

SIMPLY PUT

The Story of Millets

India has signalled the beginning of preparations for the International Year of Millets 2023, designated last year by the UNGA following an initiative by New Delhi. The government has been hard-selling millets as nutri-cereals; however, its push is yet to gain widespread traction

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AT A pre-launch celebration of the International Year of Millets 2023 organised by the Ministries of Agriculture and External Affairs on Thursday, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar named "Covid, conflict, and climate" as the world's main food security challenges, and placed the cultivation and popularisation of millets in the context of the wider imperative of "de-risking the global economy".

Millets, the crop

The word millets is used to describe small-grained cereals like sorghum (*jowar*), pearl millet (*bajra*), foxtail millet (*kangni*/Italian millet), little millet (*kutki*), kodo millet, finger millet (*ragi*/*mandua*), proso millet (*cheena*/common millet), barnyard millet (*sawa*/*sanwa*/*jangora*), and brown top millet (*korale*).

Millets were among the first crops to be domesticated. There is evidence for consumption of millets by the Indus valley people (3,000 BC), and several varieties that are now grown around the world were first cultivated in India. West Africa, China, and Japan are home to indigenous varieties of the crop.

Millets are now grown in more than 130 countries, and are the traditional food for more than half a billion people in Asia and Africa. They require much less water than rice and wheat, and are mainly grown in rainfed areas.

Globally, sorghum is the biggest millet crop. The major producers of *jowar* are the US, China, Australia, India, Argentina, Nigeria, and Sudan. *Bajra* is another major millet crop; India and some African countries are major producers.

In India, millets are mainly a *kharif* crop. During 2018-19, three millet crops — *bajra* (3.67%), *jowar* (2.13%), and *ragi* (0.48%) — accounted for about 7% of the gross cropped area in the country, Agriculture Ministry data show.

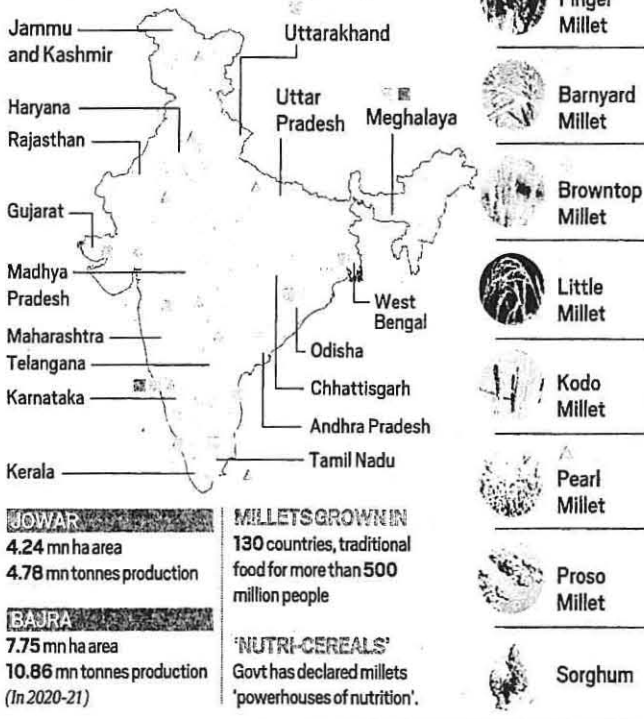
'High nutritive value'

Millets are considered to be "powerhouses of nutrition". On April 10, 2018, the Agriculture Ministry declared millets as "Nutri Cereals". *Jowar*, *bajra*, *ragi*/*mandua*, the minor millets — *kangani*/*kakum*, *cheena*, *kodo*, *sawa*/*sanwa*/*jangora*, and *kutki* — and the two pseudo millets, buckwheat (*kuttu*) and amaranth (*chaulai*), which have "high nutritive value" are now regarded as "Nutri Cereals" for the purposes of production, consumption, and trade.

The *Story of Millets* published by the Karnataka State Department of Agriculture in association with ICAR-Indian Institute of Millets Research, Hyderabad, says, "Millets contain 7-12% protein, 2-5% fat, 65-75% carbohydrates and 15-20% dietary fibre... Small millets are more nutritious compared to fine cereals. They contain higher protein, fat and fibre content."

INDIA'S MILLETS MAP

Jowar is grown mainly in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Rajasthan, and Tamil Nadu; *bajra* mainly in Rajasthan, UP, Haryana, Gujarat



Year of Millets

On March 3, 2021, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopted a resolution to declare 2023 as the International Year of Millets. The proposal was moved by India, and was supported by 72 countries. Several events and activities, including conferences and field activities, and the issuing of stamps and coins, are expected as part of the celebrations aimed at spreading awareness about millets, inspiring stakeholders to improve production and quality, and attracting investments.

Millets under PDS

Under the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013, eligible households are entitled to get rice, wheat, and coarse grain at Rs 3, Rs 2, and Re 1 per kg respectively. While the Act does not mention millets, coarse grains are included in the definition of "foodgrains" under Section 2(5) of the NFSA.

However, the quantity of coarse grains procured for the Central Pool and distributed under the NFSA has been negligible. The latest data on stocks with the Food Corporation of India (FCI) show only 2.64 lakh metric tonnes (LMT) of coarse grain was available in the Central Pool on November 1, 2022. In compar-

ison, the stocks of rice, wheat, and unmilled paddy were 265.97 LMT, 210.46 LMT, and 263.70 LMT respectively.

The push to distribute coarse grains under the PDS has not gained momentum. The Centre has accepted the recommendation of a committee set up by it, that millets be included in the PDS in order to improve nutritional support. On Thursday, Agriculture Minister Narendra Singh Tomar said "the time has come for the Public Distribution System to shift the focus of distribution programs from basic calories to provide a more diverse food basket that includes millets to improve the nutritional status of pre-school children and women of reproductive age".

The government has set a target to procure 13.72 LMT coarse grains during the Kharif Marketing Season (KMS) 2022-23, more than double the 6.30 LMT procured during KMS 2021-22. The target includes 4.12 LMT of *bajra*, of which 0.95 LMT had been procured until November 21.

MSP for millets

The government declares a Minimum Support Price (MSP) for *jowar*, *bajra*, and *ragi* only. For KMS 2022-23, the MSP for *jowar* hy-

brid was declared at Rs 2,970 per quintal, and that for *jowar maldandi* at Rs 2,990 per quintal. The MSP for *bajra* and *ragi* were Rs 2,350 per quintal and Rs 3,578 per quintal respectively.

Main millets states

Jowar is mainly grown in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Telangana, and Madhya Pradesh. In 2020-21, the area under *jowar* stood at 4.24 million hectares, while production was 4.78 million tonnes. Maharashtra accounted for the largest area (1.94 mn ha) and production (1.76 million tonnes) of *jowar* during 2020-21.

Bajra is mainly grown in Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Karnataka. Of the total 7.75 mn ha under *bajra* in 2020-21, the highest (4.32 mn ha) was in Rajasthan. The state also produced the most *bajra* in the country (4.53 million tonnes of the total 10.86 million tonnes) in 2020-21.

Consumption patterns

In the latest available NSSO household consumption expenditure survey (which is more than a decade old), less than 10 per cent of rural and urban households reported consumption of millets.

In rural areas, of the 11.231 kg of cereals consumed by a person in a month in 2011-12, 6.125 kg was rice, and 4.439 kg was wheat. Very little millets were consumed: 201 grams *jowar*, 246 g *bajra*, 75 g *ragi*, and 4 g of small millets. More than 95% of rural households reported consumption of rice and more than 59% wheat; only 8.5%, 6.6%, and 5.3% reported consumption of *jowar*, *bajra*, and *ragi* respectively.

In urban areas, monthly per capita consumption of cereals (9.322 kg) was lower than in rural areas. The monthly per capita consumption of *jowar*, *bajra*, *ragi*, and small millets were recorded at just 139 g, 91 g, 60 g, and 1 g.

The consumption of millets was reported mainly from Gujarat (*jowar* and *bajra*), Karnataka (*jowar* and *ragi*), Maharashtra (*jowar* and *bajra*), Rajasthan (*bajra*), and Uttarakhand (*ragi*).

Political significance

Millet is grown mainly in low-income and developing countries in Asia and Africa, and are part of the food basket of about 60 crore people across the globe. By proposing the resolution to celebrate 2023 as the International Year of Millets, India pitched itself as a leader of this group. This is similar to the Indian initiative on the 121-nation International Solar Alliance.

Millet growing states like Karnataka and Rajasthan will witness state Assembly elections next year. Activities around the celebrations can potentially be leveraged by the government to reach out to farming communities.