

## Millet, the food for Security

**Business Standard 13<sup>th</sup> September 2009**

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<http://www.business-standard.com/india/news/milletfood-for-security/369899/>



A Vidarbha NGO encourages millet cultivation on the premise that the crop is more nutritious and needs less water to grow

When Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Waifad village in Wardha on June 30, 2006, farmers of the Shetkari Sanghatna led by Vijay Jaywantia handed him a wishlist on behalf of the farmers of the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra.

One of their demands was a subsidy for jowar cultivation. The prime minister ignored this but provided a subsidy for drip irrigation. The latter will benefit only those with irrigated land. Jowar, like other millets — bajra, finger millet or ragi — grows on unirrigated land. If one kg of rice needs 4,000 litres of water, jowar grows on no water. Two kilometres from Waifad, 50 farmers in Dorli village of the Wardha block tied up with an NGO, Deccan Development Society (DDS), and its Millet Network of India and decided to grow jowar.

Each farmer has sown jowar over an acre and 50 acres will be ready for harvest in November this year. The DDS has given these farmers a subsidy of Rs 2,000 per acre. This marks turning back of the clock by 30 years, when jowar and bajra were a part of diet in Vidarbha.

Jaywantia says the millets are still popular in western Maharashtra and jhunka and bhakar (a bread made of jowar) are sold even in hotels.

The millet network hopes the government will try to replicate the millet subsidy project they are implementing in villages like Dorli and sell the produce through the public distribution system (PDS).

Similar projects are being run in 15 rain-fed states. The millet network is in touch with farmer organisations in these states to promote and subsidise millet cultivation. The logic behind the initiative — jowar, bajra, ragi, foxtail millet, little millet, and kodo millet not only require less water to grow but are also super cereals with more nutrients than other food grain. A bowl of halwa made of finger millets or ragi is 30 times rich in calcium than a bowl of rice. Millets also have more fibre than rice and wheat. Some varieties have as much as 50 times more fibre than rice. The network is asking for inclusion of millets in the PDS as a solution to malnutrition in the country.

Vijay Jaywantia says the government policy of thrusting rice and wheat on all states through the PDS killed millet cultivation. The output declined from 18.41 million tonnes in 1966 to 17.97 million tonnes in 2006, a fall of over 2 per cent. On the other hand, wheat production went up from 18.1 million tonnes to 69.73 million tonnes in the period, an increase of 284 per cent. Rice production rose 125 per cent during the period.

Under the guidance of the DDS, which runs a decentralised PDS and a food bank belonging to millet farmers in Andhra Pradesh, each farmer of Dorli will give a quintal of jowar to a grain bank that will be set up in the village. The bank will have 50 quintals of jowar in one go. Jaywantia says that if a farmer grows millets, he gets a large quantity of fodder, besides the nutritious crop. The fodder helps him feed animals, which give enough farmyard manure, thus leading to a fall in use of chemical fertilisers. So, the crop is a bulwark against drought and debt, not to speak of malnutrition.