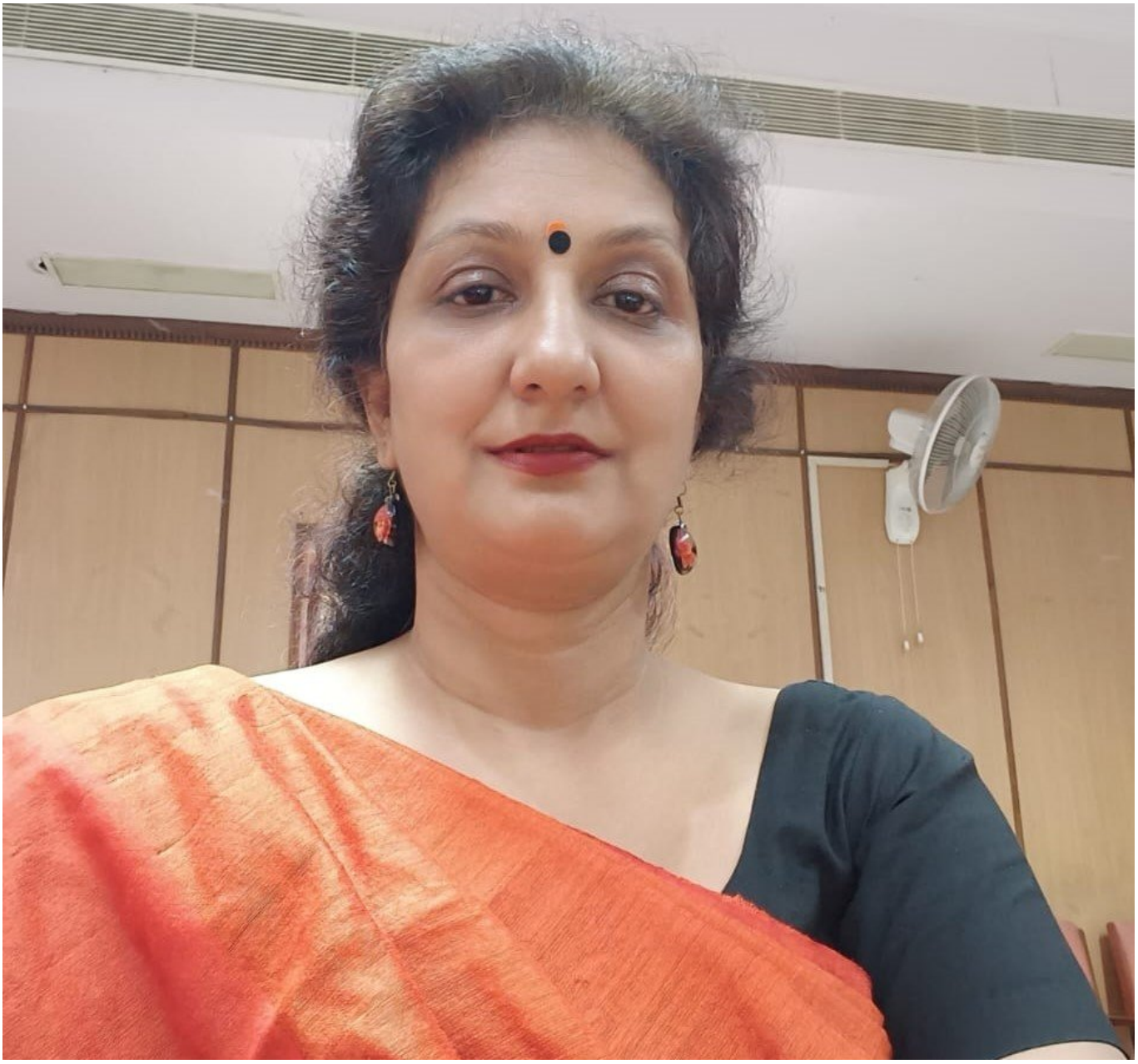
FEATURES | FEATURE

How millets can help combat anaemia

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Anaemia is a widespread health disease that affects millions of individuals, primarily women and children, and can lead to a variety of health problems. To combat this widespread health issue, we need to acknowledge the importance of the National Health Mission (NHM) in the battle against anaemia. The National Health Mission is a key initiative rolled out by the government to enhance healthcare amenities and results across the country. It comprises a wide range of healthcare initiatives and interventions aiming at guaranteeing equal access to quality healthcare for all, with a particular emphasis on marginalised communities and vulnerable populations. Irrespective of all of the initiatives, a nutritionally balanced diet is critical in the prevention of anaemia. Here's where the role of Millet becomes evident. Let's explore further.

Nature has provided us with a potent remedy in the form of millets, also known as "Nutricereal" grasses that have been farmed for thousands of years across various regions of India. These humble grains have remained overshadowed for far too long by most popular staple cereals like wheat and rice. However, it is high time that we recognise their incredible potential in addressing anaemia. These tiny grains are packed with an array of nutrients, making them an excellent dietary choice, especially for those battling anaemia as these grains are rich source of iron.

Nutrition and Millets

Millets are tiny grains that are rich in iron, which is an indispensable part of haemoglobin. Millets such as Jowar (Sorghum), Bajra (Pearl Millet), and Ragi (Finger Millet) have much greater iron content than rice and wheat. Millets are also high in folate, a B vitamin that is necessary for the synthesis of red blood cells; folate insufficiency is another major cause of anaemia, particularly in young children and pregnant women. Although the amount of iron given varies depending on millet type and processing method, research clearly reveals that millet can play a promising role in preventing and lowering high levels of iron deficiency anaemia. Milled rice, wheat, and maize have replaced traditional nutritious crops in developing nations. Refined

meals are packed with carbohydrates but low in minerals, especially micronutrients like iron (Fe) and zinc (Zn).

The fact that a large portion (>80 per cent) of the diet in underdeveloped countries comprises low-iron staple foods, attaining optimal iron intake through the remaining 20 per cent of the diet is impractical. As a result, it is critical to diversify the staple food by integrating naturally iron-rich food crops like millet. Furthermore, millets contain 2.3 to 4.0 times more dietary fibre (6.4 ± 0.6 to 11. 5 ± 0.6 gm /100 gm) than refined rice and refined wheat, which serve as food for healthy gut flora, increasing abundance and modifying gut composition. Folate, often known as vitamin B9, is required for the synthesis of red blood cells.

Millets are highly flexible and may be used to make everything from porridge to rotis and even biryanis. They are also reasonably priced, making them accessible to a broad segment of the population. Furthermore, millets are highly resilient crops that require minimum water and are well suited to India’s diverse climatic conditions. Promoting millet cultivation can not only improve food security but also contribute to environmental sustainability.

A multimodal approach to combat anaemia

1. Knowledge & Education: Raising awareness about the nutritional significance of millet grains and their associated benefits in combating several ailments.
2. Millet Farming Promotion: Encouraging farmers to cultivate millets as these grains increase their income and contribute to food security while also encouraging sustainable agriculture.
3. Government programmes: Millets should be included in national nutrition programmes that target the most vulnerable communities.
4. Innovative Processing Technologies: Processing of these grains using various novel technologies helps in the preparation of edible products with high nutritional significance. Chefs and dietitians may play an important role in generating delectable and inventive millet-based meals that appeal to a broad audience.

Enhancing Awareness and Bioavailability

Millets are a potent weapon in the fight against anaemia in India. Their nutritional value, resilience, and adaptability make them an essential component of our dietary strategy for

addressing this prevalent health concern. By consuming millet, we can improve health and well-being, particularly among women and children who are predominantly affected by nutritional inadequacy. Policymakers should recognise the right varieties and types of millets rich in iron for use as supplement food to counter the high prevalence of anaemia in countries like India. Awareness should be raised further to improve iron bioavailability in millets which can be boosted through processing methods such as soaking, germination, decortication, and fermentation, which can be an effective technique for reducing iron deficiency anaemia. Hence inclusion of millet in our diet as a staple food will help in combating several ailments.

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