

From the desk of Principal...

*Food is much bigger than what is on your plate.
It has key connections with your health, environment and culture*

Embracing Millets : A Return to Nutritional Roots and a Sustainable Future

Millets have long been woven into the tapestry of Indian agriculture and cuisine. Revered in ancient texts like the Rigveda and Sushruta Samhita for their health benefits and lauded in the Arthashastra for their economic significance, these small-seeded grains were once staples of the Indian diet. However, the Green Revolution's focus on rice, wheat, and maize relegated millets to the sidelines, resulting in a drastic reduction in their consumption.

In a bid to revive these traditional grains, the Indian government rebranded millets as "Nutri Cereals" in 2018. This rebranding effort gained further momentum during the Union Budget of 2023, when Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman referred to millets as "Shri Anna," meaning the best of all grains. Accompanying this rebranding was a commitment to fund the Indian Institute of Millet Research (IIMR) in Hyderabad, a center for excellence and a global hub for millet research and development.

Why Millets, and Why Now?

The resurgence of millets is not just a nod to tradition but a necessary response to contemporary nutritional challenges. A significant number of preschool children and adolescents in India suffer from micronutrient deficiencies, and more than half of all women are anemic. Despite being calorie-rich, the staple crops of maize, rice, and wheat fall short in addressing these deficiencies. Millets, on the other hand, offer extensive nutritional benefits, rich in iron, zinc, and other essential nutrients.

The United Nations' declaration of 2023 as the International Year of Millets has further underscored the importance of these grains. While the area under millet cultivation has dropped by 56%, production has increased from 11.3 to 15.3 million tonnes due to improved varieties, hybrids, and better crop management practices.

Stories of Millet Magic

Among the inspiring stories of millet resurgence is that of Sanjulata Mahanta from Odisha. Known as the "Poster Girl for Millets," she has stunned her fellow villagers by planting millets and making huge profits, thereby helping other women farmers achieve economic independence.

As an educational institution, our school actively encourages parents to incorporate millets into their daily diets. Millet biscuits have become a staple in our school canteen, and we have introduced traditional dishes like Gujarat's handvo and Uttarakhand's mandua roti to our menu. Our efforts to educate parents include releasing a millet recipe booklet and hosting millet festivals during parent-teacher meetings.

Millets on the Global Stage

The prominence of millets was highlighted at the G-20 dinner hosted by President Droupadi Murmu, where a variety of millet dishes were served. Additionally, the Indian Embassy in China recently organized events for diplomats to discuss and dine over millets, showcasing India's commitment to these grains on an international platform.

Companies like Tata have also embraced the millet movement, with their "Soulful" brand offering a range of delicious and healthy millet products. We encourage everyone to try these nutritious options.

Sustaining the Millet Momentum

The question remains: Are millets here to stay, or will they face a boom-and-bust cycle like quinoa? Quinoa experienced a surge in popularity during the International Year of Quinoa in 2013, but its sudden rise led to market instability. To prevent a similar fate for millets, continuous policy support is essential. This includes grants for research and development, particularly for biofortified varieties rich in iron and zinc, and an increase in start-up incubators funded by IIMR or the private sector.

As we move beyond the International Year of Millets, it is crucial to ensure that these nutritional powerhouses remain a permanent fixture in our diets. By embracing millets, we can nourish our bodies and cultivate a more sustainable future. Sustainable agricultural practices with millets at the forefront must be developed and maintained to secure the long-term benefits of these ancient grains.

In conclusion, let us not relegate millets back to the sidelines. Instead, let us continue to cultivate and celebrate these grains, ensuring they remain all-stars on our plates for generations to come. By doing so, we can address nutritional deficiencies, support sustainable agriculture, and honor a rich culinary heritage.

Dr Jagdish Sharma
(Principal)
SVPS Sadabad

