

Cyanobacterial Phycoerythrin with Special Reference to *Microchaete* sp. CCU342

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ABSTRACT: Phycoerythrin (PE) is a light harvesting red protein, found only in cyanophyta, rhodophyta, glaucophyta and cryptophyta. Till now, red algae are well characterized and exploited commercially for PE. High cost of PE (50-3600 US\$/mg), has compelled the scientists to look for its alternate sources. During present cyanobacterial screening, *Microchaete* yielded maximum PE (26.32 mg/g), which was further purified on DEAE-cellulose column using sodium acetate buffer (pH-5.5). In final step, purity value of analytical grade PE (5.12) was obtained that showed 21.8 kDa band corresponding to α -subunit of B-PE. 30°C temperature, 12.5 $\mu\text{mol photons/m}^2/\text{s}$ light, green wavelength, pH-8, 16:8 photoperiod and 50 mM salinity were the best conditions for maximum PE production. Pesticides (malathion and chlorpyrifos) and heavy metal (Cd^{2+} , Cr^{6+}) showed PE reduction whereas (Cu^{2+} , Zn^{2+} , Pb^{2+}) showed PE enhancement at lower concentrations.

Keywords: Screening · *Microchaete* · Phycoerythrin · Purity value · Environmental stress

I. INTRODUCTION

Phycobiliproteins are primary group of photosynthetic coloured proteins. Based on the presence of different chromophores they are classified into 3 groups (i) Phycoerythrin, PE (ii) Phycocyanin, PC and phycoerythrocyanin, PEC (iii) Allophycocyanin, APC. Stacks of phycobiliproteins are organized inside phycobilisomes, which are anchored on the outer surface of the thylakoid membrane and are located adjacent to the photo reaction centre of PS II [1]. The pink colored PE have application in food that do not require heating and thus is used in desserts, ice cream, sweets, cakes, decoration, milk shakes etc. [2]. Red algal PE has also been used in cosmetics such as eye shadow, face make up and lipstick, in the form of powders or creams [3]. PE is good for human health due to its free radical scavenging, anti inflammatory and anticancer nature [4]. For curing carcinosis and leukaemia, a new type of PE laser photosensitizer is developed that plays a crucial role in photodynamic therapy [5]. PE can be easily cross linked with antibody, immunoglobulins, avidin and other proteins by conventional molecule tagging technique and could be developed as fluorescence probes without losing its fluorescent properties [6]. PE is mainly extracted and purified from red algae- *Palmaria palmate*, *Gracilaria verrucosa*, *Porphyridium cruentum*, *Carollina elongate*, *Polysiphonia urceolata*, *Porphyra yezoensis* but most of them contained huge amount of polysaccharides, which form gel (carbohydrate) and thereby making the purification task most difficult and tedious [7]. There are very few reports of PE purification from cyanobacterium *Lyngbya* [8]. Therefore during present study cyanobacterial strains were screened for PE. The best strain was chosen for purification, characterization and environmental stress response studies.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Cyanobacteria were procured from National Center for Conservation and Utilization of Blue Green Algae, IARI, New Delhi. Cultures were grown for 27 days in BG-11 medium [9] at $30\pm 1^\circ\text{C}$ under of 25 $\mu\text{mol/photons/m}^2$ illumination, 12:12 light/dark photoperiod and pH-8. For PE screening, cyanobacterial biomass was harvested by centrifugation and washed thoroughly using distilled water to remove adhering salts then dried overnight at 50°C. PE was extracted by repeated freezing and thawing using 0.1 M potassium phosphate buffer (pH-7.1) till pellet color faded and absorbance

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was recorded at 562, 615 and 652 nm against 0.1 M phosphate buffer as a blank [10]. For purifying PE slightly modified protocol was adopted [11]. Pink colour elutes were collected drop by drop in eppendorf tubes. For characterizing PE, each coloured fractions of PE was analyzed by absorption and fluorescence spectroscopy at each step and also by calculating their purity ratio of A_{max}/A_{280} , which is considered as a good indication of the purity level. Absorbance at 555 nm and 280 nm indicated the concentration of B-PE and proteins respectively. SDS-PAGE was carried out using 15 % polyacrylamide gel with medium range protein marker [12]. Impact of various environmental conditions like temperature, irradiances, coloured wavelength, photoperiods, pH, salinity, pesticides and heavy metals stress were studied on PE in best strain.

Stastical analysis of the data was done by one way analysis of variance (ANOVA). Dunnett’s multiple comparison test was used in experimental setup with control in which significant difference at a level of significance of 0.01, 0.001 and 0.0001 ($p > 0.01$, $p > 0.001$, $p > 0.0001$) and ‘ns’ for non significant are represented, while post tests for linear trend method was used in experiment setup without control (Graph Pad software, San Diego, CA, USA).

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

PE has immense potential applications in pharmaceutical and food industry. But due to limited distribution and difficulties in obtaining high purity, their application has become challenging endeavour. In order to find out alternate good quality bio resource of PE, present work was done. The findings are discussed below---

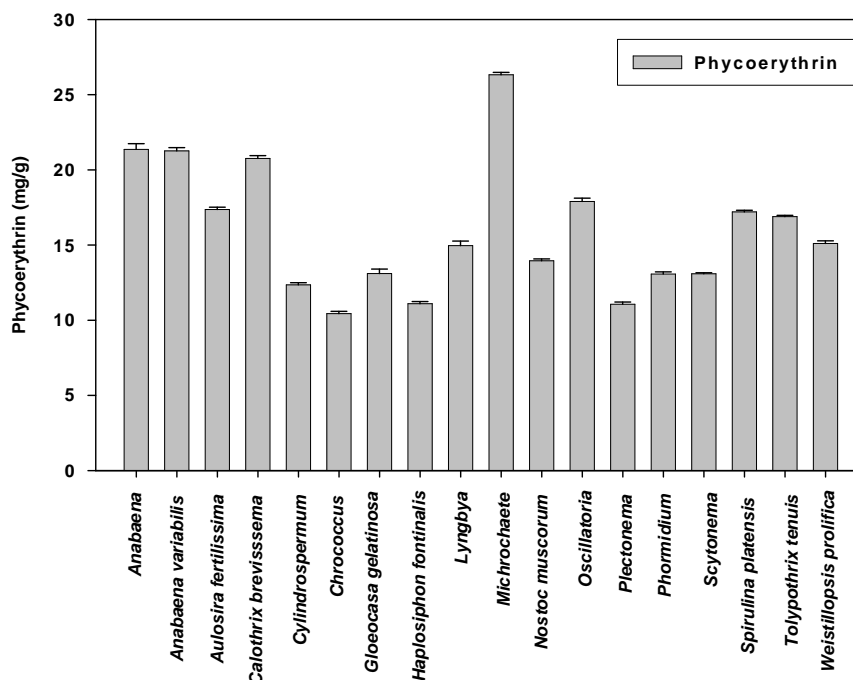


Fig. 1 Screening of cyanobacteria for PE (Error bars = \pm SD)

During screening, cyanobacterial PE yield ranged from 10.0 mg/g (*Chroococcus* CCU207) to 26.32 mg/g (*Microchaete* CCU342) (Fig. 1). *Microchaete* sp. was selected for further studies e.g. PE purification, characterization and environmental impact assessment.

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Purification Steps	Volume (ml)	PE (mg/ml)	Purity index		(A_{555}/A_{280})	Yield (%)
			OD ₅₅₅	OD ₂₈₀		
Crude extract	100	34.33	2.184	1.56	1.4	100
Ammonium sulphate	10	31.54	1.10	0.37	2.93	86.3
Dialysis	10	25.28	0.69	0.218	3.2	74.2
50 mM Ac- buffer	5	23.37	0.58	0.147	3.94	66.7
250 mM Ac-buffer	7.5	22.51	0.55	0.119	4.6	61.5
350 mM Ac-buffer	7.1	27.65	0.455	0.089	5.1	42.3

Table 1 Stepwise purification of PE from *Microchaete* CCU342 with purity index

Purity ratio is an indicator of degree of purification. A purity of 0.7 is considered as food grade, 3.9 as reactive grade and greater than 4.0 as analytical grade. In present study successive steps of PE purification increased purity value from 1.4 to 5.1 (Table 1). Less than our purity value were reported in cyanobacteria–*Synechococcus* (3.37) (Kim et al. 2011); *Lyngbya* (3.7), *Phormidium* (3.9) and *Halomicronema* (4.0) (Parmar et al. 2011). However higher purity values has been reported in red algae, e.g. *Polysiphonia urceolata* (5.6) [7] and *Porphyra yezoensis* (6.67) [13].

In present study *Microchaete sp.* Crude and purified PE fraction of *Microchaete* showed absorption maximum peak at 555 nm (Fig. 2a & 2b) and fluorescence emission at 575 nm (Fig. 3a & 3b). Absence of peaks at 620 nm and 652 nm suggested that there was no contamination of PC or APC.

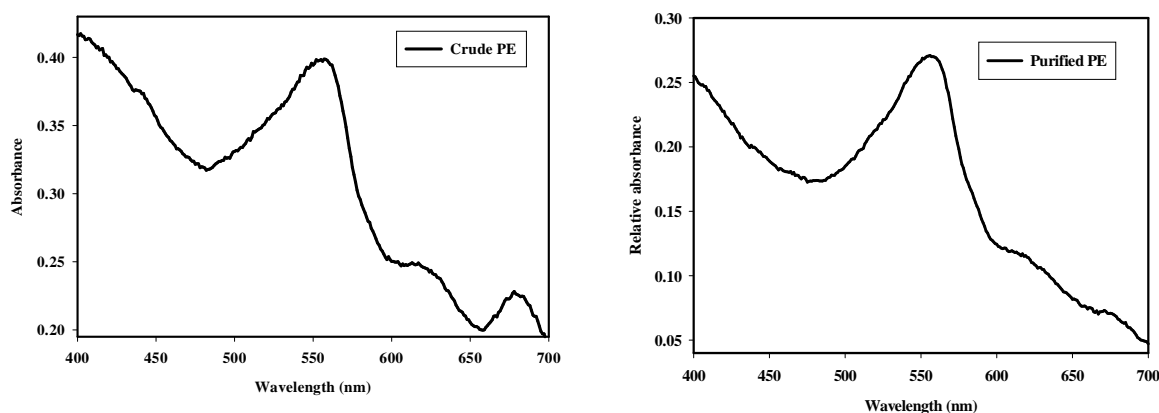


Fig. 2 Absorption spectra of crude and purified PE from *Microchaete* CCU342

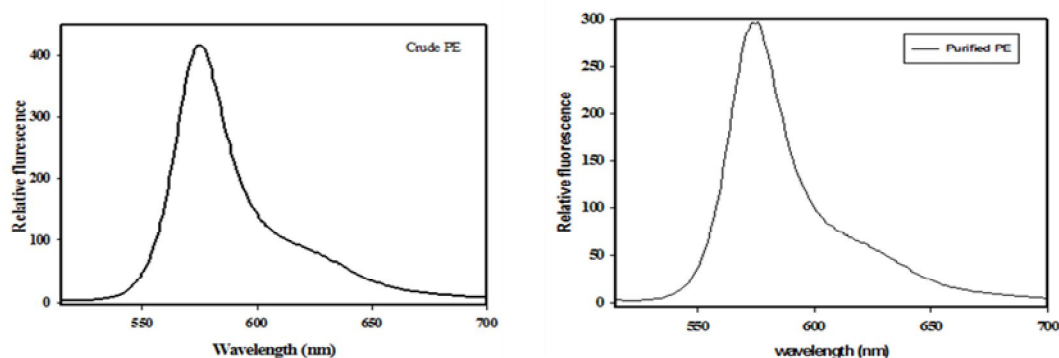


Fig. 3 Fluorescence spectra of crude and purified PE from *Microchaete* CCU342

SDS-PAGE analysis of the purified PE showed 21.8 kDa band representing α subunit in *Microchaete* CCU342 (Fig. 4). PE generally exists in hexameric state $(\alpha\beta)_6$, but its subunits may vary from 15-22 kDa. Two subunits of PE are reported in *Aphanocapsa* strain 6701 (20 and 22 kDa) and *Nostoc muscorum* (19.4 and 16.9 kDa) [14]; [15]. Whereas three subunits (18, 20 and 32 kDa) are reported from cyanobacterium *Lyngbya arboricola* [8]. Four subunits were reported from *Lyngbya* AO9DM (18, 18.5, 20 and 23 kDa); *Phormidium* A27DM (18, 19, 19.5 and 21) and *Halomicronema* A32DM (18, 18.5, 20 and 22) reported by [16], but old culture of same strains revealed a single band of 14 kDa in *Lyngbya* and *Halomicronema*. Recently a truncated PE as 14 kDa subunit was reported in *Phormidium tenue* [17] and a new type of PE-SCH (17.9 and 19kDa) in *Synechococcus* [18].

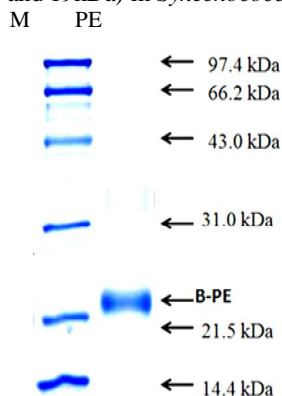


Fig. 4 SDS-PAGE analysis of purified PE from the cyanobacterium *Microchaete*.
(M- Protein molecular weight marker, PE-purified PE)

In present study, optimum temperature for PE was 25°C with 31.906 mg/g PE yield (Table 2). Analysis of variance revealed $r^2 = 0.405$, $p < 0.0001$, post test for linear trend ($n=5$). Ranjitha and Kaushik, [19] also observed maximum PE at 25°C in cyanobacterium *Nostoc muscorum*. In red algae *Leptosomia simplex* [20], *Gratleloupa cortica* and *Gratleloupa lithophyta* [21] was noted highest PE at 28 °C. In *Porphyra cortica* higher PE content were found at 10 °C but, in *Porphyra linearis* and *Porphyra umbilicus* at 15 °C [22].

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12.5 $\mu\text{mol photons/m}^2/\text{sec}$ was the best irradiance for PE production (30.79 mg/g) in *Microchaete*'s CCU342 (Table 2). Analysis of variance by post tests for linear trend revealed $r^2=0.988$, $p<0.0001$, ($n=4$) that was significant. In cyanobacteria light irradiance preferences vary like, 10 $\mu\text{mol photons/m}^2/\text{sec}$ in *Nostoc* UAM-206 [23]; 20 $\mu\text{mol photons/m}^2/\text{s}$ in *Westiellopsis iyengari* [24] and 25 $\mu\text{mol photons/m}^2/\text{sec}$ in *Nostoc muscorum* [19] and *Spirulina subsalsa* [25]. While high light intensities 40 and 90 $\mu\text{mol photons/m}^2/\text{s}$ produced maximum PE in red algae *Gracilaria tenuistipitata* [26] and *Porphyridium cruentum* [27] respectively.

The order of suitable chromatic regime for the PE production was found to be Green>Blue>White>Yellow>Red (Table 2). Analysis of variance revealed $r^2=0.000389$, $p<0.1203$, post tests for linear trend ($n=5$) that was not significant. *Microchaete* CCU342, showed 35.8% increase in green light and exhibited complementary chromatic adaptation of group-III, in which cyanobacteria can modulate both PE and PC level and the rate of synthesis of PE is greater in green light and of PC is higher in Red light [28]. Similar trend was also observed by Mishra et al. [29] in *Pseudoanabaena* where green light enhanced the PE content by 1.6 fold than white light. Bell and Fu [30] found up to 2 fold increase in *Trichodesmium* GBR TRL1101. Tomasseli et al [25] also found green coloured wavelength enhanced the production of PE in *Spirulina subsalsa*. In red algae *Rhodella reticulata* PE enhancement was up to 27% under green light [31]. Schmitt and Federspeil [32] found that the operon encoding PE, cpeBA is transcriptionally activated in green light and is expressed at very low levels in red light.

16:8 light: dark regime was the optimal photo-period for the production of PE in *Microchaete* CCU342 (Table 2). Analysis of variance revealed $r^2= 0.975$, $p<0.0001$, post test for linear trends ($n=4$). Longest photoperiod was also found optimal for PE production in *Calothrix elenkenii* [33] and *Nostoc muscorum* [34]. While, shorter (10:14) photoperiod gave high PE in red algae *Hypnea musciformis*, [35].

In *Microchaete* CCU342, the maximum PE was attained at pH-8 (Table 2). Analysis of variance revealed $r^2= 0.213$, $p<0.0001$, post test for linear trends ($n=7$). In red algae *Porphyridium cruentum* maximum PE was found at pH-8 [27]. In cyanobacterium *Nostoc muscorum* UAM-206 the PE content decreased at pH-7 (39.45 %) while enhancement in PE content (37 %) at pH-9 [23].

Conditions	PE (mg/g)
Temperature (°C)	
20 °C	25.00***
25 °C	31.90***
30 °C	29.68***
35 °C	23.20***
40 °C	20.05***
Light intensity ($\mu\text{ mol photonsm}^{-2}\text{sec}^{-1}$)	
12.5	30.79***
25.0	26.08***
36.5	21.60***
50.0	15.15***
Light colour (Wavelength)	
Red	20.87***
Green	45.28***
Yellow	22.2***
White	33.41***
Blue	26.18***
pH	
4	19.12***
5	20.52***

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6	26.0 ^{***}
7	31.65 ^{***}
8	35.82 ^{***}
9	29.18 ^{***}
10	16.06 ^{***}
Photoperiod (Light: dark)	
16:8	36.04 ^{***}
12:12	31.6 ^{***}
10:14	28.63 ^{***}
8:16	24.92 ^{***}

Probability of error is represented by asterisk (*) for * p<0.01, ** p<0.001, *** p<0.0001

Table 2 Effect of different environmental stress on PE content (mg/g) from *Microchaete* CCU342

In *Microchaete* PE increased till 50 mM (p<0.0001) salt concentration as compared to control and thereafter it decreased (Table 3). This result is also in agreement with the study of Kumar et al. [36], who found that hypersalinity (45 ppt) enhanced (70 %) PE in red algae *Gracilaria cortica*. Some enhancement in PE was also observed in *Gracilaria crassa* and *Gracilaria edulis* at 35 ppt salinity [37].

NaCl (mM)	PE (mg/g)
Control	28.25
10	31.08 ^{***}
50	37.42 ^{***}
100	26.29 ^{***}
150	22.43 ^{***}
200	18.65 ^{***}
250	10.08 ^{***}

Probability of error is represented by asterisk (*) for * p<0.01, ** p<0.001, *** p<0.0001

Table 3 Effect of salt (NaCl) stress on PE from *Microchaete* CCU342

Chlorpyrifos and malathion pesticide showed 88% (p<0.0001) and 100% (p<0.0001) reduction in PE at the concentration of 0.015% respectively (Table 4). The drastic decrease in PE with rapid bleaching was more pronounced under malathion. The inhibitory effect of pesticides on PE was reported in cyanobacteria *Anabaena fertilissima*, *Aulosira fertilissima*, *Westiellopsis prolifica* [38], *Plectonema boryanum* [39], *Anabaena dolilolum* Bhar [40] and *Anabaena sphaeroids* [41]. This reduction in PE may be due to accumulation of toxicants in the thylakoid membrane, that change membrane fluidity [42]. Such decrease in PE may be ascribed to the inhibition of pigment synthesis or accelerated degradation of the pigment due to increased active oxygen species (AOS) at various sites of the photosynthetic electron transport chain [43].

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Pesticide (%)	Cholorpyriphos PE (mg/g)	Malathion PE (mg/g)
Control	30.4	30.4
0.003 %	27.11***	24.33***
0.006 %	24.05***	21.72***
0.009 %	21.37***	14.34***
0.012 %	9.32***	5.27***
0.015 %	3.68***	----

Probability of error is represented by asterisk (*) for * p<0.01, ** p<0.001, *** p<0.0001

Table 4 Effect of different pesticides on PE from *Microchaete* CCU342

In present study, heavy metals resulted PE reduction in *Microchaete* (Table 5). The order of toxicity at 1.5 mM metal was chromium>cadmium>copper> zinc> lead (significant value (p<0.0001). Copper, zinc and lead showed slight PE increase in lower metal concentrations but inhibited at higher concentration. Li et al. [44], Ahmad and Aftab [45] also reported enhanced PE in lower concentration of Cu²⁺ and Zn²⁺ in *Porphyridium haitanesis* and *Nostoc muscorum*. Under Pb²⁺ stress PE reduction was observed in *Spirulina platensis* and *Nostoc muscorum* [46,45], *Anabaena-flos-aquae* [47], but Zaccaro et al. [48] found 4 times PE boost in *Microchaete tenera* and suggested it may be due to organism's effort to increase organic nitrogen reserve as PE under stress. Cd²⁺ stress reduce PE in *Anabaena-flos-aquae* [49, 50]. PE decline at higher concentrations of metal ions could be due to an enhanced need of metabolic energy for responses associated with adaptive mechanism of various enzymes [51]. Heavy metal induced changes in the arrangement and structure in thylakoid membrane also changes PE position and block electron transport causing inactivation of the PSII reaction centre [52].

Concentration (mM)	Copper PE (mg/g)	Zinc PE (mg/g)	Lead PE (mg/g)	Cadmium PE (mg/g)	Chromium PE (mg/g)
Control	27.83	27.83	27.83	27.83	27.83
0.05	30.55***	33.48***	32.54***	25.40***	23.59***
0.10	29.22***	36.10***	34.37***	22.31***	17.40***
0.50	25.64***	39.23***	34.80***	19.38***	13.28***
1.00	20.02***	24.64***	26.10***	16.42***	9.47***
1.50	15.22***	19.36***	21.07***	10.02***	5.26***

Probability of error is represented by asterisk (*) for * p<0.01, ** p<0.001, *** p<0.0001

Table 5 Effect of different heavy metals on PE content (mg/g) from *Microchaete* CCU342

IV. CONCLUSION

From the present study it can be concluded that *Microchaete* CCU342 may possibly be a good source of cyanobacterial PE with fast growth and purity value 5.1. It's purified PE resembled with B-PE.

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