

Why millets matter

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African Union (AU) Chairperson Azali Assoumani hugs Prime Minister Narendra Modi after the Union became permanent member of the G20 in New Delhi. (Photo: PMO/X)

Megasthenes visited India some 2,300 year ago and recorded his observations in the book Indika. His records show that millets were one of the main crops grown in ancient India and popular among the masses. The G20 delegation that visited India this year may have a similar account to narrate. The eighteenth G20 summit, hosted by India under the theme “One earth – One family – One future”, promoted millets as a sustainable and healthy option.

Millets were discussed during different G20 events and also served as part of the fusion cuisine. Millets are nutrient-rich superfoods that include diverse small-seeded crops like sorghum (jowar), pearl millet (bajra) and finger millet (ragi). They have the potential of feeding the increasing population without causing significant harm to the environment.

Millets have been part of our diet since ancient times and were recently dubbed as Shree Anna or the best among all grains. 2018 was declared as the national year of millets by India, and 2023 has been declared as the international year of millets by the United Nations at the behest of India. India took a number of initiatives as part of the G20 presidency to promote millets.

In February 2023, during the G20 Agriculture Deputies' meeting, India called on G20 nations to adopt the 3S strategy of smart and sustainable agriculture that can serve everyone. A month later, the Government of India organised a global millets (Shree Anna) conference.

The conference served as a platform for knowledge-exchange on agricultural best practices related to millets. In April 2023, the G20 Meeting of Agricultural Chief Scientists took place in Varanasi and extended whole-hearted support to India's MAHARISHI or millets and other ancient grains international research initiative proposal. India is the largest producer of millets in the world accounting for nearly 20 per cent of the global production; promoting millets is certainly in India's interest.

But millets provide benefits that far outweigh the economic gains. Millets are climateresilient, and they have a better chance of withstanding increasing carbon dioxide concentration in the atmosphere. Millets are sturdy, drought-resistant crops and their revival can boost food security in all parts of India. They are also a healthy food option and can help overcome many of the lifestyle diseases that plague city dwellers.

Despite their many benefits, millets were largely overlooked during the decades that followed the independence of India. This is because the postindependence period was a turbulent one for India. Traditional, self-sufficient village economy had significantly declined under the British rule prior to independence. The first few years of post-independent India were marred with famine, reduced agricultural productivity and widespread hunger. Increasing food production to feed the millions was the need of the hour.

High-yielding wheat and rice varieties were developed at such a time followed by mechanization of agriculture, setting up of chemical plants and enhancing irrigation facilities. In due course, under what came to be known as the green revolution, India became food-surplus. However, challenges due to green revolution became prominent each passing year since the 1960s. In 1962,

Rachel Carson published the book "Silent Spring" which amplified the detrimental effects of chemical-based agriculture on the environment. Green revolution needed favourable agro-climatic conditions due to which agriculture boomed in only a few north Indian states.

This led to regional economic disparity in the country since India is primarily an agricultural-based economy. Increasing use of chemicals and machines in green revolution states like Haryana and Punjab subsequently resulted in soil degradation, water pollution and a public health crisis. Today, ground water has alarmingly declined in most parts of Haryana and Punjab.

Climate change is worsening the situation and state governments are running schemes to discourage farmers from growing water guzzling crops like paddy. Millets were the major food crops cultivated in India before the green revolution. Today, a need is felt to reintroduce millets as part of the strategy to adapt to climate change.

Augmenting our food supply system with millets is also needed to improve the overall health index of the Indian population. Consuming a mix of millets in the diet, for example, is known to reduce iron deficiency – a key public health concern in India. Making millets part of the daily diet can do wonders for improving public health. Compared to rice and wheat, millets have higher protein, iron and calcium levels.

They are rich in polyphenols, which help reduce fat absorption and have low glycaemic index which helps regulate blood sugar levels. With so many benefits associated with them, millets are the champions of the food system. Their re-adoption in the global food supply can help achieve many UN Sustainable Development Goals at one go.

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