

Magic of millets

AGRICULTURE Till the late '80s, millets were a crucial part of agricultural produce in the Dharwad region before cash crops like maize, improved varieties of cotton and soya bean took over. Today, farmers and consumers of Dharwad district are rediscovering the importance of millets, writes Anitha Pailoor

“When incidence of lifestyle diseases like diabetes and joint pain increased in our village, we paused to introspect. Over the last couple of years, we have realised that returning to millet-based farming is the only alternative,” says Basavanneppa Angadi, a farmer in Surashettikoppa in Kalaghatagi taluk of Dharwad. As president of Sarvodaya Mahasangha, a federation of self-helps groups from 22 villages in Hubli and Kalaghatagi taluks, he reflects on the experiences of hundreds of farmers.

He explains, “Jowar, little millet (*saave*), foxtail millet (*navane*), pearl millet (*sajje*) and to a certain extent, finger millet (*ragi*) and proso millet (*baraga*) formed a key part of the agricultural produce in Dharwad district till the late Eighties. When cash crops like maize, improved variety of cotton and soya bean were introduced, the tricky post-cultivation processes of raising millets turned out to be tedious and cumbersome for farmers. Angadi says, “When we got a month’s income as a day’s wages, we forgot all about millets in our daily diet. Cooking rice was an easy and quicker way out. Now we have understood that the time saved is now spent in the waiting lounges of clinics.”

A treasure house

Cash crops do not cater to the fodder needs of cattle. “In the end, cultivating one acre of little millet is equivalent to growing ten acres of maize,” Basavaraj, a farmer from Naganur compares the fodder produced and also cost of cultivation. It took a couple of decades for farmers to understand this vicious circle, which also snatched away their food security.

In a meet held in Dharwad in 2010, farmers noted that between 1950 and 1975, 23 varieties of jowar were grown.



The number has dropped to 11 in the last one decade. Little millet also lost three varieties. The area under cultivation has also come down. Farmers have now started to safeguard the varieties that remain.

In the last two years, millets have become trendsetters in Dharwad. The grains, which were part of cuisine during rituals, have crossed the barrier to be a component of a normal meal. *Truna dhanyas* (negligible grains) have become *siri dhanyas* (crops of wealth). University of Agricultural Sciences has been creating awareness about the health benefits of these miracle grains and encouraging experiments in the kitchen.

Millet Network of India (MINI), a nationwide network working towards popularising millets, considers millets to be miracle grains that grow without any major agricultural interventions or fertilisers, and can still provide a solution to multiple problems surrounding sustainability of agriculture and environment. In Dharwad, three organisations: Society for Community Participation and Empowerment (SCOPE), Atmadeepa and RAPID have also come together to form SIRIKRISI (Siridhanya Kriya Santini) in collaboration with MINI. The group is working to understand the situation of millet cultivation and con-



MIRACLE GRAINS Farmers of Surashettikoppa tracing their memory of use of millets in culture and cultivation. (Below right) A foxtail millet field and (below left) heaps of millets post-harvest. PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

“BALABALAGA IS THE FIRST SCHOOL IN DHARWAD TO INTRODUCE A MILLET-BASED LUNCH TO ITS STUDENTS AND THEIR PARENTS. IT HAS CONVINCED THEM TO HAVE AT LEAST TWO MILLET MEALS A WEEK.



sumption in the district. Various activities like focus group discussions are held to gain an understanding of the present status. “We are also planning to set up a millet resource centre to provide all information on millets on one platform,” says Prakash Bhat, Chief Executive Officer of SCOPE.

High on nutrition quotient

Though small in size, millets surpass wheat and rice in terms of protein, mineral and vitamin components. Calcium content in finger millet is 34 times more than rice. Pearl millet provides high quantity of iron while proso and foxtail millets are rich in protein. Millets also have additional dietary fibre which facilitates proper digestion. Sanjeev Kulkarni, President of Atmadeepa says, “Millets are health foods. They offer a huge nutritional boost to populations residing in dry land areas. Millets are rich in antioxidants and micronutrients, and thereby help to maintain good immunity and other physiological functions. They have proved to be a useful diet

for diabetic people.” According to a study done by Nirmala Yenagi, Head of Food and Nutrition Department, Rural Home Science College, University of Agricultural Sciences, Dharwad, regular consumption of nutritious millet food enhanced haemoglobin level among women labourers and school children.

The litmus test for consumer response to millet-based food products was carried out by way of food festivals in the City. “We have received amazing response from people. The taste of millets draws young and old alike. Millet-based snacks absorb less oil. Just substitute rice and wheat with millets in most snacks,” points out Shanta Talavar, who is planning to set up a millet food outlet at home. Vani Purohit, Director of RAPID, which has trained a group of economically-backward section of women in preparing millet recipes, is content with their enthusiasm.

Food literacy, the step ahead

Balabalaga is the first school in Dharwad to introduce a millet-based lunch to its students and their parents. It has convinced them to have at least two millet meals a week. “We have pointed out to them the phenomenal advantages of millets. It is a gradual process. It might take some time to get them used to the taste of millets,” says Pratibha Kulkarni, principal of the school. SIRIKRISI as part of its campaign wants to spread this awareness in other educational institutions and make them Siri schools.

SIRIKRISI has initiated several such activities in the district. Consumer awareness, motivating farmers and facilitating caterers are the three broad goals of this group. “In the process, we want to address bottlenecks that hinder the universal acceptance of millets like processing, marketing and consumption. We also want to

stabilise the link between producers and consumers by synchronising demand and supply. A couple of outlets in the City have a good number of visitors,” says Prakash Bhat.

“We do not want to promote millets just as a crop. It is rooted in indigenous culture and lifestyle, now limited to rituals, for many reasons. We should understand the hope they bring as crops that can withstand the challenges of climate change.” He feels that the National Convention of Millet Farmers held in Dharwad in October was a platform to understand the prospects of millet farming across the country.

One of the demands in the Dharwad Declaration on Millets which was made at the end of a two-day convention says, “We urge the introduction of millets in all forms of Public Food Distribution Systems. We wholeheartedly welcome the current initiative to recommend inclusion of millets in the PDS as spelt out in the draft National Food Security Bill. But such an introduction must be accompanied by the principles of local production, storage and distribution.

“Only this approach can nurture the pristine quality of millet cultivation and consumption. Any other form of millets in PDS can make it vulnerable to the capture of millet production by large industrial houses and corporations. In recognition of the fiercely independent nature of millet farmers, such predatory industrial production must be banned and all procurement of millets must be done at the local panchayat/community level. Such procurement must be based on rightful remunerative minimum support prices for millet farmers.”

The crops that offer independence and dignity to small and marginal farmers are finally getting due recognition.