

Fighting malnutrition with millet: Chandigarh & Odisha show the way

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NEW DELHI: With growing focus on food diversity and inclusion of region specific traditional foods in the diet to prevent malnutrition among children, Odisha and Chandigarh are showing the way by bringing focus on the highly nutritious millets in an era of “superfoods.” How the humble Ragi laddoo and jowar and bajra are becoming part of the battle against malnutrition is highlighted in a recent report brought out by NITI Aayog in collaboration with the UN World Food Programme.

The special initiatives taken by Odisha and Chandigarh on Millets is part of the report that brings together good practices from across India on “Take Home Ration” (THR) under the supplementary nutrition programme (SNP). Part of the Integrated Child Development Scheme, SNP is delivered to more than 9 crore beneficiaries registered at anganwadis through hot-cooked meals and THR. The THR programme provides supplementary food products to children aged 6 to 36 months, and to pregnant and lactating women, for use in their homes.

The report also shows how many states are experimenting with region specific THR menus. From a northern hill state like Himachal Pradesh listing options like fortified Panjiri, wheat oats and Ajwain biscuits to Karnataka making multi-grain payasam and groundnut green gram laddoos - the report throws up a list of options offered by different states like Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Odisha and Haryana.

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As far as the focus on mainstreaming millets, in Odisha, the authorities as a special initiative introduced Ragi Laddoo in tribal dominated Keonjhar and Sundargarh districts from July 2020 as a morning snack for the preschool children (3-6 yrs) covered under ICDS. Since Covid protocols were in place, pre-cooked ragi laddu mix was provided via home delivery. The premix for

ragi laddoo is prepared by the SHGs with technical support from the “Millets Mission” and is supplied to the Anganwadi centres for supplying it to the children.

“The core objective of the programme is to improve the nutritional status of pre-school children and revive the age old traditional culture of millet consumption once prevalent among the tribal communities of Keonjhar,” it is stated in the report. It is shared that the initiative has also provided an additional source of income to women’s SHGs, an assured price to farmers for Ragi and a boost to local production of Ragi and other millets.

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This is also being cited as a unique model in the country with decentralized production, procurement, processing, supply and consumption of millets. It is now proposed to scale up the programme in the state.

Looking at the nutritive value of millets and to promote their use in daily diet, Chandigarh has taken an initiative to include millets –jowar and bajra (as per season) in the THR. The beginning was made with bajra millet which was distributed from December 2020 to June 2021 to beneficiaries, and then they moved to distributing the jowar millet.

The report draws attention to the fact that THR provided through the ICDS is more important than ever before in the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is cited how the pandemic disrupted food systems across the country, reducing individual dietary diversity and impacting household food security. “THR represents an opportunity to deliver fortified, nutritious, non-perishable food that goes beyond simply providing calories,” it is stated with emphasis on guiding states towards good practices and innovations on THR.