

As millets turn food of choice in cities, traders reap a rich harvest

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Prices of some nutri-cereals shoot up on limited supplies and rising demand in the South

As urban consumers increasingly prefer small millets, traders are jumping onto the health-food bandwagon to cash in on the growing trend. Besides scarce supplies, the traders' rising interest has led to an increase in the price of some varieties such as foxtail millet and browntop millet over the past couple of months.

While prices of the browntop millet, considered to be rich in fibre, have doubled to ₹260-300 a kg since November, that of foxtail millet have risen by over 40 per cent to ₹70-100 in the retail segment.

"There is a sudden spurt in demand from Telangana, mainly Hyderabad, for the browntop millet, which has resulted in a price spike," said Chandrakant Sangur of Sri Kumareshwara Savayava Samithi, a collective of organic farmers in Haveri district of Karnataka that mainly grows the browntop variety. "Earlier, we used to send 30-35 quintals of browntop millet to Hyderabad a year. Now, since December, we are sending similar quantities on a monthly basis," Sangur said.

With millets catching the fancy of traders and setting off a speculative trend in prices, the processed and convenience food makers are forced to look at other States beyond Karnataka, Telangana and Tamil Nadu to source the nutri-cereals.

"There is suddenly a spike in traders' interest. They are starting to aggregate and have sort of started dominating the industry," said CS Jadhav of Inner Being Wellness Pvt Ltd, a Hyderabad-based firm that focusses on millet-based products. Inner Wellbeing is looking at forging some kind of a linkage with farmer-producer organisations to overcome issues surrounding supply and pricing.

However, with rising consumer interest millets have entered the retail shelves of grocery chains and kirana shops, at least in South India, Jadhav said.

One of the reasons attributed for the rise in prices is growers holding back their produce anticipating better prices. "People are not releasing their produce into the markets," said Vilas Tonapi, Director, Indian Institute of Millets Research.

"It is difficult to find these millets in large quantities," said KC Raghu of Pristine Organics Pvt Ltd, while stating that supply issues are hurting the expansion plans.

Surya Sastri of Phalada Agro Research Foundation Pvt Ltd, attributes the price rise to the growing interest in millets. The projected demand for millets seems to be on the higher side than the actual demand, he said.

"The offtake is not as large as it is projected. There's a good amount of supply in millets, but there is some scarcity in some types," Sastri said.

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