Homecoming of forgotten foods

Forgotten traditional cereals like millets are gradually making a comeback as healthy, nutritious and environment-friendly alternatives to wheat and rice, says Vandana Shiva.

India is the land of diversity. Indigenous agriculture systems are based on biodiversity of crops, animals and trees. This biodiversity has sustained the health of the land and our health over centuries.

When chemical agriculture was introduced in India in Punjab in the 1960s it focused on chemically-grown dwarf varieties of wheat and rice, driving out the rich diversity of our crops, desertifying the soil and our nutrition.

The foods rich in nutrition, such as millets, were called "course grains", and abandoned. When I started "Navdanya" in 1987 to save seeds and biodiversity, I started with the "forgotten foods." Foods that are treasure troves of nutrition but have been forgotten in the monoculture obsession with white rice and white flour. Our millets like Barnyard millet (jhangora), finger millet (ragi), sorghum (jowar), pearl millet (bajra) and pseudo cereals like amaranth and buckwheat bring us nutrition with a very light ecological footprint.

And in this period of "water wars" because of water scarcity, forgotten foods could create "water peace" and rejuvenate our rivers, our wells, our communities who are abandoning the land because of dying soils and disappearing water. They are nourishing crops that give us nutrition and don't trap the farmer in debt. No millet farmer is committing suicide. Suicides are common among farmers who were trapped in debt because they bought costly Bt cotton seeds which failed to control pests. So they also bought costly pesticides.

Suicides have begun among potato farmers who are selling a 50 kg sack at Rs 10. We buy "Lays" chips at Rs 20 for a 50 gm packet. The farmer earns nothing, we eat junk food. India is now an epicentre of non-communicable chronic diseases. Forgotten foods are the answer to reversing this health disaster. Forgotten foods also address the agrarian crisis because they are real foods, for which the farmer gets full value.

If farmers grow millets and forgotten foods, they can increase their income, and we can reclaim our health.