Millets back in our fields and plates

For 60 years, India’s agriculture policy has focused on rice and wheat and neglected millets. But these nutri cereals are gradually making a successful comeback.

Today millets are garnering the much-deserved attention across India because of their high nutritional value. States like Odisha, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh have launched special programmes to promote these Nutri cereals in the National Year of Millets.

Millets are a diverse range of nutrient-rich crops. In the past 60 years, India's agriculture policy has focused mainly on rice and wheat, neglecting millets. Supply of subsidised rice and wheat through the public distribution system and state nutrition programmes have also played a big role in changing the dietary habits of people. Besides, millet promotion is plagued by low produce, weak markets, difficult processing methods, and low consumer interest, even though many urban health-conscious individuals are now favouring them over the traditional paddy and wheat. In times of climate change, millets score over paddy as they require less water and can withstand extreme temperatures.

Involving women in millets revival

Millets were always part of the traditional Naga diet, along with rice, in Chizami village of Phek district in Nagaland. Both these grains were manually pounded, which was a tedious job. However, with the arrival of rice mills, processing became easy for rice, but the drudgery associated with processing millets continued. Due to this, more preference went to rice and millet consumption greatly decreased, says Wekoweu Tsuhah, North East Network (NEN)-Nagaland director. But like elsewhere in India, millets have been revived here too, mostly the foxtail millet. With the intervention of NEN, many farmers are now reviving millet cultivation. The village council of Sumi in Phek district has decided to recognise and award the best millet grower in the community. The five-day millet festival, which for nearly three decades has not been celebrated, is once again gaining its place back in the community life of Chizami.

In Chizami, millets are mainly nurtured by women and over the years they have realised their dietary and nutritional significance. This is the reason for their comeback in farmers' fields. In Chizami, it is basically women, who are the custodians of seed diversity, including millets. They are involved right from the time of slashing the jhum (a type of shifting cultivation) fields until the final processes of harvesting and consumption. Seed selection, which is an important part of the process, is also mostly done by women. Read more