

Food Beliefs and Practices among Sri Lankans

2. Weaning Practices among Sinhalese

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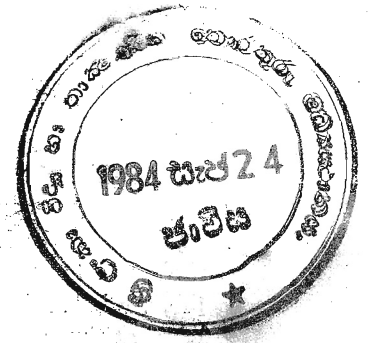
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Abstract : A study of weaning practices among 271 Sinhala Buddhist women indicates that most mothers breast-feed their babies, in many cases for two years or more. Milk supplements are introduced early; only about 30% of mothers do not give any milk preparations during the first two years. Rice gruel is fed at an early age. Fish, meat and egg are withheld during the first year by most mothers, although a variety of foods are introduced.

1. Introduction

There is no published data on weaning practices in Sri Lanka. An appreciation of such beliefs and practices would be of use to health workers engaged in guiding mothers into correct weaning procedures. A study of these practices has been carried out among Sinhalese, using the same samples of the population as were surveyed in the study of food avoidances.⁵

2. Methods

A questionnaire was prepared which sought information on items of food added to the infant's diet from birth to the age of 18 months. Reasons for delaying the introduction of a particular food item or for omitting it were also recorded.

As in the study reported earlier,⁵ the questionnaire was administered to two groups of women; 221 women attending a Course of Instruction on Child Welfare, and to mothers in 50 households in Bambarabedde. The women in the first group were requested to indicate what is actually practised in their homes and not state what has been taught during the Course of Instruction or at any other time.

3. Results

As in the case of food avoidances, weaning practices were also found to be uniform among rural women, as judged from the answers given by the two groups. Similar foods are introduced during different stages of development of the infant, the difference between the two groups showing up in the % of women conforming to a particular practice.

There are no taboos towards breast-feeding. All mothers breast-feed their infants by the third day after partus. Only 20% of the Bambarabedde mothers breast-feed on the second day. All mothers discarded colostrum in the belief that it is injurious to the health of the child. At Bambarabedde, 28% of the mothers said their infants were fed by a wet nurse until the third day after partus. Early in its life, the infant is also given sucrose or glucose dissolved in boiled and cooled water with, at times, the addition of a drop of castor oil, which is believed "to remove dirt and clear the stomach".

In the results given below, the answers given by women with a formal education are indicated first, the Bambarabedde figures being given within brackets.

0-3 months: During this period, foods introduced were fresh cow's milk 18% (4%) "powdered" milk 28% (18%), rice gruel 13% (4%), ripe plantains 9% (2%). Coriander water was given by 67% of the women during this period, as a substitute for water.

4-6 months: Fresh cow's milk was introduced for the first time during this period by 22% (8%) and 'powdered' milk by 32% (10%), so that, by the end of the 6th month about 54% of infants are fed on cow's milk preparations. During this period the following are also given for the first time:

They are, rice gruel by 47% (18%), ripe plantains by 48% (12%), papaw by 35% (8%), potato by 54%, bread by 24%, pulses by 12%, egg by 33%, fish by 9% and vegetable soup by 35%.

7-12 months : By the end of the first year of life, 85% (38%) had introduced fresh cow's milk and 73% (50%) powdered milk. Rice gruel was now being fed by 100% (56%), bread by 83% (54%), potato and other root vegetables by 70% (40%), eggs by 75% (18%), fish by 51% (10%), some kind of meat by 15% (8%).

12-18 months : By the end of 18 months all children have been introduced to cow's milk, (fresh or dried), rice gruel, bread and ripe plantains, 90% to vegetables, 87% to pulses, in both groups studied. Eggs were given to 80% (68%), fish to 81% (20%) and some kind of meat to 63% (30%).

These results are summarised in the Table 1.

4. Discussion

The most striking feature is the early introduction of milk supplements to the infant's diet. However, about 30% of the mothers did not use any kind of supplementary milk until the age of 2 to 3 years, in the belief that breast milk was sufficient.

TABLE 1. Foods introduced during weaning of Sinhalese Children.

Type of Food		3 months %	6 months %	12 months %	18 months %
Cow's milk	1.	18	40	85	100
	2.	04	12	38	50
Powdered milk	1.	28	60	73	100
	2.	18	28	50	60
Rice conjee	1.	13	60	100	100
	2.	04	22	56	92
Bread	1.	—	24	83	100
	2.	—	—	54	92
Potato	1.	—	54	70	95
	2.	—	—	40	90
Rice	1.	—	—	44	55
	2.	—	—	50	92
Coriander water	1.	67	—	—	—
	2.	68	80	92	92
Pulses	1.	—	12	12	86
	2.	—	—	38	88
Egg	1.	—	33	75	80
	2.	—	—	18	68
Fish	1.	—	09	51	81
	2.	—	—	10	20
Small fish	1.	—	—	—	—
	2.	—	—	02	04
Meat	1.	—	—	15	63
	2.	—	—	08	30
Boiled vegetables and vegetable soups	1.	—	35	79	90
	2.	—	02	50	86
Papaw	1.	—	35	77	81
	2.	—	08	69	84
Ripe Plantains	1.	09	57	93	100
	2.	02	14	82	92

1. Indicates the all-island sample.

2. Indicates the Bambarabedde sample.

On account of the teachings of Ayurveda in both countries, it is not surprising to find that in Sri Lanka, as in India, all mothers breast-feed their children and breast-feeding is continued for 2 years or more. The *Susrutha Sanhitha*⁴ likens breast milk to the "sap of immortal life divine". Breast milk is believed to make the child strong and increase its lifespan. Prolonged breast-feeding is also believed to avert the risk of a new pregnancy.¹

Indians in Andhra Pradesh,³ like Sri Lankans, discard the colostrum and start breast-feeding from the third day after partus. Both groups administer a mild purgative, usually a drop of castor oil, "to get rid of all toxic matter in the stomach of the child". Another common feature is the feeding of rice gruel from a very early age. Sri Lankan mothers use powdered milk more freely than their counterparts in India, where it is believed to be bad for the child because it produces diarrhoea. This is not surprising seeing that, even in technologically developed countries, infectious diarrhoeas are more common among the bottle-fed than among breast-fed babies.²

The reasons given for delaying the feeding of fish, meat and eggs were custom, the fear of indigestion and the development of cancer in the stomach of the child if these foods are fed along with breast milk. In Andhra Pradesh,³ meat and eggs were withheld as they were considered to be "heavy foods" and to lead to jaundice and oedema.

The present study indicates that in Sri Lanka there does not appear to be a great reluctance to feeding a variety of foods during the first year of life, although there is a significant number of mothers who delay introducing solids until 18-24 months of life.

Acknowledgement

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