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Food Beliefs and Practices Among Sri Lankans

I. Temporary Food Avoidances by Women

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1. Introduction

It is seldom that man eats all available edible material. Cultural patterns set by his parents and associates, both by observation and by explicit instruction, classifies for him food items as being appropriate or inappropriate in certain situations. The general food beliefs of any group or community are deeply entrenched in their minds and practised. Such beliefs can therefore significantly influence the nutritional status of the community and become a factor of importance in any nutrition program.

Health workers, whose duties include advising the public on the correct choice of foods, could profit from a study of food belief systems of the people among whom they work. Such a study would provide a clearer picture of the framework within which their advice will be followed. Tradition and folk-beliefs greatly influence the diet of women during adolescence, pregnancy and lactation, and undernutrition is common in these groups.

Studies on temporary food avoidances and taboos among Tamils in South India^{1,2,3,6} emphasise the influence of beliefs, attitudes and customs on the diet of women during menarche, menstruation, pregnancy, puerperium and lactation. Although a few studies have been carried out by the Department of Nutrition, Medical Research Institute, among urban slum dwellers around Colombo, there is no published data on temporary food avoidances among the Sinhalese. This is a report of a survey carried out among Sinhala women. As religion influences customs and taboos, the study was restricted to Buddhists, who form about 70% of the population. A preliminary report on this survey has been published.⁴

2. Methods

A questionnaire was prepared which sought information on foods avoided during various periods of a woman's life: viz. at puberty, during menstruation, pregnancy, puerperium, lactation and post-menopausal life. The questionnaire enumerated foods commonly eaten in Sri Lanka, and questions were designed so as to ascertain whether each item was avoided all the time or only temporarily.

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In the first study the questionnaire was administered to 221 young women attending a Course of Instruction on Child Welfare, organised by the School of Social Work. They hailed from both urban and rural areas in various districts of Sri Lanka. They had all studied up to a minimum level of Grade 8 in their secondary education. The purpose of the questionnaire was explained to them in small groups (8 to 10) and each person was asked to respond according to the practice in her home. As all of them had some basic knowledge of the science of food and nutrition, they were specifically required to avoid stating what they know to be good or ought to be done, but mention only what is actually done in their own households.

In the second study, the questionnaire was administered to women in Bambarabedde, a remote village in the District of Kandy (see Annex). Fifty families were chosen at random from the Grama Sevaka's householder's list. The mother of each family was selected, about one-sixth of the total adult female population of the village being thus included in the study. Prior to the survey, the enumerator visited the homes with two of the villagers, to establish rapport with the householders.

3. Results

The pattern of food avoidances was similar in the two groups studied, and are therefore considered together (Table 1).

TABLE 1: Food Avoidances by Sri Lankan Sinhala Women

Foods	At Menarche	During Subsequent Menstruation	Pregnancy	Puerperium	Lactation	Meno-pause
	%	%	%	%	%	%
All or some items of non-vegetarian foods	97	22	48	98	35	04
Beef	55	22	46	65	30	04
Pork	43	20	40	77	22	05
Egg	32	18	20	47	06	—
All fish	16	18	09	12	06	04
Small bony fish	—	—	28	86	32	—
Milk	22	10	28	18	04	—
Bread fruit	—	—	—	24	13	—
Jak fruit	—	—	—	20	—	04
Manioc	—	—	—	30	13	—
Tomatoes & Aubergines	—	—	27	33	28	04
Green leafy vegetables	26	24	27	36	—	—
Sesame seeds and oil	20	08	—	—	—	—
Papaw	22	25	22	22	14	—
Pineapple	28	38	66	38	14	—
Mango	24	20	—	27	06	—

3.1. Puberty

Most girls during their first menstrual period seem to conform to certain strict rules in the choice of food. The most striking prohibition was that of non-vegetarian foods. All items of non-vegetarian foods, including dried fish, were avoided by 8%, all meats by 28%, beef by 55%, pork by 43%, eggs by 32%, all varieties of fish by 16% and shell-fish by 30%.

Among the reasons given for such avoidances, the most common was the fear of pollution ("killa"). Custom, fear of abdominal pain and menorrhagia, and the belief that some foods were "heaty", also influenced food habits.

The other foods avoided were the papaw (22%), pineapple (28%), mango (24%), and green leafy vegetables (18%), cow's milk (22%) and colocasia yams (16%), the most common reason being fear of excessive blood loss. Green leaves were thought to be indigestible.

3.2. Menstruation

Although subsequent menstrual periods are also "pollution periods", the precautions required are few. Only 22% continued their abstentions from all or some of the non-vegetarian foods that they exercised at puberty. Pineapple, papaw, mango and colocasia yams were avoided, as these foods were believed to cause excessive blood loss and abdominal pain. Beef and shellfish were considered "heaty" and therefore avoided.

At this time, 56% did not conform to any strict rules in the choice of food. All meats and fish were avoided by 18%, beef by 22% and shellfish by 30%, green leafy vegetables were avoided by 24% of the women.

3.3 Pregnancy

The "hot" or "cold" nature of foods seemed to influence the choice of foods during pregnancy, 39% avoiding "heaty" foods and 28% avoiding "cooling" foods. The classification of foods as "hot" or "cold" is not well demarcated.

Eating non-vegetarian foods was considered harmful, pork, prawns and crabs being avoided most commonly. Small bony fish and 'red' fish were also avoided.

The dominating fear was that of abortion. Other reasons for abstaining from animal foods were (a) aversion to the sight and/or the smell of such food (b) poor digestibility (c) fear of harming the foetus. Some feared that fish bones may injure the foetus. Milk was avoided by 28% as it is considered "cooling".

Tomato and manioc were considered to lead to inflammation of the abdomen. Tomato and aubergines were not eaten by 27% in the belief that the peel might get stuck in the womb. Pickles, breadfruit, jak fruit, gingelly seeds and oil were considered poorly digestible or "heaty". Pineapple (66%) and papaw (22%) were avoided as they were thought to induce abortion.

3.4 Puerperium

For the first 10 days after delivery the mother is kept on a very restricted diet. Nearly all mothers avoided non-vegetarian foods, 78% avoiding even milk.

Many women adhere to a strict dietary regimen of rice, toast, coffee and "miris hodhi" (a soup made with onions, garlic and condiments) during the first 10 days after partus.

During the next 4 weeks, 65% avoided beef, 77% pork, 47% eggs, 86% small bony fish and 18% milk. "Cooling" foods were avoided by 55% and "heaty" foods by 22%.

Reasons for such avoidances were a fear that such foods harm the infant, fear of pollution, custom, lack of appetite for them, fear of abdominal pain, diarrhoea, dizziness and fits. Pieces of meat and fish were also believed to remain in the gut and cause cancer.

Of the vegetarian foods, pineapple (38%), leafy vegetables (36%), tomatoes (33%), aubergines (33%), manioc (30%), breadfruit (24%) and jak fruit (20%) were the most commonly avoided. Colocasia yams were avoided by 16%, while 12% avoided all yams and potato, and 6% any kind of vegetable. These foods were believed to cause abdominal pain, increased blood loss, chills and colds, convulsions and flatulence.

3.5 Lactation

Restrictions on the diet were less severe than during the puerperium. Some women, however, continued their avoidances throughout the period of breast-feeding.

Foods commonly avoided were small bony fish (32%), beef (30%), prawns and shell-fish (24%), pork (22%), manioc, breadfruit and pickles. "Cooling" foods were avoided because they "cool" the milk and the baby may catch a cold. Some foods were believed to be poorly digested. Custom dictated some avoidances. Bones of fish were believed to injure the breast and also harm the baby. Milk was avoided by 14% due to its "cooling" effect.

Fruits were more freely eaten during the later months of lactation than during the puerperium. Only 14% avoided pineapple, 6% mangoes, 28% tomatoes and aubergines. Other fruits, vegetables and leaves were eaten by most. Manioc was avoided by only 13%. Reasons given were the "hot" or "cold" nature of the food, the danger of causing inflammation of baby's throat, flatulence and indigestion. Tomato and mango were thought to discolour breast milk.

3.6. Post-menopausal period

Food taboos hardly exist after menopause. Among those who usually consume non-vegetarian foods only 2% avoided pork. Manioc, jak and breadfruit were avoided by only 4% and aubergines by 2%. Other fruits and vegetables were eaten by all.

4. Discussion

As in studies in Tamilnad,^{1,2,3} in this study, too, no significant differences were noticed between answers given by uneducated women living in an isolated village and those given by women who had had a formal education and have easy access to media such as radio and newspapers. Food avoidances have thus been able to persist in spite of innovations.

In general, foods avoidances among the Sinhala women studied are similar to those among the Tamils^{1,2,3} and the Malays.^{7,8} The major avoidance at puberty and during menstruation are those of animal foods, particularly meat and fish. During pregnancy, the main concern is the fear of abortion, which results in the avoidance of "heaty" foods which are believed to induce uterine haemorrhage. After delivery, abstentions are mainly foods considered "cooling", and in addition, eggs, tubers and groundnuts.

4.1 Puberty

Coming of age is a memorable date in the life of a Sinhala or Tamil girl and is marked by segregation and ceremonies. She is segregated partly to protect her from hostile powers and demons, and partly to prevent her "pollution" from spreading. She has to conform to strict rules of behaviour which includes choice of food.

The most striking prohibition is the avoidance of non-vegetarian food, the percentage of those avoiding all such foods being smaller among the Sinhalese. Eggs were avoided by one-third of Sinhala women whereas in Tamilnad, girls are encouraged to eat eggs "to strengthen the body for future pregnancies", and to make their breasts grow. As the questionnaire used in the present study did not seek information on foods that are specially recommended at puberty, it would not be correct to infer that such beliefs do not exist among the Sinhalese.

4.2 Menstruation

Subsequent menstruations are still considered pollution periods although less dangerous and requiring fewer precautions. More than half the women did not conform to any pattern of food avoidances. As restrictions on animal foods decrease, during later menstruations, so also do those on vegetables and fruits decrease, green leafy vegetables being an exception.

4.3 Pregnancy

As in Tamilnad², animal foods are avoided because the sight or smell of these foods would cause excessive vomiting. Reasons such as the fear that the baby would grow too big or develop skin ailments given by the Tamils², and in Andhra Pradesh,⁴ were not advanced by Sinhala women. Only about 22% avoided papaya, compared with over 80% in Tamilnad. The reasons given by both groups are the same: papaya is "heaty", cause uterine bleeding, resulting in abortion. Pineapple avoidance was as strong among both Sinhalese and Tamils, the reason given being its power to induce abortion, a belief also held by Malays and Chinese in Malayasia, Java and in Bali.²

The reason given by the Sinhalese for avoidance of sesame seeds and oil were that they were "heaty" and poorly digestible. Tamils, on the other hand, believe that sesame stimulates the ovaries, hastening maturity. The grain is avoided during pregnancy because of the fear of abortion, being considered only second to papaya as an abortifacient².

4.4 Puerperium and Lactation

A severely restricted diet in the first few days after partus is common among both Tamils and Sinhalese. Nearly all mothers are given a strictly vegetarian diet. Meat and fish are believed to endanger the health of the baby, causing skin eruptions, diarrhoea and fits. Dried fish may be eaten, because "it increases the flow of milk."^{2,8} Eggs may be avoided for several days after delivery as they are believed to cause flatulence, indigestion and diarrhoea, and make the milk indigestible to the baby. Milk is avoided for its "coldness". Permitted foods and behaviour appear to be designed to keep the body "hot" and prevent toxicity of the suckling.⁸

Among both Tamils and Sinhalese the major avoidances among vegetarian foods are the fruits² - papaw, jakfruit, mango, pineapple. Tubers are avoided because they cause flatulence, and could be responsible for fits, cramp, diarrhoea and constipation in the infant.

The principal explanations for avoidances are

- i. belief in the thermal quality of foods (the "hot - cold" theory).
- ii. belief in pollution and the purity or impurity of foods.

4.5 The Hot-Cold Theory

Many women never question the prohibitions about food, and accept what their elders tell them to eat or not to eat. The reasons given are within the framework of traditional medicine and its theory which attributes "thermal" qualities to foods. How deeply rooted these beliefs are is shown by the fact that educated persons often try to superimpose scientific medical terminology on ancient beliefs. "Coldness" concentrates on vegetables and certain milk products, "heat" on animal food and sweet fruits.

4.6 Purity and Pollution

The concept of purity and pollution strongly affects many aspects of life including food habits. Foods may be intrinsically pure like the products of the cow, or intrinsically impure like pork. Although considerations of purity are important for food avoidances, it is seldom given as a reason, the majority of women preferring to give explanations such as nausea, or disease that would befall the mother or baby.

The lack of differentiation between urban and rural dwellers may be in the hidden character of food avoidances which allow them to persist in spite of innovations. No restrictions are apparent when, for example, a new fruit like the apple is added to the normal diet. On the other hand, a traditional fruit like the mango continues to be avoided at certain periods. A majority of avoidances affect only those foods whose consumption is optional, and not the staple.

Annex

Bambarabedde is an agricultural village in the Central Province, 6½ miles from Hunnasgiriya, a town on the Kandy-Mahiyangana road. Its population is 1656, made up of 278 Sinhala Buddhist families, family size ranging from 3 to 13. Only a few households owned any land, most of the inhabitants being daily paid labourers employed by the Grama Sevaka, working his fields of paddy and tobacco. Only about 10 % of the women did not leave home for work. The village had one school conducting classes from the Kindergarten to the G.C.E. Ordinary Level Examination. Of the 492 children between 6 and 16 years of age, only 296 were attending school at the time of the survey. Only 46 % of the women interviewed had completed primary education and only 8 % had continued to secondary school, so that 46 % had not

been to school at all. There is no bus service to the village, the road not being motorable. The Co-operative store supplied rice and a few other essential items of food, so that the villagers have to walk $6\frac{1}{2}$ miles for most of their requirements. The nearest dispensary is at Hunnasgiriya and the nearest Hospital at Meda Maha Nuwara.

This village was selected for the study as it is isolated and agricultural, and its inhabitants live under very poor conditions and have had a low level of education.

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