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EXPLORATION OF MILLETS AND TRADITIONAL FOODS AS ADVOCATED IN SIDDHA MEDICINE IN PROMOTING OVERALL HEALTH, PREVENTION, AND MANAGEMENT OF DISEASES PROVIDING ESSENTIAL NUTRITION

S.Heamavathi.,M.D(s)^{1*}, S.Shankar.,M.D(s)², S.Karthi³, M.D.Saravana Devi⁴

¹Junior Research Fellow, Peripheral Pharmacovigilance Centre GSMC Chennai

²Co-ordinator, Peripheral Pharmacovigilance Centre GSMC Chennai

³House Officer, National institute of Siddha

⁵Head of the Department of PG Gunapadam

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***Corresponding author**

Dr. S.Heamavathi.,M.D(s)

Background:

Siddha medicine, an ancient system of holistic healing, emphasizes diet as a cornerstone for health. Millets and traditional foods hold a pivotal role in balancing the body's humors (vatham, pitham, and kapam) and providing essential nutrients. This study explores their significance in promoting health and managing diseases.

Objective:

To investigate the role of millets and traditional foods, as prescribed in Siddha medicine, in promoting overall health, preventing diseases, and managing chronic conditions while ensuring essential nutrition.

Methods:

This manuscript synthesizes data from classical Siddha texts and modern research on millets and traditional foods. The review highlights their nutritional composition, therapeutic properties, and their alignment with Siddha dietary principles.

Results:

Millets such as pearl millet, finger millet, foxtail millet, and barnyard millet offer diverse health benefits, including improved digestion, glycemic control, and cardiovascular health. Traditional foods like legumes, fermented dishes, and seasonal vegetables provide essential nutrients and therapeutic benefits. These foods are effective in the prevention and management of diabetes, hypertension, obesity, and digestive disorders.

Conclusion:

The incorporation of millets and traditional foods, as advocated in Siddha medicine, promotes a holistic approach to health and disease management. These foods offer a natural and sustainable means of achieving nutritional adequacy and preventing chronic diseases.

Keywords: Siddha medicine, millets, traditional foods, nutrition, disease prevention, holistic health, chronic disease management.

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Introduction

Siddha medicine, one of India's ancient medical systems, is deeply rooted in the natural and holistic approach to healing. It emphasizes the significance of balancing the body, mind, and spirit through diet, lifestyle, and herbal remedies. One of the integral aspects of this system is the use of traditional foods, including millets, which have been recognized for their numerous health benefits. Millets and other traditional foods play a pivotal role in promoting overall health, preventing diseases, and managing chronic

conditions, as they provide essential nutrition. This essay delves into the significance of millets and traditional foods as advocated in Siddha medicine, exploring their health benefits, disease prevention potential, and their role in ensuring nutritional adequacy.

Siddha Medicine and Nutritional Principles [1]

Siddha medicine, dating back over 5,000 years, is based on the principles of five elements—earth, water, fire, air, and space—that constitute the body and its functions. The

balance of these elements, along with three humors (vatham, pitham, and kapam), is essential for maintaining health. Diet is considered a critical factor in maintaining this balance, as foods are categorized based on their inherent qualities like taste, potency, post-digestive effect, and medicinal properties.

Traditional foods, particularly whole grains, herbs, vegetables, and legumes, are emphasized in Siddha dietary practices. Among these, millets hold a special place due to their versatility, nutrient density, and therapeutic potential. Siddha texts like AgathiyarVaidhyaKaviyam and TheraiyarKappiyam highlight the importance of these foods in maintaining a harmonious balance between the humors and preventing disease onset.

Millets in Siddha Medicine: A Nutritional Powerhouse [1-12]

Millets are small-seeded grains, considered to be one of the most ancient crops consumed by humans. In Siddha medicine, they are recognized not only for their nutritional content but also for their ability to strengthen the body, improve immunity, and balance the humors.

Some common millets include:

Pearl Millet (Kambu): Known for its ability to cool the body and aid in digestion, it is rich in magnesium, iron, and dietary fiber. It is often prescribed in Siddha medicine for managing diabetes and promoting digestive health.

Finger Millet (Ragi): Ragi is one of the richest sources of calcium and is recommended for strengthening bones and preventing osteoporosis. It also has cooling properties, making it suitable for those with excessive heat (pitham imbalance) in their bodies.

Foxtail Millet (Thinai): Traditionally used to treat digestive disorders and inflammation, foxtail millet is rich in protein and fiber. It has a low glycemic index, making it beneficial for individuals with diabetes and those looking to maintain a healthy weight.

Kodo Millet (Varagu): This millet is rich in antioxidants and has anti-inflammatory properties. It is often used in Siddha medicine to detoxify the body and improve liver health.

Barnyard Millet (Kuthiraivali): Known for its ability to improve digestion and reduce blood sugar levels, barnyard millet is a key component of Siddha dietary recommendations for managing metabolic disorders.

Health Benefits of Millets in Siddha Medicine [5-11]

The consumption of millets, as advocated by Siddha medicine, offers numerous health benefits. Their high fiber content promotes healthy digestion, prevents constipation, and maintains a balanced gut microbiome. This is critical for preventing gastrointestinal disorders and ensuring efficient nutrient absorption.

Diabetes Management: Millets are rich in complex carbohydrates and have a low glycemic index, making them an ideal food for managing blood sugar levels. According to Siddha principles, millets help regulate

kapam, the humor responsible for metabolic functions, thereby reducing the risk of diabetes.

Cardiovascular Health: The magnesium and potassium content in millets contributes to heart health by regulating blood pressure and improving blood circulation. The antioxidant properties of millets also help in reducing oxidative stress and inflammation, which are risk factors for heart disease.

Weight Management: Millets are low in calories but rich in nutrients, making them ideal for weight management. Their high fiber content ensures prolonged satiety, reducing overeating and aiding in healthy weight loss.

Detoxification: Certain millets like kodo and barnyard millet have detoxifying properties that cleanse the liver and kidneys, improving the body's ability to eliminate toxins. This aligns with Siddha's focus on purifying the body to maintain overall health and prevent disease.

Bone Health: Millets, particularly finger millet (ragi), are rich in calcium and phosphorus, essential for bone health. Siddha practitioners often recommend ragi for individuals with bone-related issues such as arthritis and osteoporosis.

Traditional Foods in Siddha Medicine [1-9]

Apart from millets, Siddha medicine places great importance on other traditional foods like legumes, vegetables, fruits, and herbs. These foods are valued not just for their nutritional content but also for their medicinal properties.

Herbs and Spices: Common herbs like *Aloe vera*, *Tulsi*, and *Neem* are frequently incorporated into the diet for their antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, and antimicrobial properties. Spices like *turmeric*, *black pepper*, and *cumin* are also emphasized in Siddha medicine for improving digestion, boosting immunity, and reducing inflammation.

Fermented Foods: Fermented foods such as curd, idli, and dosa are encouraged in Siddha medicine for promoting gut health. These foods are rich in probiotics, which help maintain a healthy balance of gut bacteria, improving digestion and enhancing immune function.

Legumes and Pulses: Legumes like lentils, chickpeas, and black gram are considered an excellent source of protein, especially for vegetarians. They are also rich in fiber and essential nutrients like iron, magnesium, and potassium, supporting overall health and well-being.

Vegetables and Fruits: A variety of seasonal vegetables and fruits are recommended in Siddha medicine. Leafy greens like spinach, amaranth, and moringa are valued for their high vitamin and mineral content. Fruits like gooseberries, bananas, and papayas are consumed for their digestive and cooling properties.

Prevention and Management of Diseases Through Traditional Food [10]

Siddha medicine views food as the first line of defense against diseases. The emphasis on whole, natural, and

minimally processed foods ensures that individuals receive the essential nutrients required for the body to function optimally. This is particularly important in the prevention and management of chronic diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, and cardiovascular diseases.

Diabetes: As previously mentioned, millets and legumes play a crucial role in managing blood sugar levels. The inclusion of fiber-rich foods, along with low glycemic index grains, helps in the steady release of glucose into the bloodstream, preventing insulin spikes and crashes.

Hypertension: Foods rich in potassium, magnesium, and calcium, such as millets, legumes, and leafy greens, help regulate blood pressure. The high antioxidant content in traditional foods also reduces oxidative stress, which can contribute to hypertension.

Obesity: The high fiber content of millets, legumes, and vegetables promotes satiety, preventing overeating and aiding in weight management. Siddha medicine advocates portion control and mindful eating practices to support weight loss and maintain a healthy weight.

Digestive Disorders: Traditional foods rich in fiber, such as millets, vegetables, and fermented foods, promote healthy digestion and prevent common gastrointestinal issues like constipation, bloating, and indigestion. The inclusion of probiotics through fermented foods supports a healthy gut microbiome, which is essential for overall health.

Conclusion

The exploration of millets and traditional foods as advocated in Siddha medicine highlights the importance of a balanced, holistic approach to diet and nutrition. These foods not only provide essential nutrients but also offer therapeutic benefits that promote overall health, prevent diseases, and manage chronic conditions. By incorporating millets, herbs, legumes, and other traditional foods into daily meals, individuals can achieve a harmonious balance of the body's humors, maintain optimal health, and prevent the onset of diseases. The principles of Siddha medicine, with its emphasis on natural, whole foods, continue to offer valuable insights into modern nutritional practices, emphasizing the need for a return to traditional diets in the pursuit of health and longevity.

Conflict of Interest

None declared

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