

Beyond the Grain: How Millets Are Transforming Tribal Livelihoods in Odisha

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ABSTRACT

Once sidelined by modern agricultural systems Millets are now experiencing a dynamic revival in Odisha's tribal districts through the Shree Anna Abhiyan (formerly Odisha Millets Mission). By reintroducing traditional millet varieties and empowering tribal communities particularly the women and youth this initiative is transforming agriculture, nutrition, and livelihoods. To promote dietary diversity and to combat malnutrition millets are being integrated into public food systems. Eco-tourism and youth entrepreneurship are emerging as innovative avenues for millet – based economic development. Moreover, millet cultivation supports climate resilience and agro – biodiversity in rainfed regions. Despite the presence of infrastructural and policy challenges, Odisha's model showcases how native crops can address modern crises like food insecurity, rural poverty, and environmental stress. The initiative bridges tradition and innovation making millets a cornerstone for sustainable development and tribal empowerment. As the world seeks climate – smart food solutions, Odisha's millet movement serves as a replicable blueprint for holistic rural transformation.

INTRODUCTION

A tiny ancient grain is powering a big revolution across the lush hills and tribal hamlets of Odisha. Once seen as a humble staple millets are now at the forefront of a movement that is transforming agriculture, nutrition, and women's livelihoods in the state's tribal regions. The change is led by two converging efforts: Odisha's Shree Anna Abhiyan (formerly the Odisha Millets Mission) and India's national Shree Anna Abhiyan which are a policy push that recognizes millets as "Shree Anna" or "divine grains". Together these initiatives are reintroducing millets as both a cultural treasure and a practical solution to the challenges of malnutrition, climate change, and rural poverty. For states like Odisha with over 22.58% tribal population and significant malnutrition indicators this shift is not just agricultural it's transformational (OdishaPlus Bureau, 2022).

RECLAIMING TRADITIONAL WISDOM

Millet cultivation is deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of Odisha's tribal communities. Crops like Ragi (finger millet), Kodo millet, and little millet have traditionally sustained generations by providing both food security and ecosystem balance. However, with the advent of high – yielding cereal crops and centralized food systems millets were sidelined. The Shree Anna Abhiyan is helping to reverse this trend. More than 160 indigenous millet varieties have been identified and revived that is enabling the farmers to reconnect with the native knowledge systems (Sahoo & Samantaray, 2021). The use of the System of Millet Intensification (SMI) has improved yields without chemical inputs making cultivation environmentally sound and economically feasible.

EMPOWERING TRIBAL WOMEN

Focus on women empowerment is one of the most transformative aspects of the millet movement. Women led Self – Help Groups (SHGs) are managing seed banks, operating millet processing units, and running food enterprises across districts like Koraput, Kandhamal, and Rayagada. Products such as ragi laddus, millet cookies, and ready – to – eat mixes are sold in local markets and urban fairs. Some SHGs have reported monthly earnings of ₹20,000 – ₹25,000 turning subsistence farming into sustainable livelihoods (Smart Food, 2022). Raimati Ghiuria fondly known as Odisha's "Millet Queen" has preserved over 30 millet varieties and empowers the tribal communities through traditional farming and seed conservation earning her national recognition and an honorary doctorate in 2024 (OrissaPOST, 2024). The mission has enabled women to become entrepreneurs, processors, and local leaders through capacity building and infrastructure support.

MILLETS IN PUBLIC FOOD SYSTEMS

The Shree Anna Abhiyan has strategically integrated millets into Odisha's public food systems to generate demand and improve nutrition. Millets are now featured in the Mid – Day Meal scheme, Anganwadi centers, and even public distribution systems (PDS). This has dual benefits one is providing children and vulnerable groups with high fiber, iron rich food, and second is ensuring assured markets for farmers (United Nations India, 2022). The introduction of millet-based products like ragi porridge, khichdi, and snacks has diversified local diets and enhanced nutrition in tribal households.



(Image Source:

https://milletsodisha.com/themes/default/asset/Photo_story/Ragi%20farmer%20pleased%20with%20her%20yield.jpg)

BUILDING INCLUSIVE MARKETS

The economic success of millet cultivation hinges on the robust value chains. The Shree Anna Abhiyan has addressed this through the establishment of decentralized processing centers, fair procurement policies, and digital platforms like the Millet Procurement Automation System (MPAS). Farmers receive Minimum Support Prices (MSP) and timely payments, reducing their dependence on middlemen (Kumar *et al.*, 2024). In addition to this the mission supports branding and promotion of millet products through state – sponsored events and urban millet cafes thereby enhancing visibility and consumer awareness.

ENGAGING THE TRIBAL YOUTH: MILLETS AS A MODERN OPPORTUNITY

The growing involvement of tribal youth is one of the vital yet often overlooked aspects of Odisha's millet revival. The Shree Anna Abhiyan which integrates modern tools, digital platforms, and entrepreneurship is now attracting younger participants to millet farming which was traditionally practiced by older generations. Startups are being launched by youth in districts like Kandhamal and Nuapada to produce millet-based products such as energy bars and breakfast mixes often in partnership with local NGOs and universities. Improved digital access enables training and online marketing that helps in linking rural producers to urban consumers. As

millet shift from a subsistence crop to a business opportunity tribal youth are embracing agriculture as a viable livelihood that helps to reduce migration and create sustainable and dignified employment locally.

MILLETS AND ECO-TOURISM: A NEW RURAL EXPERIENCE

To create new livelihood opportunities in tribal areas Odisha is innovatively linking millet promotion with eco-tourism. Visitors to districts like Koraput and Kandhamal now participate in millet-based farm stays, local food experiences, and cultural immersion activities. These initiatives often led by women groups and supported by government programs, allow tourists to engage with indigenous food systems and farming traditions (Smart Food, 2022). Millet trails, community kitchens and storytelling events turn villages into experiential destinations. This model not only boosts rural incomes but also educates visitors on sustainable agriculture, climate resilience, and the socio-cultural importance of millets.

CLIMATE RESILIENCE AND AGRO-BIODIVERSITY

Millets are highly climate-resilient which requires minimal water and thrive in degraded soils. This makes them ideal for Odisha's rainfed tribal regions. The state is also investing in climate adaptation by promoting millet cultivation. Moreover, the revival of indigenous varieties contributes to agro-biodiversity, offering resilience against pests, diseases, and climate variability (Sahoo & Samantaray, 2021). These traditional grains can serve as buffers in a climate-uncertain future while conserving local ecologies.

CHALLENGES AND POLICY GAPS

Despite its achievements the Shree Anna Abhiyan faces several challenges. Infrastructure gaps in storage, processing, and

logistics limit the scale of operations. There is also a need to expand consumer education about millets beyond rural areas. Some farmers remain hesitant due to perceived risks and the procurement processes require streamlining. Stronger inter-departmental coordination and support for entrepreneurship are essential to ensure long-term viability (Pattanaik and Das, 2023). Bridging the gap between policy implementation and grassroots innovation will be critical.

CONCLUSION

The Shree Anna Abhiyan represents a paradigm shift in how we view food, farming, and rural development. It illustrates how traditional grains like millets can be modern tools for justice by bringing nutrition to children, dignity to women, and resilience to farming systems. As Odisha moves forward with its millet mission it sets a precedent for other states and countries seeking sustainable and equitable food futures. Indeed, going “beyond the grain” means reimagining food systems that work for people, planet, and prosperity. As the world looks for climate – smart crops and equitable food systems, Odisha’s millet revolution offers a powerful reminder: the answers may lie not in the future but in the grains of our past.

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