The smart food of 21st century

Karnataka is dressing them up as "Siridanya" or rich grains that should be on every thinking eater's plate. For Icrisat, the Hyderabad-based International Crops Research Institute for Semi-arid Tropics, they are "smart foods of the 21st century" which are "good for you – the planet – the farmer."

Millets are officially classified as coarse cereals or food of the poor. When I was school-going, my mother would frighten me into studying, because the alternative was possible deviancy, a term in jail and daily servings of "ragi mudde" or steamed finger millet balls, which, in her view, was an agony worse than the loss of liberty.

Now, their very coarseness endears them to the city-bred with delicate constitutions and a less squeamish attitude to excess. With lifestyle diseases like diabetes and hypertension upending communicable ones as major causes of disability and death, millets have wormed their way back into urban diets, after they were banished by the Green Revolution.

Karnataka is plugging millets – ragi and jowar, mainly – at this cohort, hoping that gentrification of the cereals and premium pricing would persuade the state's farmers with less endowed soils to bring more area under them and give the neglected crops at least a modicum of care for better yields. Karnataka is also hitching them to the organic food movement because millets can do without chemical fertilisers and even if a farmer were inclined to apply them, the crops will not respond well in situations of water scarcity. Pest attacks can be warded off with natural concoctions. Smart and safe, the state believes, will resonate with urban audiences.

"Primarily we are developing markets," said Krishna Byre Gowda, Karnataka's young Minister for Agriculture, who went to Rome to urge the United Nations through the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) to declare 2018 as international year of millets. "We think farmers will grow what you tell them to grow. It does not work like that. Farmers look at markets. It is more important to drive demand; the supply will follow," he added. This is a tack different from that of Sikkim, which the Prime Minister declared as India's first and only wholly organic state in January last year.

No chemical fertilisers are sold in the state; so farmers have to use manure and compost. But the resultant lower yields have not been compensated with higher prices as the state failed to provide them the marketing wherewithal. The produce has to compete with non-organic fruits and vegetables from West Bengal. Local consumers are also reluctant to pay premium prices.

Half of 15,500 mall-goers in seven cities said they were eating millets daily or on a weekly basis, in a survey, Read more