

## Vedic Influences in Early Sinhala Foodways

‘May for me prosper, through the sacrifice, milk, sap, ghee, honey, eating and drinking at the common table, ploughing, rains, conquest, victory, wealth, riches. May for me prosper, through the sacrifice, low-grade food, freedom from hunger, rice, barley, sesame, kidney beans, vetches, wheat, lentils, millets, panicum grains and wild rice .May for me prosper, through the sacrifice, trees, plants, that which grows in ploughed land, and that which grows in unploughed land.’

*Yajurveda* (c.800 BCE)<sup>i</sup>

According to the Mahāvamsa, [‘Great Chronicle’] the Sinhalese are descended from Vijaya, a prince of Sīhapura in the country of the Vaṅgas, generally accepted as being modern Bengal or Orissa, both in North Eastern India. Vijaya was ‘of evil conduct’ and was set to sea by his father along with 700 men and landed in Lankā, which at that time, usually put at around 530BC, was, according to the Mahāvamsa, only inhabited by Yakkhas, a spirit race. While the specifics of this are assigned to creation mythology, what isn’t doubted is that around the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, there was a migration of people from northern India by sea to southern Sri Lanka.

Just who they were is uncertain. They are usually identified as Indo-Aryan. The term Aryan is a flexible one used to mean both a nomadic peoples from Central Asia who are thought to have migrated on the one hand south into what is now Iran and thence east across the north of the Indian subcontinent, and on the other hand turned north and west into Europe, and also to mean the peoples from whose language derived the Indo-European family of languages, Sanskrit among them. De Silva argues that they could as easily have come, however, from the Indus Valley in the north west of the Indian sub-continent as from North Eastern India.<sup>ii</sup> But the migrations into Northern India are not as straightforward as this. Achaya, citing Pargiter writing in 1922, says that there were four groups who migrated into the north of the sub-continent, ‘the Ailas or Aryans, who eventually came to dominate the whole of north India; the second were the Dhaityas, who practiced an early form of brahminism, replete with magic rituals; and the third consisted of the Manva or Dravidians, and even earlier ethnic stock’. The interaction between these groups led to the formation of the Vedic culture.<sup>iii</sup> Whoever it was – Vijaya from Bengal, Indo-Aryans from the Indus Valley, or some other peoples arising out of the interaction of various groups in northern India anywhere from 1500 – 500 BCE – this agreed date of their arrival puts the migrants within this culture.

The Vedic culture is named for the four collections of religious writings produced during this time, the Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda and Atharveda, variously described as prayers or hymns. Each of them mentions foodways to some extent, as in the quotation at the start of this article. Looking to the Vedas and other writings of the time, Achaya has developed a very comprehensive overview of Vedic foodways, and what follows is a summary of this material.

Barley is the earliest grain mentioned, rice, wheat and some other grains are also discussed. A later work, the Kashyapa Smahita (c. 200 BCE) has an extensive description of wet rice planting which suggests the practice had been known for some time and it’s likely then that it was these migrants who brought the practice to Sri Lanka. Rice became a staple in the Sutra period from around 800 to 350 BCE, which fits neatly with the nominal time of migration to Sri Lanka. Barley and wheat are ground into flour and made into breads or cakes that are fried. Barely is made into a gruel. Rice is boiled in water or milk or sesame seed and milk. Broken rice and jaggery are a sweet dish, and rice is also mixed with sweet oil cakes.

Urad, mung and masoor are the most commonly used legumes. Urud dhal was soaked, ground and fermented, then made into shapes and fried, the precursor of the vadai, the pre-eminent Sri Lankan street food. Pulses are eaten boiled and mashed or as soups. Later in the literature matar (peas) and channa (chick peas) are written about, and the papadam/papad makes its appearance.

Milks from cows, buffalo and goat were all used, with cow's milk the most commonly used. Curd was eaten with rice or barley and also mixed with milk as a drink, and also prepared as a sweet with sugar and spices. Ghee was being made and used for frying and also as a dip with other foods.

Among vegetables, mentions are made in the literature of lotus stems, cucumbers, bottle gourd, bitter melon, fenugreek sprouts, radish, onions, leeks, mustard greens and other brassica and yams. Fruits mentioned include dates, mangoes, grapes, coconut, banana, jackfruit and citrus.

Sesame seed was used extensively for oil, but also cooked up with rice or vegetables or mixed with jaggery as a sweet. Mustard seed and linseed were also crushed for oils.

Spices and flavourings included garlic, mustard, turmeric, long pepper, cumin, cloves, sour citrus, cardamom, coriander, cinnamon, spikenard and aloes. Vinegars were made from sugarcane, jaggery, jackfruit, honey and jamoon.

Honey and jaggery are the most common sweeteners in the early Vedic period, and rock sugar and sugar cane juice appear later.

Meat was consumed in large quantities during the Vedic period, some like cattle and swine raised domestically, other meat from hunting and fishing including deer, fowl, birds, alligator and tortoise. Horses, goats, bulls, buffaloes and sheep are all mentioned in the Rigveda as being sacrificed for food. Meat could be dried, fried, minced and made into patties, balls or other shapes for roasting on skewers. It was sometimes cooked with ghee, curd, rice gruel, acid fruits (a precursor to the use of tamarind) and spices. The great Indian epic, the Mahabharata describes meat cooked in fruit juice, or dried butter, with cloves and caraway seed and lentils included. Meat is mentioned being cooked with rice in what is termed a pallao-mevach.

Frying and boiling were the most common cooking methods.

Fields were worked with wooden ploughs drawn by a pair of oxen. Water was raised directly from rivers using the ashmanchakra, a set of clay pots attached to a wheel turned by oxen yoked to a shaft, but also through irrigation channels and weirs (a system that was to be built on for the great irrigation works of the Sri Lankan kings). Land fallowing, crop rotation and seasonal sowing were practiced.

Evidence of early Sri Lankan foodways is scarce. There is nothing like the Vedic hymns with their detail of agricultural practice. There is no epic like the Mahabharata or Ramayana, and the Mahavamsa's clues are elusive – references to food both soft and hard are about it. However, there is evidence vegetable and grain crops known to the Vedic people also being known to early Sri Lankan chena cultivators.<sup>iv</sup> In the absence of any evidence of these forming the diets of indigenous hunter gatherer peoples it's not out of order to suggest that some if not all of these were part of the foodways introduced at this early time in the agrarian settlement of Sri Lanka.

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- <sup>i</sup> Achaya 1994
  - <sup>ii</sup> De Silva 2008
  - <sup>iii</sup> Achaya 1994
  - <sup>iv</sup> Siriweera 2000