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Women Milletpreneurs of India

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As sedentary lifestyles become more prevalent and people become increasingly aware of the need to prevent lifestyle diseases, they are actively seeking out dietary options like millets.

Millets are high in macronutrients like fibre and protein as well as vitamins and minerals such as calcium and magnesium, making them an ideal “superfood”, more recently known as Shree Anna, meaning a food grain which has divine grace. This is a reference to its potent nutritive and medicinal value.

Adding to the growing popularity of millets is the fact that the United Nations has declared 2023 as the International Year of the Millets, following a proposal by India, which is striving to position itself as a global hub for millets. This initiative is expected to provide an even greater impetus to the trend towards incorporating millets into our diets.

In the Union Budget for 2023-24 presented by Finance Minister (FM) Nirmala Sitharaman on February 1, 2023, it was announced that the Indian Institute of Millet Research (IIMR) in Hyderabad would be transformed into a Centre of Excellence, to share best practices, research and technologies at an international level.

Moreover, the Nutrihub-Technology Business Incubator Startups Confederation (TBISC) hosted by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) has been supporting the IIMR in identifying, nurturing and promoting millets-based startups across India since 2017.

Startups in the millets space can play a significant role in developing new product varieties and bringing those products closer to the consumer’s doorsteps. From farm to fork, there are tremendous business opportunities, and more entrepreneurs are discovering them with each passing day.

According to Dr Trilochan Mohapatra, Secretary of the Department of Agricultural Research and Education (DARE) and Director General of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR).“The role of startups is crucial in bridging the existing gaps between the demand-supply of millets and their products. They are the vehicles that can bring millets to the common man’s plate.”

India is home to over 500 startups operating in the millet value-added chain. Within this ecosystem, many women entrepreneurs are playing a significant role in promoting the superfood also know as Shree Anna across the country. Their efforts are instrumental in supporting 2023 as the International Year of Millets.

Putting Nutrition First

Deepa Muthukumarasamy, a Master's degree holder in foods and nutrition, co-founded Some More Foods with her cousin Vijayalakshmi Srinivasan in 2013. Although, her cousin left the venture after a few months, Deepa continued running Some More Foods alone.

Despite little knowledge about marketing and expanding her food brand, Deepa enrolled herself in The Indus Entrepreneurs roadshow for women which proved helpful. Soon after, she launched three millet-based products: Millet noodles, Millet Sevais and Millet Puttu Mix. Since then there has been no looking back for Deepa. Today, her startup also produces Millet Pasta, Millet Bites, and Gluten Free Millet Cookies. In 2022, Some More Foods was one of the winners of the Rocketfuel D2C Accelerator X Startup India Programme announced by Shiprocket and Invest India, securing a cash prize of Rs 1 lakh. Additionally, Some More Foods is part of the consumer brand accelerator programme at the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) Bangalore with a grant of Rs 7 lakh. Deepa is presently an Entrepreneur in Residence at the Indian Institute of Management Kozhikode (IIMK) under the LIVE Innovation Fellowship which is under the Department of Science and Technology, Government of India. Recently, Deepa also participated in the Millets & Organics - International Trade Fair 2023 in Bengaluru.

"My aim is to reinstate our traditional food ingredients substantiated with nutrition science and bring them back to present food culture and promote wholesome nutrition", said Deepa Muthukumarasamy, Founder & Chief Executive Officer of Some More Foods.

Ruchika Bhuwalka, another milletpreneur founded her startup Millet Amma in 2017, with a vision to offer millet-based products to the world. The idea was conceived in Ruchika's kitchen when she had the task of switching her family's diet to a healthier millet-based one. Millet Amma has come a long way from supplying batters to family and friends from her kitchen, to serving several families in India and around the world through an omnichannel approach for distribution. The millet product line currently comprises nearly 40 stock- keeping units (SKUs) including batters, mixes, pizza bases, cookies, grains, flours, and more, that have been created from Ruchika's heart. Her venture has been recognised by the Indian Institute of Millet Research (IIMR) as Best Emerging Startup for two consecutive years. Ruchika has also been awarded the best woman entrepreneur in the agricultural department by the Federation of Indian Chambers

of Commerce & Industry (FICCI). She was invited to Rome for the inaugural ceremony of the International Year of Millets in 2023 to represent India.

“With the government providing various grants and monetary benefits for startups and farmers in the millets field, there is a lot of potential on the path ahead,” said Ruchika Bhuwalka, Founder of Millet Amma.

Winning the Game in the Second Innings

Shauravi Malik and Meghana Narayan are the co-founders of Slurrp Farm (Wholsum Foods), which was established in 2015, in New Delhi. The two friends launched Slurrp Farm after realising that most supermarket shelves only offered products made with wheat or rice for children, which contained trans fats and alarming amounts of sugar – not exactly a healthy option. So, they decided to develop healthier food alternatives made with millets. Their product range includes organic cereals, sathu maavu, khichdi mix, millet oat porridge, millet pancakes and waffle mixes, banana and chocolate chip pancakes, millet dosa, beetroot oats dosa, and much more. However, the germination of this startup venture was not instant, as the idea seemed risky to both women, who held secured corporate jobs. While Meghana was working at McKinsey’s after receiving an MBA from Harvard Business School, Shauravi studied Economics at Cambridge University and later worked in the consumer, healthcare, and retail advisory team and the leveraged finance team at JP Morgan. She was also an investment manager at Sir Richard Branson's group holding entity at Virgin Group in London. But destiny had other plans for them and they soon started developing healthy, tasty, and convenient breakfast and mealtime options for young children and families through their startup brand. Slurrp Farm secured Rs 58 crore in funding from a clutch of institutional investors last year, to ramp up product development and increase spending on marketing.

“When Shauravi and I started the company 6 years ago, we were very clear on what we wanted - to reintroduce sustainable ways of eating for families across the world”, said Meghana Narayan.

“We have a deep-rooted conviction to bring millets back to the meals we eat and to make them incredibly delicious. The UN-designated International Year of Millets strengthens our

commitment to lead the conversation on these supergrains", said Shauravi Malik**.**

Stepping out of the corporate world into the space of startups, **Sanjeeta KK** is another strong milletpreneur who is passionate about food. After spending many years working in the corporate world in the 90s, Sanjeeta's life took a sudden turn when she had to undergo a medical emergency. She had to quit her full-time job and take a break for eight long years. In her second innings, she started OGMO Foods in 2018 in Chennai with products made using ancient minor millets like barnyard and little millet, which now retails across premium stores in Chennai and Pune. Minimally processed without any artificial colour, preservatives or flavours, the range of OGMO Foods includes overnight millets, health mixes, baby products, granolas, energy bites, ready-to-cook premixes, pre-soaked minor millets, whole grain, and flour. The creative and innovative mind behind the brand, Sanjeeta is also a food blogger, recipe developer and commercial food stylist, with over a decade of experience in the food industry. She holds a bachelor's degree in science and a master's degree in Economics and Business Management.

"OGMO stands for Organic Move and I take pride in bringing some of our forgotten ancient grains back on the table", Sanjeeta said.

Joining this list of second-innings players is **Krishnaa Kantthawala,** the founder of Smart Eleven, a millets-based food startup in Pune. Hailing from a traditional Gujarati business family, a background in the luxury industry, with 15 years of marketing experience, Krishnaa always felt the need to give back to society. After a previous jewellery startup failed, she was cautioned to re-think entrepreneurship. However, a string of incidents later, she was convinced to bring healthy, affordable and easily available smart foods to people. Krishnaa started Smart Eleven with millets in 2018 and today produces over 25 millet-based ready-to-eat (RTE)/ ready-to-cook (RTC) products, with over 70 SKUs, including noodles, pasta, khakra, bakery mixes and wafers. The Government of India has awarded Smart Eleven the 'Poshak Anaj- 2022' award for the Best Startup under Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana - Remunerative Approaches for Agriculture and Allied Sectors Rejuvenation (RKVY-Raftaar) programme, supporting agri-preneurs, via the Nutrihub Incubator at IIMR. Krishnaa is now looking to expand her startup's horizons by exploring opportunities in other countries and strengthening local distribution.

“Global spending towards weight loss has gained momentum and this momentum coupled with the availability of healthy food options like millets has created a good opportunity for the market”, said Krishnaa.

Shilpi Bhandari, a Chartered Accountant by profession, founded Boutique Foods to reintroduce millets and lesser-known superfoods to Indian households. Her venture began in 2016, with the first batch of millet flour made in Shilpi’s kitchen using a recipe passed down through generations. Once she achieved the perfect phulkas and rotis out of millet flour, her entrepreneurial journey got more adventurous. The product range of Boutique Foods is now extensive and includes Energy Dense Nutrient Food (EDNF), which assists the Telangana government in tackling malnutrition among tribal children. The company has a manufacturing facility in Jaipur, Rajasthan and a corporate office in Mumbai.

“It is this journey towards intelligent eating that drives me to provide a wide variety of the freshest, most natural and healthy food options to the customers”, said Shilpi.

Leading the Way in Technological Expertise

There has been a significant technology gap in efficiently processing minor millets, while keeping the bran intact and using food- grade materials with operational ease, which hindered growth in the minor millet value chain. To address this gap, **Subalakshmi Sankaranarayanan** founded Borne Technologies in 2017. Through research, she developed the Borne Minor Millet Dehuller SSN (named after the Additional Chief Secretary of the government of Tamil Nadu, Santha Sheela Nair). The company specialises in manufacturing food processing machinery with a specific focus on dryland crops, particularly minor millets. Subalakshmi and her team, also developed complementary technologies, which are linearly set up to create an end-to-end production line for minor millet processing, known as the Borne SMART (Small Millet Aleurone Retention Technology). She recognised the potential of this technology to assist in developing the minor millet industry, which is essential to address climate-change-oriented food security, alongside nutrition security and provide the key link between backward and forward integration, which is sorely lacking in the industry.

According to Subalakshmi, “One of the major difficulties is that modern India is not aware of the health benefits of millets, and many do not know how to cook it. Also, the characteristics of millets are different from that of rice, thus different machinery is required for millets.”

Despite the progress made in empowering women in India, the sixth economic census by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation in 2022 revealed that women account for only 13.76 per cent of total entrepreneurs in India, and the millets sector is no exception.

Currently, most women milletpreneurs in the industry, position themselves under the tasty, healthy and sustainable segment, marketing their millet offerings as a healthy replacement to wheat and rice-based foods. However, with innovations such as millet-based ice cream and millet-based beer slowly gaining traction in the market, it is hoped that there will be an increased share of women entrepreneurs in India in the coming years.

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