# A Sweet Story

Posted on
Jaggery and coconut milk can beautifully sweeten
a delicious plate of kurakkan (finger millet) pittu

**Big things sometimes come in small parcels. *Kuddan*, dainty palm leaf baskets filled with sweet jaggery, are a tasty snack, but they are more than just that. Emblems of the culture from which they come, these treats tell a fascinating story of palmyrah production in Sri Lanka.**

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Pani panadu, prepared with flour, jaggery and sesame seeds

*Kuddan* are the products of the Asian palmyrah palm, which flourishes in the north, east and deep south of Sri Lanka. Called*thal* locally, these graceful trees dominate the horizon of the dry zones like sentinels, their huge leaves resembling splayed hands waving in the wind.

So versatile is the *thal*that the Tamil community call it the ‘celestial’ tree and believe that owning eight such palms is enough to secure the future of a family. It is said that the *thal* palm has 800 uses − ranging from accessories to toys, and from writing materials to food products. In some parts of India, it is even mixed with lime to form a cement used in construction.

As children, we would eagerly wait for jaggery-filled *kuddan* to be brought to Colombo from the north. We would clutch them in our hands until they melted, then lick the sticky sweetness off our palms; or unpack them straight away to nibble. There was something magical about the intricate packaging, which must have been made with great care.Unravelling the *kuddan* was as enjoyable as its contents.

To get to the heart of the *thal* story one must visit the north. January is the perfect time for such a journey because it is now that the *thal*industry swings into action. Palmyrah palms flower between January and May, enabling production of a variety of sap-based food products, and soon street stalls will overflow with *thal* vinegar, sweetmeats, honey and jaggery. In the months ahead, tappers will scale the palms once or twice a day to harvest the sap from the flowers.

They prepare the trees by getting rid of dry branches and securing the flowers for tapping. The blooms are then massaged or gently bruised to facilitate the flow of sap, their lower parts tightly bound. The ends are neatly sliced to cause the sap to drip into an attached receptacle, and the tappers keep a watchful eye on their progress, trimming the flowers daily until the pot is full.

An Asian invention, jaggery has been a delicacy throughout the region for millennia, and is an excellent sweetener. *Thal* jaggery is one of Sri Lanka's four jaggery types, the others being kithul, coconut and sugarcane. Preparing it requires skill. The sap is filtered through muslin, heated into a treacle and boiled while stirring until it begins to crystallize. It is then poured into beautifully woven baskets of all sizes, including the thimble-sized *kuddan*. The mixture hardens quickly and must be stored in a cool place to stop it from melting. The success of the process depends on the skill of the jaggery maker because timing is of the essence at every step.

*Thal* jaggery is more than a mere sweetener. Sugar serves to sweeten but has no nutritional value. In contrast, the little *kuddans* are packed with proteins, B-complex vitamins, and minerals like calcium, phosphorous, iron and copper. Ayurveda, the indigenous system of medicine in this part of the world, recommends *thal* jaggery over sugar, because it is high in fibre and very nutritious. It doesn't give you a 'sugar rush' because it takes longer to digest, and jaggery dissolved in water has a cooling effect when drunk on a hot day. In Jaffna, *thal* sap is also used to produce a sugar candy recommended for fevers, throat ailments and urinary tract infections.

The cuisine of the north and east would be incomplete without thesweetness of *thal* jaggery. It's used in a variety of dishes, from crumbly snacks made from lightly roasted ground rice, sesame seeds and crushed jaggery, to auspicious dishes like sweet *pongal* rice, the festive rice dish that takes pride of place in Tamil households during Thai Pongal celebrations. Enriched with green mung beans, raisins, cashew nuts, spices and jaggery, the first serving of *pongal* rice is always made to the gods.

*Thal* jaggery is also used as the delicious sweetener in *kurakkan* pittu, a common breakfast dish of roasted millet flour moistened with warm coconut milk. It's also crumbled and mixed with grated coconut for stringhopper rice noodles, and is the preferred sweetener in *dosas* and *appams*, two types of pancake.

In ancient times, jaggery was synonymous with wealth because it was sweet and health giving. The little *kuddan*, sheathed in its palmyrah wrapping, offers a taste of that history.

***Karupatti Coffee***

- *2 cups water*
- *2 tsp instant coffee (alter to taste)*
- *1 tsp crushed ginger juice (or 2 pods cardamom or 2 crushed cloves)*
- *2 tbs thal jaggery crushed*

Place the jaggery in a pan and melt over a low flame. Add the water, bring to a boil and simmer for a few minutes. Add the ginger or spice of your choice. Simmer for one or two more minutes. Add the coffee. Stir. Brew a little longer. Strain into a mug. Enjoy!







