



# Rainbow colours fly from central Himalayan platter

**The people, especially those in the rural areas, must be made aware of the importance of dietary habits that had been perfected over the centuries. ■ by Rajshekhar Pant**

**A** young son of the family, back home to his remote village in the Central Himalayan region of the state of Uttarakhand on his annual leave from the armed forces, or a kin on visit for some ritual worship of

the family deity - sitting in the family kitchen with its floor freshly painted with a mixture of cow-dung and fresh clay obtained from a nearby creek; eating from a bronze plate the boiled red-rice, mixing it with chulkani (spicy soup of black soya

bean) and badi (cooked gravy of the dried lumps of pulses mixed with grated cucumber) and a pinch of chutney made of sour pomegranates and curd. In front of him is put a tumbler full of buttermilk and raita of yellow cucumber....

A field of uncultivated millet.







Commercial farming in the river valleys of the Central Himalayas.



Finger Millet:  
Ready for harvesting.



Short stories written in late 60s and 70s by prominent Hindi writers from hills, invariably had a scene or two like this in their narratives. Baked breads of finger millet (madua), foxtail millet (jhangora) boiled with red-rice, sorrels, tubers, roots, fruits or leaves of uncultivated edibles, were essential features of a typical Central Himalayan platter.

In the past three-four decades, however, the colour and contents of this age old platter have undergone a drastic transformation.

From time immemorial, Kumaon and Garhwal hills of the Central Himalayas had a well established tradition of subsistence agriculture. Owing to it crop diversity and the

consequent dietary diversity were the landmark features in this region. The landrace crops were so full of diversity that the sole grocery they depended on the market for, happened to be just jaggery and common salt.

### Robust agri practices

The agricultural practices and management which despite the given limitations — like over 80% of the land being rain fed, land holdings under plough being extremely small and fragmented, vagaries of weather and so on – were capable of keeping the Himalayan platter full of wholesome diet and malnutrition





**Physiognomic Features of Kumati: A last bastion of subsistence farming.**

was unheard of in this region.

Millet, barley, amaranth, mustard, sesame, and a wide range of beans and pulses were the predominant cultivars then. Wheat and rice, cultivated generally in the river valleys had a huge number of acclimatised landraces. ET Atkinson

in his Himalayan Gazetteer speaks of over thousand genomes of rice alone, past a century and a half.

Millets with low carbohydrates and several times higher amount (at times even 300%) of trace elements, minerals, anti oxidants and even proteins – were far more nutritious

than wheat and rice.

Grown round the year, these landraces were fully acclimatised, pest and draught resistant needed no synthetic fertilizers and cultivating them was rather less labour intensive.

On the margins of paddy fields, generally grown by DSR (Directly

**Mixed cropping of Fingermillet and Amaranth.**







Locally produced cabbage is being carried to the market.



Transforming face of a village shop:  
Interior of a village eatry.

Sown Rice) method, millets were also planted. Peas were grown with wheat and radish. Parsnip, kidney beans and amaranth happened to be the natural companions of maize.

Baranaza kheti (sowing twelve seeds together) common in those days, was a kind of an insurance

against the crop failure if any.

In addition to this, backyard farming of seasonal vegetables, tubers and spices and uncultivated food stuff collected from the outskirts of the village happened to play a crucial role in making the diet quite wholesome.

In the past 30-40 years, the food basket in the Central Himalayan Hills has become quite poorer. What the dieticians in contemporary times ostensibly prefer to call rainbow diet was an established practice in far off hills.

Quite a few colours from this



charming rainbow have already faded away or taken a flight following the exponential changes in socio-economic milieu.

Since late 90s, the area under the plough has drastically shrunk in Uttarakhand (15 to 20% on an average, in the upcoming foothill towns it has already gone beyond 50%). As on date, barely 7% of the total land in hills is under cultivation.

### Receding diversity

A few small stretches in far off Central Himalayan pockets, (like Kumati, an over two-century-old establishment below the motor road connecting Mukteshwar with Almora) are now the last bastions of crop diversity on which the poor

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depend for subsistence.

Cultivation of off season cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli, capsicum, gerbera, lilies etc indeed has jacked up the per capita income but the money so earned is hardly being spent on nutritious diet.

Yawning gap between dietary needs and affordability coupled with

a blasé attitude towards healthy food often directs the villagers to buy foodstuff from the nearby market.

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Interestingly, regional pulses and millets from hills have, of late, become a success in carving a niche as a prized souvenir from hills in the kitchen of out-migrated population.

Their value added and bio-prospected products are also available in cities, at exorbitant rates albeit. As for villagers grains of



Keeping all rules at bay  
Consumption of red  
meat is growing even in  
remote areas.



**Holding on to the tradition:  
An elderly lady in her field.**



**Factory produced edible products  
being sold in a local shop.**



substandard quality made available through PDS do now constitute the narrow range of staple food.

The cultivation in hills is in peril also due to the menace of rapidly multiplying monkeys, wild boars and ungulate mammals – an issue that hasn't been taken any cognisance of by the administration.

### **Sickening scenario**

This rapid transition in the socio-economic panorama has been instrumental in effecting alarming changes in the health scenario of this region. A few decades earlier, diabetes, anaemia, cardiovascular ailments, osteoporosis, blood

pressure and diseases caused by the shortage of trace elements were almost unheard of. Regular consumption of millets and quite a few other wild edibles was responsible for this resistance.

However, osteoporosis, anaemia, arthritis, gall stone etc are rife among hill women and cases of diabetes and cardiovascular ailments, ophthalmic and pulmonary disorders may easily be found among the youth.

The Central Himalayan region is in the immediate need of a movement akin to the Slow Food Movement in Europe, which opposed the expanse of global food culture at the cost of regional cuisine and landraces in over 150 countries. ■