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The Millet Surge

Supply and Value Chains are Crucial

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Quinoa was a little-known grain outside its native Andean region before 2013. The year 2013 was declared as the ‘International Year of Quinoa’ and then quinoa literally captured worldwide cuisines. By 2014, it was cultivated in over 70 countries, had become synonymous with healthy eating and rebranded as a superfood. The International Year of Quinoa was a campaign that dealt with each aspect and acceptable to all strata and its repositioning as a desirable food commodity, instead of the fall back when nothing better was available.

Historically, governments have done similar campaigns to mainstream foods for mass consumption, over the ages for multiple reasons. Louise XVI of France wore potato flowers in his buttonholes and Marie Antoinette in her hair, to make the new tuber acceptable as food. Potato had been newly imported from South America, was growing profusely but people feared the strange tubers offered as food, alien as they were to the produce in the pantry. Potato flower is non-descript and hardly inspiring, but the royal association made it easier to accept the exotic vegetable and assimilate it into the French cuisine.

Year Of Millets

Year 2023 has been declared the ‘International Year of Millets’, on India’s proposal. The various hardy crops classified as millets, were India’s staple diet, long before the green revolution replaced the diversity in food with wheat and a few varieties of rice. Nutritionally, millets are equivalent or superior to wheat and rice, some are low GI and all are gluten free. Agro-climatically, they make more sense to grow, as they require less water and practically no fertilizer or pesticides. They all have shorter period to maturity and harvest than wheat and rice, so the climate change risks are better with millets.

Need To Popularise

First is the availability of quality certified seeds. India was the first country to bring out hybrids of bajra, over two decades ago. This addressed the anxiety of farmers about less yield. Now, certified millet seeds are available in the market, National Seed Corporation alone has certified seed for 9 millets.

The documentation of traditional seed banks, truthful label seeds, as they are called and their propagation and research will yield manifold results. Shift to millet cultivation may be hampered by farmer’s comparison to yields and MSP of wheat and paddy. So, though millets are good for consumer and good for the planet, they need to be made ‘good for the farmer’ also, in terms of economic returns, which can be supported through new released varieties of seeds.

Secondly, mechanization for cleaning, grading, primary and secondary processing of millets needs to be made affordably and easily available. The millets with husk-like kodo require equipment

for decorticating. Anyone who has tried doing this the traditional way would immediately understand why the women must have been delighted with the wheat and rice becoming popular with green revolution.

Thirdly, the value addition in the supply chain simply must produce end products that are easy to assimilate into daily diets. For instance, ragi and fox tail millet flakes to replace all breakfast cereals. Even partial replacement in wheat flour, a minimum admixture that may be mandated, for packaged flours. Malted powders for drinks or porridge, kheer, kichri and pongal mixes, mixes for idli and other batters can also mainstream millets.

Marketing & Branding

Fourthly, branding and marketing millets as specialty foods — for instance ragi-based baby foods, bajra-based diet/ weight loss mixes, malted millets as health drinks, jowar and ragi as convalescent foods, kodo and barnyard as diabetic friendly (not all millets are diabetic friendly) etc. Millets each have unique properties, taste, and benefits. The branding and marketing should highlight the USP of each millet, instead of an omnibus approach that does little to distinguish them from the current popular staples.

Fifthly, including millets in PDS with assured MSP is a common suggestion one hears. It’s a quick fix solution to increase the net sown area but needs a nuanced approach. It can be tried in areas where paddy is to be discouraged due to depleting water table but must be linked with end use of the procured stock. If PDS, then processing facilities should be locally and cheaply available. Post processing, the form in which it is to be distributed or locally consumed should be acceptable to the cuisines and palates. This can include dishes and drinks served in anganwadi centres or school mid-day meals. Besides the government subsidy programs, the traditional uses need revival sans the drudgery of processing and cooking millets.

The Way Ahead

So, what is the likelihood of millets ‘doing a quinoa’ on worldwide cuisines? It depends on how seriously the issues are addressed. What gets assimilated into food is based on taste (millets definitely score higher than quinoa), ease of cultivation (they have been grown for centuries without any state support, so government support now can result in a quantum jump), higher productivity (needs sustained efforts), improved and widespread processing facilities (work in progress with many schemes now supporting) and most critical, the ease and access for the consumer (being addressed by start-ups, industry and platforms like ONDC).

Millets can outdo quinoa as the superfood of the world. We are the cusp of a new culinary phase where the purity of millets, sans pesticide and fertilizer residues of other crops, can feed ‘Shree Ann’ to the masses.