



Millets. Forgotten Food in India.

The core message at the outset is that millets are on steady decline in India. The current production is less than what we produced/consumed in the 1960s when the population was 1/3rd of what it is now.



What are Millets?

Millets are small-seeded annual grasses, commonly cultivated as grain crops in semi dry regions. Millets are highly drought tolerant and climate resilient.

Millets are believed to be among the earliest domesticated plants, which have long served as traditional staple crops for millions of people, particularly in India and Africa.

Major millets in India are jowar (sorghum), bajra (pearl millet), ragi (finger millet), Ramdana (Amarnath), Kuttu (Buckwheat Millet), Kangni/kakum (Foxtail millet), kodon (Kodo Millet), Sama (Little Millet), banyard millet (sawan), proso millet (common) and Chena (Broomcorn Millet).

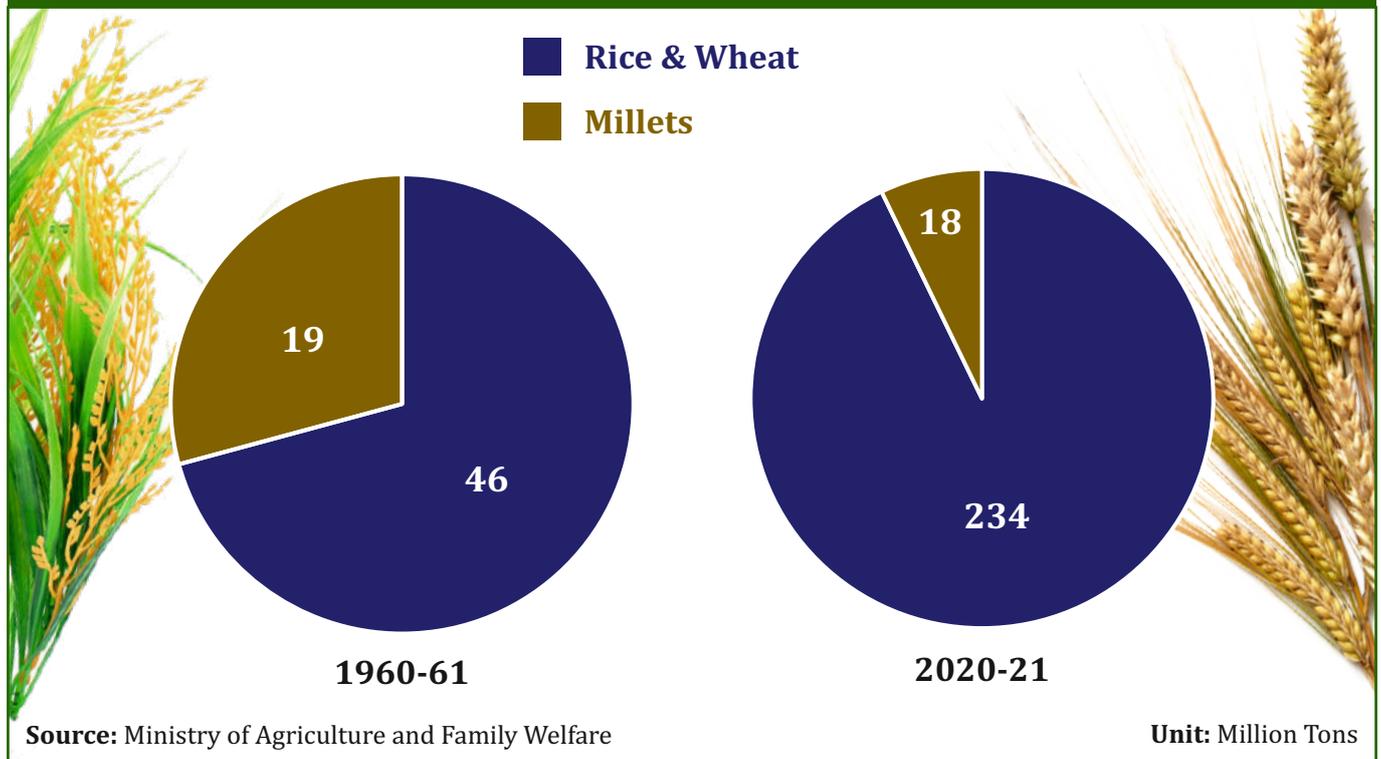
When compared to rice and wheat, millets have relatively lower carbon and water footprint.

In terms of nutrition, millets are considered much superior to rice/wheat. Millets are the powerhouse of nutrients.

With no gluten and low glycaemic index, millet diet is ideal for those with celiac diseases and diabetes.

India has been and still continues to be the largest producer of millets in the world. But a granular analysis shows a grim picture.

Shrinking share/size of millets:



In 1960, India's millets production stood at 19 million tons, which was higher than wheat (11 million tons).

Now, India's millets production stands at 18 million tons, which is 6 times lower than wheat (110 million tons).

In 2013, millets were included in the National Food Security Act. This is yet to make any material difference.

Recognising the importance of millets in our diets, 2018 was observed as the Year of Millets as part of the National Food Security Mission in India. But it failed to rejuvenate the millets production/consumption.

Experts feel that the large-scale subsidized distribution of rice and wheat under the public distribution system (PDS) weaned people away from millets.

For the urban elites, it has become fashionable to eat imported "quinoa" ignoring millets.

Poor social status of millets as food, resistance to changing the dietary habits and lack of knowledge on the use of the millets in the daily diet have been constraining their consumption.

The general perception that people are returning to traditional food grains (millets) is not at all supported by data.



The Indian Institute of Millets Research (IIMR) was established in the year 1958 with the mandate to do *“basic and strategic research to increase productivity of millets and their diversified utilization for enhancement of profitability... promote economic growth... and transform millets cultivation from subsistence farming to globally competitive...”*. A dispassionate review would bring out its shortcomings in the research and promotion of millets.

The per capita consumption of millets in India has in fact declined by about 90% over the last 60 years.

Admittedly, millets have slipped into the alarming category of **“forgotten foods”**.

Yes, there could be multiple reasons for their decline. But one thing is clear; reviving millets would require result-oriented efforts aimed at increasing their consumption. Increase in production would follow suit.

Tailpiece

The year 2023 will be observed as "International Year of Millets" by the UN-FAO. Will that revive the demand for millets, our indigenous super food?

A trillion dollar question indeed.



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