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Popular Article

## Millets in Chhattisgarh: From Forgotten Grain to Future Opportunity

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### Introduction

Millets are not new to India's agricultural landscape — the country has long been the world's largest producer of millets, accounting for around 38–40 % of global output according to Food and Agriculture Organization estimates and national production statistics. In 2024-25, India produced approximately **180.15 lakh tonnes of millets**, an increase from previous years, with **bajra (pearl millet), jowar (sorghum) and ragi (finger millet)** dominating production. Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Karnataka were the top producers, reflecting regional specialization in different millet types ([Press Information Bureau](#)).

Despite this national strength, millets have seen a long-term decline in area and focus as India's food policy emphasized rice and wheat under procurement and distribution systems. For states like Chhattisgarh, where agriculture is still largely rainfed and dominated by small and marginal farmers, the story of millets is both historical and contemporary. In tribal districts such as Bastar, Surguja and Kanker, crops like **kodo, kutki and ragi** were once essential parts of diets and farming systems. These crops grew quietly in upland fields and survived climatic stress when other cereals failed.

The declaration of **2023 as the International Year of Millets** brought these grains back into policy conversations and public awareness, shining a spotlight on their nutritional benefits and climate resilience. However, for Chhattisgarh, the central question is economic rather than symbolic: can millets contribute meaningfully to farmer incomes, food security and rural resilience?

### Millets as Traditional Security Crops

In traditional agriculture, millets were more than subsistence crops — they represented risk management in uncertain rainfall environments. Long before polished rice dominated



public distribution and wholesale markets, communities in Chhattisgarh regularly consumed grains such as **kodo, kutki, ragi and jowar**. These crops were low-input and well adapted to local ecological conditions, requiring **less water, minimal chemical inputs and limited irrigation**. Their growth cycle suited short rainy spells, and in years of monsoon failure, they often produced something harvestable when paddy failed.

Over the decades, however, the lure of assured procurement and Minimum Support Prices (MSP) for paddy shifted farmer preferences. Rice acreage expanded rapidly in Chhattisgarh because stable market access reduced income risk, whereas millets continued to be viewed predominantly as subsistence staples rather than commercial crops. This historical shift, shaped by institutional incentives, changed cropping patterns across the state.

### **Climate Resilience and Agronomic Advantages**

Climate variability has increased production risk for rainfed agriculture in Chhattisgarh. Monsoon unpredictability — characterized by delayed onset, uneven distribution and mid-season dry spells — frequently affects paddy yields in upland areas where irrigation infrastructure is limited. Millets, by contrast, have inherent drought tolerance, shorter crop durations and lower water requirements, making them more resilient under climate stress.

At a farm level, these characteristics translate into risk reduction. In upland tribal regions, farmers often speak of millets as dependable fallback crops. A farmer from Kondagaon once remarked, “When paddy fails, kodo still gives something.” That “something” often means food security and a portion of household needs met even in difficult seasons. In an agro-ecology where irrigation coverage is uneven, such traits have real economic significance, especially for small and marginal farmers.

### **Nutritional Importance and Changing Consumption Patterns**

Nutrition has emerged as a key theme in contemporary millet discourse. Millets are rich in dietary fiber, iron, calcium and other micronutrients, making them important in the fight against hidden hunger and micronutrient deficiencies — conditions still prevalent in many rural and tribal parts of India, including Chhattisgarh. As urban consumers become more aware of lifestyle diseases such as diabetes and obesity, demand for millet-based foods — such as flour, breakfast mixes and ready-to-eat products — has grown.

This shift presents a two-fold opportunity: rural households can improve diets through local consumption, and farmers can tap into expanding urban and niche markets. However, nutritional value alone cannot guarantee economic returns; robust market systems must convert this demand into price signals that benefit producers.



### **Market Linkages and Economic Viability**

The core challenge for millets in Chhattisgarh is economic viability. Unlike paddy, which benefits from organized procurement and guaranteed price support, millets often lack stable market mechanisms. Production remains largely small-scale and dispersed, with limited aggregation through Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) or Self-Help Groups (SHGs). Processing facilities — essential for value addition — are also inadequate in many areas. As a result, most millet output is either consumed locally or sold in informal markets at low prices. Without systematic aggregation and value addition, farmers struggle to benefit from rising urban demand. Institutional coordination, including improved processing infrastructure and market linkages, is therefore essential to elevate millets from subsistence staples to commercially viable crops.

### **Women's Role and Local Value Addition**

In many tribal and rural contexts, women play a central role in the millet value chain. They preserve seeds, conduct post-harvest processing, clean and store grains, and prepare traditional millet foods. This knowledge base, if supported through institutional channels, can become an asset for rural income generation.

For instance, SHGs and community enterprises can process millets into flour, ready-to-cook mixes and snack products — increasing value along the chain. Local processing not only adds income but also retains value within the community, supporting rural jobs and strengthening livelihoods in areas where alternatives are limited.

### **Policy Support and the Pakistan of Paddy**

A major economic tension in Chhattisgarh's agricultural system is the dominance of paddy due to assured procurement. Farmers' cropping decisions are influenced heavily by price security and stable returns. As long as paddy benefits from strong procurement mechanisms, including MSP and bonus support, millets must offer either comparable or supplementary income opportunities to attract farmers.

Recent efforts under the **Chhattisgarh Millet Mission** aim to expand production and increase millet area — targeting up to 1 lakh hectares through incentives and support programs, up from around 69,000 hectares previously reported under state schemes ([Studocu](#)). Additionally, recent state support prices for millets such as kodo-kutki and ragi (for example, ₹3,000 and ₹3,377 per quintal respectively in one policy year) demonstrate attempts to create price signals that benefit producers ([Business Standard](#)).



However, effective implementation and broad market coverage remain critical for these policies to translate into sustained farmer adoption.

### **Toward Balanced Diversification**

Millets cannot replace paddy overnight — nor should they. A balanced approach that positions millets as part of a diversified cropping system can yield multiple advantages: reduced climate risk, improved nutritional outcomes, supplementary income streams and more sustainable land use. Integration of millets into public nutrition programs such as the Public Distribution System, Mid-Day Meal Scheme and Anganwadi feeding can help stabilize demand, thereby enhancing price signals for farmers.

If policy support, market development and farmer incentives align effectively, millets could move from symbolic recognition to practical agricultural transformation in Chhattisgarh.

### **Conclusion**

Millets in Chhattisgarh embody both tradition and opportunity. With appropriate institutional support, strong market linkages and economic incentives, these crops can contribute meaningfully to farm incomes, food security and rural resilience. The future of millets in the state will be determined not by slogans but by stable demand and tangible economic benefits. If that happens, millets will not just return — they will thrive.

