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Culture has helped millets survive

Throughout ages, many rituals have been associated with millet cultivation and women are to be thanked for this

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Despite being neglected millets survived, thanks to cultural associations and festivals, which played a vital role in preserving them. Credit: Vikas Choudhary/CSE

As millets make a [comeback to our fields and plates](#), the formal launch of an extensive campaign beginning from Pune to promote these nutri cereals assumes great significance. According to B Dayakar Rao, principal scientist at the Indian Institute of Millets Research, "The Pune event is basically an extension of the National Millet Mission mooted by the Department of Agriculture, Cooperation and Farmers' Welfare across 14 states."

Historically, India always had a rich association with millets. But in the past six decades, India's agricultural policy favoured rice and wheat over millets. Professor Martin Jones, Department of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge, blames food standardisation for the disappearance of millets from India's food plates.

"The primary driver is the market, which optimises food profit, through an increasing specialisation in a few market-friendly crops. This is opposed to food security, which relies on a greater diversity of

resources that don't all fail at the same time. Currently, market-friendly cereals are wheat, rice and maize, which fuel over 50 per cent of the global food chain," Jones says.

P V Suresh Kumar, a Vishakhapatnam-based development consultant, points out that the present agriculture priority is linked to commercialisation. Earlier, farmers had the freedom to choose their crops, seeds and land. These days, the government and sometimes even foreign players, control the choice of inputs. This forces farmers to follow modern cropping patterns where he values a few crops over others. This is the reason that after 1976, paddy gradually replaced millets, he says. "Millets were part of daily consumption but were not traded so much in India. Now, the reverse is happening."

During the pre-Green Revolution era (1965-66), millets were cultivated in 36.90 million hectares (ha). However, in stark contrast, the area under millet cultivation declined to 14.72 million ha in 2016-17. "This has been largely due to policy impact, in addition to changes in consumption pattern, dietary habits, lower yields, lesser demand and conversion of irrigated area for cultivation of rice and wheat," says C Konda Reddy, assistant FAO representative. This brought about adverse nutritional consequences such as fall in protein, Vitamin-A, iron and iodine levels, especially among women and children.

Millets' cultural association

Despite being neglected millets survived, thanks to cultural associations and festivals, which played a vital role in preserving them. Kumar explains that the main reason behind giving due importance to millets was that people knew about their significance in daily life. According to Stephen Gangmei, the in-charge of the millets project, North East Network (NEN)-Nagaland, earlier millets were regarded as healthy food, which had the power to treat illness, when medicines were scarce. Also, the Yimchunger Nagas of Nagaland celebrate the Metumniu festival August after the harvest of the millet crop

Even today, millet festivals are celebrated across India. Sanyasi Rao, programme manager at the Hyderabad-based non-profit, Wassan, says that in the tribal areas of Vishakhapatnam, people celebrate *Mandukiya*, a community festival, during June-July. As part of this, recipes made with *ragi* (finger millet) are offered to bullocks. In many places in northern Andhra Pradesh, after celebrating

Deepotsav (Diwali) in the evening, it is mandatory to eat *ragi* pancake before entering home. The tradition of making *ragi* recipes still continue on the occasion of *Nagula Chavithi* (the festival of worshipping the snake god).

In Madhya Pradesh, *madiah (ragi)* is mixed with turmeric and applied on the bodies of the bride and the groom during wedding ceremonies, says Naresh Biswas of non-profit Nirman. Millet seeds are also used to ward off evil spirits in tribal communities. The Pahadi Korwa tribe of Chhattisgarh hangs millet stalks in their courtyards to ensure good hunting and bountiful harvest.

All these examples show India's deep connection with millets, which can be rooted back to ancient texts. It is remarkable how things are turning around and people are favouring millets once again. "However, we don't expect a sudden u-turn after 40 years, but there is a gradual change happening. Today, there's a stage where there is enough sensitisation around millets," says Dayakar Rao.

According to Kumar, agriculture is not just limited to tilling, sowing and harvesting. There are many sub-activities like the observance of different kinds of rituals associated with cultivation. "Without women, no ritual ever takes place. So, they are to be thanked as through them millets have survived. Today, if India can widen the space for women in decision-making, then millets can empower female farmers," says Kumar.

There is another reason to bring millets back. Given our sensitive agro-ecosystems, the focus should shift back to millets, one of the oldest foods known to humans, says Reddy.

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