

Magazine

Published on Sundays

Features: [Magazine](#) | [Literary Review](#) | [Life](#) | [Metro Plus](#) | [Open Page](#) | [Education Plus](#) | [Book Review](#) | [Business](#) | [SciTech](#) | [NXg](#) | [Friday Review](#) | [Cinema Plus](#) | [Young World](#) | [Property Plus](#) | [Quest](#) | [Magazine](#)



Archives

- [Datewise](#)
- [Issues](#)
- [Cuisine](#)
- [Travel](#)
- [Gardening](#)

TIME OUT

A place for happy potatoes

ASHISH KOTHARI

The Potato Park in the Andes is a tribute to the humble potato, a celebration of its role in the lives of the native Indians...

PHOTO: ASHISH KOTHARI



Rediscovering lost traditions: (Clockwise from left) Women of the Quechua tribe in their colourful attire, the different types of potatoes and local marketing initiatives...

The potato is part of our family, we have to keep it happy". This quiet assertion by Francisca Bayona, of the Quechua indigenous people of Peru, took us by surprise. How does one keep a potato happy?

We should not have been surprised. We were, after all, in an extraordinary place with extraordinary people. We were in the Parque de la Papa ("Potato Park"), high up in the Andean mountains, visiting it with other participants of an International Congress on Ethnobiology.

A park for potatoes? For those of us accustomed to thinking of "parks" as either havens for wildlife, or places to go for a stroll, this might sound rather incongruous. Yet what we found was a landscape full of congruence, balanced in its functionality and beauty, and brimming with innovation.

Increased importance

The humble potato, now one of the world's four most important crops, originated in the Andes mountains of South America. Almost 7,000 years back, farmers found wild varieties and experimented with growing them over a range of altitudes, soil types, and climatic conditions. Through this, they developed

News

[News Update](#)
[Front Page](#)
[National](#)
States:

- [Tamil Nadu](#)
- [Andhra Pradesh](#)
- [Karnataka](#)
- [Kerala](#)
- [New Delhi](#)
- [Other States](#)

[International](#)
[Opinion](#)
[Business](#)
[Sport](#)
[Miscellaneous](#)
[Index](#)

Advts

[Retail Plus](#)
[Classifieds](#)
[Jobs](#)
[Obituary](#)

an astonishing diversity of several thousand varieties, meeting various food, nutrition, cultural, spiritual, and ritual needs. The potato was so crucial that it was considered a part of the family, and in many ways sacred. Along with it, the entire landscape, including the mountains and grasslands and forests and lakes and rivers, were imbued with meaning and purpose, a mix of the spiritual and the material. Pachamama, Mother Earth, gave life, livelihoods, and identity to people and to all creatures. This traditional bio-cultural landscape continued to evolve organically over several thousand years, managed in more contemporary times by the Quechua, direct descendants of the Incas.

Then came "development". In the 1970s and 80s, "expert" institutes and government agencies told the "illiterate" that their agriculture was "primitive" and unproductive. Enticing them with a few laboratory generated varieties that were highly productive, they encouraged replacement of the traditional diversity. But these new varieties were productive only given a number of external inputs, including chemical fertilizer. Over a couple of decades, the communities lost several hundred traditional varieties of potato (and other crops), and became dependent on the government and external markets.

But they soon realised this was a trap. "We also started falling ill much more frequently, as we were no longer eating the nutritious crops we used to", explained Pablo Machacca Queros, another Quechua elder. About a decade ago, villagers of six communities and the NGO Asociacion ANDES, held consultations on the crises facing agriculture, livelihoods and health. A process to re-establish bio-cultural heritage, relevant in today's world, was started. This was quite a struggle. The six communities had till then been fighting over boundary disputes, the younger generation was much less interested in traditions and agriculture, a lot of crop diversity had already been lost, and means of earning a livelihood were severely deficient.

Over a number of years, inter-community relations were mended, realising the benefits of collaborating on common challenges.

Then in 1998, the communities declared the Potato Park (www.parquedelapapa.org). This was intended to sustain a holistic approach to biodiversity, one that respects the continuum of "wild" and "domesticated", and integrates various forms of land/water use over a larger landscape. An Association of Communities of Potato Park (ACPP) was formed, which has formulated regulations regarding resource use in the landscape, using the ancient Andean principles of duality, reciprocity and balance.

The communities have also diversified into a variety of products and services. New activities include the production and sale of soaps, shampoos, and creams made from plants, and of ceramic cups and flutes (some shaped ingeniously like potatoes!). A community-led Asociaciones de Artesanias promotes these and traditional clothing, of which Peru has an incredible range: the ear-covering caps and thick Alpaca shawls typical of the higher reaches of the Andes, sweaters and headbands and wristbands, gloves and belts.

Most recently, the communities have set up the Restaurant Papamanka ("Potato Oven"), where visitors are given traditional recipes with ingredients that are wholly organic. Members of the Asociacion de Gastronomía, which manages the restaurant, had prepared for us a small sample of these: delicious roasted corn (the biggest I've ever seen), boiled or baked potato with a chutney made of wild and cultivated herbs, and the meat of alpaca (a domesticated animal similar to the more familiar llama), all to be eased down our throats with a pleasantly sweet non-alcoholic drink made from — you guessed it — potato!

Visitors can also avail of a few trekking trails that take them through the Park, experiencing typical village life, hiking up to sacred lakes, and getting a glimpse of agricultural biodiversity and wildlife.

Intertwined knowledge

The scientific knowledge of the farmers is integrated with deep cultural and spiritual values. Each variety of potato has a name, each is identified not only by taste, smell, texture, shape, colour, and growing properties, but also by stories and spiritual values associated with it. There is also more than a dash of humour. One rather convoluted potato variety full of knobs and wrinkles is called the "tears of the bride"; it is given to young women to peel without breaking any bits as a test of their readiness for marriage!

Recognising the worth of the Quechua initiative, the International Potato Centre is collaborating with farmers to increase productivity without affecting diversity. This kind of joint research marks a paradigm shift, for, conventionally, such formal institutions have only considered farmers as donors of "raw" material and recipients of lab-generated technologies.

The Potato Park is a unique community conserved area, aimed at reviving and strengthening the biological and cultural heritage of an ancient civilisation, and making it relevant to contemporary times.

Ashish Kothari is with Kalpavriksh – Environmental Action Group.

Getting there

The Potato Park is south of Pisac, in the Sacred Valley of the Incas, about an hour-and-a-half's picturesque drive from the city of Cusco in Peru. The six communities that have joined to form the Park also have a number of packages for ecologically responsible tourism. For day visitors, accommodation is plentiful in Cusco; the local communities will arrange your stay if you are going for more than a day. Contacting them before going is essential for the trip to be mutually beneficial to the visitor and to local people.

For more info see www.parquedelapapa.org .

[Printer friendly page](#)

[Send this article to Friends by E-Mail](#)

Magazine

[Features: Magazine](#) | [Literary Review](#) | [Life](#) | [Metro Plus](#) | [Open Page](#) | [Education Plus](#) | [Book Review](#) | [Business](#) | [SciTech](#) | [NXg](#) | [Friday Review](#) | [Cinema Plus](#) | [Young World](#) | [Property Plus](#) | [Quest](#) |

[The Hindu Group: Home](#) | [About Us](#) | [Copyright](#) | [Archives](#) | [Contacts](#) | [Subscription](#)
[Group Sites: The Hindu](#) | [Business Line](#) | [Sportstar](#) | [Frontline](#) | [Publications](#) | [eBooks](#) | [Images](#) | [Home](#) |

Comments to : thehindu@vsnl.com Copyright © 2009, The Hindu
Republication or dissemination of the contents of this screen are expressly prohibited without the written consent of The Hindu

