



Millet as a Cultural Heritage: Phong Noctes of Tirap, Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

Traditions and cultures of any society are dynamic and evolve over time in response to social and technological advancements. This paper attempts to explore how deeply the significance of millets is embedded in the social and cultural life of the Phong Nocte community. Across generations, millets have been cultivated and have provided food and nutritional security to the community. Millets play a significant role in the life of the Phong community, as they ensure continuity of cultural and traditional occupations. In other words, millets not only serve as a source food but also possess cultural utility, as their use is traditionally integral to festivals, rites of naming, house inauguration ceremonies and other social occasions. Thus, it is imperative to examine the role of millets in preserving the cultural heritage of the Phong community. However, with the advent of modernity, the cultural aspects and ethical values associated with millet cultivation have gradually declined over time.

Keywords: Millet, Phong Nocte, Nutritional Security, Cultural Utility, Cultural Heritage.

Introduction

Millets, often termed as “Nutri-Cereals”, belong to the poaceae family and are primarily kharif season crops. They are also referred to as “miracle crops” because they can be grown in arid and semi-arid regions, require relatively less water, and adaptable and resilient to environmental stress. Millets are among the oldest crops domesticated by humankind.

Table: 1 Biochemical Composition of Millet Foodgrains

Millets	Ash (%)	Carbohydrates (%)	Dietary Fibre	Energy (kCal)	Fat (%)	Protein (%)
Barnyard	2.2	65.5	12.6	307	2.2	6.2
Browntop	-	61.4	12.5	-	-	11.5
Finger	2.0	66.8	11.2	320	1.9	7.2
Foxtail	2.6	60.1	10.7	331	4.3	8.9
Kodo	1.7	66.2	6.4	331	2.5	12.3
Little	1.3	65.5	7.7	346	3.8	10.1
Pearl	1.4	61.8	11.5	347	5.4	10.9
Proso	2.7	64.5	9.6	341	3.5	11.5

Source: DoA&FW. 2023. Brief notes on millets. Ministry of Agriculture and Family Welfare, India. 20pp.

Scientific evidence suggests that millets offer greater nutritional and health benefits compared to other cereals. They contain carbohydrates, proteins, fat, dietary fibre, and energy, along with phytochemicals and essential micronutrients. The biochemical composition of millets is presented in Table: 1. These biochemical components are potentially vital in controlling non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, obesity, and in reducing the risk of hypertension and gastrointestinal disorders.

Millets have been cultivated across generations, sustaining numerous generations and have become deeply integral to the traditions and cultures of many societies. Especially, in the North-East Region (NER) of India, various types of millets- such as proso millet, pearl millet, little millet, finger millet, foxtail millet, and barnyard millet- are traditionally cultivated. Beyond their contribution to sustenance, millets are considered intrinsic to the cultural heritage in the India's NE region, as they are deeply woven into the core structure of festivals, folklore and other ceremonial practices. Stephenson (2023) cultural heritage plays a crucial role in lives and history, influencing the values, beliefs, and sense of belonging. UNESCO (2003) Cultural Heritage does not end at monuments and collections of objects. It also includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts.

Until recent times, millets are widely consumed as a staple food; however, their consumption patterns have declined due to the increasing dietary intake of other food grains. This changing trend in consumption patterns is also evident among the Phong community. The Phong are a sub-ethnic group of the Nocte tribe, sub-divided on the basis of dialect, residing in the nearby villages of the Deomali township in Tirap district of Arunachal Pradesh.

Table: 2 List of Phong Villages.

Sl. No.	Village	Sl. No.	Village
1.	Soha	6.	Turet
2.	Barak	7.	Subang
3.	Jumdang	8.	Mapoya
4.	Thalot	9.	Kenon
5.	Doidam	10.	Dongron

This paper investigates the relevance of millets as cultural utility within the social structure of the community. The Phong community utilizes millets to brew alcoholic beverages, which constitute the very fabric of their tribal way of life and are used in ceremonies associated with both joy or sorrow, symbolizing unity. This study highlights two traditional items prepared by the community: (i) Millet Wine (Chimoi-Kham) where Chimoi refers to millet and Kham denotes wine, and (ii) a cooked composite food comprising millet and meat, locally known as Woong-Tik in Phong dialect. The information presented in this paper is confined to the Phong villages and is collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were gathered through observations and interactions with targeted respondents from the community.

Chimoi-Kham and Woong-Tik: Its Significance

The Phong villages are primarily agricultural subsistence communities that practise shifting or jhum cultivation. Each Phong village is administered by its respective king, with well-demarcated boundaries determined by traditionally established customs and traditions. The cycle of millet cultivation begins with the selection of jhum plot in the month of October. This is done by placing stakes on the forest land to mark boundaries. Generally, jhum land, referred to as Wik, is cultivated for approximately one and a half years. Thereafter, it is abandoned for 6 to 7 years as barren land allowing natural vegetations to regenerate freely. Following the selection of the jhum plot, cutting and clearing of trees and vegetation are carried out with the help of swords during the months of November or December, and burning is done in January. Within a few days, millet is sown in the newly prepared jhum field, locally known as Chaa in the Phong dialect. The event of sowing of millet is called Chi-Room which marks the first crop sown in the new jhum field. Chi-Room-Kuh is one of the major festivals celebrated on the occasion. However, the timing of the celebration varies from village to village, as each village observes it according to its own customary laws.

On this occasion, the festival-celebrating village may slaughter a domesticated fowl or pig for consumption in the jhum field. The meat is cooked with millet, known as Woong-Tik, and a local rice beer, preferably brewed from millet, is also prepared. Additionally, villagers prepare food for the entire day to be consumed in the jhum field. Before moving to the jhum field for sowing of millets in the morning, villagers partake in the local rice beer along with Woong-Tik. In the jhum field, rituals are performed by an elderly

person. Thereafter, millet is sown by digging the soil with the help of sticks. The millet crop begins to ripen for harvest from the month of June.

The Haac-Som ritual requires that only the first harvest of millet be offered to the Almighty God. Without millet, this customary ritual cannot be performed. Each year, Haac-Som ritual is observed by the respective Phong villages, where Haac refers to “land” and Som means “to pray” or “prayer”. This ritual signifies a traditional practice aimed at seeking divine blessings from the Almighty God known as Rang’O, for well-being and prosperity of the village. In most Phong villages, this ritual is practised between the months of May and June. The ritual requires the preparation of millet wine and Woong-Tik to be consumed at Jongbaan-Thaan or God Place where Haac-Som ritual is performed. Only after completion of the Haac-Som ritual is the annual festival of the respective villages celebrated. The festival is known as Ronghon-Kuh.

Millet-based items, especially Woong-Tik, are also used in several other social functions such as marriage ceremonies, naming rites, house inauguration ceremonies, and other customary occasions. Thus, millets serve multiple purposes and hold significant utility within the customs, culture and traditions of the community. Without millets, many traditional functions cannot be performed harmoniously.

Conclusion

The Phong community is still deeply embedded in village life, to the extent that its members find it difficult to distance themselves from it. However, limited employment opportunities within the villages compel younger generations to migrate to nearby towns, as the villages offer fewer prospects. In addition, parents also aspire to provide better education for their children and, for this purpose, send them outside the village. These socio-economic transitions have gradually detached younger people from their traditions and cultural values.

Furthermore, as the PDS scheme plays a crucial role in ensuring food security, millets are perceived by the Phong community as having lower economic viability. Consequently, they increasingly prefer vegetable, horticultural, and other income-generating crops. Nevertheless, this shift towards the production of alternative crops remains at a nascent stage and requires substantial institutional support. As a result, the cultivation of millets has slowly and steadily declined. The study also reveals that the significant increase in elephant-induced damage of life, crops and property has further discouraged Phong villages from continuing shifting cultivation.

As global development accelerates, urbanisation is expected to intensify, leading to increased migration from rural and underdeveloped regions. This trend is likely to place considerable pressure on the growing demand for food and agricultural resources. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2018) highlights increasing uncertainties surrounding food and agriculture by 2050 due to multiple factors including climate change, population growth, technological advancement, the condition of natural resources. Consequently, these challenges pose serious risks to achieving long-term food and nutritional security requirements of future generations. In this context, initiatives such as the National Year of Millets (2018), Global Millets (Shree Anna) Conference in New Delhi (2023), the International Year of Millets (UNGA, 2023), and similar policy interventions are crucial in revitalising millet-based farming systems. Such initiatives will not only promote millet cultivation but also strengthen participation of farming communities- particularly the Phong community- in sustainable agricultural practices, thereby reinforcing the integration of millets into everyday life and cultural traditions.

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