

Millets: The new superhero to fight hunger?



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‘The war against hunger is truly mankind’s war of liberation.’

– John F. Kennedy

It’s the 21st century and the world has grown multiple manifolds in terms of economy, technology and intellectual developments. The growth of science has made our lives easier than it was ever in the entire human history. The average life expectancy of a 21st century man is greater than any man living in the pages of history due to declined mortality rates, better healthcare and medicines, good nutrition and many such factors. According to the WHO, the life expectancy has increased by more than 6 years from 66.8 years in 2000 to 73.4 years in 2019 globally. Now this clearly could lead us to assume that the coming future is bright with our future generations having few more added years to add-on some more memories to their lives. But even though data tells us this, we are not alien to the fact that this is not true for all the nations in the world. There are many marginalized underdeveloped nations that are deprived of good economy or development conditions with majority of their population being poor having very bad living conditions, lesser life expectancy than the average global figure. The reasons could be many such as political crisis, unequal wealth and resource distribution, lack of natural resources, population growth, climate

change, war and many others but one thing is observed common in all these places and that is hunger. While some of the countries are in a struggle to become global superpowers, there are many who are struggling just to keep their population fed. According to the Global Report on Food Crisis 2024, almost 300 million people faced acute food shortage in 2023 in about 59 food-crisis countries/territories. While the world has been seeing increase in problems like armed conflicts, refugee migration, economic slowdown, harsh environmental events like prolonged droughts or sudden flash floods etc., it is assumed that the problem of hunger and food security could amplify in coming years. Addressing this global issue of hunger and food security, the 75th session of United Nations General Assembly in March 2021 decided 2023 to be the ‘International Year of Millets’ (IYM 2023) based on a proposal submitted by the Government of India supported by 72 other countries.

But why suddenly millets? What is so special about millets? How can it ensure food security in coming future? The answer lies in the history, diversity and the features of this crop. So, ‘Millets’ is a general term used for a wide variety of



grass species that produces small grains used as cereals. Millets have been a traditional staple crop for a wide variety of tribal, indigenous people across Asia and Africa since ages dating back to pre-historic times. The biggest advantage these crops have is their ability to grow in a wide range of environments from deserts to plains to highlands. Millets can grow easily in dry, arid climatic regionstolerating high temperatures with less water requirements and are highly disease and pest resilient crops (Lancelotti et al., 2019). So, these crops are a perfect alternative in places where the cereal crops are getting destroyed due to climate change. Millets would lessen the global dependency on the three major cereals i.e. rice, wheat and maize as the yield of these crops are getting affected due to decline in soil fertility, extreme weather conditions and diseases year on year(Willett et al., 2019). The major millet crops grown

across the world are finger millet, pearl millet, foxtail millet, proso millet, bodo millet, little millet etc and they provide different nutrients particularly rich in carbohydrates, minerals, dietary fibres, protein and antioxidants and are also gluten-free. Millets provide nutrition to a vast African population and a significant amount of Asian population(Bhat et al., 2018) which live under stressful environmental conditions which is fit for usual agricultural practices. It generally has a shorter growing period of about 8-12 weeks compared to other major cereals having 20-24 week growing time which makes it a perfect crop to grow during crop rotation period preventing soil erosion and generating more yield for farmers. These crops also have more photosynthetic rates and increased efficiency of water and nitrogen uptake than rice and wheat (Lancelotti et al., 2019).



Source:FAO. 2023

A major advantage of promoting millet production is also to offer income and innovation opportunities for underdeveloped rural communities in low-income countries who have been cultivating this forgotten crop for ages.Realizing all these potential in this simple yet fruitful crop, an entire year was assigned for the promotion, growth and expansion of millet production as IYM 2023 which co-aligned with various SDGs

including Zero Hunger, Good Health and Well-being, Decent Work and Economic Growth, Responsible Consumption and Production, Climate Action and Life on Land. As the year 2023 ended, the initiative proposed by India and adopted by the UN could be said a successful one in terms of making the world aware about this superfood. Small steps like adding dishes made of millets in the G-20 conference held at India gave it a boost on



a global stage. There is still a lot way to go as millets would be the potential gamechanger in assuring food security in the coming decades where environmental factors are only going to get worse for agriculture productivity.

Thus, the least we can do from our side is to add this cereal in our daily diet in order

to promote it as well as ensure good health so that the demands for millets increase and policies regarding its wide scale production is implemented throughout the world. Investing in such global efforts now would keep us ready for the food shortage challenges that we are about to face in future and would also ensure that no child sleeps hungry in any part of the world.

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