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(A No. 137) The Rise of Shree Anna: Promoting Nutri-Cereals and Crop Diversification for Global Health and Resilience

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The global food system has historically focused on maximizing the production of a few staple crops—primarily rice, wheat, and maize—driven by Green Revolution policies and consumption patterns. While this strategy achieved food self-sufficiency in many nations, it led to a dangerous monoculture, contributing to **nutritional poverty** (the "hidden hunger" of micronutrient deficiencies), depleting groundwater reserves, and leaving agricultural systems vulnerable to climate change. The current global response is a powerful pivot back to **Nutri-Cereals** (Millets and coarse cereals), championed in India under the collective banner of **'Shree Anna'** (Supreme Grains).

The promotion of Nutri-Cereals and broader **crop diversification** is a strategically critical policy: it simultaneously addresses climate resilience, water security, farmer profitability, and public health, making it an essential component of 21st-century agriculture, particularly in the arid and semi-arid regions of the world.

The Unmatched Value of Nutri-Cereals (Millets)

Millets—including pearl millet (*bajra*), finger millet (*ragi*), sorghum (*jowar*), foxtail millet, and others—were staple foods in India for centuries before being displaced by subsidized rice and wheat. Their resurgence is driven by their profound **nutritional and ecological advantages**.

1. Nutritional Powerhouses

Millets are often called the **"nutri-cereals"** due to their superior nutritional profiles compared to major staples:

Nutrient Category	Millet Advantage	Impact on Health
Micronutrients	Rich in Iron, Zinc, and Calcium (Ragi is highest in Calcium).	Combats anemia and micronutrient deficiencies (hidden hunger), especially among women and children.
Protein	Contains higher and more balanced protein content than rice.	Vital for growth, development, and overall physical health.

Fibre	Extremely high in dietary fibre (both soluble and insoluble).	Aids in digestion, helps control blood sugar levels (low Glycemic Index), and reduces the risk of non-communicable diseases.
Gluten-Free	Naturally gluten-free.	Makes them essential for people with Celiac disease or gluten sensitivities.

2. Climate and Ecological Resilience

From an environmental standpoint, millets are the perfect crop for a climate-stressed world:

- **Drought Tolerance:** Millets are known as **'miracle grains'** for their ability to thrive in extremely low rainfall areas, requiring **70% less water** than rice. They can withstand extended periods of drought and recover quickly.
- **Minimal Inputs:** They require significantly less fertilizer and pesticide than high-yielding rice and wheat varieties, leading to lower input costs for farmers and reduced environmental pollution.
- **Soil Health:** They can grow on poor, marginal, or sandy soils, often improving soil health and acting as excellent **cover crops** or rotational crops (linking directly to Regenerative Agriculture).

Crop Diversification: Reducing Risk and Enhancing Income

The promotion of Nutri-Cereals is part of a broader strategy of **crop diversification**, which involves shifting land from monocultures (primarily rice and wheat in many parts of India) to a mix of crops, including millets, pulses, oilseeds, and vegetables.

- **Risk Mitigation:** Climate change increases the risk of complete crop failure for single crops. Diversification creates a **financial hedge**; if one crop fails due to climate shock, the farmer still has income from others.
- **Market and Income Stability:** Relying on a variety of crops reduces vulnerability to price crashes in a single commodity, providing a more stable and predictable income stream.
- **Addressing Water Stress:** Shifting acreage from water-guzzling crops like rice, sugarcane, and highly subsidized wheat (grown with high irrigation in dry areas) to less water-intensive millets and pulses is vital for the long-term sustainability of groundwater in states like Punjab, Haryana, and Maharashtra.

Policy and Institutional Momentum: The 'Shree Anna' Push

The global movement was amplified when the United Nations declared **2023 as the International Year of Millets (IYoM)**, spearheaded by India. In its national policy, the Government of India officially branded millets as **'Shree Anna'**, signifying their importance.

- **Procurement and Subsidies:** The key to sustained diversification is providing a **Minimum Support Price (MSP)** and robust procurement infrastructure for millets, ensuring that farmers are guaranteed a profitable price floor comparable to rice and wheat.
- **Inclusion in Public Distribution System (PDS):** Integrating millets into the PDS and other nutritional security schemes (like mid-day meals and ICDS programs) creates a huge, stable institutional demand, driving farmer adoption and improving the nutritional quality of public food assistance.
- **Value Chain Development:** Policy support is directed towards developing the **post-harvest value chain**. This includes funding for decentralized processing equipment, hulling machines, and food technology research to create palatable, modern, and convenient millet-based food products (e.g., ready-to-eat mixes, fortified flours, millet pasta) to meet urban demand.
- **Research and Breeding:** ICAR and State Agricultural Universities are intensifying research to develop high-yielding, drought-tolerant, and disease-resistant **biofortified varieties** of millets with higher levels of iron and zinc, ensuring that the next generation of *Shree Anna* is even more impactful.

Conclusion: Reshaping the Global Plate

The promotion of Nutri-Cereals and crop diversification is a powerful example of how returning to traditional wisdom can solve modern crises. By shifting focus back to *Shree Anna*, countries are not just diversifying crops; they are diversifying diets, managing water resources, building climate resilience into the land, and providing a sustainable pathway to alleviate both hidden hunger and farmer vulnerability. This is a foundational policy shift essential for sustainable food systems globally.