India needs to choose Smart Foods to thwart deficiencies in diets; drought

India needs to move on the path of Smart Foods, which is the only way to thwart deficiencies in diets and subsist during phases of water scarcity and drought.

“It is high time India brings in Smart Foods to the mainstream because it is nutritious, environmentally sustainable and good for the farmer as it increases yields,” said Ashok Kumar Jalagam, Smart Food coordinator, Asia Pacific, strategic marketing and communication, ICRISAT (International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics), Hyderabad.

Smart Foods are those cereals and pulses that provide the much needed nutrition. These are environment friendly and have the potential to increase yields. These include pigeon pea, finger millet, pearl millet and sorghum.

A focus on Smart Foods allows farmers to diversify to staple foods covering pearl millet or bajra, rice, whole-wheat flour and a variety of lentils, such as red lentils, pigeon peas, black gram and green gram in India, by focussing on staples, often 70% of the plate and eaten three times a day. “This is where even our Smart Food initiative is popularising and bringing to the mainstream to offset malnutrition, cope with climate change.”

“Nutrition and malnutrition are not different. The latter impacts urban dwellers as much as the rural folk. Hence we see Smart Foods for addressing issues like poor diets, water scarcity among others,” he added.

Jalagam was in Bengaluru for the National Conference on Health and Wellness through Nutrition and Nutraceuticals at M S Ramaiah University recently. Delving on the topic of ‘Why Smart Food is Important - We can’t keep working in Silos,’ he said, “We need to ensure that rural communities benefit from the increased demand, and from the health and nutritional benefits of Smart Foods. We work globally to open markets for Smart Foods and promote healthier and sustainable diets.”

“Our current diet is based on the: Rice, Wheat and Maize. For instance over 45 per cent of the private sector investment in agriculture research is on maize. It needs to incorporate the: Sorghum, Pearl Millet, Finger Millet and Legumes along with rice and wheat. We also need to focus on the processing and packaging of these Smart Foods. There needs to be a change on the relative contribution of diet by calorie intake. Here sorghum and millets are vital. Moreover, Smart Foods are affordable and accessible anywhere. The Government of India’s Millet Mission is the first step to use Smart Foods that are healthy. For instance, millet-based mid-day meals by the Akshay Patra Foundation.”

Moreover the type of millet, its variety, its cooking process and the foods it is combined with are some of the key elements that can make a difference in nutrition. Sorghum and millets are rich in calcium, vitamins and folic acid among other antioxidants to keep diabetes under control and degenerative diseases at bay. Hence Smart Food is important, according to Jalagam.