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Historical Approaches to Food Management in Sri Lanka During Famine and Drought Season

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Background: Famine can be defined as a disaster situation that poses a significant threat to human life. They are often caused by climate change, war, and government policies. A prolonged lack of rainfall causes drought. During this disaster, the people's need for food goes beyond nutrition or taste and is reduced to the meaning of 'preserving life'. This research explores the question of whether Sri Lankans' indigenous knowledge of food has been instrumental in sustaining human life in the face of famine and drought in ancient Sri Lanka.

Objective: The primary objective is to identify the foods that ancient Sri Lankans relied on for survival during periods of famine and drought. Secondary objectives include analysing the famines and droughts that affected ancient Sri Lanka, the causes and consequences of these disasters, and traditional food patterns.

Methods: Although a few studies were found on famine and Sri Lanka's traditional food culture, a research gap was identified on the contribution of traditional foods to tolerance to famine. Here, the qualitative research methodology is analysed through a historical comparative approach.

Results: Several disasters, including '*Bulukesaya*', '*Baminithiyasaya*', '*Ekanalika Saya*', '*Raktakshi Plague*', and '*Bhayasivasaya*', are attested by historical sources. Foods such as boiled rice water, rice porridge, wild potatoes, *Karakola*, lotus stems, and palm fruits were consumed, and these plants were able to withstand even severe drought. Through continuous water supply from irrigation systems, '*thahanchi*', and food preservation methods, people increased their resilience to famines.

Conclusion: Sri Lankans can attest to the fact that by conserving food during times of abundance, preventing overconsumption and waste, and managing the small amounts of food left, they have minimised loss of life during times of famine and drought.

Keywords: Drought, Famine, Traditional diet