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# Millets Are Back on the Menu, but Not Quite Like Before

## ABSTRACT

Millets have held a historical place in the agricultural production, culinary traditions, and cultural life of many communities in south India. Due to policy neglect in the latter half of the 20th century, when rice and wheat were the stars of the “Green Revolution,” neither research nor infrastructures were set up to support the production or consumption of millets. Since the mid-2000s, various actors are progressively showing an interest in this family of crops. The structures put in place through this millet renewal present a hybridation of conventional agricultural and alternative practices that the author seeks to explore through a food systems approach. Are millets seeds of resistance or simply the next lucrative fad? How does the appropriation of this traditional crop affect producers’ and consumers’ perceptions of their territory and culinary habits?

## KEYWORDS

Millets, Tradition, Agroecology, India, Food studies

## RÉSUMÉ

Les millets ont occupé une place historique dans la production agricole, les traditions culinaires et la vie culturelle de nombreuses communautés du sud de l’Inde. En raison de la négligence politique de la seconde moitié du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, lorsque le riz et le blé étaient les stars de la « révolution verte », la recherche et les infrastructures n’ont pas été mises en place pour soutenir la production ou la consommation de millets. Or, depuis le milieu des années 2000, différents acteurs s’intéressent progressivement à cette famille de céréales. Les structures implantées par ce renouveau du mil présentent une hybridation de pratiques agricoles conventionnelles et alternatives que l’auteur cherche à explorer par une approche des systèmes alimentaires. Les graines de mil sont-elles des graines de résistance ou simplement la prochaine mode lucrative? Comment l’appropriation de cette culture traditionnelle affecte-t-elle la perception qu’ont les producteurs et les consommateurs de leur territoire et de leurs habitudes culinaires?

## MOTS CLÉS

millets, tradition, agroécologie, Inde

## 1. “MILLETS ARE GOOD FOR YOU, GOOD FOR THE FARMER, AND GOOD FOR THE PLANET”

This slogan, and similar ones, can be seen on millet food packages, store or restaurant walls, or heard in the talks of organisation leaders and politicians. Millets have recently spurred a public curiosity due to these seemingly beneficial attributes. First of which, it is a healthy food which is *good for you*, rich in dietary fibres, amino acids, complex carbohydrates, minerals like iron, calcium and folic acid, with a low glycemic index and gluten-free. It is therefore good for a country struggling with the *triple burden of malnutrition* (Gomez *et al.*, 2013). Second, millets are promoted as *good for farmers*. Unlike rice, wheat, and many vegetable cash crops, millets are rainfed crops –they do not require irrigation or inputs, they are not subject to many diseases and attract few pests. They are commonly referred to as *hardy crops*, *resistant crops*, which *grow like grasses*. Plus, with this new urban demand for health foods, they are also becoming lucrative. Everything to make a happy farmer. Thirdly, they are *good for the planet* since they technically do not require any chemical inputs or pumping water out of the ground. They also contribute to maintaining agrobiodiversity if grown following certain *traditional* agricultural practices. These agronomic and sanitary reasons are thus what have attracted new actions, both political and social, around millets. Millets are being hailed as a post-capitalist crop, which can grow anywhere, reminiscent of Tsing’s *Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015).

## 2. THE DISAPPEARANCE OF MILLETS

Starting in the 1960s, the Indian national government promoted the production of rice and wheat, high yielding varieties, the use of chemical inputs, and large irrigation projects in order to boost the productivity of the agricultural sector, thus improving employment in the agricultural and industrial sectors. This contributed to improving the country's food security after its recent independence. The narrative regarding the environmental and socioeconomic consequences of this "Green Revolution" are also well-known: The common (over)use of chemical inputs and irrigation has had heavy environmental and health impacts across the country. Equal access to inputs and opportunities was not obtained: Not all agricultural areas are situated in the command areas of large dams; Not all farmers have access to the financial or human resources to start using *modern* agricultural techniques. But for those farmers who had the resources, irrigation allowed them to grow rice or wheat, as well as other cash crops.

Rice has traditionally been consumed by high castes in India as well as by British colonisers, while millets have been considered the food of lower castes, peasants and tribal peoples. These groups would consume rice occasionally, at religious festivals or important celebrations (Bhat *et al.*, 2018). When rice became an object of agricultural policy and highly promoted in the 1960s, farmers rejoiced in the opportunity to eat this grain which came with such social connotations. Fields and landscapes transformed as the Green Revolution imported agricultural techniques from the West, paddy mono-cropping became a normalised landscape across many regions of India. Meanwhile, millets continued to be grown by those farmers who did not have access to dam irrigation or financial access to borewell irrigation. Millets thus became the food of the poor, of the marginalised, and the status of this staple declined further. As time passed, new generations of farmers and children would grow up eating rice, millets remaining a food preference of older generations only.

## 3. REQUALIFYING MILLETS

About two or three generations later, in the early 2000s, nutritionists and doctors are noticing alarming rates of diabetes and obesity in urban populations. The mediatised culprits are urban sedentary lifestyles and unbalanced diets which are too rich in sugar, processed, and refined foods. This includes polished rice, an Indian staple in both urban and rural cuisines.

At about the same time, journalists, researchers, politicians, farmers are noticing many problems in India's countryside, farms, and rural households. Environmental conditions and soil quality are deteriorating, rain is becoming increasingly unreliable, groundwater levels are decreasing, farmers are increasingly indebted, subject to market rates, health risks, and have nutrition deficiencies despite India's food policies. There is an agrarian crisis, certainly structural in nature, but which is being exacerbated by climatic and environmental conditions.

The first political response occur in the state of Karnataka, where I am conducting my PhD field work. The local government sets up a series of measures to promote organic farming as well as organic food consumption starting in 2004. In 2012, the first policies promoting millet production and consumption are launched.

At about the same time, new enterprises sprout in cities like Mysore and Bangalore, that are run by health-concerned and environmentally-concerned IT-sector veterans in search of work in line with their ideals. A first wave of start-ups sprouts; They are buying, processing, and selling organic goods, creating physical stores and/or selling online.

It will take about 10 years before millet-specific start-ups pop up in South Indian cities. Under the influence of a charismatic Agriculture Minister, Krisha Byre Gowda, and a prophetic media figure, Dr. Khader, millets have become a common-place term in classes with access to newspapers, television, and the internet. Entrepreneurs who have embarked in the millet business cite the influence of these two individuals, in addition to environmental documentaries ("Food Inc.," "The World according to Monsanto," etc.). In their desire to make a difference, contribute to improve their country, or help the farmers of their place of origin, this highly educated (85% of the studied sample had an engineering or post-graduate degree) population is seeking a break from their newly abandoned career in information technology. They are sometimes also seeking an exit from city life, practice urban gardening, or have a small farm just a dozen kilometers outside of the city where they are putting in place agro-ecological methods. They look for alternatives for themselves and to be models for other citizens and companies. But they typically have capital amassed already and are providing alternatives to those who can afford them. The IT market represents the ideal target public for these companies: Busy, aspiring to be healthier, having disposable income, and media literate they have heard about the hype surrounding millets once or twice already.

Many of these entrepreneurs also envision their businesses differently than the standard business model. They propose alternatives not only in what they procure (generally organically grown grains), and the way

they procure (alternative, short circuits), but also how they sell their products. These businesses tend to go beyond lucrative activities and often propose movie screenings, cooking workshops, nature talks, weekend farm visits. You can also buy handicrafts, hand-woven clothing, baskets, soaps, metal cookware, wooden toys, made by women's groups in these shops. Millets are being accompanied by a renewed interest in *tradition*, heritage, and supporting local initiatives

#### 4. REVISITING AND CREATING TRADITION

These new food services have thoroughly thought out their menus and dishes. *Ragi mudde* (or *ragi bowl*: A traditional Karnataka dish consisting of a steamed ball of *ragi* flour to be eaten with *sambar*, a vegetable soup) is not the most appealing dish for the young urban crowds these businesses are targeting. Four solutions have been adopted to appeal to the public of these young companies:

- Replace: A method consisting of taking recipes commonly made with rice and substituting the rice with a type of millet. For example, a millet-based *thali*, millet rice bath, or millet curd rice.
- Revisit: A method consisting of making fastfood options healthier by incorporating millets. For example, making a millet-based pizza dough or millet-based cookies. The recipes which are being adapted are typically non-Indian in origin, often Western fast foods.
- Ready-to-cook products: Designed for busy people, these products require little preparation in order to obtain traditional Indian dishes by just adding water, salt and taking some time to boil or heat up packaged ingredients.
- Ready-to-eat products: Designed for the busiest or kitchen-averse people, these products, like cookies, breakfast cereals, some traditional dishes, only require heating up and are ready to be consumed.

Regional tradition and globalisation (aka *glocalisation*) have crossed paths in these new spaces as their managers attempt to make it as easy as possible for millets to re-enter the busy urbanite's household. The urbanite who does decide to welcome millets into their home is typically between 28 and 50 years of age, upper middle class, educated, and employed. The primary reason people consume millets is for health reasons, generally following a doctor's recommendation, or because they heard alarming information about health conditions in Indian cities. However, many times these first-time consumers will not know what to do with millet grains; thus they seek prepared options. In response to this situation, many entrepreneurs have also decided to propose cooking workshops where they teach the very basics of cooking with millets: how to cook them, how long, how to season them, or how to make *ragi chapathi* and multi-millet dosa. Many have also started blogs, Facebook groups, or Instagram accounts, to share recipes and pictures to inspire/illustrate followers to cook with millets through 21st century platforms. They also regularly use these social media platforms to promote their activities and products, and seek out new customers. They participate in community and regional events on millets, organics and healthy living. It might perhaps all be with a view to self-promotion and networking in some cases, and perhaps in the objective of making a difference in others.

Regardless, cultural traditions are changing with this mediatic and political attention. Brahmins and high castes are now eating millets, creating vegetarian recipes with this grain which was historically consumed by non-vegetarian communities. Meanwhile, farmers and rural residents who have been encouraged to eat, grow, and aspire to a rice-based diet are now being encouraged to return to producing, transforming, and trading millets.

#### 5. THE RURAL RESPONSE AND THE MOBILITY OF TRADITION

Typically not logged into Facebook or Instagram, the rural household cook is not too familiar with the hype around millet-based pizza dough, or the raw and vegan millet smoothie. Nonetheless, in certain pockets of rural Karnataka, farmers are being encouraged to grow millets by manufacturers, private businesses coming to see them directly, or government aids. Some farmers are reluctant, not only because of the image of millets but also to the complexity of processing millets, some of which have multi-layered husks requiring removal, thus labour and/or machinery. New market players are also demanding a high quality product and requiring organic production meanwhile some farmers do not know how to keep their stocks pest-free without chemical inputs.

How will farmers respond to these market demands and policy measures that encourage them to revisit traditions? Will they start growing millets the way they used to, in multi-cropping systems, using traditional knowledge, designed to provide food for the household year-round; or will they plant millets the way they grow cash crops, in tight single-crop rows, optimising all space and time. Will new areas that have never grown millets before start to do so, and what techniques will they adopt, with what discourse? How will this family of plants, associated meals, and growing areas be perceived by producer and consumer groups:

As backwards and poor, or as traditional, preserved from the decadence of modernity, or even perhaps as progressive (Billiard, 2017)?

It appears obvious that the definition of tradition is highly political. Moreover, far from being neutral, the labelling of foods as “traditional” produces a new reality. Institutions and individuals with the power to decree what is traditional are powerful agents of change. People are told that their current cooking practices are not only unhealthy but also unfaithful to their nation (*ibid.*). We can also question how green the Green Revolution really was (Latour, 1991). Further, we can wonder if governments, businesses, and high-class consumers imprison societies in the past when they promote (or impose) these *traditions*? How do consumers and producers perceive their culinary traditions and production in light of the age of the millet renewal in South India?

## CONCLUSION

Milletts have moved in and out of political and media discourse and in and out of urban markets. Today they are definitely back on the restaurant menu and on the political agenda in the state of Karnataka. Former agriculture minister Krishna Byre Gowda was not ambiguous when he stated that India’s role was to contribute millets to the world (2017, speech pronounced at the Bangalore Millet Fair). Clearly there is economic and political interest, will, and strategy in accessing the international market and branding millets as India’s traditional superfood here to save the 21st century from its health and environmental ailments. But, before they reach the international superfood status, will millets succeed in their more regional or local ambitions, in ways that quinoa in Bolivia or amaranth in Mexico did not, that is increasing nutrition security and local food systems among urban and rural populations. What changes will they spur among the millet producing and consuming populations in terms of agricultural and culinary practices and perception of the grain and its associated territory?

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