	59	Traditional cook
Informant 6	Female	65	Traditional cook
Informant 7	Female	58	Traditional cook

Research Instrument and Data Collection

An interview protocol was developed to guide the semi-structured interviews to ensure consistency across all participants while allowing sufficient flexibility to explore the phenomena. The interview guide was developed based on the study objectives and an extensive review of the literature on food heritage, cultural practices and Bhogi Parchu celebration among Chetti community (Goodell et al., 2016).

The protocol consisted of three sections. The first section collected participants' demographic profiles. The second section explored participants' experiences and perceptions of traditional food practices, including the preparation, symbolic meanings and cultural significance of food during celebration. The final section examines the role of food in preserving cultural identity, transmitting food knowledge and strengthening family and community bonds. Open-ended questions and probing techniques were used to encourage participants to expand on their experiences and provide detailed information.

Data were collected through face-to-face in-depth semi-structured interviews with seven key informants residing in Kampung Chetti, Gajah Berang, Melaka. Interviews were conducted between May and June 2025 at participants' homes, providing a familiar and comfortable environment that facilitated open discussion. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 50 minutes and was conducted in the participants' preferred language. Prior to the interviews, participants were informed about the objectives of the study, and written informed consent was

obtained. With their consent, all interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit seven key informants (two males and five females) aged between 46 and 82 years old, who had extensive experience in the Bhogi Parchu celebration. Data collection continued until data saturation was achieved after the seventh interview, when no new themes emerged (Lochmiller, 2021; Terry et al., 2017).

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis following the six-phase approach proposed by Terry et al. (2017) and further described by Lochmiller (2021). In the first stage, the researchers repeatedly read the interview transcripts and familiarised themselves with the data. Second, initial codes were generated manually by identifying meaningful segments relevant to the research objectives. Third, the codes were organised into potential themes. Fourth, the themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and consistency with the coded data and the entire dataset. Fifth, the themes were defined and named to accurately reflect participants' experiences. Finally, the findings were interpreted and presented using representative quotations to support each theme. The analysis resulted in five major themes, namely food as cultural symbolism, transmission of food knowledge, traditional food practices, ritual taboos and sacred rules, and assembly and reinforcement of family bonds during *Bhogi Parchu*.

Findings

Theme 1: Food Cultural Symbolism in Bhogi Parchu

Based on the findings, Bhogi Parchu ceremonies carry deep symbolic meaning when it comes to food. It not only serves as a source of nourishment, but also a sacred offering dedicated to ancestors. The offerings such as *Nasi Lemak* serve as central components of the celebration, together with other ingredients, such as fresh peeled coconut. The fresh peeled coconut symbolised a purity and freshness.

"If the coconut water spills out when they crack it, that means 'pardon us'. Afterwards, we can slowly pull the banana leaf and enjoy the food." – Informant 1

The accompanying dishes are arranged on banana leaves. Typically, it comes in odd numbers such as one, five, seven, or nine. This reflects the spiritual respect and reverence for the ancestors.

"It depends on whether the family wants to serve one, five, seven, or nine leaves, but it must be an odd number." – Informant 2

"We put the dishes on the banana leaves. Nasi lemak will be in the middle, and the other dishes will be placed around it. We will also serve the ancestors' favourite food and beverages during the prayer." – Informant 7

This practice displays a blend of Hindu rituals and Chetti traditions, preserving a sacred connection between the living and the deceased.

Theme 2: Transmission of Food Knowledge

The study finds an ongoing change in how food knowledge is transferred. While elders continue to play a key role, modern lifestyle restrictions such as work and migration limit younger generations' participation.

“Mostly, our children now live far from us. So, they only get the chance to learn and experience it during festivals like Bhogi Parchu.” – Informant 3

“My grandchildren take photos and videos of me while I cook. They want to keep it as memories. I hope these will help them learn the process and continue our tradition in the future.” – Informant 5

Some connect through social media or brief festive returns, but the largely oral and experiential nature of traditional knowledge makes its continuity fragile. Informant 4 noted that modernisation and the rise of food delivery services have transformed eating habits, affecting young people's bond to traditional dishes. This represents both continuity and disruption traditions are valued, but at risk of weakening.

Theme 3: Traditional Food Practices

Food preparation during *Bhogi Parchu* is highly ritualized, stressing authenticity, freshness, and manual preparation. Informants highlighted the importance of using fresh ingredients and avoiding instant items.

“All ingredients need to be fresh. Chilli, onion—we have to cut them ourselves. The kuih also needs to be homemade.” – Informant 7

Informant 2 highlighted the conventional gender division of labor, with women usually leading food preparation. However, men take over if women are unavailable.

“We start early in the morning. We have to steam nasi lemak, make kuih, cut vegetables, make coffee and tea. All ingredients must be fresh.” – Informant 5

This dedication reflects how food serves as a form of dedication and a means of sustaining ancestral methods and cultural purity.

Theme 4: Rituals, Taboos and Sacred Rules

Food practices during *Bhogi Parchu* festival is of ritual taboos and rules of cleanliness. Women who are menstruating are not allowed to cook or participate in rituals (Informant 3). Food must not be tasted before it is offered.

“Cannot taste the food before prayer. If it lacks flavour, we have to put salt or sugar on a different plate.” – Informant 6

“If one of the family members has just died, we cannot conduct Parchu. We must mourn for at least a year.” – Informant 2

These taboos reflect deep spiritual values and are observed to preserve the sanctity of the offerings, while also encouraging discipline and respect for ancestral spirits.

Theme 5: Assembly and Reinforcing the Bond

Bhogi Parchu is more than a religious performance. It is a time for togetherness, emotional fulfilment, and family reunion. Informants emphasized the joyfulness of having children and grandchildren return home.

“We sit and eat together. It is one of the best moments for us as elders because we can spend time with our family.” – Informant 4

“My children from KL and JB return home for prayer. At that time, the vibe is very lively and full of laughter.” – Informant 7

Even those who have migrated make the effort to return, altering *Bhogi Parchu* into an expression of cultural identity and continuity.

Conclusion

This study found that the Chetti community in *Kg. Gajah Berang, Melaka*, continues to preserve its cultural practices and traditions during the *Bhogi Parchu* celebration. The findings show that food plays a symbolic and spiritual role in the ritual, representing ancestral reverence, purity, and bonding. Food preparation and serving practices are rooted in old traditions and spiritual beliefs. As noted by Mohd Fikri et al. (2021), these food customs are passed down through generations. They now face challenges due to modernisation, migration, and generational gaps. However, some youth still engage in these traditions, even informally through observation, photography, and festive participation, indicating a step of cultural resilience.

These findings contribute to the existing literature by providing empirical evidence on how food functions beyond its nutritional and ritual roles. Thus, serving as a medium for preserving cultural identity, facilitating intergenerational knowledge transmission and strengthening social cohesion within a minority ethnic community. By focusing on the *Bhogi Parchu* celebration, this study also extends current understanding of the relationship between food heritage and cultural sustainability in the Malaysian context.

Taboos and ritual cleanliness further strengthen the purity of the event as the communal aspects of *Bhogi Parchu* remain central to the community's identity and emotional unity. As Malaysia's diverse cultural heritage faces threats from modernisation, assimilation, and globalisation, digital preservation efforts can play a critical role in preserving these cultural treasures (N. M. Suaib et al., 2020). Preserving *Bhogi Parchu* is essential not only for maintaining Chetti identity but also for supporting national multicultural preservation and enriching scholarly discussions on Malaysia's endangered minority cultures.

Contribution, Study Limitation and Future Research

This study offers contributions across sectors including the tourism ministry, NGOs, academia, and cultural practice. The government can promote the diversity and uniqueness of Chetti

culture to attract both local and international tourists. NGOs can use social media to raise awareness of Chetti food and traditions. Academically, this study serves as a reference for future research and may be integrated into culinary and cultural programs. It also adds to the limited literature on the Chetti ethnic group, a field still in its early stages.

However, the study faced several limitations. Researchers encountered difficulties in reaching potential informants due to specific circumstances. Language barriers also posed challenges, requiring clarification and repetition to ensure data accuracy. Additionally, long-distance travel to Melaka created financial constraints. Future research could expand the scope by exploring perceptions, motivations, and challenges among Chetti youth regarding participation in cultural celebrations such as *Bhogi Parchu*.

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