

Traditional Knowledge Systems of India and Sri Lanka

Papers presented at the COMPAS Asian Regional Workshop
on Traditional Knowledge Systems and
their Current Relevance and Applications

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A. V. Balasubramanian and T. D. Nirmala Devi (eds)

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Illustration on the cover

***Kalamkari* painting by artist C. Subramanian of Sri Kalahasthi, Andra Pradesh**

The cover depicts the story from our *Puranas* about the Neem tree. When the *Devas* and the *Asuras* (representing the divine and the demonic forces respectively) churned the ocean of milk, Lord *Dhanvanthri* (the patron saint of traditional medicine) appeared with a pot of *Amritha* (ambrosia). A few drops of this ambrosia dropped on the Earth and from these drops was born the Neem tree. It has been revered in our Tradition, as *Sarva Roga Nivarani* – the cure for all diseases. Even today it is widely used in traditional agriculture for crop protection and enrichment of soil.

CONTENTS

1. Background	8
2. Programme schedule	11
3. Conference papers	15

Inaugural session

Bertus Haverkort, <i>Knowledge and Sciences in the Global Context: Contradictions, Competition, Coexistence, Complementarity, Coevolution</i>	16
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Agronomy

Nene, Y.L., <i>Utilizing Traditional Knowledge in Agriculture</i>	32
Malkanthi Gunaratne, <i>Nawakekulam – A traditional agricultural practice of Sri Lanka^ψ</i>	39
Ranganathan, T.T., <i>Documentation and Validation of Traditional Agricultural Practices</i>	40
Sridevi, R. and Subhashini Sridhar, <i>Traditional Agricultural Practices for Crop Protection – Testing and Validation</i>	62
Gowtham Shankar, K.J.N., <i>Endogenous Development in Tribal Agriculture</i>	68

Livestock and Veterinary Sciences

Balakrishnan Nair, M. N., <i>Documentation and Assessment of Ethnoveterinary Practices from an Ayurvedic Viewpoint</i>	78
Veena Ganesaiah, T., <i>Punyakoti Test – An Ancient Egyptian Test (2200 BC) Extended to Diagnose Pregnancy in Cattle</i>	91
Hariramamoorthy, G., <i>Promotion of Ethnoveterinary Medicine in Dakshina Kannada District, Karnataka</i>	94
Aruna Kumara, V.K., <i>An Initiative towards the Conservation and Development of Indian Cattle Breeds</i>	104
Kahandawa, K.A.J., <i>Traditional Veterinary Knowledge of Sri Lanka</i>	114
Vivekanandan, P., <i>Towards A Pastoral Policy: For Protection of Pastoralists' Rights and for Conservation of Local Animal Breeds</i>	119

Traditional Methods of Weather Forecasting

Kanani, P.R., <i>Testing of Traditional Methods of Weather Forecasting in Gujarat Using the Participatory Approach</i>	125
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Traditional Healthcare Methods

Nimal Hewanila, <i>Reclamation of Traditional Knowledge on Snake Bite Treatment^ψ</i>	145
---	-----

^ψ The full text of these papers are currently not available and hence the abstract alone has been presented here.

Unnikrishnan, P.M., <i>Traditional Orthopaedic Practices of Southern India - A Pilot Study</i>	148
Smita Bajpai, <i>Advocacy for Recognition of the Dai</i>	156
Jayasinghe Perera, <i>Traditional Medicine and Food Today</i>	174
Harish Naraindas, <i>Conflict, Co-existence and Translation: The Question of Innovation in Contemporary Traditional Medicine^W</i>	177
Discussion on Policy Issues Working in Smaller Groups	178
• Group I - University teaching and research	
• Group II - Generation and validation of traditional knowledge	
• Group III - Upscaling and translating endogenous development (ED) into action	
• Group IV - Advocacy forum	
Methodology of Traditional Sciences and Technologies	
Balasubramanian, A.V., <i>Is There an Indian Way of Doing Science?</i>	183
Rama Jayasundar, <i>Research in Ayurveda</i>	193
Ram Manohar, <i>Methodological Rigour in Knowledge Building – Ayurveda and the Scientific Challenge</i>	195
Padma Venkatasubramanian and P.M. Unnikrishnan, <i>Traditional Knowledge Guided Research and Standardization of Traditional Medicines</i>	204
Sarat Bandara, J.M.R., <i>Indigenous Methods in Sri Lankan Agriculture: Beliefs, Mysteries, Myths or Science^W</i>	212
Coen Reijntjes, <i>Universities: From Assessment of Traditional Knowledge to Intra- and Intercultural Dialogue and Coevolution</i>	213
Chitra Krishnan and Srinivas V. Veeravalli, <i>Tanks and Anicuts of South India: Examples of an Alternative Science of Engineering</i>	220
Nimal De Silva, <i>Concepts and Principles used in Traditional Houses and their Modern Adaptations in Sri Lanka</i>	227
Ananda Wood, <i>New physics and Old Sciences</i>	230
Creating an Enabling Policy Environment for Strengthening Traditional Knowledge Systems	
Bhargava, P.M., <i>How to make India a Knowledge-based Society?</i>	239
4. Concluding session	250
5. Brief Bio-Data of Participants	252
6. List of Participants	258

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Traditional Medicine and Food Today

K.A.Jayasinghe Perera, *Future In Our Hands*,
325/A/3, Kanupegalle, Badulla, Sri Lanka
Email : fiohfund@gmail.com / future@wow.lk

Abstract

Surrounded by the sea, Sri Lanka has 3 major climatic zones and nearly 24 minor climatic zones. The main cause for the rich and largely endemic biodiversity is the diverse climatic conditions. As a result of colonialism, many endemic flora and fauna were destroyed, vast areas of forest were opened for monocropping and many new varieties of flora were introduced to the country as commercial crops. The result of these practices was the gradual erosion of biodiversity. This was evident mostly in the central hills and the wet zone. But, the biodiversity of the dry zone still remains rich. During the colonial period, new food varieties were also introduced. These are called “English vegetables” even today.

During the old days, health conditions in the villages remained at a high standard because of the consumption of indigenous nutritional food and the use of indigenous medical practices. But, today, as a result of “modernization” most of the traditional food varieties are lost. Many varieties of local fruits are dying out.

Under the Compas indigenous knowledge revitalization programme, emphasis was placed on food that is eco-friendly, readily available and sustainable in its zone. The areas where traditional food practices are still prevalent in rural communities were selected for the study. Owing to modernization, traditional food and its preparation systems were undermined by modern society and in the media. However, there are some groups of people who still preserve the traditional methods related to food and food preparation.

Medicinal properties of food: In order to prevent and/or control certain diseases, indigenous medical practitioners introduced suitable additions and ingredients to food. When a patient sought treatment, indigenous medical practitioners educated them on the do's and don't's of food as well as on methods of preparation.

Surrounded by the sea, Sri Lanka has 3 main climatic zones and nearly 24 minor climatic zones. The main cause for the rich and largely endemic biodiversity is this diverse climatic condition. Many varieties of flora and fauna, which are endemic to each zone, are found on the Island.

British colonialism destroyed the biodiversity of the country. Vast areas of forest were opened for monocropping, and many new varieties of flora were introduced to the country as commercial crops. The result of these practices was the gradual erosion of the Island's biodiversity. This was evident mostly in the central hills and the wet zone.

But, this condition did not affect the dry zone much, and therefore, the biodiversity of the dry zone still remains rich. During the colonial period, new food varieties were also introduced. These are called “English vegetables” even today.

During the old days, health conditions in the villages remained at a high standard because of the consumption of indigenous nutritional food and the use of indigenous medical practices. The consumption of traditional indigenous food also served to prevent and cure many diseases like rheumatism and bile- and phlegm-

related disorders (*pitta* and *kapha*). At the same time, it conserved the forests and gardens.

But, today, as a result of “modernization” most of the traditional food varieties are lost. Many varieties of local fruits are dying out.

Under the indigenous knowledge revitalization programme supported by Compas, emphasis was placed on food that is eco-friendly, available and sustainable in its zone. The areas where traditional food practices are still prevalent in rural communities were selected for the study. Although traditional food and its preparation systems were undermined, by modern society and in the media owing to modernization, there are some groups of people who still preserve the traditional methods related to food and food preparation.

Medicinal properties of food

Indigenous medical practitioners introduced suitable additions and ingredients to food in order to prevent and/or control certain diseases. When a patient sought treatment, indigenous medical practitioners educated them on the do’s and don’ts of food as well as on methods of preparation.

The objective of the study and documentation done by FIOH (Future In Our Hands) under the Compas programme was to revitalize the knowledge and practices related to traditional food culture with special emphasis on its medicinal qualities.

The focus here was on the following:

- Traditional dry zone villages in Uva province
- Food and its preparation at the rural level – different preparation methods and their rationale
- Medicinal properties of food and combinations as people perceived them
- Food varieties available locally for which the knowledge of their use was fast fading

The methods used for collection data

Data collection was carried out through the existing women’s groups in the FIOH working area. A large number of recipes were collected from women. The criteria for selection of recipes were based on the endemic nature of the plant species used in the recipes and the lack of knowledge about such items among people in general.

The collected information was categorized into the following:

- Herbs used for food and food preparations
- Food used for recovery – after illnesses, childbirth etc.
- Food used for prenatal and post-natal care
- Food preparation during cultural festivities

Validation

Once the information was collected, the data was discussed among other groups and additions and deletions were made. As the food recipes that were described are ones

that are being used now, it was only a matter of clarifying the preparation methods and discussing their value as medicine.

The food recipes and their medicinal values were discussed with Ayurvedic and local health practitioners. The information on medicinal value was revised accordingly.

Presentation and popularization

The information gathered was presented in a booklet for the benefit of the people who would use it as resource book. The information is organized in the following format:

1. Popular name of the food item
2. Botanical name
3. Nutritional value
4. Usage: food/curry etc.
5. Beverage

The following actions were taken to popularize traditional food among people.

1. Organizing food fairs and competitions
2. Holding workshops and discussions on food values and preparation
3. Putting on street dramas
4. Distributing plants in order to help people conserve and use them

Perera, K.A.J.

As Programme Officer of FIOH, K.A.J. Perera is responsible for the overall monitoring and supervision of all Compas related activities and networking. He has 10 years' work experience in PLAN International, Sri Lanka, where he was involved in project planning, implementation and evaluation of projects and personnel administration.