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The Untold Story of Forgotten Millets

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Long before rice and wheat dominated Indian agriculture, millets were considered as the backbone of food and nutritional security for millions of people. These hardy grains not only nourished the civilizations, but were capable of surviving in harsh climates, and supported farming communities across India's drylands. Yet, despite their remarkable qualities, many millet species gradually disappeared from farms and kitchens with changing growing patterns and with the onset of new agricultural technologies thereby earning the label of "forgotten crops." But today as the world faces climate change, water scarcity, biodiversity loss, and nutritional deficiencies, these ancient grains which were once labelled as forgotten crops are making a remarkable comeback into the agricultural scenario. This story of forgotten millets is not merely an agricultural narrative but it is a story of heritage, resilience, and hope for the future.

A Rich Legacy Hidden in History

Millets have been cultivated in India for more than 4,000 years belonging to the Neolithic period. Archaeological findings also suggests that several millet species were grown in the Indian subcontinent long before the widespread cultivation of rice and wheat. For centuries, these millet crops served as staple foods in many regions of India due to their ability to grow in area with low rainfall and less fertility. Traditional Indian agriculture supported the cultivation of diversity of millets, including Kodo millet, Little millet, Barnyard millet, Foxtail millet, Proso millet, and Browntop millet, pearl millet and finger millet. These grains were associated with the local cultures, food traditions, & farming practices of particular region.

Why millets?

Millets are called the climate-smart crops because they can grow under low rainfall (arid zones), poor soils, and limited irrigation, while requiring fewer inputs than many other major cereals. Apart from their limited resources requirement millets are highly nutritious and considered to be packed with benefits of antioxidants, minerals and vitamins and protein. Kodo Millet (*Paspalum scrobiculatum*) is known for its drought tolerance and high dietary fiber content. Little Millet (*Panicum sumatrense*) very well adapts to marginal lands and provides essential minerals. Barnyard Millet (*Echinochloa frumentacea*) is known to be one of the fastest-growing millet crops and is highly nutritious. Foxtail Millet (*Setaria italica*) is among the oldest cultivated millets and contains significant amounts of protein and micronutrients. Proso Millet (*Panicum miliaceum*) requires very little water and matures quickly. Browntop Millet (*Urochloa ramosa*), once widely cultivated, is now among the least grown despite its excellent nutritional and environmental benefits.

Why Did Millets Disappear?

The decline of millets can be roughly traced back to the period of Green Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s when high yielding varieties with higher yield potential were introduced.

With the growing population as India faced severe food shortages, India promoted high-yielding varieties of rice and wheat that were supported by irrigation, fertilizers, procurement systems, and public distribution networks. There was a shifting in the dietary pattern of the people with diversification of cereals. People got more attracted to the high yielding cereals and considered the traditional cereals to be outdated. Green revolution was very successful in increasing the productivity and by decreasing the food scarcity but it greatly reduced the importance of millets. On the other hand government support, minimum support prices, and procurement policies largely favored the cultivation of rice and wheat. Urbanization and changing consumer preferences also changed the perception of people for which many thought millets to be the “poor man's food.” In addition, limited processing facilities and weak market infrastructure severely affected their commercial value. According to reports from NITI Aayog, India's per capita millet consumption declined dramatically from approximately 32.9 kg in 1962 to around 4.2 kg in 2010, showing the extent to which these crops were neglected.



Why Forgotten Millets Matter Today?

Millets are popularly known as climate resilient crops. As they can withstand drought, high temperatures, and poor soils while requiring very less water as compared to other crops. Many millet species effectively grow under rainfed conditions and in marginal lands requiring fewer agricultural inputs. Millets are gluten free food with low glycemic index. Millets are rich in dietary fiber, protein, iron, calcium, zinc, magnesium, and antioxidants. They can contribute significantly to addressing malnutrition and hidden hunger, particularly in vulnerable populations. Millets also promote sustainable agriculture by enhancing crop diversity, reducing dependence on irrigation, and lowering environmental footprints. Their cultivation aligns well with the goals of climate-resilient farming systems.

Guardians of millet farming

The practice of growing millet species is largely due to tribal communities and smallholder farmers who continued cultivating these crops despite declining popularity. These communities preserved traditional seed varieties, indigenous knowledge systems, and climate-resilient farming practices. Without their efforts, several millet species might have disappeared entirely from the agricultural scenario.

The Millet Revival

In recent years, awareness about healthy diets and sustainable agriculture are now being discussed globally that has increased the interest of people for growing millets again.. India has played a major role in this initiative by promoting millets globally, culminating in the United Nations declaring 2023 as the “International Year of Millets”. Many entrepreneurs, researchers, policymakers, and farmers are now working together to revive millet cultivation and consumption. Millets are now gaining popularity for which they are being transformed into value-added products such as breakfast cereals, cookies, noodles, pasta, snacks, and energy bars, making them attractive to modern consumers. Through this process of value addition also people are fetching higher prices with limited use of resources.

Odisha's Role in Millet Revival

Odisha has emerged as a pioneer in millet promotion through the Odisha Millets Mission popularly known as Sree Anna Yojana .This initiative focuses on increasing millet cultivation, strengthening seed systems, improving market access, and creating awareness

among consumers about the overall benefits of millets. The program has helped revive traditional millet cultivation while enhancing the livelihoods of tribal and smallholder farmers. This initiative has also generated many employment opportunities for the rural youth and women those who are engaged in this initiative.



Value added products made from millets



Challenges

Despite several enthusiasm, many challenges still remain. Consumer awareness is still limited in many regions. Processing infrastructure and market access need proper strengthening. Farmers often face difficulties accessing quality seeds and stable markets. Continued policy support and investment will be essential to sustain the momentum of millet revival.

Conclusion

The story of forgotten millets reminds us that solutions to modern challenges often lie in ancient wisdom and practices. The practices that were once neglected and pushed to the margins, are now being recognized for their potential to address climate change, water scarcity, nutritional insecurity, and sustainable agriculture. As nations is focusing more towards sustainable food systems and better health forgotten millets are no longer the parts of the past. They are crops of the future, proving that some of the oldest grains may hold the key to a healthier and more sustainable world.

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