

## **A Small Millet against Starvation**

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“Konidhan”- A small millet against starvation “Konidhan” is the local name for a traditional millet grown in Assam. Millets belong to a family of cereals grown across continents, feeding millions in Asia and Africa..

ALMOST EVERYONE in Assam has heard of this cereal grain which is known as “Konidhan”. When we feel hungry, we ask for some rice or chapattis; nobody asks for “Konidhan” as it is not a staple food outside this region. “Konidhan” is the local name for millet. Actually many of us don’t have much knowledge about the grain itself because utilization of this cereal is very poor. This is a minor millet found in various regions of the world.

Millet belongs to the family of cereals grown globally with different levels of importance across various regions of the world. They form a diverse group of small grains cultivated in diverse and adverse environments, mostly in the dry, semi-arid to sub-humid drought-prone agro eco-systems. Moreover these plants are less prone to diseases and pests in the field and store. The advantage of millets lies in the fact that they can be grown in infertile soil, intense heat, and scanty rainfall. For millions of people in the semi-arid tropics of Asia and Africa, millet has been the most important staple food for centuries. They are sometimes known as the “poor man’s cereal” because given a choice, people go for other cereals such as wheat or rice.

Mainly millets can be divided under two heads - major millets and minor millets. Sorghum, pearl millets are major millets. Under minor millets, foxtail millet, barnyard, kodo millet, proso millets, and little millets, are important.

Several kinds of millets are grown in the world. According to FAO data, millet production increased from 26 million tonnes in 1979-81 to 31 million tonnes in 1989 and 1990. A recent global production record of millet shows that India, China and Nigeria produce a majority of the world’s millet.

India is the leading millet producing country and accounts for 38.6 per cent of the world’s total millet production. Different parts of India grow different kinds of millet. Rajasthan along with a large part of rain-fed India cultivates pearl millet, the Deccan plateau (as well as Marathwada in Maharashtra, Telangana in Andhra Pradesh and North Karnataka in Karnataka) is well known for sorghum. Southern Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Orissa and Southern Karnataka are the home of finger millet (ragi). Uttarakhand and other tribal areas cultivate a range of small millets such as foxtail, proso, kodo and barnyard.

Information on the production of millets in Assam is very scanty. According to the basic statistics for NER 2002, the area under small millet is 11.0(‘000)ha and production is 4926.181t. In the hilly areas of Karbi Anglong, the villagers practice a unique method of farming called the Mix Cropping System or “Jhum” cultivation system. Using this cropping system they cultivate millets along with vegetables. The Mix Cropping System enables them to cultivate different crops together in a limited area. It not only helps in utilizing the seasonal rainfall but also in keeping the soil unexposed thereby preventing top soil erosion.

Out of 30 million tonnes of millet produced worldwide, about 90 per cent is utilized in developing countries and a tiny volume is used in developed countries. Exact statistical data are unavailable for most countries, but it is estimated that a total of 20 million tonnes are consumed as food, the rest

being equally divided between feed and other uses such as seed, the preparation of alcoholic beverages and waste. Six countries namely China, India, Ethiopia, The Niger, Nigeria and the former Soviet Union are estimated to account for about 80 per cent of global millet utilisation, as reported by FAO.

A nutritive analysis of millets vis-a-vis the major grains such as rice and wheat prove that nutrient to nutrient, millets score over most other grains. They have a 30 to 300 per cent higher nutritional content that includes calcium, minerals, iron, fibre, beta carotene and many other micronutrients. But utilization is poor due the non-availability of proper processing techniques. For that matter, some processing techniques like puffing and malting can be developed in household- and cottage-level which can improve the utilization of millets.

Last June, 2008, The Millet Network of India (MINI) had organized a workshop on millet at Hyderabad and concluded that millets had the capacity for multiple securities such as food security, fodder security, health and nutritional security, livelihood security and ecological security; millets can be the food and farming future of India. They suggested the millets were nutri-cereals.

Deforestation, industrialisation, and urbanisation, have caused rapid climate change all over the world, and this has a drastic effect on biodiversity and we know that agricultural diversity is directly related to food production. Different varieties of agricultural plants are set to vanish in the near future due to climate change. So, there is a great chance that the world is going to face a severe food crisis. So, in this context we can say that millet can be a sustainable agricultural crop for us in the future as it has that potential.

Though millets are grown in a limited area in the North-East of India, undoubtedly, it can be a sustainable agricultural support for our future. In Assam, millets are mostly used for preparing local alcoholic beverages and for preparing a porridge called "payasam". They use some traditional techniques for preparing this stuff.

So, these indigenous technologies along with the traditional knowledge can be coupled with modern science and technology for the effective utilisation of these lesser-known grains. Along with modern technologies, some standardised processing techniques as mentioned above, like puffing and malting can be developed, at household levels, which can increase the utilization of this amazing crop.

Different socio-economic studies and nutritive value analyses and product development aspects of millets have been undertaken in different parts of the world along with some parts of India. But no systematic study has been done on millets in North-East Assam. So, the study on millets in this region is essential to understanding these important non-conventional cereals which have a role in food security. These lesser-known food grains happen to be an important staple food for us in the future. Who knows, this "Konidhan" is probably what stands between us and impending starvation. We should not neglect this very important crop.