

Reviving Traditional Grain Production and Consumption in India (2025)

Opportunities to integrate sustainability, health, and rural economic development in India

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| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Community | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Policy Change | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Food Prices |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Public Health | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Menu Change | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Environmental Degradation |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agriculture | | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Industrialized, Capitalist Systems |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Foodservice | | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Lack of Infrastructure |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Nutrition care | | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Profits as Priority |

At a Glance:

- Navdanya and the Organics & Millets e-Platform are part of a movement in India to revive the production and consumption of traditional grains such as millets
- Millets are highly desirable for both sustainability and health reasons: there are dozens of varieties suited to varied local ecological conditions, making them low-input crops, and they are highly nutritious, especially compared to rice and wheat and their more processed products that have largely replaced the diversity of traditional grains.
- **Lessons Learnt:** Reviving traditional crops that can meet both sustainability and nutrition goals requires a cultural shift as well as economic and policy supports. Rebuilding or creating infrastructure to promote these crops can have significant economic benefits for small-scale, rural producers and nutritional benefits for rural and urban communities.

History

Traditionally, a diversity of grains including millets, barley, rye, oats and corn were eaten in most parts of India. Since the middle of the twentieth century, these have been largely displaced by commercial grains such as rice and wheat. This shift has been driven in significant part by the pressures of globalized food, agriculture and trade systems.



In the 1950s and 1960s, a combination of industrialized agriculture and federal price supports led to an overproduction of wheat crops in the US. These surpluses were subsequently dumped as 'food aid' in countries like India, severely undermining local agricultural production capacity and bankrupting thousands of farmers. This dumping, in conjunction with the growth of the processed food industry, led to a significant shift in dietary patterns away from traditional grains and towards processed forms of wheat and rice.

As products from the 'developed' industrialized world, these commercial grains were also seen as being socially and culturally more desirable. This trend continues today with traditional grains being perceived as old-fashioned and less appetizing. They have eroded demand and, in turn, production of traditional grains. Aggressive marketing and promotion of hybridized seeds and chemical inputs, as well as growing demand due to dietary shifts have led to increased domestic production of monocultures of wheat and rice to replace traditional grain production.

Revival

Organizations such as Navdanya have been advocating for the revival of traditional grain varieties for sustainability, health, and economic reasons:

- ☑ Health: Millets, rye, barley, oats, and corn are significantly more nutritious than wheat and rice, especially when those are consumed in highly processed forms such as polished rice and white flour or products made from these.
- ☑ Sustainability: The diversity of traditional grains is adapted to different soil, water, and growing conditions across India. As such, they are a more reliable crop option that requires minimal external inputs, is typically integrated in more biodiverse mixed cropping systems, and is more resilient in the face of changing climatic conditions.
- ☑ Economic: Seeds are open-pollinated and can be saved from year to year, thereby decreasing farmers' reliance on expensive market-based inputs and the associated loans and debt that have been the cause of hundreds of thousands of farmer suicides.

Navdanya is supporting the revival of these traditional grains through awareness-raising campaigns and seed banks where traditional grain varieties are stored, propagated, and distributed. The Organics & Millets e-platform and the Indian Institute of Millets Research (IIMR) are examples of organizations working to understand and promote the health and ecological benefits of traditional grains with the aim of increasing their popularity and reviving their consumption.

The creation of more familiar convenience foods such as cookies, breakfast cereals, and ready-to-eat snacks from whole, traditional grains is an approach being used to make traditional grains more interesting and attractive to modern palates and lifestyles. These efforts are having positive results, notes Dr. Vilas Tonapi, Director of IIMR, with demand increasing about 20-22% each year.

Food for Thought

- *What traditional foods can be produced sustainably and offer more nutritious options in your region than commercial, processed foods?*
- *What supports are needed to revive the popularity and consumption of these foods?*
- *What other benefits might this revival have (such as economic or cultural benefits) that would engage other stakeholders in such a project?*

Contact Information

- Navdanya: <http://www.navdanya.org/>
- Indian Institute of Millets Research: <https://www.millets.res.in/>



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