

## **Revitalizing Indigenous Food Traditions for Better Nutrition and Sustainable Living**

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**Keywords:** Indigenous Food, Global Hub on Indigenous Food Systems, The Indigenous India Food Hub Network (IFHN), Indie Food, Food Tourism, Cultural festival.

### **Abstract**

India's Indigenous foods (IFs) are vital for nutritional security, cultural preservation, and sustainable agriculture, yet modernization and colonization have significantly threatened their conservation and consumption. Recognizing the global importance of these foods, exemplified by FAO's "Global-Hub on Indigenous Food Systems," this research highlights innovative models aimed at revitalizing Indigenous food systems, particularly within tribal communities. The proposed Indigenous India Food Hub Network (IFHN), taking inspiration from the Global Hub on Indigenous Food Systems, leverages digital platforms, community-based food hubs, farmer training, culinary collaborations, and awareness campaigns to enhance cultivation, consumption, and cultural engagement with traditional crops like millets and wild foods. Success metrics include increased cultivation, market access, cultural participation, and improved nutritional outcomes. The model distinguishes itself through decentralization, community involvement, and integration of modern technology, creating a scalable, sustainable ecosystem aligning with current trends toward biodiversity conservation, dietary diversity, and local economic empowerment. Financial sustainability is envisioned through diverse revenue streams such as product sales, grants, partnerships, and impact investments. Policy support and community-led initiatives illustrate pathways for scaling impact across India's diverse regions. This integrated approach offers a culturally meaningful and environmentally resilient pathway for safeguarding India's Indigenous food heritage, promoting nutritional well-being, and fostering rural livelihoods.

### **Introduction**

Indigenous foods (IFs) in India are important because they are nutritious, hold cultural importance, and support sustainable food systems.<sup>i</sup> They offer a diverse range of nutrient-rich options, support local economies, and are deeply intertwined with the cultural identities of various communities. As per FAO's recent mandate on the creation of "Global-Hub on Indigenous Food Systems,"<sup>iii</sup> IFs have received renewed global recognition for their potential to contribute to improved food security while enhancing biodiversity across the world.

Tribals account for 8.6% of the total population of India.<sup>iii</sup> Historically, tribal populations relied heavily on traditional food systems rooted in their local ecosystems, which provided diverse, nutritious, and culturally significant foods.

Colonization and modernization have reduced tribal access to Indigenous foods, worsening malnutrition. The introduction of processed foods, limited agricultural opportunities, and a lack of awareness about nutritional benefits further exacerbate the issue of malnutrition and health issues within these communities.<sup>iv</sup> The level of child undernutrition among the tribal population is higher than India's aggregate of 35.4% (stunting) and 32.08% (underweight).<sup>v</sup>

The local circumstances—such as deforestation, displacement, limited access to healthcare, and marginalization—have significantly contributed to a decline in traditional dietary practices, thereby threatening the nutritional well-being and cultural identity of tribal populations.

To address these gaps, emphasis is placed on revitalizing Indigenous food systems.

### **Innovative Solutions**

Innovative solutions for the revival of Indigenous foods in India are driven by NGOs that document traditional knowledge, promote cultivation and consumption of millets and forgotten crops, and support farmers through training and market linkages. Collaborations with chefs, researchers, and government agencies help create a supportive ecosystem, while awareness campaigns highlight the nutritional and cultural value of these foods.

Examples of NGOs in India working for the revival of Indigenous foods include:

**North East Slow Food and Agrobiodiversity Society (NESFAS)<sup>vi</sup>:** Focuses on reviving traditional food systems and wild foods in Northeast India.

**Millet Bank<sup>vii</sup>:** Promotes millet cultivation, consumption, and market accessibility to sustain traditional grains.

**North East Network (NEN)<sup>viii</sup>:** Works to revive Indigenous crops and traditional farming practices in Northeast India, empowering local communities and women.

**Ajam Emba<sup>ix</sup>:** Based in Ranchi, Jharkhand, helps revive tribal culinary traditions and recipes through cultural and culinary education.

**Atmashakti Trust**, a grassroots organization, works with more than 2.5 million families in the tribal regions of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Odisha, and Maharashtra. Through its 'Indigenous Yatra' initiative (it is focused on reviving and restoring Indigenous food and recipes), it is collaborating with state-specific food entrepreneurs—local artisans, food chefs, small-scale food producers, and entrepreneurs—to promote Indigenous food items of the states it is working in.

### **Innovative Model: The Indigenous India Food Hub Network**

The Indigenous India Food Hub Network (IFHN), a decentralized platform inspired by the Global-Hub on Indigenous Food Systems, could be built that connects local farmers, community

elders, chefs, grassroots NGOs, researchers and consumers from the states of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Odisha and Maharashtra to revitalize, preserve, and promote Indigenous foods and traditional agricultural practices. The model combines digital technology, community engagement, and market development to ensure sustainable preservation and consumption of traditional crops like millets, wild foods, and tribal recipes.

### **How the Model Works**

1. *Digital Platform:* An easy-to-use app, “**Indie Food**” and website serve as a hub for knowledge sharing, collection of Indigenous recipes, farm-to-market linkage, and community events. These web-based applications can be developed or co-created with the community representatives to give them greater ownership.
2. *Local Food Hubs:* Farmers can be enabled to sell their Indigenous crops directly to consumers, chefs, and retailers at community-based centers. These hubs also host workshops such as cooking demonstrations and experiential cultural events led by community members.
3. *Farmer Training & Support:* Providing farmers with organic farming techniques, seed preservation methods, and market access support to increase Indigenous crop cultivation.
4. *Culinary Collaborations:* Collaboration with chefs and culinary schools to develop recipes, host food festivals, and create Indigenous food menus in restaurants.
5. *Awareness Campaigns:* Using social media, storytelling, and cultural events to highlight the nutritional, environmental, and cultural benefits of Indigenous foods.

### **Success Indicators that Will Be Seen in the Future as a Part of the Model**

1. *Increased Cultivation & Consumption:* Growth in Indigenous crops cultivated and sales at local food hubs.
2. *Farmer Empowerment:* An increased number of farmers trained and adopted Indigenous farming practices, along with a rise in demand for such produce.
3. *Cultural Revival:* Higher participation in traditional food festivals and recipes shared via the platform.
4. *Nutritional & Environmental Impact:* Improved dietary diversity and reduced reliance on industrialized food systems, tracked through surveys and health metrics.
5. *Market Expansion:* Rise in sales and demand for Indigenous foods in local markets and restaurants.

## **Outcome & Impact Measures**

1. *Quantitative*: Number of active farmers, volume of Indigenous crops sold, number of food hubs established, and consumer engagement metrics.
2. *Qualitative*: Testimonials from farmers, chefs, and community members about cultural and nutritional benefits.
3. *Long-term*: Sustained increase in Indigenous crop cultivation, preservation of traditional culinary practices, and improved local livelihoods.

This integrated, community-driven approach ensures the revival of Indigenous foods is sustainable, scalable, and culturally meaningful.

**Enablers of Indigenous food revival include a combination of factors that support the preservation, cultivation, and promotion of traditional foods. Key enablers are:**

1. *Community Engagement & Knowledge Preservation*: Active involvement of local communities, elders, and farmers in documenting and sharing traditional knowledge and practices.
2. *Policy Support & Government Initiatives*: Favorable policies, subsidies, and programs that promote Indigenous crop cultivation, seed preservation, and rural livelihoods can greatly impact success rates.
3. *Market Access & Economic Incentives*: Development of local markets, fair trade practices, and branding initiatives that create demand and better income for farmers growing Indigenous foods.
4. *Education & Awareness Campaigns*: Continued efforts through media, culinary festivals, and educational programs to raise awareness about the nutritional and cultural importance of indigenous foods.
5. *Research & Innovation*: Scientific research into Indigenous crops' nutritional benefits, pest resistance, and adaptive farming techniques to encourage wider adoption.
6. *Collaboration & Partnerships*: Multi-stakeholder collaborations involving NGOs, government agencies, researchers, chefs, and farmers to foster ecosystem development.
7. *Capacity Building & Training*: Skill development programs to educate farmers in sustainable cultivation practices and value addition techniques.

8. *Cultural Revival & Tourism*: Promoting Indigenous foods through cultural festivals, food tourism, and storytelling to enhance cultural pride and visibility.

## **Financial Model**

A sustainable financial model for social innovation in Indigenous food systems blends multiple revenue sources while centering social and environmental impact. Its primary goal is to achieve financial resilience while advancing community well-being and safeguarding cultural heritage.

### **Key Revenue Sources:**

1. *Market Sales & Product Revenue*:
  - Revenue from selling Indigenous crops, processed foods, packaged traditional products, and specialty delicacies through local markets, supermarkets, and online platforms.
  - Revenue from hosting food festivals, culinary events, and cooking classes featuring.
2. *Grants & Funding*:
  - Grants from government agencies supporting rural development, agriculture, and cultural preservation.
  - Support from philanthropic foundations and international organizations focused on biodiversity, nutrition, and community resilience.
3. *Membership & Subscription Fees*:
  - Community members, farmers, chefs, and consumers can subscribe for access to exclusive content, training programs, or participation in food hubs and events.
4. *Partnerships & Sponsorships*:
  - Collaborations with brands, health companies, and tourism operators seeking to associate with sustainable, culturally-rich initiatives.
  - Sponsorships for cultural festivals, culinary competitions, and awareness campaigns.
5. *Value-added Products & Services*:
  - Income from value-added processed foods such as millet-based snacks, packaged recipes, or herbal teas.
  - Consultation, training, and capacity-building services offered to farmers and community organizations.
6. *Impact Investing & Social Bonds*:
  - Raising funds through impact investors who seek both social impact and financial returns.
  - Social impact bonds are dedicated to specific outcomes like increased crop diversity or improved nutrition.

### Scaling Examples

1. *Millet Mission by the Government of India:* The Government launched Millet Mission in 2023 to promote millet cultivation nationwide. This initiative aims to increase production and consumption of millets, demonstrating large-scale policy-driven scaling that benefits farmers and improves nutrition in produce of more than 170 lakh tons (80% of Asia's & 20% of global production) of millets. The global Millets market was valued at \$9.95 billion in 2020 and is projected to reach \$14.14 billion in 2028, growing at a CAGR of 4.5% from 2021 to 2028.<sup>x</sup>
2. *Bihar's 'Litti' Promotion:* Efforts to popularize traditional nutritional foods like litti (a baked, savory, wheat-flour ball, often stuffed with sattu (roasted gram flour) and spices) through government and NGO collaborations have helped in scaling regional culinary traditions across markets and urban centers.
3. *Tribal Food Festivals & Cultural Campaigns:* Initiatives such as the "Tribal Festival" in Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand showcase Indigenous foods, encouraging youth and tourists to partake, thus scaling awareness and demand.

### Impact Examples

1. *Promotion of Millets in Andhra Pradesh & Telangana:* Government programs and NGO partnerships have increased millet cultivation, improving farmers' incomes and nutritional outcomes since 2011.<sup>xi</sup>
2. *Revival of Tribal Crops in Northeast:* NESFAS's efforts have led to increased cultivation and consumption of Indigenous wild foods and traditional crops, safeguarding biodiversity and supporting local livelihoods.
3. *Women-led Food Cooperatives:* Self-help groups in states like Rajasthan and Odisha are marketing Indigenous grains and recipes, empowering women economically and socially.

### Policy Implications

1. *National Food Security Mission (NFSM)<sup>xii</sup>:* Incorporates Indigenous grains to diversify diets and farming practices, supported by government subsidies and extension services.
2. *Protection of Indigenous Seed Rights:* Policies recognizing community seed banks and traditional seed varieties help safeguard biodiversity and cultural heritage.

3. *Recognition of Tribal Food Systems:* The Indian Government is gradually acknowledging and integrating tribal culinary practices into tourism and cultural promotion policies, for example, through Western Ghats eco-tourism and Northeast cultural festivals.

India's efforts to scale Indigenous food systems through government schemes, cultural campaigns, and community-based initiatives demonstrate tangible impacts on biodiversity, nutrition, and livelihoods. Policy reforms and sustained collaborations are essential to institutionalize and expand these successes across diverse regions.

## **Conclusion**

Revitalizing India's Indigenous food systems represents a transformative step toward sustainable development, cultural resilience, and nutritional security. By fostering community-driven initiatives, leveraging innovative technology, and forging strategic collaborations, the Indigenous India Food Hub Network exemplifies a scalable, inclusive model capable of reversing the erosion of traditional diets and biodiversity. Policy frameworks and social investments that support these efforts are crucial for embedding Indigenous foods into mainstream markets and cultural narratives. As India continues to champion its Indigenous gastronomic heritage, these efforts not only enhance local livelihoods and health outcomes but also position the country as a global leader in sustainable, culturally rich food systems. Ensuring the preservation and promotion of Indigenous foods offers a promising pathway toward a more equitable and resilient future for India's diverse communities, aligning tradition with innovation for long-term impact.

## Endnotes

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