

# Millet Cultivation: Current Status in the Eastern Ghats Section of Tamil Nadu

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Millets are a group of small-seeded cereal food grain crops. With an annual production of 15.53 million ton, millets are grown on nearly 12.45 million ha of land in India, accounting for 10% of the country's food grain basket. India is the [largest producer](#) of millet as of 2021, with a total share of 41%, followed by Niger (~12%) and China (~8%). Sorghum and pearl millet are major millets, and minor millets group is made up of six cultivated species, including small millet, Indian barnyard millet, kodo millet, foxtail millet, finger millet and proso millet. Millets have been an integral part of our diet for centuries. They offer a plethora of health benefits and are also good for the environment with low water & input requirements for production. With the aim to create awareness and



A farmer at Burgur (Erode district) showing millet grains

increase production & consumption of millets, the United Nations, at the behest of the Government of India, declared 2023 as the '[International Year of the](#)

[Millet](#)'. To assess status of millet cultivation, existence of variability in it, collection of landraces and wild relatives, an exploration survey was carried in the Eastern Ghats section in Erode and Namakkal districts of Tamil Nadu, which are traditional millet growing belts. Majority of the areas are uneven terrains or hills with their elevation ranging from 200 to 1400 m MSL and an average annual rainfall around 900 mm in the northern Erode district, whereas ca.1350 mm in Kolli Hills. Red-sandy soils prevail in the surveyed areas. The inhabitants (*Hindu Uralis*, *Malayali*, *Soliga*, *Lingayat* and *Badagas*) are primarily dependent upon agriculture for their livelihood and economy. Millets were grown in *kharif* season except proso-millet, which is grown in *rabi* season. Random sampling was followed in most cases. A total of 47 millets germplasm were collected belongs to 12 species namely, *Echinochloa crusgalli* (1), *E. frumentacea* (3), *Eleusine coracana* (7), *E. indica* (1), *Panicum miliaceum* (5), *P. sumatrense* (8), *Paspalum scrobiculatum* (1), *Pennisetum americanum* (5), *Setaria italica* (11), *S. pumila* (1), *Sorghum bicolor* (3) and *Sorghum propinquum* (1).



Chen-thinai: A variant in foxtail millet

In little millet (*P. sumatrense*), different names are used to depict the variability such as 'jaminsamai', 'karuppusamai', 'arasamai', and



**Variability in foxtail millet germplasm**

‘kattavattisamai’, and grain colour variation (with shades of yellow, white, grey) was found in the collections. Proso millet (*P. miliaceum*) is characterized broadly by two kinds of grain colour - shiny golden yellow and greyish black. In foxtail millet (*S. italica*), there are three landraces - Mookanthinai (only inflorescence harvested), Koran thinai (three months crop) and chen-thinai (red grains), which tend to differ in grain colour and crop duration. Chen-thinai is also nutritionally superior and rich in antioxidants. Medium variability with respect to grain colour and size in finger millet, sorghum and pearl millet was observed. *S. propinquum* (PT/23-50), collected probably for the first time for Bureau from this area and it is added to the primary gene-pool of sorghum. Kodo (*P. scrobiculatum*) and barnyard millets (*E. crusgalli* and *E. frumentacea*) were hardly found under cultivation. A semi-domesticated millet ‘korala’ (*S. pumila*; syn. *S. glauca*) was collected from Burgur area hamlets in Erode district, where it was grown along with little millet as a mixed crop. Its grains are used similarly to that of little millet. Overall, in a remote tribal area of Gundri, located near the Karnataka border, Thamarakarai in Burgur areas and a few pockets in Selur Nadu, Alathur Nadu and



**Variability in little millet germplasm**

Thiruppuli Nadu in the Kolli Hills could find reasonable cultivation of millets.

Till ca. 2005, millets formed the staple food and cultivated in all these areas. Due to the menace of wild animals namely, wild-boar, peacock, wild



**A rare germplasm of semi-domesticated ‘Korali’ (*Setaria pumila*; PT/23-91) collected from Burgur area in Erode**

elephants during the past 15 years, people tend to switch over to flower crops such as marigold, and cash crops such as castor, tapioca, and potato in Thalavadi belt

and high-value plantation crops such as black pepper, coffee, and cardamom in Kolli Hills. People mentioned that drastic reduction of jackal and wild-dogs population in these areas due to expansion of cultivation negatively correlated with increasing population of peacock and wild-boar, otherwise these animals steals eggs of peacock and hunts peachicks and wild-boarlets.

The area under traditional crops has been reduced drastically. Kodo millet (locally called 'Aarenga'/'Arika') was extinct from Thalavadi, Gundri and Kolli hills and farmers expressed the desire to grow/revive this crop. Millet-growers also expressed marketing problems faced by them and expressed their demand of fixing up MSP. Now some private agencies with government supports (e.g., Malai Millets Farmers Producers Company Ltd., Thalavadi; Dimbam cooperative farmers

produce association) make good initiatives to buy back millet produce and value addition to revive their cultivation. Celebrating International Year of Millet 2023 increases awareness about millet consumptions, its health benefits, diversification in the millets product and value addition among people. This leads to increase the demand for millets in the market and encourage millet growers to grow the crops in sustainable manner.

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