

# How Vishala Reddy is bringing millets back into vogue — and she's 'banking' on it big time!

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**You knew that millets were healthy. But did you know how grossly neglected they are as a crop? When Vishala Reddy found out, she decided she was going to turn that whole situation around with farmers**

*They are open | (Pic: Millet Bank)*

When a nation loses a language, a tribe or even a dish, it almost loses an entire culture. Recently, I discovered it's the same for crops. It is a matter of concern that

millets

, known to be one of the oldest cultivated crops, is at that precipice today. Entrepreneur and start-up mentor

Vishala Reddy Vuyyala

recalls for us how growing up in Mullur Krishnapuram (also known as MK Puram), a village in Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh, she saw how before sowing for the kharif season,

sashyalu

(noodles kind of dish) was made to celebrate the occasion. Then there were

gadhelus

, traditional storage pots, which were used to store millets and

gadhees

, common places where millets were stored in case of natural calamities. "Nowadays, I realise that it was not just about growing a crop — there was a whole culture associated with it which kept communities together, ensured food safety and above all, was sustainable," says Vishala, Founder Director of IdentCITY, a firm focussed on destination/city branding and marketing services in Hyderabad. This lockdown gave this Hyderabadite the chance to go back to her village and really mull over all that was lost and all that will be lost if she didn't act now.

*The logo of Millet Bank is inspired by gadhe (in the picture), a space used to store grains. Its motto is the Sanskrit shloka Lokah Samastah Sukhino Bhavantu meaning, may all beings everywhere be happy and free | (Pic: Millet Bank)* **This one's in the bank** "If you knew the amount of fertilisers and pesticides used to grow crops, you wouldn't consume any of it," says Vishala cringing, when talking about how we have forgotten millets and are growing pulses with the advent of borewell technology. So with the hope of bringing back what's good for Mother Earth and good for mankind and on the serendipitous occasion of Prime Minister Narendra Modi announcing September as Nutrition Month, a soft launch for the ambitious Millet Bank was done on August 31, 2020. What's up for offer? Millet processing is a long-drawn out process so the Millet Bank will help farmers with the process by setting up a processing unit — after encouraging farmers to store millets for themselves, they will purchase it at a fair price and take it from there. "After the first interaction during the soft launch, about 40 farmers agreed to come on board," says Vishala, who hails from a family of farmers who are well-respected in their village. The idea is to reclaim 150 to 200 acres of dryland and encourage farmers to grow millets. They, primarily Vishala's nephew, have already successfully convinced about seven farmers and now, 25 acres of land is ready to grow millets. Since the family has a tractor, they are offering to plough the land for free. She also met the collector in July to discuss with him the plan of expanding the concept of the Millet Bank. And this is just one part of the story.

Uyyala Chandrika and Uyyala Siva Reddy are Co-founders of the Millet Bank | (Pic: Millet Bank)

## Let's catch up and crop up

"A lot happens when people meet each other and hence, meeting spaces are important not just for professionals but for farmers too," says Vishala, who is 42 years old. To this end, she converted an agricultural shed into a community space and revamped it with the help of 60 villagers, including craftsmen and artists, who lent their hands. "It was a beautiful experience of people coming together and working," she describes how the space was used for sericulture (silk farming) about 15 years back.

Vishala Reddy | (Pic: Millet Bank)

Now, more about what's inside the 250-seater space. A 65-inch TV which is used to air online classes (we hear Spoken English classes are quite popular). They even recently tuned into a webinar by Millet Man Dr Khader Vali. There are floor mats for people to sit on and a blackboard to write down ideas. There is also a display of indigenous seeds and traditional farm equipment that have gone MIA. Their choice of decor are pots and other artwork. Can you picture this agro-paradise already? But the paradise was almost lost when Vishala, and nine other members, were tested positive for COVID and were even admitted to the hospital too. "The entire process of putting together Millet Bank took one month too long because of this," she rues, but as soon as they recovered, they were back on the field again.

It's from January next year that things will start getting hectic because harvesting season will be upon them. "It's only when you sit with the farmers in their homes and talk to them face-to-face about the benefits of switching back to growing millets will they be convinced," asserts Vishala. And she doesn't envision this whole 200-250 acre as scattered farms across the two Telugu-speaking states — she wants it to be one big unit at one place, her own hometown. Down the lane, she doesn't just want to sell millets, she is also exploring the possibility of actually manufacturing value-added products.

[Twig baskets | \(Pic: Millet Bank\)](#)

Calling herself a big dreamer, she goes on to say that she wants Millet Bank to be for farmers what Amul is for cooperative societies. All we had to say to that was Godspeed.

## The kind of millets they are growing:

- [Samalu or little millet](#): It has slow-digesting carbs and dietary fiber, is rich in magnesium and aids those who have respiratory conditions.

- [Ragi or finger millet](#): Gluten-free and a rich source of good carbohydrates, it is also loaded with calcium and helps control diabetes.

- [Korralu or foxtail millet](#): It is rich in Vitamin B12, and it helps reduce insulin and cholesterol and hence, is good for the heart. It is good for skin and hair too.

## The ancient art of farming

Navadhanyalu (nine grains) was a crop-rotation practice that involved farmers to grow grains like kandulu (pigeon pea), minappappu (black gram), alasanda or bobbarlu (black eyed beans or cow peas), sajjalu (pearl millets), jonnalu (sorghum) and more. These are the kind of practices that the Millet Bank wants to bring back. This ensured:

- Economic benefit because if one crop fails, the others still stand a chance
- It enriches the soil, prevents soil erosion and helps with soil moisture
- The harvest happens in different times so the farmer is not under pressure

#### [Pottery | \(Pic: Millet Bank\)](#)

To help start-ups in the Cultural and Creative Industries (CCI), Vishala started Jamiti, a physical space where they are mentored. They provide research and consulting, events and education, skills training and market access and have done so for about 15 start-ups so far. They have helped Asli Hyderabad, Envision Studio, The Culinary Lounge and many more.

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