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TREADING THE UNTRODDEN

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Bringing back millet to cope with climate change, empower women

By Teresa Rehman

CHIZAMI, India (AlertNet) - Seno Tshuhah, a primary school teacher in this picturesque village near the Myanmar border, wants to help local women cope with changing climate conditions in Nagaland by promoting an old practice: the cultivation of traditional varieties of millet.

Sowing seeds is mostly the domain of women in the area, explains Tshuhah, the moving spirit of a local resource centre of the North East Network, an NGO that works on women's empowerment and human rights. In each home, a woman "usually keeps the seeds and the different crop selection is mainly done by her. We are trying to sensitise women farmers to promote crop diversity and revive the traditional indigenous seeds which are suitable for the local soil," she says.

Millet, an upland crop, has long been cultivated in the hills of northeast India, and millet-based 'apong,' a country liquor, is a common brew. But the traditional grain is seen primarily as food for the poor and for animals, and millet cultivation is diminishing, along with the traditional 'jhum' system of integrating multiple crops in a field.

"The earlier jhum systems were very complex, but nowadays it has been extremely simplified and the focus has shifted to mono-cropping," said Subbiah Arunachalam, of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research in Meghalaya state.

Increasingly unusual weather, including more erratic rainfall and



ABOUT ME

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NORTHEAST INDIA

The seven states of India's Northeast are also known as the 'Seven Sisters'. They comprise of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, Nagaland and Manipur. The

prolonged dry spells, however, are driving Tsuhah and others to try to revive the crop, which can grow in harsh conditions and needs little in the way of fertilizer or other inputs.

Her centre is in the process of setting up a seed bank of traditional millet varieties and has so far collected about 15. It is also collecting traditional millet recipes and organizing food festivals and exhibitions to pass on the information. "We are trying to ensure that the seeds are preserved and accorded due importance. If some seeds are lost, there is always a scope of sharing the seeds," she said.

Climate change is leading to increasingly temperatures in places like northeast India, and wheat harvests are expected to suffer as a result. Cultivation of rice, another staple, releases too much methane, a potent greenhouse gas, from paddies, environmentalists say.

MILLET SEEN AS A RESILIENT CHOICE

Millet is seen as a more resilient choice, not least because it requires much less water than rice or wheat. Millet, cultivated in traditional mixed 'jhum' fields, is usually sown on rocky sloping ground with minimal soil. Planted in April, it is harvested in July, and a millet feast usually follows in August. "Jhum is the indigenous way of maintaining the ecology and rejuvenating life. It is difficult to understand why millet is called a poor man's food," Tsuhah said.

Millet, while a traditional food and widely used for brewing, is today largely used as animal fodder. But it has also won a spot on the shelves of health food shops frequented by India's elite.

The Millet Network of India, in a nationwide campaign, is now promoting the grain as a climate change-compliant crop and a traditional Indian choice.

Srinivas Vatturi, of the millet network, emphasizes that multi-cropping of grains like millet are part of women-led traditional farming, while mono-cropping is largely controlled by men. Men may control money produced by selling mono-crops, he said, but women control food produced at home for the house. Millet also improves not only food security but health, ecological, livelihood and fodder security, he said.

OUTSIDE INDIA'S DISTRIBUTION SYSTEM

One problem in expanding the cultivation of millet is that it is not included in India's national distribution system for subsidized grain, said P.V. Satheesh of the Deccan Development Society, an Indian NGO that promotes development among India's poorest.

tripura, nagaland and mizoram. The region has suffered from decades of insurgency and bloody conflict and a strong sense of alienation from 'mainstream India'.

USP

The northeastern region of India is a paradise for journalists. It has been neglected by mainstream Indian media and has often been ghettoised as a monolith. The blog is an attempt to present write-ups on myriad hues from the region for a global audience.

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That exclusion - which has resulted in more Indians eating distributed grains like rice and wheat - has hurt millet production in the country and curbed the diversity of Indian diets, he said. Many young people are no longer aware of traditional crop varieties.

With hunger still widespread in India and a state focus on distributing rice and wheat doing little to curb that, growing nutritionally rich millet at a household level could improve diets, he said. It could be a particularly good choice in remote hilly areas where people are now dependent on food transported all the way from the neighbouring plain areas.

"The farming landscape of the country needs to be redesigned and new food policies shaped, as crops of larger powerful states like Punjab and Haryana are designing the food policies of our country now. Most millet growers are from poorer areas and communities," Satheesh said.

Ketaki Bardalai, executive director of the Foundation for Social Transformation, a northeast Indian NGO, said promoting traditional cultivation systems, mapping millet cultivation pockets and discovering the reasons for its decline are all key, particularly in Northeast India, one of the country's most economically backward and conflict-troubled zones. "Sadly, the growing and consuming of millet is slowly fading. The treasure trove of traditional systems disappearing is also very high," she said.

Teresa Rehman is a journalist based in Northeast India. She can be reached at www.teresarehman.net
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