RISE OF THE HOLY GRAIN

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***The rolling hills we walk through are now lined with rows of crisscrossed crop that time has forgotten. Millets, the magic grains, the staple diet our ancestors. Those holy grains are rising again from the dirt to alleviate poverty from this holy land. May lord Malleeswara and ancestors shower blessings on us to fulfill the mission to bring back millets- the super crop of our forefathers!***

Till about 5 decades ago, millets were the major grain grown in India. Though world’s leading producer of millet is still India, Green revolution and policies that favored rice and wheat, ignored millets which led to a sharp decline in millet production and consumption. Due to the change in food habits, millets became less significant in our diet.

**Return of the Super food**

In the era of global warming and climate change, millets are gaining importance. One rice plant requires nearly 2.5 times the amount of water required by a single millet plant of most varieties, according to the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid ,ICRISAT. Crops like rice and wheat cannot tolerate temperatures more than 38 degrees Centigrade, while millets can tolerate temperatures of more than 46 degrees C. Requirement of inputs like fertilizers and pesticides are also much less compared cereals like rice and wheat. They can also grow in saline soil. Millets could therefore be an important solution for farmers struggling with climate change – sea level rise, which can cause soil salinity, heat waves, droughts and floods.

Marking a major policy shift, Government of India and many States have decided to promote millets. These nutrient-rich grains are making a quick comeback in the Indian agrarian landscape after decades of neglect.

**Valley of the wind**

Attapadi area is situated in Palakkad district of Kerala. This serene land is nestled below the enchanting Nilgiri hills. Nature has showered her bounty on the Land with virgin forests, mesmerizing river valleys and whistling wind. It has an average elevation of 800-1000 meters with Malleeswaran peak as its most notable landmark. The Bhavani and the Siruvani rivers flow through the valley and join outside the limits of Kerala.Attappady is considered to be one among the driest parts of Kerala. The hills on the western side are higher and steeper and the dryness in the eastern half has been attributed to the rain-shadow effect of the mountains.

Attapadi is one of the largest tribal settlements in Kerala. The three tribes in Attappady are Irula, Muduga and Kurumba. Apart from collection of forest produce, farming of traditional crops like millets as well as cattle and goat rearing have been their main livelihood options. Millets occupied a prime space in their diet.

In Attappady, the exploitation of tribal farmers by seed and agro-chemical companies and local money lenders is prominent .Due to their influence farmers shifted to cotton farming and gradually millets were wiped out of the hamlets. During 2006 genetically modified B.T cotton became common in Attapadi. Though initially good yields were obtained, later due to severe incidence of other pests, chemical pesticides were dumped into the fields. The situation was getting grave. Malnutrition and infant deaths became common in Attapadi, mainly due to the change in traditional food habit which included millets, pulses like red gram and oil seeds like groundnut and mustard.

**Millet Village**

By 2009, due to Government intervention cultivation of BT cotton was reduced. But cotton still remained to dominate the fields. In 2016, a new project “Millet Village” was launched by the Department of Agricultural Development and Farmer's welfare in association with Department of tribal welfare at Attapadi. This innovative project was conceived by the visionary leader and Minister for Agriculture V.S.SunilKumar.

Initially the tribal farmers were reluctant to replace cotton with millets. The field staff of the concerned Departments arranged awareness programs in all hamlets and succeeded in convincing the tribal communities that returning to traditional cultivation and traditional crops will help them to overcome the health hazards.

Seeds of millets and other crops were distributed free of cost .Goat and cattle rearing being common, organic manure is available here in abundance. During 2016 itself Millet farming resumed in the valley.

Customs associated with millet farming was also revived.Mixing of various millets, pulses and other seeds and sowing them after ritualistic worship of earth known as “Kambala”is the traditional practice in Attapadi. Farming in the hamlets is lead by Chieftain Known as “Oorumoopan” and head of farming, “Mannookaran”.Traditional song and dance accompany the sowing.

515 hectare was planted with millets and other food crops during the first year which gradually increased to 650 hectare by 2019.1480 farm families are involved in the scheme now. Per season production is about 800 tons.

Traditional grain and seed storage practices followed by tribes were also rejuvenated under the program. The produce left after consumption by tribal families is procured by the Department of Agriculture. These are processed and made into value added products by Krishi Vigyan Kendra, Coimpathore. Tribal women are employed to do this work. Products are sold with Organic label by Department of Agriculture.

Attapadi is home to many traditional varieties of millets, oil seeds and pulses. Under the project, efforts are being taken to conserve and cultivate them in the fields. Studies have begun at the “Intellectual Property Rights Cell” at the Kerala Agriculture University to present the case of *Attukombu Amara*, a variety of Lablab Bean and *Attappadi Thuvara*, variety of red gram for the Geographical Indication tag.

The traditional millet dishes also made a comeback in the hamlets. Millet dosa, puttu, porridge and roti are some of those tasty dishes. Consumption of millets has resulted in substantial improvement of the health condition of tribal people. According to the study done by tribal health nodal officer during 2018, rate of infant deaths in Attapadi reduced to 13 from 31 in 2013 while abortions were reduced to 31 from 77 in 2013.This is a good indication that revival of millets is having good impact on the community. Tribal farmers are eager to continue the farming of millets. The Department of Agricultural Development and Farmer's welfare, Kerala will extend the project for further 3 years under ‘Rebuild Kerala Initiative’.

Attapadi valley is celebrating the return of the holy grains. As the saying goes “Dreams are the seeds of change. Nothing ever grows without a seed, and nothing ever changes without a dream”.

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