

Millets, the answer to India's food security: say food scientists

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INDIA is making major efforts to ensure the consumption of millets is on the rise. In this regard considerable importance is given to processing and value addition of finger Millet or small millets.

The millets are known to be low in dietary bulk, high in nutrient density and known for its good profile of amino acids, according to officials from the department of food and nutrition department, division of Home Science, University of Agricultural sciences, Bangalore.

In this regard an event was organized by Rainbow LifeLine Conservation Society and non governmental organizations to highlight the forgotten millets and value-added food products. Some of the forgotten millets are foxtail millet, sorghum, spiked millet, kodo millet, Little millet, Proso millet and Barnyard millet.

According to UAS, there are several projects under the National Agriculture Innovation Scheme. UAS is one of the stake holders working on the development of millets and maize.

While Karnataka is one of the leading states in the production of millets primarily finger millets or ragi, we are looking to increase the acreage through intercropping.

Currently the key millet growing regions in the state are Old Myore, Bangalore rural, Chennapatna, and Kollegal, Tumkur, Gauribidnaur, Chitradurga, Davengere.

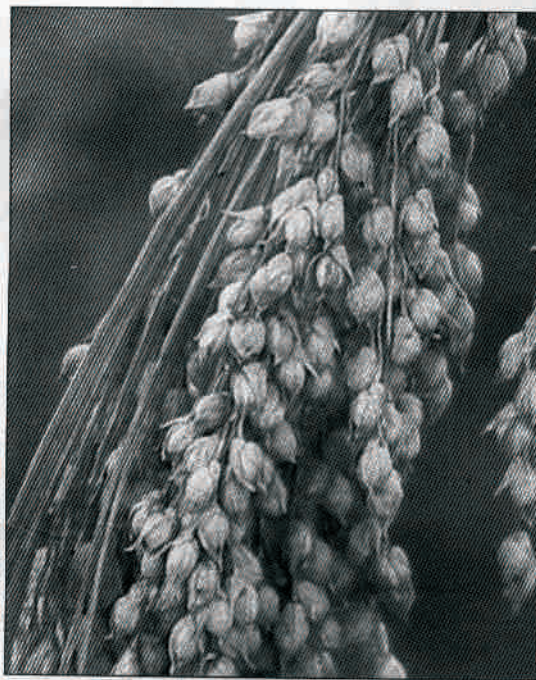
Millets are priced between Rs. 1,900 to Rs. 2,000 per quintal and finger millet costs Rs. 1,600 to Rs. 2,000. The rise in prices are attributed to the low supply of the produce.

The millets are highly recommendable as functional foods. It is known for control of diabetics and many vitamin-mineral deficiency disorders.

Among the value added products are ready to eat Flour, papad, chaklis, cakes and biscuits.

Sahaja Samrudha an organic farmers Association of Karnataka is now selling many of the value added products of millets at outlets in the state.

The cultivation of millets is highly recommendable for drought prone regions because these are low water consuming crops. Most millets are grown in low fer-



tile soils. It is the ideal crop for climate crisis because it can withstand high temperature regimes. These include both acidic and saline soils. Pearl millets can be grown in the deserts too. It also does not demand synthetic fertilizers. Further, these are also pest free crops. Most millets are grown in traditional farming systems and are biodiversity. The millets are popular as fodder because of its edible stocks which are most favoured by cattle but now food scientists are taking a re-look at the nutritive value of the millets.

The biggest advantage of millets is that it can produce multiple security like food, nutrition, fodder, fibre, health, livelihood and ecology, according to Millet Network of India - Deccan Development Society-FIAN India.

In terms of nutrition, millets are far more valuable than rice and wheat. Finger millet has 30 times more calcium compared to rice. Foxtail and little millet are also higher in nutrition compared to rice. It also contains high quantity of beta carotene.

According to G Krishna Prasad, director, Sahaja Samrudha, there is an urgent need to put millets in the Public Distribution System. Millets are also water saving and drought tolerant crops. Therefore they must be viewed as climate change compliant crops. This factor makes the crop India's food and farming future. This is the perspective from which millet cultivation must be regarded.

"Every millet farmer in India must be given a climate change bonus, biodiversity bonus and water conservation bonus, according to Millet Network of India - Deccan Development Society-FIAN India.

Different parts of India grow diverse kinds of millets. While Rajasthan is home to the pearl Millet (Bajra), Deccan Plateau comprising Marthwada in Maharashtra, Telangana in Andhra Pradesh and parts of North Karnataka are well known for sorghum or great millet. Southern Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Orissa and southern Karnataka is known for finger millet or ragi. Uttarkhand and other hilly areas grow a range of small millets like foxtail and proso, kodo and barnyard. The Indian PDS system if it includes this millets, then it will provide the below the poverty line population a food and nutritional security programme.

The pro-millet PDS paradigm must depend on a completely decentralized approach based on local production, local storage and local distribution, said Prasad. However, this must be supported by the government both in procurement and in storage. Government must on a war footing provide space for millet based foods in ICDS, school meals and welfare hostel programmes. This will overcome

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the problem of malnutrition of young children where India fares worse than the sub-Saharan region.

Further, there are also a number of institutional mechanisms to be created. This is because millets need a number of conditions. The key factor is to increase the livestock which are local breeds and adapted to local ecosystem. This will only forge a alliances between farmers and the. It will help to increase the organic manure, fodder availability, milk production and increased incomes for farmers, said Prasad.

The focus should be given to

the productivity of rainfed lands where millets are grown. This could be achieved through special water shed on millet lands and dovetailing the government's employment programme such as NREGA to support millet cultivation from sowing to harvesting.

According to Millet Network of India - Deccan Development Society-FIAN India, research institutions must give a new thrust on millet areas and issues. But research initiatives must be led for farmers since they offer viable perspectives for the research which must be people centered and people directed. ○

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