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— go earthy —



The miracle Grain

Millet is not only a climate saviour but also a commodity that is high on the health table

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DECCAN CHRONICLE

With floods and drought playing spoilsport in India, a handful of farmers in Jharkhand were rejoicing their decision to shift to crops that don't demand a high water intake (like rice) and can stand high temperatures (unlike wheat). "While farmers across the country were bemoaning the fact that their soil and climate no longer supported cultivation, these farmers were busy harvesting the not-so-demanding crops such as *mandua* (millet) that use little water, give lots of fodder and are on high on nutrients," says renowned environmentalist Vandana Shiva.

Shiva has been working on millet for the past 25 years and has great success stories to tell. "Today, we have a book, *Forgotten Foods* that helps urban dwellers make burgers out of millet," says the Navdanya chief.

The miracle grain, as millet is called is no longer a realisation confined to India alone. According to research by International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT), crops such as pearl millet, sorghum, chickpea, pigeonpea and groundnut

are important for the livelihood of people in the dry land areas of Asia and Africa.

"These crops have several natural evolutionary advantages for the global-warming scenario. Both pearl millet and sorghum have high levels of salinity and heat tolerance, and hence are better adapted to areas that are likely to become saline due to global warming. Our medium to long-term focus now is to develop crop varieties that will adapt to a water-scarce and warmer world," says Dr William Dar, DG, ICRISAT in a statement.

BEING A FIBRE RICH FOOD, MILLET IS A BOON IN DISEASES SUCH AS DIABETES

Millet — sorghum, finger millet, pearl millet, foxtail millet, barnyard millet, proso millet, kodo millet and little millet — is an all-season crop, whereas wheat and rice are season specific. While wheat and rice might provide only food security, millet has multiple securities (food, fodder, health, nutrition, livelihood and ecological) making it the crop of agricultural security. "Besides, a vast dry land area that is not so rich in nutrients can be put to use in millet farming," says PV Sathesh, National Coordinator of the Millet Network of India (MINI).

For a consumer millet, being a high fibre food, is a boon in diseases such as diabetes. Millet is also low on car-

bohydrates and cholesterol, and thus its consumption lowers the danger of heart disease and obesity. "This health consciousness has pushed the commodity onto the top of the health table. Now, we see newer qualities of millet being discovered by people themselves!" says Sathesh, adding, "In Dharwad, Karnataka, you have this great phenomenon of the little millet (*sawan*) being preferred to Bt Cotton since farmers are finding that it is in great demand by chefs who have discovered that it makes softer *idlis* as compared to those made with rice!"

All these developments have given ideas to workers like Sathesh. MINI is currently working with the Andhra Pradesh government to put millet into the state's public distribution system to create a demand for the commodity. In the pilot phase, it has asked the government to convert cultivable fallow land into millet farms. "The state has over 30 million hectares of land under cultivable wastes and current fallows. If this land is considered for millet farming, the state can produce 25 million tonnes of millet and 3 million tonnes of pulses and fodder," Sathesh adds.

With awareness, business and demand it seems like the millet is about to cast its magic regardless of how high the temperature soars and how low the rainfall gets!

The towering threat

DC CORRESPONDENT

The electromagnetic waves emitted by mobile phone towers and cellphones can pose a threat to honey bees, says a study. An experiment conducted in Kerala has found that a sudden fall in the honey bee population was caused by towers installed across the state by cellphone companies wanting to increase their network.

The electromagnetic waves emitted by the towers cripple the "navigational skills" of the worker bees that go out to collect nectar from flowers to sustain bee colonies, says Dr. Sainuddin Pattazhy, who conducted the study. He found that when a cellphone was kept near a beehive, the worker bees were unable to return, resulting in the collapse of the colony within 10 days. If towers and mobile phones increase further, honey bees might be wiped out in 10 years, Pattazhy adds.

A similar study done in Kerala a few months ago found that the population of house sparrows was adversely affected by the same problem. The Kerala Environmental Researchers Association studied railway stations, FCI godowns, warehouses, human dwellings, etc. and found that the sparrow had gone missing from most areas in the state.

The menace of communication towers is global. In at least one instance, several thousand birds were killed at a single tower in one night. At least 231 species have been affected, with neotropical migrants making up a large proportion of all the species killed.



Green LOBBY

Eco-driven infotainment

We aim to take the cause of climate change ahead via our screens — a staunch mass communication medium," says Amitabh Vardhan, CEO, PVR Cinemas. The country's largest multiplex chain, PVR recently opened its screens for the global premiere of the critically acclaimed docudrama on climate change, *The Age of Stupid*. The screening in the capital was hosted by Greenpeace and attractions included celebrated Hollywood-Bollywood director, Shekhar Kapur who urged Asia to consider the vanishing glaciers as crucial as any of its resources being looted.

With this screening the multiplex company aims to get more vocal about saving the planet. "We aim to take the cause of climate change ahead. We don't want to make it heavy with sermons of do's and don'ts, but entertaining where people, while watching a film with family and friends, realise the cause and find solutions," says Vardhan.

"We must make films that help us realise what we have and what we are losing due to our ignorance. There is a lot we can do through films," concludes Vardhan.

—JV