

Ingenuity of Indigenous Food Habits

The theme of this edition of *Vidurava* is on food technology and food safety standards. Digressing from this theme for a moment let us retrace some historical episodes of Sri Lanka's traditional food consumption habits, which have earned very interesting comments from ancient travelers and explorers. Indigenous knowledge of nutritive value, palatability, culinary properties, medicinal value and methods of food preparation and preservation of a variety of food substances drawn from the country's unique biological diversity has been an unprecedented experience for the ancient visitors to Sri Lanka. While the early British civil servants like J.W. Bennett (1843) and Sri James Emmersion Tennett (1859) wasted no time in observing and documenting the biological diversity of the country, they had taken pains to study the great variety of foods prepared and consumed by the local population. These writers have also described several ways in which food had been prepared and stored. These include a variety of ways in which uncooked food stuff had been dehydrated, smoked or treated with salt or kitchen ash for the purpose of preservation and later use.

Robert Knox, the 17th Century voyager, who for almost 20 years was in captivity in the Kingdom of Kandy describes in his memoirs a number of plants that were in use as food and medicine. In some instances he had tried to explain the methods of preparation of food from leaves, roots and fruits of plants. Describing the manner of partaking food, Knox says "They always wash their hands and mouth both before and after they had eaten". Symbolically this statement implies the hygiene consciousness of the Sri Lankans in partaking of food, which apparently was an unusual experience for the Englishmen of that era.

This reference to our great cultural traditions is brought in here to show the richness of Sri Lankan food consumption habits and how and why we as a nation should be proud of a unique indigenous culture.

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