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Fearing stem rust, India works on new wheat varieties

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INDIA is working on new varieties of wheat that are resistant to stem rust, a disease that is causing devastation in Africa, and being airborne, could come here as well.

India is vulnerable considering that the variety of wheat which is succumbing to stem rust in Kenya is grown over six million hectares in Haryana, Punjab, western Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Rajasthan.

"In 2002, we woke up to the problem and decided that another gene should be brought into the variety we use. We then sent 22 lines to Kenya for testing," said Indian Council of Agriculture Research DG Dr Mangala Rai.

Out of 22, three varieties were found resistant to stem rust. These are two to three years from reaching the farmers but the ICAR has distributed the seeds to breeders.

But fear remains that the rust might find its way to India accidentally. "The issue has been bothering us for long. New races of rust have been emerging. This rust (in Kenya) has spread in Africa and might come to Asia," Rai said.

What is worrying scientists more is that the disease was controlled by the high-yield varieties introduced in the 60s. Now it is the same variety that has become susceptible to the new strain. "The PBW 343 is grown over six million hectares which makes us vulnerable. Yellow rust was detected in Africa in 1985 and in six years, it travelled to India. It is airborne and can come by plane or through somebody's clothing," said Dr M Prashar, Directorate of Wheat Research in Flowerdale in Shimla, who had recently gone to Kenya to study the disease.