

Our Views

Millets are also good economics

Last week I had an opportunity to share some food for thought at a very atypical and interesting conference on 'food security' organised by an engagement group of C20 (civil group of G20) under the chairmanship of Shri Gauranga Das, Director, Govardhan Ecovillage at Palghar, Maharashtra.

Food is reflective of the culture in which it evolves. It tells us a lot about the place, its physical characters, its history, and the people of the land. Food culture goes far beyond cooking and eating. Our diet routine not only makes us who we are but also what our future generations turn out to be. Economically, food encompasses a wide value chain from before production to post consumption.

The UN General Assembly, at its 75th session in March 2021, declared 2023 as the International Year of Millets. In the budget speech earlier this year, the Indian Finance Minister also referred to millets as "shree anna" or "the honoured grain", highlighting their economic importance. This article is focussed on nutritional and economic security that can be achieved through indigenous crop production of millets.

So, what are millets? They are a group of small grain cereal food crops which are highly nutritious and are grown under marginal/ low fertile soils with very low inputs such as fertilizers and pesticides. Millets were the first crops and are the future crops. Most of millet crops are native of India. Based on area of cultivation and the size of the grain, millets are classified as major or minor millets. The major millets include Sorghum (Jowar) and Pearl millets (Bajra). Minor millets are Finger millet (Ragi/ mandua), Foxtail (Kangni), Little millet (Kutki), Kodo millet, Barnyard millets (sawan/ jhangora), Proso millet (cheena) and brown top millet (Korale). All these millets have shorter growing duration and adapt themselves to the changing environmental conditions especially during drought.

Millets are the ancient crops of the mankind and are important for rainfed agriculture. Millets, being drought tolerant, require very less water as compared to rice and wheat. They are a major energy source and staple foods for people living in the dry and arid regions. However, with large scale cultivation of rice and wheat due to urbanization and industrialisation, the importance and cultivation of millets has reduced over ages. In recent years, they have gained higher economic importance because of their versatile environment adoption, sustainability in low input agriculture and organic cultivation amenability. Since they are grown in regions with low rainfall, they resume significance for sustained agriculture and food security of any nation.

Globally, millets are also recognised for their several health benefits and are popularly known as nutri-cereals as they provide most of the nutrients required for normal functioning of human body. With many lifestyle ailments like diabetes, hypertension and cardiovascular becoming more prevalent, millets are today seen to offer a viable alternative to live healthily and to reduce the incidence of lifestyle diseases. They are known as a powerhouse of nutrition due to their many nutritional, nutraceutical, and health promotional properties - especially the high fibre content and the nature of starch. A healthier society based on higher consumption of millets will not just reduce the health expenses of any nation but will also lead to increased productivity.

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India is the leading producer and consumer of millets crops and their products. People in arid and semi-arid regions of the country grow and consume millets as staple food. Millets ensure food and fodder security in the rainfed agricultural areas. Am glad that the government has started focussing on this very important agricultural produce and consumption initiative.

To conclude, millets are smart foods that help overcome some of biggest nutritional and health challenges. They are good for the planet as they don't require a lot of water and are able to survive in the hottest and the driest climates. They require very low fertiliser and pesticides. They are good for the farmers as their yield is almost 3 times of a wheat or rice crop and they can survive the drought. Increased production, consumption, and export of millets by the country will only mean sustainable agriculture, lower health expenses, higher human productivity.

Millets are not just the good food; they are also good economics!

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