

On course: CMFRI starts project to make 'Kallummakkaya' a pan-Kerala palate



In the culinary tapestry of northern Kerala, few flavours rival the salty, spicy deliciousness of Kallummakkaya (mussels). In Malabar, they are a ritual of taste and a coastal culinary heritage. But travel south and the delicacy becomes obscure. While kakka (clams), a close cousin, enjoys a place of pride on menus from Kochi to Thiruvananthapuram, Kallummakkaya remains a stranger - well known but rarely relished. This geographical and gastronomic divide is precisely what the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI), under the Indian Council of

Agricultural Research (ICAR), is now aiming to bridge. In a quiet but ambitious programme, CMFRI has begun introducing mussel farming to the central and southern districts of Kerala. The primary focus is on empowering Scheduled Caste communities through sustainable aquaculture. If successful, the initiative could turn a regional taste into a statewide staple.

Shellfish with promise

"Mussels are not only tastier but also more valuable than clams," says Dr Vidya R, Senior Scientist at CMFRI's Shellfish Fisheries Division. "They are rich in protein, zinc, and fatty acids and are extremely nutritious," she says. Mussels fetch between ₹1,000 and ₹1,200 per kg without shells and ₹200 to ₹250 with shells intact. Cultivating them requires little infrastructure. "They do not need feeds. They grow in saline water with minimal intervention," says Dr Vidya. Ideal salinity levels range between 15 and 20 parts per thousand (ppt), with anything above 20 ppt offering optimal conditions. "But they must be thoroughly cleaned before consumption. Microorganisms can sometimes settle in the gut," she says.



Mussels in new waters

Pilot farms have already taken shape in Chettuva and Kodungallur in Thrissur district, and in Muthukunnam and Puthenveli in Ernakulam. In Pulloottu, where water salinity is lower, CMFRI has pivoted to oyster farming. The broader aim is to ensure more community inclusion in this shellfish economy. "We are providing both financial and technical support, especially to people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds," Dr Vidya says. Yet the road to culinary adoption is not without its bumps.



In Kodungallur, where the project made an enthusiastic debut, initial energy gave way to scepticism. "The main hurdle was acceptance. Mussels are not familiar to many local people," says Sivaram K S, councillor of Ward 27 in Kodungallur Municipality. Twelve families in his ward were trained in mussel farming. Initial harvests before the monsoon were promising but oversupply and low local demand drove prices down. "Mussels do not survive in freshwater. We had to harvest early. But the volume was too much for the market," Sivaram says. Still, he believes the tide is turning. "Interest is rising

again. We are expecting a better season ahead," he says. Among the new entrants into this unfamiliar enterprise is Rajesh, a first-time mussel farmer in Kodungallur. "In my first season, I sold 300 kg. Then it dipped to 250 kg. This season, I crossed 275 kg," he says. The group he is part of sells mostly through social media. "There is real potential if we can scale up. But we do not know how to collect and culture seeds ourselves. We rely on what is given to us," Rajesh says. Dr Vidya responds to this knowledge gap. "There are two methods to obtain seeds. One is to collect them from the wild. The other is to culture them in hatcheries, like our CMFRI facility in Vizhinjam, and then transfer them to farms." Farmers, she says, have been trained in both methods. Rajesh is not discouraged yet. He is already preparing for the next season. What CMFRI envisions is not just an aquacultural intervention, but a culinary shift. If star hotels and foreign tourists can take delight in Kallummakkaya, why not the households of Thrissur, Ernakulam, or Vizhinjam? "Hotel groups like Casino and Hyatt already include mussels in their menus," Dr Vidya says. "It is only a matter of time before the rest of Kerala embraces it."