

The Case for Millets: Despite Calls by Scientists and Activists, The Coarse Grain Remains Unavailable Under PDS

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[Dalit women farmers in Telangana have formed their own collectives to revive millet farming. Millets are the indigenous foods of various marginalised communities in India. Despite their inclusion in the National Food Security Act of 2013, the coarse grain is yet to come under the public distribution system.](#)

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On 2 September 2013, an adamant United Progressives Alliance government sailed through stiff opposition in the Rajya Sabha to pass [an ambitious legislation](#): the National Food Security Act. The NFSA, which had been in the making for nearly a decade, aimed to make food a legal entitlement of the population. Under it, 75 percent of the rural population and 50 percent of the urban population—nearly 800 million people at the time—would receive subsidised food grains. The act promised nutritional security to women and children in particular, and mooted the digitisation of ration cards to prevent leakages and duplication in public distribution systems, or PDS. It also proposed plans to revitalise India's agriculture in favour of small and marginal farmers. One key reform proposed in the NFSA was the inclusion of millets—tall grasses with heads of small seeds, a climate-resilient coarse cereal—in the PDS, where for decades rice and wheat had remained the dominant cereals, and the encouragement of its local sourcing. According to the act, all households eligible under the PDS would be able to purchase millets at Rs 1 per kilogram. India is the largest producer of millets in the world, and accounts for [more than 40 percent of the global consumption](#). Historically, millets have been the staple food for indigenous communities in the semi-arid regions of Asia and Africa—India, Niger, China, Mali, Nigeria and Sudan are [the top five](#) millet-producing countries in the world as well. In India, for the poor, for instance among tribal people residing the highland areas such as Himalayas, and for farmers in dry areas including the Deccan, central India, western Indian states such as Gujarat and Rajasthan, and the western ghats, [millets have long acted as a nutritional supplement](#). Millets are classified into [roughly eight types](#) based on their grain size, although less popular varieties exist. According to *Millets: Future of Food and Farming*, a report published by the Deccan Development Society, an organisation that works with women farmers' collectives in villages in Telangana, "millets dwarf rice and wheat" when it comes to their mineral content. [An August 2016 report by IndiaSpend](#), a data journalism initiative, noted that barnyard millet has nearly five times the iron content and three times the mineral content of wheat, and is comparable in its protein content; pearl millets have six times more iron than rice, and four times the calcium density. Though many political leaders [criticised the bill](#), several agricultural experts hailed the NFSA as a [decisive step towards promoting millets](#). The bill was perceived to have two-fold implications: the price could spur demand for millets and [aid 31 million coarse-grain farmers in India](#)—mostly small and marginal farmers in dry-land India, who cultivate millets, sorghum and maize, and who were plagued by lack of fair or uniform pricing and unstable demand for their crops. As a nutritious grain with qualities that made it superior to rice and wheat, the millet was also expected to act as a much-needed nutrition intervention tool, especially in rural India. But in the three years that have passed since the act was implemented, little has changed on the ground level for millets. Apart from Karnataka, distribution through PDS has not begun across the country. Even though the act promoted decentralised sourcing from farmers—where the grains are sourced and distributed locally keeping in mind the peculiarities and needs of each region, a move that will ensure constant demand for crops such as millets—nothing to that effect has been implemented. Due to the advantages millets can provide to its consumers and producers, many [activists and academics](#) have frequently urged the government to include millets in the PDS, but state support has remained absent. In contrast to rice and wheat, procurement policies for millets have not been fixed, nor have any incentives been offered to the small and independent farmers who cultivate it. Despite the benefits they offer, millets remain woefully underutilised in India. India's PDS system is the [largest food distribution network in the world](#). Post Independence, the PDS emerged as an effective tool to keep hunger at bay. Over the years, its nature has changed drastically. As rice and wheat were distributed for free or at nominal prices through the PDS across the country, local foods such as millets got marginalised over the years, resulting in the imposition of one kind of food system. [In the 1960s](#), an annual average 32.9 kilograms of sorghum and millets was consumed per capita, a figure roughly eight times the 4.2 kilograms an urban Indian consumed in 2010. According to a 2011 National Sample Survey report, [in 2010](#), an urban Indian consumed 52 kilograms of wheat a year, almost twice the annual consumption of the mid 1960s: 27 kilograms. A [2013 report published](#) by the National Academy of Agricultural Sciences noted that, between 1961 and 2012, nearly 50 percent of the area under cultivation in India that was producing millets had switched to soybean, cotton, maize, sugarcane and sunflower. The report also noted the reasons behind the decrease in millet production:

A combination of factors like low remuneration as compared to other food crops, lack of input subsidies and price incentives, subsidised supply of fine cereals through Public Distribution System (PDS), and change in consumer preference (difficulty in processing, low shelflife of flour and low social status attached to millets), have led to shift from production of millets to other competing crops.

The increased consumption of rice, [especially in the southern states](#), led to various health issues such as diabetes, while failing to address malnutrition. For PDS, the grains are sourced centrally by the Food Corporation of India (FCI), and then distributed among the states. The centre procures food grains from farmers at a minimum support price (MSP) to its central storage locations and sells it to states at standard prices—resulting in a long distribution chain that is benefitting neither local farmers nor the consumers. The decentralised sourcing proposed in the act would address this issue, so that local foods such as millets could be sourced from respective areas and distributed through the PDS. According to IndiaSpend, India loses about 1 million children under the age of five from malnutrition-related causes every year. As the dominant food choices lack in iron content, rates of anaemia among women in India—about 48 percent—are some of the worst in the world, ranking at [170 out of 185 nations](#). Many experts believe that channeling millets through the PDS, Mid-Day Meal and government-run daycare centres can help the malnutrition problem in India. On 18 August 2016, [the Economic Times reported](#) that Maneka Gandhi, the union minister for women and child development, wrote a letter to the consumer affairs minister Ram Vilas Paswan. In her letter, the minister stressed the higher nutritional value of millets compared to other grains under the PDS, as well as their suitability to addressing malnutrition. Millets are often praised for their ability to withstand drought and are resistant to other climate-induced stresses. The farmers from Deccan region I spoke to said that even during the peak drought years, millets never gave up, the least possibility being a reduction in yield. Currently, in India, [millets are being distributed as part of the PDS in Karnataka, since July 2015](#). Of the 25 kilogram of cereal quota every month, in southern Karnataka, five kilograms is Ragi, or finger millet. Sorghum, a major millet, is being distributed in northern Karnataka. In a phone conversation on 28 September, TN Prakash Kammardi, the chairman of the Karnataka Agriculture Price Commission said that the implementation in the southern region gave a "huge impetus" to the state's food security mission. "The government procured Ragi for of price of Rs 2100 per quintal, which is unprecedented for any other cereals in India, including superior rice varieties," Kammardi said. As a result, he added, 23 lakh quintals of Ragi was procured and distributed by the government last year. "Farmers are extremely happy and are ready to bring more areas under millet cultivation," he said. According to Kammardi, the PDS system should be reformed such that grains are procured and distributed locally. The NFSA "gave a momentum to millet production in the

country, especially in the southern Indian states,” Vilas A Tonapi, the director of the Indian Institute of Millets Research (IIMR), a premier agricultural research institute engaged in research on millets under the aegis of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), said. Tonapi added that over the last few years, millet cultivation in the states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Telengana and Andhra Pradesh had increased substantially. I asked him about the impact of Karnataka’s inclusion of millets in PDS. Tonapi told me that he believed it created interest among the people who were not eating millets before. He then cited the “millet mission” that had been initiated by Andhra Pradesh earlier this year, terming it a model for other states. In August 2015, the Andhra Pradesh State Agricultural Department began a [comprehensive millet revival programme](#) aimed at increasing production and consumption of millets primarily in the state’s tribal areas and rain-fed regions. It also advised farmers in distressed areas to not grow more than two crops of rice an year, and to go for millets instead—a far more water-efficient crop, grown mostly in rain-fed agricultural lands—and rarely rely on irrigation. According to IndiaSpend reports, pearl and finger millets require 28 percent of the rainwater required by paddy. The DDS’s Millets report estimated that to grow one kilogram of rice, 3,000 litres of water is needed—this means that, for every acre of farmland that grows millets over rice, nearly 6 millions litres of water is saved. Millet farming, or the lack thereof, also impacts the ongoing tussle over the Cauvery. [In a report published on the website the News Minute](#), Anisha Sheth questioned why Karnataka has, over the past four decades, shifted from millets to more water-intensive crops such as sugarcane and paddy, straining the river. Sheth added, however, that the decline in millets “could not be explained away” by merely a shift to sugarcane and paddy—changing food habits and profit were the other two. “It’s a question of what is profitable for the farmer. With paddy, you get more profit with less expenditure,” Maruti Mandape, the state head of the Karnataka Pranta Raita Sangh, a farmer’s movement, told Sheth. The senior environment journalist Naresh Hegde told Sheth that the shift was also a result of government policies that did not support millets. “Irrigation projects are a big opportunity for the cash crunched state governments to mint money,” said PV Satheesh, the National Convenor of the Millet Network of India (MINI), an alliance of farmer organisations, scientists and civil society groups. Satheesh is also the director of the DDS and has written extensively on the qualities of millets and the need to include them in PDS. He added that often, farmers are happy with irrigated crops because they are not shown an alternative. Tonapi said that governments must demarcate cropping zones depending on the water availability and recommend millets to drought-stressed areas. “It will help address the issue of farmer suicides arising out of crop failures,” he told me. Between 1995 and 2014, [over 3,00,000 farmers](#) committed suicide in India, according to the National Crime Records Bureau, mostly due to mounting debt on account of crop failures. In February 2016, I [had reported](#) on how millet-based farming was providing food security for marginalised communities in Telangana’s Medak district, where Dalit women farmers in close to 35 villages have revived the traditional practice of bio-diverse millet farming. These women farmers are part of the DDS. For many of them, millets are a great source of nutrition, and also provide fodder for their cattle. Millets are able to accommodate a series of other crops such as pulses, greens, vegetables, and oil seeds, making millet farms hotspots of biodiversity. In contrast, the mono-cropping found in other fine cereal and cash-crop farms can eventually lead to soil decay. When the NFSA was passed, Samamma, a 53-year-old Dalit woman farmer and activist, said that it appeared that the nation had realised the value of their indigenous crop. The thought brought her great satisfaction. But now, still plagued by the lack of a market and fair price for her crop, she is not so sure. “We thought the movement started by small farmers like us became a success,” she said. But the “government has always looked down upon millets.” First published by **Caravan magazine**