

# Fresh From Farm To Plate: How A Think Tank In Bhubaneswar Is Creating New Space For Millets In Its Backyard

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Millet, the nutri-rich and climate-smart grain, has been part and parcel of Odisha's agricultural landscape, especially in the arid and semi-arid areas. They have been a traditional staple in the tribal, and to a great extent, coastal Odisha. In order to address the entangled social issues of concern relating to irrigation facilities (or lack of it), changing climatic condition, alarmingly skewed malnourished demography, the Government of Odisha has taken up millet promotion in a mission mode through its Special Programme for Promotion of Millets in Tribal Areas of Odisha, Odisha Millets Mission (OMM) in 14 tribal districts, to revive millets from farm to plates.

The aim is to create awareness about millets in four verticals: produce organically, process methodically, market strategically and consume carefully. In addition, a flagship programme, "Special Programme for Promotion of Integrated Farming in Tribal Odisha," has been launched in Malkangiri district. The aim of the twin programmes is to include millets in the diverse dietary chart of people across the state, emphasising organic food for enhanced nutrition security.

## A new kind of lab

The mission gets a special acknowledgement for its unique architectural structure, with government, civil society and academia coming together on one platform. Under the aegis of the agriculture department, government of Odisha, Nabakrushna Choudhary Centre for Development Studies (NCDS) has been hosted as the state secretariat, with two wings under it: the research secretariat (for review and research) and the programme secretariat (NGO WASSAN, for implementation).

The continuous brainstorming that takes place between the research and programme wings in the state secretariat often opens up exciting spaces for experimentation: from strategy for organic farming promotion to inclusion of millets for daily consumption. Interactive space for learning, a backyard garden of the institute, is a case in point.

Interactive space for learning, an innovative academic exercise conceived by the researchers of OMM, is conceptualised in order to provide policymakers, implementers, civil society organisations, research scholars and other stakeholders—engaged in agro ecological practices, health, nutrition and related subjects—a laboratory exposure to organic integrated farming and millet cultivation. The conviction behind such initiative is to establish the fact that the in-house learners are meaningfully invested in the process and outcome of the twin programmes. A patch of unutilised land has been converted into a farmland where vegetables and millets are grown, adopting eco-agricultural practices, borrowing technical know-hows and expertise from agricultural scientists and organic farming practitioners in an experimental manner. The objectives can be summed up as:

- An innovative academic exercise to promote research on integrated (organic) farming and millets cultivation encouraging multi convergence approach by roping in policymakers and implementers, civil society, research scholars and other stakeholders.
- A physical laboratory, set up to experiment with agro-economic activities by researchers engaged in agro ecological practices, health, nutrition and related subjects in a multi disciplinary approach researchers
- A learning experience to encourage organic agricultural activities in urban landscape by utilising in-house labour and skill.
- To provide nutritious and non toxic agricultural product to the in house staff with an exemplary 'begin from home' approach

## The learning space

Increased use of modern technology in agricultural practices to enhance productivity and protecting crops from pests--are justified in many quarters. This has resulted in massive use of chemical manure and synthetic pesticides. However, research findings show that it has long-term adverse impact on productivity of land and, additionally, health and nutrition implications. And a new perspective has emerged, to resume organic farming and invent alternative ways to increase production through multi-cropping, inter-cropping and other scientific methods instead of adding poison to our food. Many constructive efforts and interventions are taking place in this regard.

With this backdrop in perspective, a state level symposium was organized by NIRMAN, a civil society organization, entitled 'Safe and Nutritious Food' on September 29, 2018. The workshop was hosted by NCDS. Emphasis was given to grow nutrition garden and grow our own food to address this issue and bring about a linkage between agriculture, food and nutrition. Many participants wished to experience such initiatives in an urban landscape. In this regard, Maheswar Khillar, consultant, organic farming and managing trustee of the kitchen garden association, Bhubaneswar, who had participated in the workshop as an expert, has requested NCDS to develop an 'experimental nutrition garden' in its backyard as an exemplary initiative in the state.

This led to engaging discussion among NCDS academicians involved in OMM and Integrated Farming Programmes to respond to the suggestion in a concrete manner. Prof Srijit Mishra, Director, NCDS, flagged off the conversation with a motivating reflection, "if the source of food remains toxic, all our effort to introduce mindful consumption to address nutrition issue will lose its meaning."

R.P. Mohanty, Research Officer, NCDS, took the lead to create the learning space and roped in as many knowledge providers to contribute to the cause. A dedicated gardener who has a passion for organic farming, he played a crucial role in single handedly managing the project with support from the institute staff. "It has not been easy to manage raw materials for the organic manure in the city, and that is precisely why we need to stress even more on organic farming. Easy access to contaminated food obstructs healthy food habits in people."

Sushant Choudhary of WASSAN (Watershed Support Services And Activities Network) an NGO, enthusiastically experiments with a variety of millet cultivation in a limited space. "This is more of a trial-and-error method. We will evolve with each harvest. So far, one harvest has been completed and we are analysing the results," he says.

Sushil, the caretaker of the farmland, echoes the essence of the project: "This is learning for me as well. Our forefathers used to grow food this way and then came these new chemicals which looked so attractive to us. We are again going back to the roots."

Cyclone Fani of April 2019 had adversely affected the yield of the farmland, but the resilient farmers of the institution have brought it back to shape. As Sidheswari, a research scholar, pointed out, "This cyclone experience taught us the ordeal farmers go through during the entire process of cultivation."

#### The last word

This one-year-old initiative has converted the backyard into a sprawling 10,000 sq.ft organic farm. About 22 varieties of green vegetables are being cultivated and sold to the in-house staff every day. The income is being utilised for the maintenance of the garden, making it a self-sufficient unit. Over 15 indigenous varieties of millets have been grown, using the standard system as well as a range of trials. The harvest of the first batch has already been completed and the results are being analysed by scientists. Organic manures and composts, organic insecticides and pesticides are being prepared and used under the supervision of agricultural experts. Visitors to the institute now routinely take away bunches of fresh greens from the garden—a sign of their appreciation for the project. The learning space aims to create an inspiring urban landscape.

The exercise hopes to see this approach having a snowball effect in its neighbourhood and influence policymakers to notice unutilised spaces of educational and other institutions as potential platforms to convert and encourage a fresh from farm to plate culture approach. Will it not be beautiful if the unutilised landscape available in cities, towns and villages are converted into organic agricultural patches and enhance accessibility to organic food and promote millet cultivation with twin slogans 'No poison in our Food' and 'Revive Millets in Farms and on Plates'?

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