

Food of the future: The business and economy of super grains

By [Garima Singh](#) | Apr 09, 2023

Synopsis

Once known as inferior coarse grains, millets are now known as super grains for the huge health, economic and environmental benefits they offer. The United Nations, the government, fitness experts, startups, FMCG giants and almost everyone who is health conscious is talking of millets.

In 2015, a controversy broke out over poor villagers in drought-hit Bundelkhand region in [Uttar Pradesh](#) managing to survive by eating rotis made of grass. Later, it was argued by some that it wasn't grass but a kind of grain that had fallen out of use decades ago with wider prevalence of wheat and rice. It was a local variety of millet that grew wild as well as could be sown. Since that millet variety was drought-resistant and could be stored for years, it was the staple for local people in times of repeated crop failures.



Once known as inferior coarse grains, [millets](#) are now known as super grains for the huge health, economic and environmental benefits they offer. The United Nations, the government, fitness experts, startups, FMCG giants and almost everyone who is health conscious is talking of millets. Those who aren't talking of millets must have heard of them as the [United Nations](#) has declared 2023 the International Year of Millets, and the Indian government has unleashed a mega publicity campaign to promote millets.

When millets lost favour

The Indian Army wants its soldiers to eat millets. Twenty-five per cent of the authorised entitlement of cereals (rice and wheat atta) in rations for troops will now be millet flour. The Army is not following a health fad. Almost half a century ago, millets were very much a part of soldiers' daily food. Millets lost favour to wheat and rice, in the Army as well as across India, after the Green Revolution led to bumper crops of rice and wheat and the government's public distribution system doled out these staples as subsidised grains.

Even before that, millets were considered inferior to wheat and rice and were known as 'mota anaaj' or coarse grain as against the fine grain of wheat and rice which taste better as well as are easier to process and cook.

Yet, millets stayed in use because they were an essential part of ethnic cuisine. Most ethnic dishes across India are made of one or the other type of millet. Even in rice-wheat states such as Punjab and Haryana where other food crops were nearly wiped out, dishes such as bajra khichdi remained popular. In drought-prone states such as Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra, millets remained part of daily diet in several regions.

Before the Green Revolution, according to an estimate, millets made up around 40 per cent of all cultivated grains. Now they are just around 20 per cent. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who is promoting millets with zeal, said recently that millets or Shree Anna, the new name government has coined for millets, today constitute only 5-6 per cent of the national food basket.

How humble millets became the supergrain

Millet is a common term for categorizing small-seeded grasses that are now called nutri-cereals. Some of them are sorghum (jowar), pearl millet (bajra), finger millet (ragi), little millet (kutki), foxtail millet (kakun), proso millet (cheena), barnyard millet (sawa), and kodo millet (kodon). The first three are the most popular and prevalent across India. They constitute nearly 90% of total millet production and around 60% of the millets produced in India is bajra, according to Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA).

Millets have been in vogue since the Indus Valley civilisation. They find mention in the Yajurveda too where foxtail millet is called *priyangava*, barnyard millet *aanava* and black finger millet *shyaamaka*,

Millets received some attention in 2012 when the then government crafted a policy called Initiative for Nutritional Security through Intensive Millet Production. In 2018, millets were declared “nutri cereals” and added to the national food security mission. Rs 300 crore was earmarked for its development. It was also in 2018 that India proposed to the UN to declare 2023 as the international year of millets.

Millet received a shot in the arm when the government earmarked an outlay of Rs 800 crore for millet-based products under its Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme, and 33 applicants were selected. This year's Union budget announced funding for the Indian Institute of Millets Research in Hyderabad for R&D. The government has also provided a \$500,000 grant to the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the UN to promote millets.

The economy of millets

Economic benefits of millets are obvious — they are cheaper to grow. These hardy crops are drought-resistant and require very less water to grow. Some can grow on their own as weeds, even in rocky terrains. Rice, in comparison, guzzles water, while wheat too needs far more water than a millet crop. Millets also don't require expensive fertilizers and pesticides.

When the climate is changing for the worse, rains are erratic, earth and water are getting poisoned with pesticides, groundwater level is falling, and farmers' profits are always threatened with crop failures and rising input costs, aren't millets the best deal, especially after the acute wheat shortage the world faced due to the Ukraine war? What has stopped us from diversifying to millets?

To begin with, millets being cheaper, they hold little attraction for farmers as they offer low margins. Second, the government does not buy them or offer a minimum support price (MSP) as well as it does for wheat and rice which are part of its food security programme. Bajra, ragi and jowar are covered by the MSP but farmers have to struggle to sell these crops at MSP. Now the government is considering inclusion of certain naturally growing millets in Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand in MSP, Tribal Affairs Minister Arjun Munda said recently, Millets also need to find place in the government's mammoth free foodgrain scheme for farmers to start growing these crops.

On top of the government's demand-side measures is to boost exports of millets and millet-based products.

The \$100 million target

India is drawing up a roadmap to figure among the top three exporters of millets by 2025, improving upon its fifth rank at present. Canada, Russia and Ukraine are the top three exporters of millets, followed by the US. Global exports of millets increased to \$402.7 million in 2020 from \$380 million in 2019. In 2020-21, India exported millets worth \$28.8 million against \$26.7 million in 2019-20, mainly to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Nepal, Oman, the UK, Japan, Taiwan and South Africa.

India has nearly 40% share of global millet production but it exported 1% of its millet production in 2021-22, earning \$64.28 million (over \$59.75 million in 2020-21), according to APEDA. While Canada, Russia, Ukraine and the US are importing millets and exporting value-added products. India just exports millets, according to APEDA. India's share of value-added products in millets is almost negligible. India has now begun to conduct better research to increase shelf life of millet products and to manufacture more efficient processing machines.

APEDA is leading the efforts to ramp up exports. It has set an exports target of \$100 million by 2025. "APEDA will push value-added and processed forms of millets globally, targeting various hypermarkets and retail chains. We have identified top 50 countries, exporters, importers and supply sources linking production bases," APEDA Chairman M Angamuthu told ET recently.

Through the diplomatic missions, APEDA wants to reach out to leading departmental stores, supermarkets and hypermarkets in those countries to promote millets through food sampling and tasting campaigns. There would be branding and publicity of Indian millets in the targeted markets. On December 5, APEDA held the first international buyer-seller meet on millets in New Delhi. About 50 mission heads from multiple countries, 35 importers from 18 countries and 75 Indian embassy representatives participated in the event.

The government is in the process of creating HS codes for smoother exports of millets. APEDA has sent a request to the Director General of Foreign Trade, Angamuthu told ET.

The business of millets

The global millets market is projected to register a CAGR of 4.5 per cent between 2021-2026, according to a government statement. Since the government has decided to promote millets in a big way and consumers are getting aware too, businesses are warming up to the opportunity. Millets can help the FMCG industry during disruptions in [global food](#) grain supply chains, as it happened due to the Ukraine war, or adverse climate such as erratic monsoon rains bringing down the wheat and rice output. When raw material gets scarce and costlier, they crimp the margins of the FMCG companies.

Food and beverage producers in India are adopting millets in a big way. You can find millets in a range of products, from biscuits to beer. From packaged foods to breweries to restaurants, large companies including [Nestle](#), [ITC](#), [Britannia](#), [HUL](#), Tata Consumer, Bira 91 and Slurrp Farm are putting up ambitious plans to introduce millet-based packaged foods, beers and restaurant menus or boost their existing millet portfolios,

"We are innovating on functional ingredients by incorporating more of super grains, seeds, nuts and fruits with whole grains in our foods, actively engaging with partners and also looking for appropriate opportunities in this evolving space," Sudhir Nema, chief development and quality officer at India's largest biscuits maker Britannia, told ET recently. Nema said Britannia, which already makes packaged foods with millets, oats, seeds and herbs fortified products under its flagship NutriChoice biscuits brand, is doing backward integration with farming communities, millers and government institutions to escalate the millets association.

"We recently brewed a Bajra Brut India Pale Ale; the beer used local bajra (pearl millet)," Ankur Jain, chief executive at beer maker Bira 91, has told ET. "We are now brewing a Ragi Red Ale (using local ragi from Karnataka), which gives the beer a unique complexity." He said the company launched a millet beer in its taprooms starting last month, adding that the use of millets also allows Bira 91 to make its beers gluten-free.

India's largest packaged foods maker Nestle, which makes Maggi noodles and KitKat chocolate, has already inked a tie-up to integrate millets in its foods. A Nestle R&D Centre India spokesperson told ET

recently that an MoU has been signed between millets incubator startup Nutrihub, ICAR-Institute of Millets Research and Nestle's R&D Centre, a subsidiary of the Swiss foods maker's parent company Nestle SA.

HUL has signed an MoU with Indian Institute of Millets Research (IIMR), which has been named as a Centre of Excellence by the government, to make millet-based drinks under its Horlicks brand, executives aware of the developments told ET.

[ITC Ltd](#) is going to introduce millets into most of its packaged food products and has started millet-based dishes in its chain of hotels in an effort to make them a mainstream cereal like wheat and rice, Chairman and MD Sanjiv Puri told ET in January. The company will introduce millets as an additive or roll out 100% millet products across categories like snacks, confectionery, cereals, ready to eat range, biscuits and instant noodles, said Puri.

ITC's divisional chief executive of foods business Hemant Malik told ET that the company will have its millet-based products in the regular and premium price range. At present, most such products are sold in the premium or super-premium range. For instance, when we add millet in confectionery or in snacks there won't be a change in the product pricing but we will roll out a cookie made with 100% millet at the premium range, he said. The company will develop farmer demonstration and training on growing millets over 7,000 acres and production will be aligned to the offtake as the consumption builds up.

ITC has already introduced a number of millet-based products under the Aashirvaad Nature Superfoods brand including ragi flour, gluten free atta, multi-millet mix. Aashirvaad Soul Creations, as part of ITC's Food Tech Initiative offers millet-based khichdi that can be ordered at home. ITC Hotels has included millet-based dishes in their buffets — from risotto, jowar kebab and jowar tur dal tadka to kutki khao suey and kodo halwa. Taj Mahal Palace in Mumbai sources various kinds of millets for risotto, tehri and khichdi.

Besides big companies, a new breed of entrepreneurs is selling millet products. Pune-based Sharmila Oswal, who calls herself a milletpreneur, is a co-founder of Basillia Organics. In the last two years, it has exported millets to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), US, the Netherlands and Australia. Her products include millet noodles, millet cookies, millet namkeen and millet pasta. She nudges parents to pack millet lunch boxes for their children. "Consumers are willing to pay a little more because millets are nutritious. Once production grows, prices should come down," she says.

"The Indian Institute of Millet Research has identified 200 new entrepreneurs of millets. The startups are creating value-added products and many of them have started exporting in small quantities. We are promoting them through international fairs," APEDA Chairman Angamuthu, told ET recently,

The blessed food

As part of the government's innovative promotion of millets, it has named millets Shree Anna, which roughly translates to the blessed food. No wonder, the Kashi Vishwanath temple in Modi's own parliamentary constituency Varanasi, has decided to offer devotees 'prasad' made from millets. The 'laddu prasad' at the temple will now be known as 'Sri Anna prasad'.

But that's just one part of the millet promotion. Sri Anna is making waves all around, from Bill Gates cooking a Shree Anna khichdi with Union Minister Smriti Irani to Shree Anna dishes being served at the G20 meetings India is hosting.

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