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Changing Food Culture in India: From Prestigious Staples to the Revival of Millets through Indian Knowledge Systems

Ms. Aditi Meshram
Project Co-ordinator,
National Institute of Women
Child and Youth Development (NIWCYD), Nagpur

Abstract

Food habits in India have never been static; they have evolved in response to historical, economic, and social changes. Over the last century, however, this evolution has been particularly sharp. With the influence of colonial rule, urbanization, and post-independence development policies, certain foods such as polished rice, wheat, and pulses like toor dal gradually came to be seen as symbols of social status and modern living. At the same time, indigenous coarse grains and millets were increasingly viewed as inferior or as "food of the poor," especially in rural and tribal regions.

This paper examines how such shifts in food preferences altered India's traditional dietary diversity and contributed to the erosion of indigenous food knowledge. It traces the gradual movement from prestige-oriented modern diets to the renewed interest in traditional millets such as kodo, kutki, jowar, and bajra. Drawing upon the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), regional food practices, contemporary nutrition science, and recent policy initiatives, the paper argues that millets represent nutritionally rich, culturally rooted, and environmentally sustainable food choices. Rather than viewing the return to millets as a step backward, the paper positions it as a meaningful integration of traditional wisdom with present-day health and sustainability concerns.

Introduction

Food is more than a means of survival; it reflects social identity, cultural values, and historical processes. In India, traditional food systems were shaped by local ecology, climate, and community knowledge. Diets varied from region to region and were closely aligned with seasonal availability and agricultural practices. Millets, pulses, forest foods, and fermented preparations formed an essential part of everyday meals across much of the subcontinent.

Over time, however, these diverse food traditions began to change. Colonial influence, followed by rapid urbanization and modernization after independence, introduced new ideas of what constituted "good" or "modern" food. Polished rice, wheat, and certain pulses gradually acquired cultural prestige, while many indigenous grains were pushed out of mainstream consumption. This paper seeks to understand how and why this transformation occurred, and how present-day concerns around health, nutrition, and sustainability are prompting a renewed interest in millets rooted in Indian Knowledge Systems.

Prestige and Modernity in Indian Food Practices

a) Emergence of Prestige Foods

During the colonial and early post-colonial period, polished white rice and wheat became increasingly visible in urban households. Advances in milling technology made rice easier to cook and visually appealing, attributes that were often associated with refinement and modern lifestyles. Similarly, toor dal emerged as a preferred pulse due to its taste, availability in markets, and association with economically stable households.

Gradually, food consumption began to reflect class distinctions. Eating rice or wheat rotis came to signify progress and social mobility, whereas millets were linked with rural hardship and economic marginalization. This shift was cultural as much as it was nutritional.

b) Role of Institutions and Policy

State interventions played a significant role in reinforcing these food preferences. The Green Revolution, procurement systems, and the Public Distribution System largely focused on rice and wheat. While these measures addressed food shortages, they also reshaped consumption habits and farming patterns. Farmers in many regions shifted away from traditional millet cultivation toward crops that were institutionally supported and economically incentivized.

Nutritional Consequences of Dietary Change

The growing dependence on refined cereals created a nutritional contradiction. Although calorie intake improved, dietary quality and diversity declined. Polished rice, despite being energy-rich,

contains very little fiber, iron, or essential micronutrients. Diets heavily dependent on such staples contributed to several emerging health concerns, including:

- Increasing prevalence of diabetes and obesity
- Widespread iron-deficiency anemia, particularly among women
- Declining gut health linked to low fiber intake

These trends highlight how cultural ideas of prestige in food consumption have had unintended public health consequences.

Indian Knowledge System and Traditional Food Wisdom

Within the Indian Knowledge System, food occupies a central place in maintaining physical, mental, and environmental balance. Ayurvedic texts emphasize the relationship between diet, digestion (*agni*), bodily constitution (*doshas*), and seasonal rhythms. Foods were traditionally chosen not only for taste but for their effects on health and harmony with nature.

Millets were considered *laghu* (light) and *ruksha* (dry), making them suitable for balancing metabolic conditions and supporting physical labor. Practices such as seasonal eating, fasting, fermentation, and food combinations evolved as adaptive strategies rooted in observation and experience. The decline in millet consumption therefore also meant a gradual loss of this embodied and community-based knowledge.

Millets: India's Overlooked Nutritional Resources

Millets such as kodo, kutki, jowar, and bajra have long been staple foods in arid, semi-arid, and tribal regions. These grains are nutritionally dense, climate-resilient, and well suited to local agro-ecologies. They are rich in dietary fiber, have a low glycaemic index, are naturally gluten-free, and require minimal water for cultivation.

Kodo millet is known for supporting digestive health, kutki for its iron and zinc content, bajra for its relevance to women's nutrition, and jowar for its role in cardiovascular health. Their decline was not due to nutritional inadequacy, but to changing perceptions shaped by social and economic forces.

Revival of Millets in Contemporary Contexts

a) Health and Lifestyle Concerns

In recent years, rising lifestyle disorders have renewed interest in traditional grains. Nutritionists increasingly recommend millets as part of balanced diets, particularly for managing diabetes, obesity, and digestive issues.

b) Environmental Sustainability

Millets are also gaining attention for their environmental advantages. They require far less water than rice or wheat and thrive under rain-fed conditions. In the context of climate change and water scarcity, they represent sustainable food choices aligned with ecological resilience.

c) Policy and Global Recognition

The United Nations' declaration of 2023 as the International Year of Millets marked an important milestone. India's leadership in this initiative has led to greater policy support, with millets being promoted as "nutri-cereals" and integrated into school meals, Anganwadi nutrition programs, and livelihood initiatives.

Cultural Reconnection and Culinary Innovation

Alongside policy efforts, cultural and culinary shifts are also visible. Urban households, chefs, and food entrepreneurs are experimenting with millet-based dishes that blend tradition with modern tastes. At the same time, communities are reviving traditional recipes and festivals associated with millets, helping restore cultural pride and intergenerational knowledge.

Role of Tribal Communities in Preserving Millet-Based Food Systems

Indigenous Knowledge and Seed Conservation

Tribal communities in India have played a critical yet often unacknowledged role in preserving indigenous food systems, particularly millets. Long before millets gained recognition in policy discourse or urban health narratives, tribal farmers continued to cultivate, consume, and conserve indigenous varieties of grains such as kodo, kutki, jowar, and bajra. These efforts were not driven by market incentives but by lived experience, ecological understanding, and cultural continuity.

In many tribal regions of central and eastern India, millets remained integral to daily diets despite their declining social status elsewhere. Indigenous seed preservation practices—such as community seed banks, intergenerational seed exchange, and ritual-based seed protection—ensured the survival

of local millet varieties even during periods when state agricultural systems prioritized rice and wheat. These practices represent a living Indian Knowledge System rooted in sustainability, resilience, and collective responsibility.

Case Study: Ujiyaro Bai and Tribal-Led Conservation of Food, Ecology, and Culture in Madhya Pradesh

The contribution of tribal communities to India's changing food culture cannot be understood without recognizing their integrated relationship with forests, land, water, and traditional diets. The life and work of Ujiyaro Bai, a tribal woman leader from Gram Poudi, Dindori District, Madhya Pradesh, offers a powerful illustration of how indigenous food systems, particularly millet-based diets, are sustained through ecological and cultural stewardship.

Ujiyaro Bai's efforts extend beyond the conservation of millets to the broader protection of trees, medicinal plants, tubers, forest vegetables, and traditional food sources. Through sustained community practices, the preservation of forests and native vegetation has led to the revival of wells, springs (झरना, झिरिया), rivers, ponds, and local water bodies**,** resulting in increased groundwater recharge.

This ecological restoration has had direct impacts on community health, with improved access to clean water and traditional foods contributing to a reduction in illness and greater physical resilience among local populations. These efforts are not episodic but continuous and community-driven, reflecting long-term commitment rather than project-based intervention.

Central to Ujiyaro Bai's work is the understanding that food, health, and ecology are inseparable. By conserving indigenous seeds of millets such as kodo and kutki, and by encouraging their cultivation and consumption, she has actively contributed to the maintenance of nutritionally rich diets suited to local climatic conditions. These food practices align closely with the Indian Knowledge System, which emphasizes harmony between human health and natural ecosystems.

Beyond her local impact, Ujiyaro Bai has played an important role in sharing tribal knowledge on global and national platforms. She has addressed audiences in South Africa and Finland, as well as in Ahmedabad (India)**,** where she spoke on the importance of protecting forests (*jungle*), water (*jal*), land (*zameen*), traditional attire (*vesh-bhusha*), and cultural practices as interconnected elements of sustainable living. Her participation in these forums highlights how tribal knowledge systems contribute meaningfully to global discussions on sustainability, food security, and cultural preservation.

In recognition of her lifelong work, Ujiyaro Bai was recently honored by the Hon'ble President of India, Smt. Droupadi Murmu. This national recognition underscores the critical role played by tribal women as custodians of biodiversity, indigenous seeds, and traditional food cultures. It also affirms that the revival of millets and indigenous diets in India has been sustained not by policy alone, but by the quiet, persistent efforts of grassroots leaders who safeguarded these systems during decades of neglect.

This case study demonstrates that tribal communities are not merely participants in India's changing food culture, but key drivers of transformation. Their continued efforts to preserve millets, forest foods, and water systems offer a holistic model of health—one that integrates nutrition, ecology, and culture. Recognizing and learning from such contributions is essential for shaping food policies and dietary practices that are both sustainable and socially inclusive.

Tribal Contributions to Changing Food Habits

The role of tribal communities in shaping healthier food practices goes beyond preservation. By continuing to consume millets as staple foods, these communities demonstrated the long-term health benefits of such diets. Low incidence of lifestyle disorders, high physical endurance, and strong digestive health observed in millet-consuming tribal populations offer important insights for contemporary nutrition discourse.

In recent years, tribal farmers and women leaders have increasingly engaged with civil society organizations, researchers, and policymakers to share their knowledge. Their lived experiences challenge dominant narratives that associate modernity with refined foods and instead propose an alternative understanding of development—one rooted in nourishment, sustainability, and self-reliance.

Reframing Tribal Knowledge in National Food Discourse

Recognizing tribal contributions requires moving beyond viewing them merely as beneficiaries of development programs. Instead, they must be acknowledged as knowledge holders and change agents in India's evolving food culture. The revival of millets in urban markets, policy frameworks, and global discussions would not have been possible without the continuous, often invisible labor of tribal communities who protected these grains during decades of neglect.

Integrating tribal knowledge into mainstream food and nutrition strategies not only honors cultural heritage but also provides practical solutions to contemporary challenges such as malnutrition, climate vulnerability, and loss of agrobiodiversity.

Discussion

The changing food culture in India demonstrates how ideas of prestige and modernity are socially constructed. Foods once viewed as inferior are now being re-evaluated as "superfoods." This shift challenges long-standing hierarchies of taste and underscores the importance of culturally grounded approaches to nutrition and sustainability.

Conclusion

India's food culture has moved through several phases—from millet-based traditional diets to prestige-driven consumption of refined cereals, and now toward a renewed appreciation of indigenous grains. While modern food choices once symbolized progress, they also distanced society from nutritionally balanced and ecologically sustainable practices.

The revival of millets, informed by the Indian Knowledge System and supported by modern science, offers a pathway toward healthier diets, environmental sustainability, and cultural continuity. Reintegrating millets into mainstream consumption is not a return to the past, but a thoughtful step toward a more resilient food future.

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