

# CEREAL SOLUTION: ON MILLETS AND GRAIN GROWING

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[Millets, a family of coarse grains and popular staple](#), are having an unprecedented moment in the sun. [Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently inaugurated a global conference on millets](#), extolling them as the “door to prosperity” for India’s marginal farmers, the “cornerstone of nutrition”, and as a potential ally against “climate change”. The United Nations has declared 2023 as the International Year of Millets and Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, in the Budget speech in February, singled them out as ‘Shree Anna’ — roughly translated as the ‘best among grains’ — adding that the [Indian Institute of Millets Research in Hyderabad would be supported as a centre of excellence](#).

Millets such as sorghum, bajra and ragi are strongly linked to Indian dietary traditions, which is why the country has for long been the largest producer of millets in the world. It is no surprise that this cereal family is popular because it is energy dense, can be grown with ease in arid soils and, relative to grains such as rice, wheat and maize, is less susceptible to pests. Why such a ‘super food’ got sidelined by the Green Revolution of the 1960s in favour of rice and wheat has little to do with nutrition and more with the development of high yielding varieties of rice and wheat, that produced twice or thrice per acre. Coupled with guaranteed procurement by the government, the rice-wheat combination enabled India to be food secure even in droughts and climate blights. However, this food security came at a cost such as the wanton exploitation of groundwater, a surfeit of pesticide-use, and ossified systems of grain production and procurement that, over the years, is decreasingly remunerative for the average farmer. With average global incomes having risen since the 1960s and rising demand for ‘sustainable agriculture’, India is looking to market millet as a global panacea. However, competing with the global rice-wheat-maize troika, which according to the Food and Agriculture Organization constitutes 89% of global cereal production, means that millet production must be many times more remunerative than now. Hybrid varieties of jowar and bajra exist, and that yields have not dramatically risen in decades despite this means that it would be unrealistic to expect quantum jumps in yield from technological tweaks alone. Dietary shifts are slow processes and promoting certain grains as ‘superior’ or inferior is self-defeating as it ignores the economics of production and promotes cycles of hype — as seen in cash crops. This can have consequences for marginal farmers. Letting all grains grow and helping a wider base of consumers access the cereal they want is a more sustainable enterprise.

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