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Odisha: Convention on Millets Closes with a Ringing Declaration

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Report by Orissadiary.com correspondent;
Bhubaneswar: The two-day convention of millet farmers from the eastern Indian states of Odisha, Chattisgarh and Jharkhand, organized at Ramiah Hall, Orissa University of Agriculture and Technology, concluded with the farmers bringing out a ringing declaration in support of millets in food and farming.

The day saw panels, comprising of several eminent members of the farming, NGO and academic worlds, discussing different aspects concerning millets; and trying to identify ways and means by which traditional millet-based mixed farming systems can be given a big push in the states under question. The panels discussed the changing land use patterns in eastern India; looked at how the millet-landscape in these states can be widened; tried to come up with an alternative vision for Public Distribution System; and tried to understand the contributions that millets in particular, and traditional mixed farming systems in particular, can play in cushioning the poor and the marginalized from the effects of climate change.

There was a general agreement that millets needed a greater push through the initiatives of both state and non-state actors; so that the households that sustain on these food crops can be secured and strengthened. An analysis of Dr.A.K.Padhi indicated that the area under millets has been steadily declining over the last few decades; more so in the recent decades, thanks to the inroads being made by cash crops like cotton and maize. This, farmers and civil society activists alike felt, had to be reversed. Another concern that found resonance with the farmers was that millets needed to figure in the Public Distribution System, and in other government food security programs. Under the current PDS regime, we have seen starvation deaths occurring in Orissa; which only underlines the limitations of a centralized system of procurement, storage and distribution. Thus, it was felt that only a decentralized PDS would really help the poor and the marginalized in achieving food sovereignty in the truest sense. Millets were extremely hardy crops and were therefore climate change compliant. They can grow under conditions of low water and in poor soils; as against wheat which is a thermal sensitive crop, and rice which releases large quantities of methane which is a greenhouse gas. In light of the changing weather patterns, the eastern Indian states are scene of intense contestations over land. The changing land use patterns wherein land is being diverted towards industries and towards industry-oriented crops, is the death knell to traditional systems of agriculture and livelihood; and therefore to the culture and lives of millions of communities living in these states. For biodiversity to survive, it is essential that land where food crops are grown is not diverted towards industries.

The Bhubaneswar Declaration is a reflection of some of these ideas and analyses of the farmers. It demands that the government include millets in the public distribution system; and in all the public food systems like mid-day meal scheme, ICDS and so on. Further, the Declaration states the need for localized procurement and distribution of food grains. The Declaration further emphasizes the importance of biodiversity in agriculture; and urges government to give due recognition to the farmers who are practicing such agriculture; as this is vital for the lives and livelihoods of scores of Dalit and Adivaasi communities. The farmers present at the convention took a resolute stand against the diversion of lands towards 'development' and have demanded that the State reconsider the policy of acquiring agricultural land—especially the land where food grains like millets are grown—for such purposes.

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The farmers further demanded that germ-plasm of thousands of species of endemic food grains that are being stocked in various foreign-funded research institutions should be placed in public domain; and farmers should be allowed access to and use of the same so that endemic species can be revived in the various regions where they have nearly vanished.

One of the most important demands that farmers made, as part of the Bhubaneswar Declaration, was that all those farmers who are practicing millet farming should be given bonuses by the state—Biodiversity Bonus, Water Conservation Bonus, Nutritional Bonus and Climate Change Compliance Bonus—for the yeoman services that they are rendering towards maintaining the food sovereignty of the rural populace. This is contrary to the philosophy of subsidies that underpins that cultivation of other crops like rice, wheat and so on.

Other prominent demands that were made include a minimum support price for millets, more research on millets by state and non-state actors, and that food grains NOT BE substituted by food coupons and cash transfers, under PDS.

The Declaration has been endorsed by more than 120 farmers from 18 districts of Orissa and from Chattisgarh and Jharkhand; and was supported by the several prominent people from the development firmament of India, viz Prof.Radhamohan, Shri.P.V.Satheesh of DDS, Shri.Achyut Das of Agragaamee, Shri.Jagannath Chaterjee of RCDC, Shri.Jacob Nellithanam, Smt.Sumani Jodia, farmer leader, Shri.Natwar Sarangi and Shri.Prashant Mohanty of Nirman-Orissa among others. The two-day Eastern India Convention of Millet Farmers was organized by Millet Network of India.

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