

***In silico* identification of genes for combined drought and salinity stress in rice (*Oryza sativa* L.)**

ABSTRACT:

The salinity and water stress are the important abiotic stresses which severely affect the rice growth, development and yield depending on degree of stress. Moreover, these stresses are inter-related and include many crosstalks at genetically and physiologically. The identification of genes controlling both the stresses would mean a lot in understanding the molecular mechanism of tolerance, which in turn assists in the development of stress resilient genotypes. In the present study, an *in silico* approach was used to identify genes commonly expressed under combined drought and salt stress using microarray data retrieved from the NCBI GEO database. The meta-analysis of this transcriptome data revealed 35 candidate genes expressed under combined stress with 82.8% of the genes showing up-regulation and 18.2% of the genes with down-regulation. The functional annotation of candidate genes showed the expression of diverse stress-responsive proteins, mainly transcription factors, UDP-glucosyl transferase, glycosyl transferase, flavanone 3-hydroxylase, plant PDR ABC transporter associated domain and dehydrins. Among the expressed proteins, transcription factors shared a major part in gene regulation. The key gene Os05g48650.1, which is present on chromosome five at 28.8 Mb physical position, encoded for HBP-1b protein. Earlier authors proved that the over-expression of this HBP-1b gene in rice plants showed improved tolerance to salt and drought stress. Two more genes, Os11g26780.1 and Os11g26790.1, co-localized on chromosome 11 and encode for an important stress-responsive dehydrin protein which is positively correlated with tolerance to cold, drought, and salt stress. Finally, in conclusion, the genes Os11g26780.1, Os11g26790.1, Os06g27560.1 and Os05g48650.1 were directly related with salt and drought stress tolerance. The introgression of these genes in high yielding stress susceptible genotypes could assist in developing stress tolerant cultivars.

Key words: Rice, Salinity Stress, Drought Stress, Microarray, Gene expression, *In silico*.

Introduction:

Rice (*Oryza sativa* L.) is a staple food supporting more than three billion people and comprising 50% to 80% of daily calorie intake [1]. Rice production requires a larger amount of water throughout its life cycle compared to other crops for good yield. Hence, water-related stress causes a severe threat to rice production across the world. Approximately 23 million

32 hectares of rainfed rice cultivated across the world was affected by severe drought [2]. The
33 global climate change resulted in 32% of rice yield variability from year-to-year with 53% of
34 rice harvesting regions experiencing rapid climatic change [3]. The increased frequency of
35 dry spells in many regions of the world forced the farmer to use water from dam, canal and
36 bore well etc. The irrigation water used from these canals contains large amount of dissolved
37 salts. Approximately 20% of irrigated areas suffer from salinization problems by various
38 degrees. The drought and salinity stress are often inter-related and obstruct the water uptake
39 adversely, affecting plant growth and productivity.

40 These stress causes a wide range of genetically, physiological and biochemical
41 responses in plants. Understanding plant responses to abiotic stresses at the transcriptomic
42 level provides an essential foundation for future breeding and genetic engineering efforts. A
43 significant number of QTLs were discovered in rice under drought and salinity, but a QTL
44 would be more useful only when it contains functional candidate gene. With advancement of
45 molecular technology, the interest on gene expression studies increased enormously. A large
46 number of genes have been identified under salinity and drought stress [4,5]. Among the
47 available methods, DNA microarrays have been devised as standard strategy for the global
48 analysis of plant gene expression [4,6]. Several important traits of rice have been analyzed
49 using microarray which helped in monitoring the gene expression pattern under multiple
50 abiotic stress *viz.*, cold, drought, and high salinity stresses at temporal and spatial level [4,7].
51 Taken together, previous transcriptomic studies in rice have identified various genes
52 regulated by different stress conditions. The meta-analysis of transcriptome data retrieved
53 from both salt and drought stress would helps in pointing out the common genes expressed
54 under both the stress situations and assist in understanding the molecular mechanism of these
55 complex traits in rice. The present investigation, a cumulative analysis of gene expression
56 data of rice genotypes evaluated under salt and drought stresses which were deposited by
57 various authors in NCBIGEO database was used.

58 **Material and Method:**

59 **Data mining:**

60 The current study is a bioinformatics approach to identify the genes that commonly expressed
61 under salinity and drought stress in rice. Rice is the one of the crop which had large amount
62 of genomic, transcriptomic and proteomic data deposited in various repositories. Likely,
63 NCBI GEO has large amount of microarray data deposited by various author

64 [\[http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/geo/\]](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/geo/). NCBI GEO is the platforms where gene expression data
65 generated from microarray studies was deposited, which is easily downloadable and can be
66 processed to find new insights using meta analysis [8]. To identify the genes commonly
67 expressed under different stress, it is mandatory to use uniform microarray platform which
68 has large number of genes spotted and having more number of series and samples [8]. To
69 have consistency in results, the platform GPL2025 [Affymetrix Rice Genome Array] having
70 51,279 probes was used in present investigation. This platform has 3096 samples and 191
71 series, out of which the data regarding differential gene expression [DEGs] for salinity and
72 drought stress belonging to six series [GSE24048, GSE6901, GSE41647, GSE3053,
73 GSE4438 and GSE16108] and 9 samples deposited in NCBI GEO was retrieved. The DEGs
74 of tolerant genotypes were used for further study. The identification of genes in tolerant
75 genotypes helps in understanding the molecular mechanism involved in tolerance [9, 10].

76 **Data processing:**

77 The raw data retrieved from NCBI GEO was subjected to GEO2R to obtain the log₂
78 fold change [logFC] values [<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/geo/geo2r/>]. The so obtained
79 logFC values were used to identify the DEGs in respective stress. The logFC value of ± 1
80 [two fold change] was set as threshold level to discriminate the DEGs from the total genes.
81 The genes which met the set criteria under each stress among multiple samples were sorted
82 and saved as separate files. Later, the genes expressed commonly under both the stresses
83 were identified using excel with various function. To view the expression of the genes
84 diagrammatically, a tab-delimited file was created with logFC values for salinity and drought
85 stress having corresponding spot IDs. Using MultiExperimental Viewer [MeV] software heat
86 map of gene expressed under combined stress was viewed [11]. The software is freely
87 downloadable from <http://mev.tm4.org/>. Later in progress of analysis, the gene loci
88 associated with spot ID were retrieved from ricechip.org [<http://www.ricechip.org/>]. The
89 retrieved gene loci were used as input in orygenesdb.cirad.fr to know the further information
90 regarding the gene position on different chromosome and functional annotation
91 [<http://orygenesdb.cirad.fr/tools.html>].

92 **Results and Discussion:**

93 Plant responses to drought and salinity are complexes and involve morphological,
94 physiological and molecular changes which may lead plant to adaptive advantage and/or
95 deleterious effects. The both salinity and drought stress has similar effect on plant growth by
96 obstructing the water uptake and finally decreasing the water potential [12]. The decrease in

97 the water potential occurred in both abiotic stresses results in reduced cell growth, root
98 growth and shoot growth and also causes inhibition of cell expansion and reduction in cell
99 wall synthesis [13]. [4] in his study found that among multiple abiotic stresses encountered
100 by rice plant, there would be more cross talks between drought and salinity stress. In the
101 present study, the comprehensive analysis of transcriptome data of salinity and drought stress
102 retrieved from multiple experiments found that a total of 1261 and 849 genes were
103 differentially expressed at log fold change value of ± 1 [logFC] i.e. 2 fold change [14].
104 Majority of the authors used logFC ± 1 has a criteria to distinguish the DEGs . The further
105 insights into the results showed more number of up regulated genes [936] compared to down
106 regulation [325] under drought stress. Earlier reports proved the expression of more number
107 of up regulated genes in tolerant genotypes [15, 16]. These up regulated genes may contribute
108 to adaptive mechanism of tolerant genotypes under stress condition. Similarly, more or less
109 equal number of genes were expressed under salinity stress [Fig. 1]. This fact proves that
110 both up regulation and down regulation of genes play major role in salinity stress tolerance in
111 rice. The analysis for combined stress revealed 35 genes commonly expressed with more
112 number of genes showing up regulation. Among these, 82.8 % of the genes showed up
113 regulation and in contrast only 18.2 % of the genes showed down regulation. The differential
114 expression pattern of the common genes under both the stress can be viewed in fig.2. The
115 gene loci associated with affymetrix probe ID were traced out using ricechip.org web site. All
116 the gene loci associated with the probe ID were retrieved and further used for functional
117 annotation of the genes. The retrieved gene loci were used as input in orygenesdb.cirad.fr
118 under locus search option to map the position of the gene on to respective chromosome [Fig.
119 3]. The genes Os05g48650.1, Os08g36920.1, Os02g46030.1, Os06g27560.1, Os05g25920,
120 Os02g33380.1, Os11g26780.1, os06g04940.1, Os07g46950.1, Os07g48830.1,
121 Os10g21590.2, Os04g12960.1, Os11g26790, Os11g26790.1 and Os02g41510 showed strong
122 up regulation under both the stresses. Similarly among all the DEGs, the genes
123 Os12g12390.1, Os01g44390.1, Os01g63180.1, Os07g03870.1 and Os10g31720.1 showed
124 high down regulation. The integration of gene on to chromosomes revealed that chromosome
125 2 and 8 had more number of candidate genes under combined stress. In present analysis
126 chromosome 9 did not show any genes for combined drought and salinity stress. The
127 functional annotation of candidate genes showed that most of the genes encodes for
128 transcription factor [TF] followed by different stress related proteins [table.1]. Transcription
129 factors are early responsive genes important candidates for expression of large number of
130 downstream stress responsive genes by binding to the specific *cis*-acting elements of the

131 genes to access tolerance mechanism [17]. Some of the prominent protein that expressed
132 under combined stress include MYB family transcription factor, ethylene-responsive
133 transcription factor, UDP-glucuronosyltransferase, WRKY53, glycosyltransferase 8, plant PDR ABC
134 transporter associated domain and dehydrin. The tolerance mechanisms to drought and
135 salinity stress include changes at genetic, transcriptomic and metabolomic level [18]. The
136 gene Os05g48650.1 which present on chromosome five at 28.8 Mb physical position encodes
137 HBP-1b [histone gene binding protein-1b] transcription factor showed strong up regulation.
138 The HBP1b falls under bZIP family of TFs. These proteins are present throughout the plant
139 kingdom and plays important role in plant response to biotic and abiotic stresses [19, 20 and
140 21]. The over expression of OsHBP1b dramatically increases salinity as well as drought
141 tolerance of tobacco suggests that, further analysis of this gene will have the potential to
142 greatly improve stress tolerance in other crop species like rice [22]. through altering the
143 activation of ROS scavenging system and the levels of protective compounds, such as MDA,
144 sugars and proline. This may serve as a useful ‘candidate gene’ for improving multiple stress
145 tolerance in crop plant. Similarly, the TF AP2 encoded by gene Os08g36920.1 which present
146 on chromosome 8 has multiple functions under biotic and abiotic stress [23]. These TFs
147 involves in regulation of CBF/DREB factors involved in abiotic stress responses. The over
148 expression of DREB1A TF isolated from rice showed enhanced tolerance to drought, salt and
149 cold stress in transgenic Arabidopsis [24]. The genes [Os02g41510 and Os02g46030.1]
150 present on chromosome 2 showed their association with MYB family transcription factor.
151 The MYB gene family comprises one of the richest groups of transcription factors in plants.
152 Plant MYB proteins are characterized by a highly conserved MYB DNA-binding domain.
153 MYB transcription factors are involved in plant development, secondary metabolism,
154 hormone signal transduction, disease resistance and abiotic stress tolerance [25]. Three
155 Os04g12960.1, Os06g27560.1 and Os07g48830.1 which located on chromosome 4, 6 and 7
156 respectively encodes for glucosyltransferase and glycosyltransferase enzymes. Earlier authors
157 reported the function of glycosyltransferase under different abiotic stress [26]. In Arabidopsis
158 thaliana, UDP-glucosyltransferase showed improved tolerance against drought and salinity
159 stress by enhancing the rooting capacity through regulating IBA and NAA concentrations
160 [27]. Glycosyltransferase mainly function in to the biosynthesis of plant cell walls [28]. In
161 our study, we identified transporters encoded by genes Os06g03700.1 and Os10g21590.2 on
162 chromosome 6 [1.4 Mb] and 10 [11 Mb] respectively. Different types of transporters were
163 reported in plant kingdom, in general many of them are required for plant growth,
164 development, nutrition, and response to abiotic stresses by manipulating the concentration of

165 toxic ions [29]. The two genes Os11g26780.1 and Os11g26790.1 localised on chromosome
 166 11 encoded for dehydrin a stress responsive gene. Many studies reported that the expression
 167 of dehydrin is positively correlated with the tolerance to cold, drought, and salt stress [30,31].
 168 The dehydrin works as a molecular chaperone under stress situation and helps in maintaining
 169 the structural and functional integrity of the proteins, enzyme activities, nucleic acids and
 170 membrane structure. The over-expression of dehydrin gene [OsDhn1] improved drought and
 171 salt stress tolerance through scavenging of reactive oxygen species in rice [32].

172 In conclusion, our study showed only a limited number of tolerant genes common
 173 between drought and salinity stress. The genes Os11g26780.1, Os11g26790.1,
 174 Os06g27560.1 and Os05g48650.1 were directly related with salt and drought stress tolerance.
 175 The introgression of these genes in high yielding stress susceptible genotypes could assist in
 176 developing stress tolerant cultivars.

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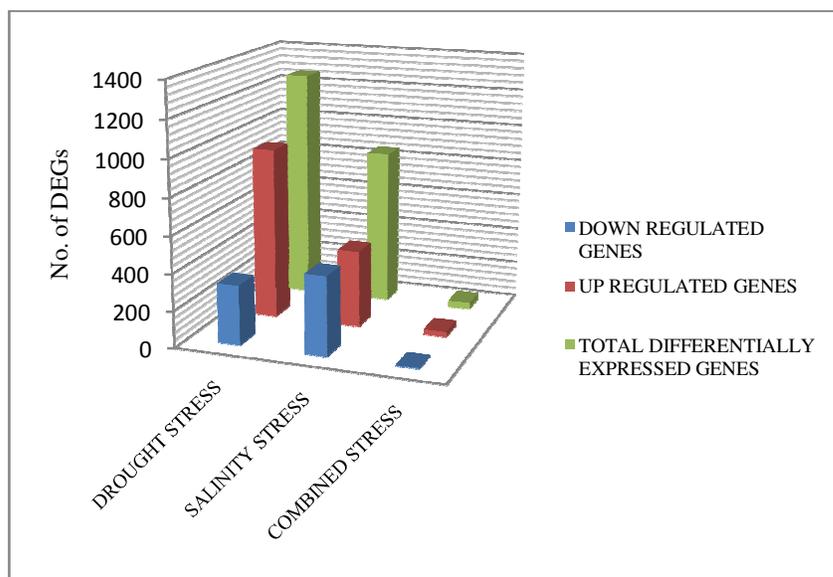
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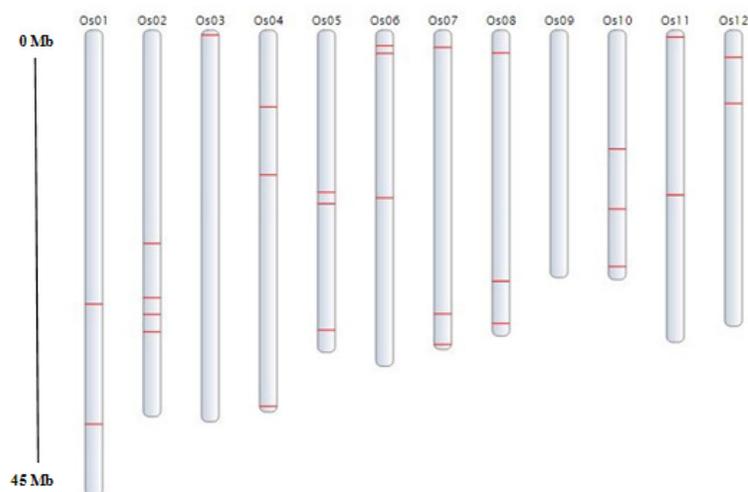
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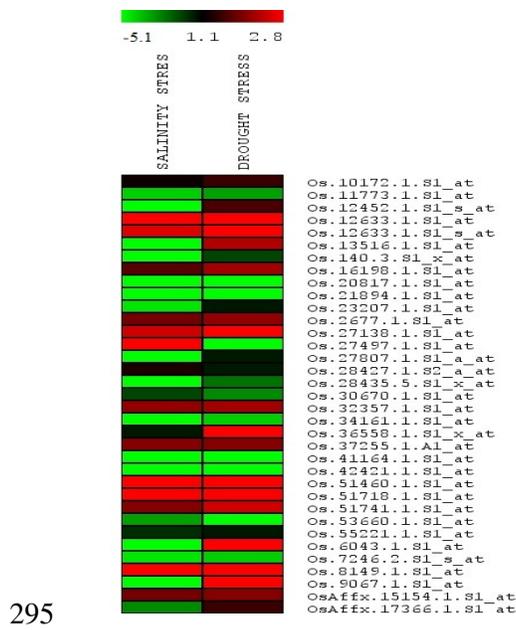
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291 Fig. 1: differential expression of genes [DEGs] under each stress and combined stress.



292

293 Fig. 2: Physical position of candidate gene on respective chromosome [chromosomes
294 arranged in ascending order from 1 to 12].



295

296 Fig. 3: MEV analyses for genes commonly expressed genes for salt and drought stress
 297 [colour gradient towards red indicates up-regulation and gradient towards green implies
 298 down-regulated genes].

299 Table. 1: Functional annotation of candidate genes commonly expressed undet combined
 300 stress.

Probe ID	Locus ID	Chr.	Start [bp]	End [bp]	Putative function
Os.41164.1.S1_at	Os01g63180.1	01	36616801	36621516	laccase-6 precursor
Os.10172.1.S1_at	Os01g44390.1	01	25461991	25463691	MYB family transcription factor
Os.51460.1.S1_at	Os02g41510	02	24878775	24879934	MYB family transcription factor
Os.53660.1.S1_at	Os02g33380.1	02	19834281	19835139	pectinesterase inhibitor domain containing protein
Os.8149.1.S1_at	Os02g43790.1	02	26422182	26423485	ethylene-responsive transcription factor
Os.27807.1.S1_a_at	Os02g46030.1	02	28041115	28044149	MYB family transcription factor
Os.140.3.S1_x_at	Os03g01740.1	03	470268	471096	expressed protein
Os.16198.1.S1_at	Os04g58810.1	04	34980601	34982203	CAF1 family ribonuclease containing protein
Os.6043.1.S1_at	Os04g12960.1	04	7153701	7156100	UDP-glucuronosyl/UDP-glucosyl transferase
Os.11773.1.S1_at	Os04g23550.1	04	13466420	13468869	basic helix-loop-helix family protein
Os.51741.1.S1_at	Os05g27730	05	16150266	16152747	WRKY53, expressed
OsAffx.15154.1.S1_a t	Os05g25920	05	15077666	15078358	expressed protein
Os.7246.2.S1_s_at	Os05g48650.1	05	27883503	27884410	transcription factor HBP-1b
Os.34161.1.S1_at	Os06g27560.1	06	15601591	15603932	Glycosyl transferase protein

Os.37255.1.A1_at	Os06g03700.1	06	1459192	1464339	oligopeptide transporter
Os.20817.1.S1_at	Os06g04940.1	06	2175882	2176926	early nodulin 93 ENOD93 protein
Os.2677.1.S1_at	Os07g03870.1	07	1612858	1616245	receptor like protein kinase
Os.9067.1.S1_at	Os07g48830.1	07	29220283	29221843	glycosyl transferase 8 domain containing protein
Os.55221.1.S1_at	Os07g44140.1	07	26382581	26385011	cytochrome P450 72A1
Os.12452.1.S1_s_at	Os08g43120.1	08	27268083	27277540	Plant PDR ABC transporter associated domain
Os.23207.1.S1_at	Os08g36910	08	23340676	23343533	alpha-amylase precursor
OsAffx.17366.1.S1_at	Os08g04340.1	08	2129613	2130615	plastocyanin-like domain containing protein
Os.21894.1.S1_at	Os08g36920.1	08	23353882	23355003	AP2 domain containing protein
Os.27138.1.S1_at	Os10g31720.1	10	16625819	16626573	glycine-rich cell wall structural protein 2 precursor
Os.28435.5.S1_x_at	Os10g21590.2	10	11053081	11055159	transporter family protein, putative
Os.51718.1.S1_at	Os10g40934.1	10	21988523	21993310	flavonol synthase/flavanone 3-hydroxylase
Os.12633.1.S1_s_at	Os11g26780.1	11	15336034	15337163	Dehydrin
Os.36558.1.S1_x_at	Os11g26790.1	11	15342564	15343857	Dehydrin
Os.13516.1.S1_at	Os11g02290	11	651185	652057	expressed protein
Os.27497.1.S1_at	Os12g05540.1	12	2535821	2539020	Ser/Thr protein phosphatase family protein
Os.42421.1.S1_at	Os12g12390.1	12	6821234	6822471	transposon protein, putative, CACTA

301 Chr. : chromosome, bp: basepair