Farmers turn to millets as a climate-smart crop

Farmers in arid parts of Karnataka have adapted to climate change by switching from water-intensive rice, sugarcane and maize cultivation to various types of drought-resistant millets.

It’s late July and there are wisps of clouds scattered in the muddy sky. Whether the clouds will usher the much-awaited rains doesn’t bother Korale Raghu, a middle-aged farmer of Hondure village in Sira administrative block, 70 km from Tumakuru and an hour-and-half car ride from the southern city of Bengaluru in Karnataka.

Belonging to a family of farmers that for generations has been growing rice and maize relying on the monsoon rains, Raghu, like several others in this drought-prone district, has over the years shifted to growing millet, freeing themselves from the vagaries of weather. With continuous drought for three years, the farmers have abandoned irrigation-intensive crops like rice, sugarcane or maize in favour of millet, a drought-resistant crop.

A village with a population of 2,000, most farmers in Hondure grow Korale (brown top millet). Following workshops held at farm doors and millet-themed fairs organised by Sahaja Samruddha, an NGO working among agriculturists in Karnataka’s five arid districts, farmers like Raghu took to growing it and presently grow brown top millets on 10 acres besides growing rice and wheat.

We could not think beyond the irrigated crops like paddy and sugarcane, which left us at the mercy of either scanty rains or drought, [these weather changes] made us go for millet,” Raghu, who began cultivating millet in 2011 on eight and a half acres, adding more in subsequent years, told indiaclimatedialogue.net. He harvests a yield ranging between 70 to 80 quintals (a quintal is 100 kilogrammes) and retails his produce through a network of housewives, besides selling seeds to farmers.

Raghu has been instrumental in reviving brown top millets and popularising it among farmers in Karnataka, which till now was restricted to pockets of Ananthpur in neighbouring Andhra Pradesh. This has earned him the sobriquet ‘Korale’, the local name of the brown top millet. Read more