

Odisha Millet Mission: The successes and the challenges

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WRITTEN SPECIALLY FOR THE VIKALP SANGAM - experiences shared by WASSAN members “Somehow, it got lost in the translation,” says Dinesh Balam of WASSAN ruefully, as he recounts his challenges of taking the Odisha Millets Mission (OMM) to thousands of tribal farmers of Odisha. Dinesh, who until recently, was the state coordinator of OMM explains, “You see there are 64 distinct tribal communities who speak different languages or other dialects, and when we were listing the procurement requirements, which included cleanliness of the grain, this farmer somehow understood that we wanted sand in the grain and proceeded to add sand to his sack of newly-harvested *mandia* crop!” Odisha Millets Mission (OMM) also known as the Special Programme for Promotion of Millets in Tribal Areas of Odisha was launched by the Government of Odisha in 2017 to revive millets in farms and on plates. The aim was to tackle malnutrition by introducing millets in the public distribution system (PDS) and other state nutrition schemes. To that end, says Srijit Mishra, director, Nabakrushna Choudhury Center for Development Studies (NCDS), “the four major objectives are production, consumption (both in urban and rural), processing and marketing. The focus is on reviving millets in farms and putting it on plates.”

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Millets, a nutritious and climate-resilient crops, have traditionally been cultivated and consumed by tribal communities in the rainfed regions of southern Odisha. The conscious pursuit of an agricultural policy since the 1960s to meet national food security with paddy and wheat, however, led to a decline in millet production and consumption among these communities. Though millets were included for distribution via PDS system in the National Food Security Act (NFSA) 2013 and more recently recommended by Niti Aayog and the National Food Security Mission (NFSM), implementation of the same had met with marginal success due to a lack of an integrated approach to the supply-chain. *Growing Mandia for OMM: Nilakantha and Sehati Parska* OMM may well be a game-changer in the country as it has worked out a comprehensive end-to-end programme design for promotion of millets within an agroecological framework that has the potential to be replicated in other parts of the country. The OMM programme design was based on a participatory multi-stakeholder consultative approach that brought together key government departments, academic and policy-development institutions, activists, farmer collectives, and development NGOs. The programme design took into account grassroots experiences and was based on consensus, which resulted in collaboration and ownership of the programme. A cluster-based approach for reaching out to farmers, promoting processing facilities at village and block level, encouraging household consumption of millets through celebration of local millet based food cultures, and rigorous monitoring of the implementation partners and processes are other commendable components of the programme. “Such an ambitious program,” says Aashima Chaudhary the current state coordinator “is not without its challenges. There are many problems that cannot be foreseen at the planning stage that come up during implementation. One such challenge for this year has been promoting entrepreneurship and decentralized agri-tech businesses. On the one hand it was difficult to find the right people and on the other hand, it took time to get the necessary government approval for the technical specifications of our machines.” OMM, however, is highly successful in that it has already exceeded its targets and is currently being implemented in 72 blocks spread across 14 districts with 51,045 farmers. Already last year, finger millet, locally known as

mandia

was distributed to 1.6 million households via the PDS, and in subsequent years there are plans to increase procurement and perhaps replace rice rations with millets. One of the key ingredients for the triumph of OMM is its decentralized approach to project implementation where in each block an NGO was chosen as the implementing partner to ensure the seamless working of supply-chain processes from farm to plate. Also, the government of Odisha has a decentralized approach to PDS where grains are procured, processed and distributed within the district. This is in sharp contrast to the Karnataka initiative where the government centralized the procurement and distribution of finger millet in PDS but consequently could not meet its objectives. For Dinesh, the philosophy between the two governments is also different in that the Odisha government troubled by the skewed malnutrition in the state, which disproportionately affects its tribal population, is committed to ensure millet consumption by the poorest while the millet program in Karnataka government focuses on urban markets.

System Mapping Exercise conducted by WASSAN for Odisha Millet Mission
at a stakeholders' consultative workshop (open pdf file with this image)

As in Karnataka, the Odisha Millet Mission has succeeded in creating a change in the urban mindset. Aashima explains that “among the affluent sections, there was a stigma about eating millets, which was considered a poor's man crop. We have changed that and created awareness about the nutritional benefits of millets. And to satisfy urban demand, we have come up with new recipes using millets including making Westernized food such as cakes, pizzas and burgers.” Shabnam Afrein of WASSAN who helped compile the millet recipe book for OMM, however adds that there is also a lot of emphasis in preserving the traditional cuisine of Odisha. “70% of our recipes are native to the area where we only substitute rice or wheat with millets,” she adds. Millet recipes are perfected in competitions and womens' self-help groups generate income by selling millet-based snacks at food and other cultural festivals that are regularly in the capital city, Bhubaneswar. While the consortium of public and private institutions that designed OMM continue to support it, NCDS and WASSAN spearhead the mission. NCDS as the state secretariat has two wings under it, the research secretariat (for review and research) and the programme secretariat, and as part of the latter wing, WASSAN serves as the implementation agency. The close collaboration between action-research and programme implementation is another ingredient for the success of OMM. Research includes taking into current farming practices: “In our Participatory Varietal Trials, in each block we seek to scientifically document the farmers' preference for the seeds varieties. Farmers in rainfed regions already work within the agro-ecosystem, and thus in each area they have distinct preferences, based on their agricultural needs, for the varieties they want to sow. We want to study and support this practice as well as honour such indigenous knowledge as it is ecologically more sustainable than centralized distribution of hybrid market seeds. Similarly we engage in participatory research in location-specific practices on intercropping that are being currently practised in millet cultivation, but scientific literature on the benefits of intercropping is non-existent, which makes it difficult to suggest improvements,” says Dinesh. Both Dinesh and Aashima speaks of the invariable pitfalls and trade-offs that happen when development is institutionalized and scaled up. Dinesh says, “taking any crop to scale is daunting from an agro-ecological perspective, for it invariably results in favouring one species over the other and risking a loss in biodiversity. Among millets, jowar (great millet), bajra (pearl millet), and ragi (finger millet) dominate the market for they have much higher yields. Aashima adds, “Ragi corners 90% of the millet market in Odisha as it is included in the PDS, and unless we adopt better policies and practices, we face the danger of losing the rich

diversity of minor millets that still exists in India.” One would hope that in the future, OMM also creates an awareness of the need to cultivate diverse millets, at least for household consumption to promote greater resilience in the climate-change era. But this, of course, is easier said than done. Training over 100,000 people on the ground to implement OMM is not an easy task, and many of the tribal areas are in remote, hilly forests that are still prone to Naxalite attacks. Despite such challenges, due to OMM for the first time in 20 years, the area under finger millet and little millet cultivation is increasing in many districts in Odisha. Such a reversal in agricultural trends would not have been possible without the unflinching support of the state government, which allocated Rs. 5369.2 million in the FY 2019-20. Part of this allocation is towards giving farmers a decent minimum support price of Rs. 28.97 per kg for finger millet. Appreciating this initiative, small farmers Nilakantha and Sehati Parska in the Rayagada district state that for the first time they have a decent annual income of nearly Rs 7,000 from their three-acre farm. “We retained what we needed for our own consumption, and sold the rest. It is a big amount for us. Earlier, the local vendors would come after the harvest and take the surplus we had at a much lower price,” says Nilakantha.

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Financial support from the OMM has also resulted in the youth coming back to millet farming and tribal farmers shifting from water-intensive hybrid paddy to indigenous, rainfed millets. Though some local NGOs complain about the delays in getting funds released by the government offices, all in all, it is obvious that commitment from the state government support would be the first step in replicating Odisha’s success in other states. Niti Aayog recently commended the OMM model and has asked all the states to adopt the model. Every journey begins with a single step. And, for Dinesh this step was taken by the Revitalizing Rainfed Area Network (RRAN) years ago in the Malkangiri district. It was therefore a personally fulfilling moment for Dinesh when to kickstart OMM’s millet procurement plan, the Minister of Agriculture and Farmers Empowerment of Odisha, Dr. Arun Kumar Sahoo inaugurated the first Ragi Mandi in Swabhimana Anchal in Malkangiri. Dinesh reminds me that for decades 151 villages in this district had been artificially water-locked by a hydroelectric dam projects, and until recently, this tribal area had been largely neglected by the government. Over ten years ago, the late Dr N.K. Sanghi, encouraged Dinesh and other RRAN members to work in this remote, poverty-stricken area. Consequently, the RRA Malkangiri Network was formed, which undertook participatory pilot projects for improving millet cultivation in this tribal area. “The success of these pilots,” concludes Dinesh, “led to the conceptualization of OMM. I am proud to be part of the RRA Network and it is gratifying to see that for the first time a key agriculture mandi intervention has taken place Malkangiri in 72 years.” For more info about OMM, please check www.milletsofodisha.com

[\[1\]](#) As cited in

[After years of neglect, hardy and nutritious millets return to the fore](#)

^[2] *ibid.*

Contact

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