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Traditional Processing Methods for Millets: Enhancing Nutritional Value and Health Benefits by Reducing Anti-Nutritional Factors

Sourabh Ajit Chougala[1], Vishwaradhya M Biradar[2] and Ramappa[3]

[1]Ph.D. Scholar (Agril.Engg.)
Department of Processing and Food Engineering, College of Agricultural Engineering, University of Agricultural Sciences, Raichur-584101

[2]Ph.D. Scholar (Agril.Engg.)
Department of Processing and Food Engineering, College of Agricultural Engineering, University of Agricultural Sciences, Raichur-584101

[3]Ph.D. Scholar (Agril.Engg.)
Department of Processing and Food Engineering, College of Technology and Engineering, MPUAT,Udaipur, Rajastan-313001

*Corresponding Author
Sourabh Ajit Chougala*

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INTRODUCTION

Millets are ancient grains, widely cultivated and consumed in regions like India and Africa for thousands of years. They belong to the *Poaceae* family and are considered a staple food in many traditional diets due to their adaptability to arid climates and poor soils. Common varieties of millets include finger millet (*Eleusine coracana*), pearl millet (*Pennisetum glaucum*), sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor*), and foxtail millet (*Setaria italica*). These grains are not only resilient but also nutritionally dense, making them a vital component of food security in many developing countries (Rao and Deosthale, 1988).

Millets are rich in macronutrients such as carbohydrates, proteins, and fats, and are excellent sources of micronutrients like calcium, iron, magnesium, and B-vitamins (Hulse *et al.*, 1980). Additionally, they contain a high level of dietary fiber, making them beneficial for digestive health. The nutritional profile of millets makes them a valuable alternative to more commonly consumed cereals like rice and wheat, especially in addressing malnutrition and food security in resource-limited regions (Taylor, 2016).

Anti-Nutritional Factors in Millets

Despite their nutritional benefits, millets also contain various anti-nutritional factors (ANFs) that can interfere with the absorption and utilization of nutrients. These include phytates, tannins, oxalates, and saponins, which are naturally occurring compounds that can bind to essential minerals, reducing their bioavailability. Phytates, for instance, form complexes with minerals like calcium, iron, and zinc, inhibiting their absorption in the gastrointestinal tract (Reddy and Pierson, 1994). Tannins, on the other hand, can precipitate proteins and interfere with enzymatic activity, leading to reduced protein digestibility (Chavan *et al.*, 1981).

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The presence of these ANFs in millets poses a challenge for nutrition, particularly in populations that rely heavily on these grains as a staple food. However, traditional processing methods have been developed to mitigate the effects of these compounds, thereby enhancing the nutritional value of millets (Singh and Raghuvanshi, 2012).

Traditional Methods for Reducing Anti-Nutritional Factors

Traditional processing methods are crucial in enhancing the nutritional value of millets by reducing the content of anti-nutritional factors (ANFs). These methods have been practiced for generations and are effective in making millets more suitable for consumption.

1. **Soaking:** Soaking millets in water for a specific duration helps in leaching out water-soluble anti-nutritional factors like tannins and saponins. The soaking process also activates endogenous enzymes that break down phytates, thus improving the bioavailability of minerals. For example, soaking finger millet for 12 hours has been shown to reduce phytate content significantly, enhancing mineral absorption (Sripriya, 1997).
2. **Fermentation:** Fermentation is a traditional process widely used in the preparation of millet-based foods such as idli and dosa in India. During fermentation, lactic acid bacteria produce organic acids that lower the pH, leading to the hydrolysis of phytates. This process also enhances the availability of amino acids and improves protein digestibility. Fermented millet products are particularly rich in nutrients and easier to digest.
3. **Germination/Sprouting:** Germination involves soaking the grains and allowing them to sprout. This process activates enzymes such as phytase, which breaks down phytates and other anti-nutritional factors. Sprouted millets have higher levels of vitamins, especially B-vitamins, and improved protein and mineral bioavailability. The process also reduces tannin content, improving the overall nutritional quality of the grains.
4. **Malting:** Malting is another traditional method where millets are soaked, germinated, and then dried. This process not only reduces ANFs but also enhances the nutritional quality by increasing the content of soluble sugars, amino acids, and vitamins. Malted millets are often used in the preparation of beverages and weaning foods due to their enhanced nutritional properties.
5. **Cooking Methods:** Traditional cooking techniques such as boiling and roasting are effective in reducing the content of heat-labile anti-nutritional factors like oxalates and saponins. Roasting, in particular, is known to reduce tannin levels significantly, thereby improving the palatability and nutritional value of millets (Hama *et al*., 2011).
6. **Decortication:** Decortication involves the removal of the outer layer or bran of the millet grains. Since most of the anti-nutritional factors are concentrated in the outer layers, this process significantly reduces their content. However, it is important to note that decortication may also reduce the fiber content of the grains (Malleshi and Desikachar, 1981).
7. **Parboiling:** Parboiling is a process where millets are soaked, steamed, and then dried. This method is effective in reducing phytates and improving the cooking quality of millets. Parboiled millets also have a longer shelf life and improved texture, making them more versatile in various culinary applications

Comparison of different Traditional Methods

Traditional methods such as soaking, fermentation, germination, malting, cooking, decortication, and parboiling effectively reduce anti-nutritional factors (ANFs) in millets to varying degrees. Soaking lowers water-soluble phytates, while fermentation and germination greatly enhance mineral bioavailability and protein digestibility. Malting improves nutrient composition and flavour. Cooking reduces heat-labile ANFs, whereas decortication removes concentrated ANFs along with some nutrients. Parboiling moderately reduces phytates and enhances texture, collectively enhancing the nutritional quality and digestibility of millets (Kayode *et al*., 2007).

Health Benefits

The traditional processing methods used to reduce anti-nutritional factors (ANFs) in millets not only make these grains more nutritious but also enhance their health benefits. The improvement in nutrient bioavailability and the reduction of harmful compounds result in millets becoming powerful functional foods that can help manage and prevent various health conditions.

- **Improved Nutritional Value:** Germination, fermentation, and malting reduce anti-nutritional factors, enhancing the bioavailability of minerals like iron, calcium, and zinc. This improvement is vital in regions facing micronutrient deficiencies, as sprouted millets offer more bioavailable iron and zinc. These processes also break down phytates and tannins, improving protein digestibility and amino acid availability (Chavan and Kadam, 1989).
- **Managing Lifestyle Diseases:** Processed millets play an important role in managing diabetes and cardiovascular diseases due to their high dietary fiber content, which helps regulate blood sugar by slowing carbohydrate absorption. Parboiling and fermentation increase resistant starch, lowering the glycaemic index. Traditional processing also enhances antioxidants and phenolics, reducing oxidative stress and supporting heart health.
- **Contribution to Gut Health:** Fermentation of millets produces beneficial compounds like lactic acid and short-chain fatty acids that promote healthy gut microbiota. These compounds enhance digestion, immunity, and overall gut balance, as seen in fermented foods like dosa and idli. Additionally, increased dietary fiber after processing supports regular bowel movements and prevents digestive disorders such as constipation and IBS (Chaturvedi and Sarojini, 1996).
- **Enhanced Immune Function:** The improved nutrient profile of processed millets supports the immune system by providing essential vitamins, minerals, and bioactive compounds that are necessary for maintaining immune health. The increased bioavailability of zinc, in particular, is crucial for immune function, as zinc plays a key role in the development and function of immune cells. Additionally, the presence of antioxidants in processed millets helps in neutralizing free radicals, thereby reducing the risk of chronic diseases and supporting overall immune resilience (Hama *et al*., 2011).

CONCLUSION

Millets, known for their rich nutritional value, become even more beneficial through traditional processing methods such as soaking, fermentation, germination, malting, cooking, decortication, and parboiling. These techniques effectively reduce anti-nutritional factors and enhance mineral bioavailability. They also improve protein digestibility, flavour, and overall health benefits. Incorporating these methods into modern diets can boost millet consumption, help address nutrient deficiencies, and support sustainable, health-focused food systems worldwide.

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