RESEARCH ARTICLE

Status and Development of Exotic Crops in Khandesh Region of Maharashtra (India): A Plea for Agrobiodiversity Conservation

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Manuscript Details

Manuscript Submitted : 10/04/2021
Manuscript Revised : 17/06/2021
Manuscript Accepted : 18/08/2021
Manuscript Published : 16/09/2021

Available On

https://plantaescientia.com/ojs

Cite This Article As

Khairnar S. B., Patil M.V. & D.A. Patil, (2021). Status And Development of Exotic Crops in Khandesh Region of Maharashtra (India): A Plea for Agrobiodiversity Conservation . Pla. Sci. 2021; Vol. 04 Iss. 04 & 05:230-235.

ABSTRACT

Selective utilization of limited crop species threatened some other crop species. This trend rendered some crop species into underutilised grain crops throughout. At this backdrop, the present authors inventorised agrobiodiversity in Khandesh region of Maharashtra (India). The area was visited in different seasons. The tribal farmers were interviewed to tap down information with respect to agroclimate, yield, characteristic features etc. Actual field visits were also made in study area. The crop species were deciphered using standard state, regional and district floras, besides the manuals and cyclopedia of cultivated plants. Total 17 exotic crop species were investigated belonging to cereals, millets, pulses and edible oil-yielders. The data accrued has been evaluated with the relevant national and international scenario. A need for their conservation is earmarked with particular emphasis on underutilised millets. The subject-matter is further dilated in view of their importance for the welfare tribal people in the area and developing countries.

Keywords: Exotic Crops, Khandesh, Maharashtra, Conservation.
INTRODUCTION

The prime necessity of mankind is the food which comes from vegetable kingdom in different forms. Man's oldest occupation is cultivation of plants. Plants from wild sources were domesticated in different geographical areas and cultures. Man's most outstanding necessity is also an adequate food supply. Before domestication of plants for food sources, man devoted his entire time in search of food and led life of hardships. Even in modern period, man is witnessed by agrarian crisis because of selective utilization of crops and their forms of germplasm. Green evolution also aggravated this situation since only few crop sources are emphasized for their development and increase in food yield. This trend marginalised some crop species and now they are on the threshold of depletion in many areas. The present authors, at this backdrop extended research on agrobiodiversity particularly in tribal-dominated areas in Khandesh region of Maharashtra (India). This attempt has laid special attention of exotic crop species. Their diversity, origin and necessity are, therefore, being communicated in this paper.

STUDY AREA

Khandesh is the North-Western region of Maharashtra state in India. The districts viz., Dhule, Nandurbar and Jalgaon constitute the Khandesh region. It has a common border with the adjacent states of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh and district boundaries with Nasik, Aurangabad and Buldhana districts of Maharashtra. It extents between 20°8' and 22°7' north latitude and 73°42' and 76°28' east longitude (Map I-II). Ranges of Western Ghats (Sahyadri Mountain) extend in easterly direction and north-western border adjacent to Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh has Satpura mountain in wall-like manner. The forests are mainly dry deciduous type. The main river and its tributaries drain in the west Arabian sea.

PEOPLE

Apart from urban population, the tehsils bordering Nashik district, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh are tribal-dominated. The main tribes inhabiting this region are Kokani (Kokana), Mawachi, Pawara, Bhil and Tadwi. They have small land holding and also depend on forest resources. They rear few domestic animals. Khandesh is a agrarian in nature and cultivate traditionally some cereals, millets, pulses, oil-yielding crops etc. for their sustenance.

METHODOLOGY ADAPTED

This region was inventorised during 2008-2015 for studies in agrobiodiversity particularly in tribal-dominated tehsils. The tribal farmers, elder men and women were interviewed from different villages and hamlets in different seasons. Actual field visits were paid during various agricultural operations. Crop plants, useful parts, local name, phenological period, seasons, etc. were recorded. These crop species were deciphered using state, regional and districts floras, manuals and encyclopedia (cf. Cooke 1958; Sharma et al., 1996; Singh et al., 2000, 2001; Naik, 1998; Patil, 2003; Kshirsagar and Patil, 2008; Bailey, 1949, 1950, 1958, 1963. The present communication includes exclusively exotic crop species. Their nativity is authenticated by relevant taxonomic literature. The plant and family names, local and English common names, nativity alongwith relevant references are provided in the table I.
RESULTS

This inventory reports only exotic crop species especially from tribal region of Khandesh region of Maharashtra (India). In all, the tribal farmers cultivated exotic crop species belonging to 17 genera and 04 families of angiosperms. The split-up of these crop groups is as:

(i) Cereals: 02 species, 02 genera and a single family Poaceae

(ii) Millets: 06 species, 06 genera and a single family Poaceae

(iii) Pulses: 04 species, 04 genera and a single family Fabaceae

(iv) Oilseeds: 05 species, 05 genera under 03 families viz, Fabaceae, Brassicaceae and Asteraceae. Some of these crops are diverse as such:

(i) *Triticum aestivum* (01)

(ii) *Zea mays* (II)

(iii) *Eleusine coracana* (02)

(iv) *Panicum sumatrense* (03)

(v) *Paspalum scrobiculatum* (01)

(vi) *Pennisetum americanum* (02)

(vii) *Setaria italica* (01)

(viii) *Sorghum bicolor* (25)

(ix) *Cicer arietinum* (01)

(x) *Lens culinaris* (1)

(xi) *Pisum sativum* (01)

(xii) *Vigna unguiculata* (09)

(xiii) *Arachis hypogaea* (01)

(xiv) *Brassica juncea* (01)

(xv) *Glycine max* (01)

(xvi) *Guizotia abyssinica* (01)

(xvii) *Helianthus annuus* (01)

The figures in parenthesis denote cultivars in study area.

DISCUSSION

Agrobiodiversity focuses mainly on that portion of the biodiversity that has undergone selection and modification over millennia by mankind to serve his better needs (Subramanian and Thirumeni, 2007). It refers to the variety and variability of plants. It has to play a great role in sustaining and strengthening the food and nutritional security and health of human families, communities and nations. Obviously, its rapid depletion causes threat to welfare of mankind (World Bank, 2008).

The above results of inventory on agrobiodiversity particularly belonging to exotic crops in tribal dominated area of Khandesh are rather fair. The agrobiodiversity studied belong to various agronomic plant groups viz, cereals, millets, pulses and oil-yielding ones. It appears relevant to dilate the subject matter at the backdrop of national and international scenario.

(i) *Sorghum bicolor* (Sorghum) is the 5th most important crop in the world. These are five basic races viz, bicolor, guinea, caudatum, durra and kafir (Seetharam et al., 2007). It has received fair attention in view of diversity, conservation, distribution and germplasm collection (Elanovan, 2007; Seetharam et al., 2007; Prasada Rao et al., 2006, 1995; Gopal Reddy et al., 2006). The present account also shows fair diversity of cultivars or landraces in Khandesh region. These are well suited to the agroclimatic zone and needs of native tribal communities. Hybrid varieties are attracting tribal farmers. These obviously need conservation.

(ii) *Pennisetum americanum* (Pearl millet) is the 6th most important crop in the world. It is 2nd to Sorghum. Its germplasm is conserved in the 48 countries. About 21 landraces from Eastern Ghats and 14 landraces from Rajasthan state are documented in India. Although 30 hybrids have been released during 1987 to 2005, decrease in area is recorded (Seestharam et al., 2007). Khandesh region has only two cultivars that too in tribal areas. Its hybrid varieties are more in vogue in other area of Khandesh. At this backdrop the two cultivars, being rare, need conservation.

(iii) *Panicum sumatrense* (Little millet) is a minor millet and cultivated mainly in India. It is quick-growing and adapts well in poor soil (Deshaprabhu, 1966). About 25 landraces from Eastern Ghats in India are reported (Seetharam et al., 2007). During 1987 to 2001, India has released 09 varieties. Only 03 cultivars are noted in Khandesh region. Being important for food and fodder, these need to be conserved.
(iv) *Vigna unguiculata* (Cowpea) is cultivated in Africa, Asia (including India), and West Indies, America and Caribbean area. A large number of collection of cultivars is found in IITA in Ibadan, Nigeria, USA and India (Grubben, 1977). As many as 09 cultivar/landraces are being cultivated in Khandesh as a pure or mixed crop. It is important as pulse, green vegetable and even fodder. It can be cultivated in different seasons and hence important and a perennial source for varied use-reports. Obviously, these varieties need a special attention.

Other crop species reported from Khandesh region exhibited not much of diversity and represent only a single cultivar. Many hybrids are being grown. No local cultivars are on record. These are also cultivated in tribal areas to suffice various daily needs. Wheat, Sorghum, Pearl millet, Maize, Chickpea, Garden Pea, Groundnut and Sunflower are under cultivation with other hybrid varieties in non-tribal area of Khandesh as they yield more.

Nevertheless, The millets in general, whether exotic or indigenous to some countries, deserve special attention. These are ancient crops but orphaned or forgotten because of their low yield. Most of them are on the verge of extinction. This precarious situation, of late, is being redeemed as they are of great flavour, taste, nutritional profile, high antioxidants, gluten-free, vital trace elements and even evidence-based health benefits. They are regaining the fame as ‘superfood grains’ (Patil, 2020).

CONCLUSIONS

The present inventory and resume of past literature indicates that:

(a) millets, in particular, adapt fairly, strengthen food and nutrition security

(b) they have a wide genetic adaptation and able to grow in diverse soils, varying rainfall regimes and diverse photoperiods

(c) they have potential to thrive with low inputs and bear varied edaphoclimatic stresses

(d) and now has immersed as ‘superfood grains’. In the scenario of climate change and specially for poor tribal farmers in developing nations, they appear the best candidates to conserve for their well-beings.

Attention is but desired to increase their total yield so that they can be favoured in place of other crops.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors are thankful to the authorities of Shri Shivaji Vidy Prasarak Sanstha, Dhule (Maharashtra, India) . Junior author (KSB) is also thankful to the authorities of B.S.S.P. Mandal’s Arts, Commerce and Science College, Songir, District Dhule (Maharashtra, India) for laboratory and library facilities.

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Table 1: Exotic Crops in Khandesh and their nativity

| Sr. No. | Crop Name | Family & Local Name | Common English Name | Nativity & References |
|---------|-----------|----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| Cereals |           |                      |                     |                       |
| 1       | Triticum aestivum L. | Poaceae (Graminae) | Gahu | Wheat | Fertile crescent (Singh and Nigam (2017). |
| 2       | Zea mays L. | Poaceae (Graminae) | Maka | Maize | Central America (Purseglove, 1972) |
| Millets |           |                      |                     |                       |
| 3       | Eleusine coracana (L.) Gaertn. | Poaceae (Graminae) | Nagali | Finger millet | Tropical Africa (Gaikwad & Garad, 2015) |
| 4       | Panicum sumatrense Roth ex Roem. & Schult. | Poaceae (Graminae) | Sawa | Little millet | Asia (Excl. India)(Kaul, 1986) |
| 5       | Paspalum scrobiculatum L. | Poaceae (Graminae) | Kodra | Kodomillet | Tropical Africa (Singh and Nigam, 2017) |
| 6       | Pennisetum americanum (L.) K.Schum. | Poaceae (Graminae) | Bajara | Pearl millet | Tropical Africa (Purseglove, 1972) |
| 7       | Setaria italica (L.) P. Beauv. | Poaceae (Graminae) | Rala, Rawal, Bhadi | Foxtail millet | China, Patil, 2019; Asia (Excl. India) (Kaul, 1986) |
| 8       | Sorghum bicolor (L.) Moench. | Poaceae (Graminae) | Jawar | Sorghum | North Eastern Quadrant of Africa/Ethiopia (Singh and Nigam 2017) |
| Pulses  |           |                      |                     |                       |
| 9       | Cicer arietinum L. | Fabaceae (Papilionaceae) | Harbhara | Chickpea | Mediterranean Region (Shetty & Singh, 1987) and South Europe (Patil, 1990). |
| 10      | Lens culinaris Medic. | Fabaceae (Papilionaceae) | Mathur, Masur | Lentil | Mediterranean Region and West Asia (Shetty & Singh, 1987) |
| 11      | Pisum sativum L. | Fabaceae (Papilionaceae) | Watane, Watana | Garden Pea | West Asia (Shetty & Singh, 1987) |
| 12      | Vigna unguiculata (L.) Walp. subsp. Vigna cylindrica (L.) van Eseltine | Fabaceae (Papilionaceae) | Chawali | Cow pea | West Central Africa (Singh and Nigam, 2017) |
| Oil Seeds |           |                      |                     |                       |
| 13      | Arachis hypogaea L. | Fabaceae (Papilionaceae) | Bhuimug | Groundnut, Peanut | Brazil (Shetty & Singh, 1987), South America (Yadav & Sardesai, 2002). |
| 14      | Brassica juncea (L.) Koch | Brassicaceae (Cruciferae) | Mohari, Rai | Indian mustard | Europe (Naqshi & Javeid, 1987; John, 1891) |
| 15      | Glycine max (L.) Merr. | Fabaceae (Papilionaceae) | Soybean, Gandituri | Soybean | Asia (Excl. India) (Dar et al., 2002). |
| 16      | Guizotia abyssinica (L.) Cass. | Asteraceae (Compositae) | Kali til, Khurchani | Niger | Tropical Africa (Naik, 1998; Yadav & Sardesai, 2002). |
| 17      | Helianthus annuus L. | Asteraceae (Compositae) | Suryaphul | Sunflower | Western USA (Sing et al., 2001, Patil, 2003) |