

Sri Lanka: Between loaf and halal

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Sri Lanka tries to shake off entrenched practices that nationalists see as a threat to local food culture

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Keeping its identity and culture pure has always been something of a challenge for Sri Lanka. Legend has it that this island nation was colonised by a castaway Bengali prince and his entourage two-and-a-half millennia ago. These 'foreigners' ruled over its original inhabitants, establishing kingdoms in the dry north-central plains. Its history is filled with invasions from neighbouring South Indian kingdoms, and more recently, colonisation of its coastal areas by the Portuguese and the Dutch. Lastly, for almost a century and a half, the British ruled over the entire country, deposing its last king who was actually of sub-continental origin.

Keeping language, dress, food, music, dance and other cultural practices 'pure' under such frequently changing circumstances has been understandably difficult. Since Independence in 1948, nationalism has ebbed and flowed. In the 1950s, such sentiment took the form of a language barrier sanctioned by the government; declaring Sinhala as the national language and alienating 20 percent of Sri Lanka's population – who spoke either Tamil or English. In Sri Lanka, Tamils and Muslims as distinct ethnic groups find themselves linguistically united by their use of Tamil. The decision regarding the national language was reversed in the 1980s, but its effects still reverberate.

Nowadays, nationalism has been defined by ethnic conflict, primarily the polarisation between Sinhala Buddhists and Tamil Hindus. But caught up in the throes of war were other minorities: Tamil Christians, plantation workers of Indian origin, and Muslims. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) demonstrated the most extreme facet of nationalism when it carried out ethnic cleansing of the 'Tamil Homeland' in the northern and eastern parts of the country. Many Sinhalese and Muslims were forced to leave their traditional villages during the 30-year war.

In Southasia, nationalistic sentiments are influenced by and expressed through politics, culture and religion. Forms of dress, film, theatre and books are often targeted by nationalistic movements attempting to keep religious or cultural identity 'pure'. Sometimes, however, communities retaliate, as happened during a short spate of peace between 2002-2004, when the self-proclaimed saviours of the Tamil people insisted that their women wear saris all the time. Women in the north have adopted a more practical dress code consisting of long jackets and skirts, allowing them to ride bicycles – the main mode of transportation in war-affected districts. They refused to be strong-armed by the LTTE into giving it up.

Since the end of the ethnic conflict in 2009, there has been a resurgence of Sinhala Buddhist sentiment and nationalism, manifest in the installation of statues of Lord Buddha across the country including in the Northeast. More subtle and sometimes bizarre indications include the insistence that mothers should wear saris when visiting their child's school and a ban on the use of Western

musical instruments in school bands. Now nationalism has filtered into food. There are instructions from the Department of Education that school lunches should be of “locally grown, traditional food”. Reflecting the views of a government pining for the glory days of long-gone kingdoms, some nationalist movements can be seen taking a militant stance on what people should eat, and how.

The politics of bread

Bread and wheat flour have become unusual victims of the new wave of nationalistic fervour. Rice is the staple food and main crop in Sri Lanka, but imported wheat flour and white bread made of refined flour have become extremely popular. Neighbours in Southasia have consistently failed to understand Sri Lankans’ obsession with the European-style loaf, but wheat nonetheless makes up almost 40 percent of the total staple consumption. The habit stems from food aid donated by the United States during a famine in the 1960s. In later years, the government subsidised wheat flour because the country could not meet the demand for rice. In the late 1960s a 500g loaf of bread was 25 Sri Lankan cents (USD 0.002), while a kilo of rice cost somewhere between 30 and 60 cents.

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Over the past five decades Sri Lankans became hooked on bread. In both urban and suburban areas, the bread man heralds the dawn; waking up to the loud jangle of a musical horn emanating from competing bread delivery services and running outdoors to buy the morning meal has become standard practice. The ritual is repeated in the evening. Rice meals may be cheaper, but to middle-class Sri Lankans, convenience is key – perhaps even at the expense of health.

The refined wheat flour milled by multinational companies in Sri Lanka is quite unlike the wholegrain wheat flour available in countries like Nepal and India. Devoid of any real nutritional value, except for an overdose of gluten-and-sugar rich carbohydrate, white bread in Sri Lanka is a possible cause and certain contributor to the high rates of diabetes among urban Sri Lankans. One in seven now has Type 2 diabetes, though the rate drops rapidly in rural areas, denoting that both diet and physical activity are responsible. Attempts to manufacture convenient alternatives out of rice flour have resulted in expensive and exclusive products available only to the very rich.

Bread is so central to the Sri Lankan middle class diet that it has assumed a political space of its own. So when the charismatic Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga – daughter of two prime ministers – promised a loaf of bread at SLR 3.50 (USD 0.028) the masses cheered and elected her president. She also promised to abolish the executive presidency within six months of her election, but it was likely the former promise that won her the resounding victory. Both promises went unfulfilled.

Following that election, imported wheat flour was declared an essential item and became price-controlled by the government. Huge subsidies were introduced so that milled flour could be available to bakeries at a fraction of the real cost, making SLR 3.50 bread possible for a short time.. An escalation of the ethnic conflict in the north and east provided the government with the cover necessary to gradually wind down its treasury-crippling subsidies, causing bread prices to inflate.

Since 2006, bread has once again become a centerpiece of Sri Lankan politics once again, but from a different perspective. As the populism of Chandrika Kumaratunga gave way to the nationalism of Mahinda Rajapaksa, the government began trying to wean Sri Lankans off bread. President Rajapaksa’s government has promoted rice and derivative rice products as bread substitutes. It is promoting a ‘rice for all meals’ approach, instructing schools to adjust their lunch menus accordingly, restricting bread-based items and promoting local food such as rice, boiled mung beans

and chickpeas - all under the auspices of the prevention of childhood diabetes.

The present government taxes wheat flour imports heavily, and has brought bread prices to an all-time high of SLR 60-65 (USD 0.5) for a loaf. The government is trying to curb outflow of foreign exchange while boosting the production and consumption of rice, and is gradually extending this approach to other imported foods. Some nutritionists and experts worry that high taxes on imported wheat, canned fish, powdered milk and potatoes could actually result in rural malnutrition. A recent article in Lanka Business Online criticises the nationalistic preoccupation with rice at the expense of cheaper foods popular among lower-income households. Canned fish used to provide a cheap source of protein to people without refrigerators. Powdered milk benefited the same group, and for the same reasons, is also over-taxed to induce self-sufficiency in dairy products.

“The parliament canteen began serving pork items after nearly 20 years off the menu, but how this helped preserve Sinhala Buddhist culture remains a mystery”

While the overall trend for fresh milk, fresh fish and homegrown produce is commendable in terms of national-level food sovereignty and security; the government is perhaps putting the cart before the horse. Heavy taxation has set food prices artificially high before domestic production levels could meet the demand. Sri Lanka, with a per capita income of over USD 2500, is no longer considered a Least Developed Country. However, poverty and malnutrition are still present. In a largely rural population, with very low levels of urban migration, poverty correlates to access, opportunity, education and conflict. Poorer districts have fewer roads and vehicles; higher rates of school dropouts between primary and early secondary; and higher levels of debilitating and chronic diseases. Poor farmers have limited access to land and irrigation facilities.

The recently published Human Development Index for Sri Lanka shows that poverty has declined overall, but persists in districts emerging from conflict due to long term disruption of social and livelihood assets, and in Up-country estates growing rubber and tea. Child malnutrition is a serious problem in the rural districts characterised by plantation labour and in post-conflict districts. Eradicating this chronic marginalisation and malnutrition with purely homegrown solutions may not be entirely feasible, especially given the government target to end poverty by 2016.

Food as a political canvas

While the nationalistic government is trying to force imported foods out of the Sri Lankan diet, political and religious groups have also found food and eating habits to be fertile ground for harnessing popular sentiments.

For centuries Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist communities have co-existed in the island country. Muslim villages with abattoirs and halal meat stalls stood, and continue to stand, side by side with vegetarian Hindu and Buddhist villages. Two decades ago, the term 'halal' generally referred to meat items prepared according to Sharia rulings. But today, due to the complex nature of the industry and demand from Muslim consumers and importers, a mind-boggling array of products - including paint brushes, coconut milk, Ayurvedic balms and instant noodles - carry halal labels ensuring that pork and pig derivatives do not contaminate the manufacturing process. Restaurants in Colombo stopped serving pork and pork products, and even multinational fast food chains such as McDonalds, KFC and Pizza Hut adhere to halal regulations.

According to industry sources, the halal certification determined by a group of clerics called the All Ceylon Jamiyathul Ulama used to be free and liberally issued ten years ago. But it soon became a fee-levying mandatory requirement, designed to secure Muslim patronage. Muslims make up between eight and nine percent of the Sri Lankan population, and are generally engaged in trade.

They are considered by many to be the 'wealthy' demographic, with higher purchasing power in urban areas. Over time it became common practice for concerned products to display the halal logo, as Muslim customers demanded to see proof of certification. When the practice extended from meat products to everyday items like biscuits, noodles and soft drinks, the certification began to irk other communities.

Rumblings of dissatisfaction from Hindus, Buddhist and Christians on the Islamisation of the food culture went largely unaddressed until the Bodu Bala Sena (or BBS – translated as the Buddhist Force) called for a boycott of products bearing the halal logo in November 2012. This new and powerful organisation is fighting against what it deems the “halal-isation” of Sri Lanka, and more specifically Sinhala Buddhist, food culture. The BBS takes a hardline stance on the prolific spread of halal certification in Sri Lanka, and questions why non-Muslim consumers should be forced to buy and eat halal food. The boycott, extended to Muslim-owned shops and businesses, impacted badly on year-end sales.

The ethnic underpinning of the fight against halal labelling did not escape the political area. The subject was brought up in parliament many times, where the Muslim Congress (an ally of the present government) warned that this type of ethno-religious disagreement could disrupt Sri Lanka's hard won peace. MPs supporting the BBS's worldview pressed upon the government to suspend the halal certification process. Soon after, the parliament canteen began serving pork items which had been off the menu for nearly 20 years. How this serves to further the preservation of Sinhala Buddhist culture remains a mystery.

Politicians rarely play fair. Undoubtedly, the halal issue will likely be used by both Muslim and Sinhala politicians to further their divisive agendas and to advance personal gain. In 1995 however, a different 'food' issue actually served to unify the voting masses – the promise of cheap bread. Nationalists fighting to protect 'indigenous' food culture will find theirs a difficult battle in a country that has openly embraced globalisation for many centuries. As I write this, I hear the jangle of the bread van; and realise that although the rice harvest has just been brought home, many Sri Lankans still wait by the roadside to buy a loaf of fluffy white bread to eat with imported red daal.

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