

# IDEAS FOR INDIA

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Agriculture

## Introduction to e-Symposium: Carrying forward the promise of International Year of Millets

📅 16 October, 2023

Symposium



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*Although millets were a staple food in many Indian diets, their consumption has declined over the last few decades. Taking into account their resilience to climate change and potential to contribute to nutritional security, the Indian government has vowed to increase millet production and consumption and successfully advocated the United Nations to declare 2023 as the International Year of Millets.*

*Starting from World Food Day on 16 October, Ideas for India will host six pieces from researchers and practitioners discussing how the promise of millets can be realised. Anchored by Bharat Ramaswami, this series will feature perspectives on increasing millets' land under cultivation; investment in R&D and machinery for its production and processing; suggestions to revive demand by including millets in government food programmes; and increasing the scope for exports.*

Millets belong to the group of coarse cereals that include other crops such as maize and barley. In rural India, coarse cereals were as much as 35% of cereal consumption in 1960-61. However, by 2011-12, their importance had declined to only 5% of cereal consumption. In the same period, urban areas recorded a decline from 17% to 2.5% in the relative importance of coarse cereals (Defries *et al.* 2018).

The last six decades have seen the decline of millets as a staple food in Indian diets. Today, that is seen as a major loss. Relative to rice and wheat, millets are hardier crops, promising resilience in the face of climate change. Millets also offer more nutrition – Defries *et al.* (2018) attribute a sizeable decline in iron intake in India to the decline of millets consumption, with the steepest decline seen in the lowest income quartile. These trends are troubling considering the widespread prevalence of anemia in India, especially among women and children.

Promoting millets consumption and production is the avowed goal of the Central government and of several state governments. At the request of the Indian government, the United Nations declared 2023 to be the International Year of Millets, and in recognition of their nutritional value, millets are increasingly called ‘nutri-cereals’.

This e-Symposium offers contributions that assess the prospects of millets’ revival, while being sympathetic to the government’s goal. Over the course of a week, authors consider how policies can boost supply and demand. Manan Bhan uses the concept of ‘embodied area’ to demonstrate the decline of land area used for millets production, and notes how despite recent dynamism in exports, the market for millets remains overwhelmingly domestic.

The government plans on increasing millets production from less than 18 million at present to 45 million tonnes by 2030. Shalander Kumar, Abhishek Das and M. L. Jat argue that this can be best achieved by channeling R&D and extending resources to districts where millets’ productivity can compete with that of rice and maize. They show that as many as 125 rice growing districts and 50 maize growing districts could be targeted for millets production.

While sorghum (*jowar*) and pearl millets (*bajra*) are the varieties of millets that are mostly widely grown, Ashwini Kulkarni points out the importance of minor millets to ensure the food security of poor farmers. While these are even more neglected in terms of R&D and extension priorities, Kulkarni finds that extension efforts, where undertaken, have substantially increased yields. Interestingly, and contrary to what might be expected of

crops grown primarily by poor farmers, Kumar *et al.* and Kulkarni both identify the lack of scale-appropriate machinery as a constraint to the local processing of millets.

Some authors also have specific suggestions to revive demand. Of these, a popular recommendation is to include millets in food assistance programmes (for example, mid-day meals, Integrated Child Development Services and even the Public Distribution System). This could be one way of nudging farmers to switch away from crops such as rice and wheat that enjoy guaranteed procurement. Private initiatives to develop millet supply chains and markets run into problems such as “inconsistent supply of millet grains throughout the year, limited shelf-life of millet flours, lack of regular demand, lack of suitable processing machines and high demand for margins by retailers in the absence of proper supply chains” (Kumar *et al.*, forthcoming).

The much lauded (and now replicated<sup>1</sup> Odisha millets mission (OMM) began by targeting districts with the highest tribal population to tackle nutritional security of indigenous and vulnerable communities. Additionally, with cash incentives, farmers were encouraged to adopt improved practices. The successes and challenges of implementing the OMM are described by Basu *et al.* (2021). The team at Bharat Rural Livelihoods Foundation will contribute to our symposium and follow up on this earlier piece by gathering the experience of CSO members working in the field to implement the OMM, and analysing available secondary data. They explore how the OMM – which received an extension until 2026 by the Odisha government – functioned and changed during the Covid-19 crisis and what that means for the future of millets in the state.

The potential for also increasing exports is stressed by Pallavi Agarwal. She uses the success of Quinoa as a superfood in rich countries to be a case study which holds lessons for the marketing of millets. Reshma Roshania sounds a note of caution against the capture of millet products by ‘Big Food’. In her view, that is unlikely to deliver nutritional benefits, and argues that the path to success lies in millet-based street foods and policies that ensure both “profitability for farmers and affordability for consumers”.

Revival efforts aside, and despite their limited share in overall consumption, millets are thought to play an important role in the food security of some drought-prone populations. As an insurance crop for poor farmers, improvements in its productivity may have a high social value.

## India's millets consumption and trade over the last three decades

**Manan Bhan**

*Manan Bhan reveals the decline in land area under use for the production of millets and sorghum, and the potential to expand millet cultivation, trade and consumption...*

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## Farm to fork: An overview of millet supply chains in India

**Shalander Kumar,  
Abhishek Das and M. L.  
Jat**

*Kumar, Das and Jat outline some of the factors contributing to low demand for millets, despite effects to increase awareness about their nutritional benefits...*

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## Going beyond the International Year of Millets to achieve decade-long action

**Ashwini Kulkarni**

*Ashwini Kulkarni discusses how the momentum generated by the International Year of Millets can allow a decade-long action on millets in India...*

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## Making the most of Indian millets: Lessons from the International Year of Quinoa

**Pallavi Agrawal**

*Pallavi Agrawal looks at how the International Year of Millets is an opportunity to adopt learnings from the success of quinoa...*

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## Mainstreaming millets right: Dangers of promoting ultra-processed products

**Reshma Roshania**

*Reshma Roshania suggests that, instead of focussing on 'Big Food', farmers must be empowered to make millets a part of government food schemes...*

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## Odisha Millet Mission: An update at the end of IYM 2023

**Pritha Banerjee and  
Shomita Kundu**

*The article highlights how policies contributed to increased production and productivity, as well as greater marketing and consumption of millets....*

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Note:

1. The State Planning Commission of Chhattisgarh has asked the Government of Chhattisgarh to start a millet mission on the lines of Odisha Millets Mission.

## Further Reading

DeFries, Ruth, et al. (2018), "[Impact of Historical Changes in Coarse Cereals Consumption in India on Micronutrient Intake and Anemia Prevalence](#)", *Food and Nutrition Bulletin*, 39(3): 377-392.

Basu, S, A Saha and S Sathpathi (2021), '[Addressing the nutrition crisis: Reflections from Odisha Millets Mission](#)', *Ideas for India*, 9 April.