Short Communication

Efficient discrimination by MIRU-VNTRs of *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* clinical isolates belonging to the predominant SIT11/EAI3-IND ancestral genotypic lineage in Kerala, India

Biljo V. Joseph [a], Smitha Soman [b], Véronique Hill [c], R. Ajay Kumar [b], Nalin Rastogi [c], Sathish Mundayoor [b,*]

[a] Department of Biotechnology, Christ University, Hosur Road, Bangalore 560 029, Karnataka, India
[b] Mycobacteria Research Group, Department of Molecular Microbiology, Rajiv Gandhi Centre for Biotechnology, Thycaud Post, Thiruvananthapuram 695 014, Kerala, India
[c] WHO Supranational TB Reference Laboratory, TB & Mycobacteria Unit, Institut Pasteur de la Guadeloupe, Abymes, France

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The present study evaluated the ability of MIRU–VNTRs to discriminate *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* (MTB) clinical isolates belonging to the SIT11/EAI3-IND ancestral genotypic lineage, which is highly prevalent in Kerala, India. Starting from 168 MTB clinical isolates, spoligotyping (discriminatory index of 0.9113) differentiated the strains into 68 distinct patterns, the biggest cluster being SIT11/48 SIT11 ($n = 48$). The present study shows that 12-loci MIRUs and 3 ETRs allowed an efficient discrimination of these isolates (discriminatory indexes of 0.7819 and 0.5523, respectively).

India ranks first in the burden of tuberculosis (TB), and along with the other Asian countries, like China, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia, accounts for over 50% of the TB burden of the world [1]. Different methods of genotyping such as IS6110–RFLP, spoligotyping and MIRU-VNTR (Mycobacterial Interspersed Repetitive Unit-Variable Number Tandem Repeats) have helped in studying the evolution and dissemination dynamics of *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* (MTB) [2]. IS6110–RFLP, long considered the gold standard for genotyping of MTB, has disadvantages such as the requirement of good quality DNA and the inability to type strains with low/no copy number of IS6110 insertions. In addition, the difficulties in inter-laboratory comparison of the RFLP patterns hinder its generalized use [3].

PCR-based spoligotyping has helped to distinguish different MTB lineages; it also allows easy inter-laboratory comparison of data thanks to huge international databases [4]. Another PCR-based typing method using MIRU-VNTR mini-satellites has advantages similar to spoligotyping for inter-laboratory comparison; but in addition, it shows a significantly higher discriminatory power – equal to that of the IS6110–RFLP gold standard [5]. However, both the MTB population under study as well as the discriminatory power of the method(s) in question is important to choose a typing

technique. Though IS6110–RFLP has been used worldwide for successful genotyping, MTB populations from Kerala, South India contain low or no copy of IS6110 in their genomes, and therefore this method fails to discriminate the isolates [6]. In such a case, spoligotyping has an advantage over IS6110–RFLP.

The study population consisted of 168 clinical isolates of MTB obtained from patients attending different TB clinics in Kerala, India [7]. This included 9 multidrug resistant (MDR) and three extremely drug resistant (XDR) isolates. The spoligotyping of the isolates was done as described by Kamerbeek et al. [8]; 12 loci MIRU-VNTRs and Exact Tandem Repeats-A, B & C (ETR A, B & C) were performed as reported previously by Supply et al. [9] and Frothingham and Meeker-O'Connell [10]. The amplicons were separated manually on 2% agarose gels, and the copy number of each locus was scored by comparing the corresponding bands with appropriate DNA size markers. Both spoligotypes in octal format and MIRU patterns were compared with the SITVIT2 proprietary database of the Institut Pasteur de la Guadeloupe, which is an updated "in-house" version of the recently released SITVITWEB database [4]. In this database, Spoligotype International Type (SIT) and MIRU International Type (MIT) designate identical patterns shared by two or more patient isolates, whereas "orphan" designates patterns reported only for a single isolate.

In this study, spoligotyping differentiated the 168 strains into 68 distinct patterns, of which 51 (n = 151 or 59.88%) corresponded to different SITs whereas 17 patterns (n = 17 or 10.12%) corresponded to orphans. The majority of the isolates (n = 108 or 64.28%) belonged to the ancestral East-African Indian (EAI) lineage; and among these, EAI3-IND sublineage predominated (n = 61 strains). The EAI3-IND sublineage strains were further split into 7 subclusters: a major subcluster that belonged to EAI3-IND prototype SIT11 (n = 48/61) with high phylogeographical specificity for India [4], and six other SITs (n = 13/61). Interestingly, three out of the nine MDR cases belonged to SIT11/EAI3-IND lineage strains.

12-loci MIRUs could differentiate this ancestral prototype into 15 distinct patterns and three orphans (Fig. 1). Out of the 15 patterns observed, eight patterns corresponded to "newly created shared-type" in the database (two or more strains belonging to a new pattern detected within this study, or due to a match with an orphan in the database). The analysis showed that 45% (21/48) of the SIT11 strains belonged to MIT69, which was discriminated using ETR-A, B and C in 16/21 strains with ETR pattern 614 (copy numbers for ETR A, B & C, respectively), followed by 2/16 isolates with ETR pattern 624, and a single isolate each with ETR patterns 514, 664 and 622, respectively.

Calculations of the Hunter Gaston Discriminatory Index (HGDI) for the study sample (n = 168) vs. SIT11/EAI3-IND strains (n = 48) are summarized in Table 1. The HGDI values for the global dataset (n = 168) by different typing formats were as follows: (i) spoligotyping alone, 0.9113; (ii) 15 VNTRs, 0.9735; and (iii) spoligotyping + 15 VNTRs, 0.9904.

The discriminatory power of 12 loci MIRU set for SIT11 sublineage was found to be 0.7819, with individual loci ranking in the order: MIRU4 (0.37) > MIRU10 (0.23) > MIRU31 (0.20). The ETRs showed a global HGDI of 0.5523 for SIT11/EAI3-IND strains, followed by individual values of 0.339 (ETR-B) > 0.199 (ETR-A) > 0.196 (ETR-C). Interestingly, the same values calculated for the global sample population were much higher: 0.738 (ETR-A) > 0.674 (ETR-B) > 0.617 (ETR-C).

Ali et al. has reported the efficient use of MIRUs for the discrimination of CAS1 strains isolated from Pakistan [11]. Their study showed MIRU-4 to have the least HGDI in CAS1 strains while the present study shows that it has maximal discrimination for the strains. A recent study from Poland showed the efficient use of 15 and 19 loci MIRU-VNTR for further discrimination of spoligotype clusters [12]. In their study population, MIRU-40 exhibited maximum polymorphism. In India, Sharma et al. has shown the efficient use of MIRU typing for better discrimination of spoligotype of MTB isolates from north India. In their study population, MIRU-26 showed
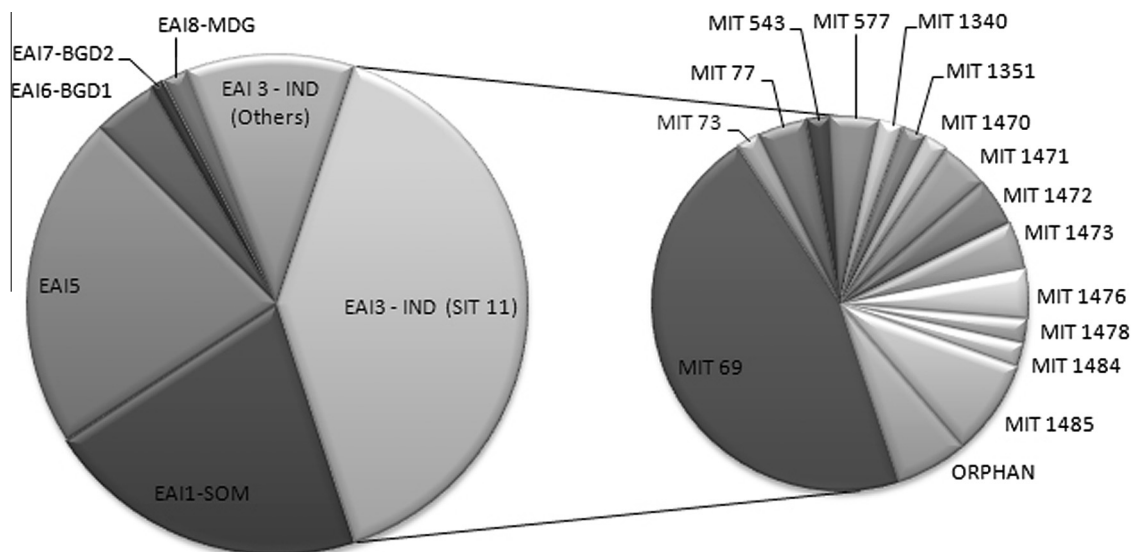

Fig. 1 – Discrimination of SIT11/EAI3-IND genotype of *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* isolates from Kerala based on MIRU-VNTRs & ETRs.