

Indigenous Knowledge and Practices for Sustainable Living

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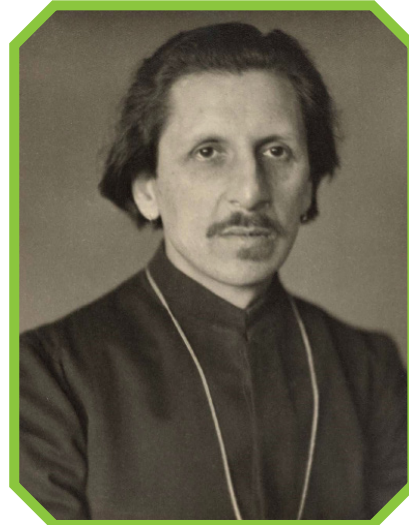
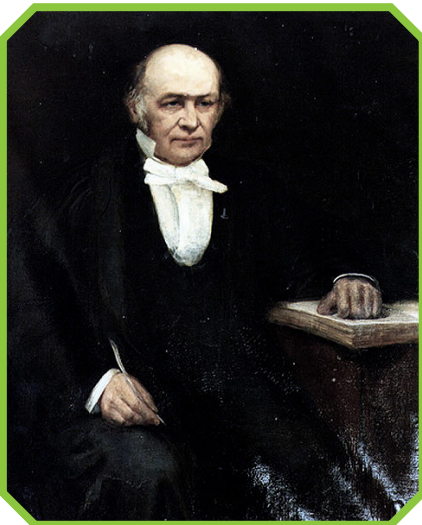


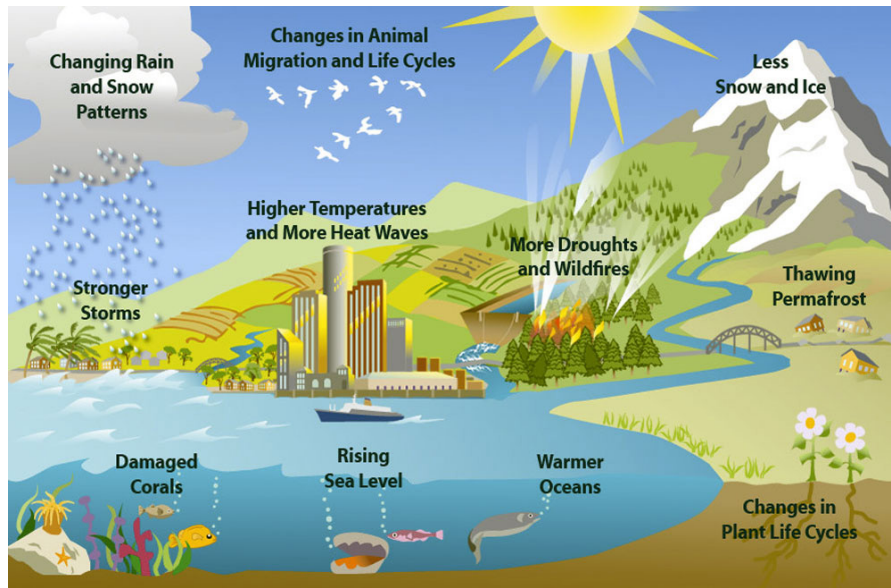
Lifestyle practices of our ancestors in ancient Sri Lanka had received the highest recognition from mediaeval and colonial commentators such as Robert Knox (1681), Ananda Coomaraswamy (1908), Robert Percival (1805), Rev. James Cordiner (1807), and Charles Sirr (1850). A comprehensive review of their observations on the traditional lifestyle of our ancestors, is embodied in a recent publication titled “Glorious Historical Antecedents of a Cultured Civilization: Sri Lanka”, Vijitha Yapa Publications. Robert Percival (1803) referring to the lifestyles of people of Sri

Lanka states that, “both sexes are remarkably clean and neat both in their person and houses. In dressing their victuals, they are scrupulously nice. They are cautious not even to touch the vessels out of which they drink with their lips. Robert Knox (1681) also gives a similar description of how people drank water. He also appears to have been amused and bewildered as to why the inhabitants of this country (Sri Lankans) needed to wash their hands before and after a meal. Ananda Coomaraswamy views with great administration the simple agrarian lifestyle of people when he states that “there is a great charm as one walks along the narrow village

paths, in coming suddenly upon a hillside clearing where 20 to 30 are at work singing in chorus with an old man leading them, or a party of women weeding and singing as they work across a field with stooping backs in the hot sun. They say that singing makes the labour less arduous and irksome, no doubt it does”.

Although emphasis of indigenous knowledge and practices had been heavy on natural resource management, agriculture, climate, water resource management, food security, genetic resources, biodiversity, ecosystems, ethno-botany, ethno-forestry etc, the contribution of this generational knowledge for sustainability of the home economy, domestic





healthcare, nutrition, spiritual manifestation and gender contribution to a holistic lifestyle had not been highlighted. It is well known that the serenity of the traditional lifestyle manifests initially from the cultural backdrop of the village tank and the temple, which constitute the centerpiece of rural life. These are followed by the lands set apart for swidden cultivation, or the commonly known chena cultivation, the old and new *vel-yāya* (paddy field), and finally the forest fringe. This unique landscape architecture constitutes the basis for recreation, well-being and sustainable food production for the community.

The dwelling places of people were simple, airy, and set in harmony with the natural environment. The means of production and disposal were orderly. Waste production and disposal were in compliance with nature's turn-over cycle, where organic components were recycled by collecting, consolidating, and allowing these to decompose in small heaps in their backyards to generate compost manure, or depending on the composition, the waste was incinerated under anaerobic conditions in shallow pits

to generate ash containing inorganic nutrients such as potassium and metallic micronutrients, which are then applied in the field for crop production operations in an effort to return the lost nutrients, and thereby retain the fertility of the soil.

Traditionally, wealth and material prosperity in ancient Sri Lanka were not measured in terms of rupees and cents, neither was it measured in *Masurang* and *Kahavanu*, nor for that matter even in gold, silver, ivory and gems. Prosperity in pre-modern Sri Lanka was reflected mainly in the achievement of an overall state of happiness,

contentment, spiritual satisfaction and the characteristic holistic lifestyle, literally indicative of what is referred to as "*Saubhaghyā*". The term "*Saubhaghyā*" signifies a traditional wholesome physical and mental state which encompasses economic prosperity, spiritual advancement, well-being as well as contented living in harmony with the natural environment. There is no English equivalent that genuinely reflects the contextual meaning of this term. Significantly, this term drew considerable interest at the World Bank funded "Workshop on a National Strategy for Incorporation of Traditional Knowledge into Development Practices", held in September 2002, where it was explained and defined to constitute the alliterative doublets (or *Yugala-pāda* in Sinhala), comprising –*Watha-batha*, *Bulatha*, *Kiri-peni*, *Atu-kotu*, *Gaba-kola*, *Haraka-bāna*, *Pin-dhaham*, and *Bana-bhāvanā*. One therefore can observe that their needs for a simple but sustainable living were food security with free availability of rice, and agricultural land for wet and dry cultivation, as well as storage facilities for grains; betel vines and leaves; the free flow of milk and



honey as an expression material prosperity; the natural greenery with its arboreal environment; ownership of livestock in the form of milch cows and grazing grounds; and finally the freedom of worship for spiritual gains.

In the modern day context, this lifestyle would imply the availability to every family in the country, a basket of all essential amenities, resources and utilities, as well as spiritual satisfaction that may amply serve their wants for a happy, contented, wholesome and sustainable livelihood. It is in fact clear that the pre-modern system

of governance ensured equality and prosperity for all citizens in terms of livelihoods by facilitating and ensuring that all service providers to the State were amply and equitably rewarded.

It is well known that Buddhist principles and culture decries any form of discrimination, including ensuring of gender equality. Women had their own capabilities,

and played a significant role not only in bringing up their families but also in contributing towards community welfare. Although this tradition continues to exist, modern lifestyles have unfortunately tended to smother some of the special indigenous capabilities of women. Studies undertaken by Prof. Anoja Wickremasinghe at the University of Peradeniya during 1995-1997 had shown that women in ancient times played a central

role in procuring and producing materials of practical domestic needs for sustenance of family health, nutrition and livelihoods. Their indigenous knowledge related to nutritional food and medicinal plants in regular use, and consequently of ecosystem diversity as well as its utility value for maintaining family health, nutrition and general well-being for a sustainable lifestyle were distinctly prominent.

Unfortunately this cultural advantage had been overrun, and women in modern times are no longer in a position to

nutrition, well-being and happiness in their families, and thereby ensuring a sustainable and enriched lifestyle.

This unfortunate situation is exemplified by the inability of modern day housewives to utilize the generational traditions in the use of simple but highly effective home remedies for common ailments.

Traditionally mothers with their indigenous wisdom could instinctively diagnose simple health problems of children, and treat them with simple home remedies.

Take for example, the use of the carminative, and anthelmintic decoction prepared with *Embelia ribes* (*Walangasal* in Sinh.) for the treatment of intestinal worms in children. Likewise a decoction made out of *Phyllanthus emblica* (*Nelli* in Sinh.) and *Tinospora cordifolia* (*Rasakinda* in Sinh.), a medication popularly referred to in Sinhala as *Nelli-rasakinda*, was used as a common treatment for

rheumatic pains, urinary disorders and for blood purification. Yet another universally used medicinal preparation for colds, fever, and influenza combining coriander (*Coriandrum sativa*) (*koththamalli* in Sinh.), in combination with the dried rhizome of ginger (*Zingiber officinale*), and the dried slender shoots of *Mollugo cerviana* (*pathpadagam* in Sinh.), to which the inclusion of *Coscinium fenestratum* (*Venivel-geta* in Sinh.), is commonly known to extend and



concentrate on family health due to the exigencies of a competitive commercially oriented economic scenario, where they are compelled to supplement family incomes through white collar employment. Here therefore we see somewhat of a negative aspect resulting from gender equality, where women as housewives are no longer capable of utilizing advantageously the wealth of indigenous wisdom on maintenance of good health,



and understanding of this spiritual dictum in ancient times, was a clear reflection of the non-existence of any barriers to equality and well-being, not only among communities of human beings, but also among all other types of living beings. While decrying egocentricity, selfishness, and greed, this philosophy emphasizes the roles to be played by men and women towards unity and social well-being

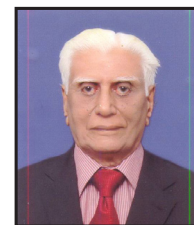
enhance its effectiveness to prevent or control tetanus, continues to be in common use even to this day. These traditional home remedies have now been largely replaced with Western pain-killers and antibiotics, which needs no domestic effort for preparation, and are also freely available in pharmacies. Apart from good health and well-being, responsible production and consumption were hallmarks of traditional lifestyles. Such an organized community based livelihood and an agrarian lifestyle, where the intrinsic value of floral and faunal biodiversity was also recognized, would have been intuitively conditioned by the



of the family unit as well as that of the community at large, which is thus the very foundation for a harmonious, superlative and sustainable living.



Buddhist philosophy of “*Sabbe Saththā Bhavanthu Sukhithathā*”, which literally implies the “Dedication of oneself for the cause of his own well-being and that of all living beings”. The acceptance



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