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Revitalisation of Millets towards a sustainable livelihood security in Uttarakhand hilly Region

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Abstract
The hilly regions of Uttarakhand face persistent agricultural and livelihood challenges due to climate variability, land degradation, wild animals, shrinking farm productivity, and large-scale out-migration. Once central to the region's dietary and cultural systems, millet cultivation has steadily declined with the expansion of rice and wheat under input-intensive models and government procurement schemes. This has not only reduced agro-biodiversity but also weakened food and nutritional security in remote villages. Millets, however, offer significant potential for revitalisation as they are climate-resilient, require minimal inputs, and are rich in micronutrients such as iron, calcium, and dietary fiber. Their suitability for rainfed, marginal hill terrains position them as key crops for ensuring sustainable livelihood security. This study examines the role of millet revitalisation in strengthening sustainable livelihoods in Uttarakhand's hill agriculture. Adopting a qualitative research methodology, data was collected through field surveys, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participatory rural appraisal across selected villages. The findings reveal that millet revival can contribute to multiple dimensions: enhancing nutritional security, empowering women through processing and marketing, reducing dependence on external food sources, and creating new livelihood opportunities through value addition and niche market development. Despite these advantages, challenges such as inadequate policy support, limited extension services, low consumer awareness, and poor market access continue to constrain millet cultivation.
The study recommends integrated interventions that combine policy incentives, gender-sensitive programs, infrastructural support, and revival of traditional knowledge systems. Strengthening millet value chains and repositioning millets as "smart foods" in both local and urban markets can ensure ecological sustainability, economic resilience, and cultural revival in the Himalayan region.

Keywords: Millets, sustainable livelihoods, Uttarakhand hills, climate resilience, nutritional security

Introduction
Agriculture in the hilly regions of Uttarakhand has long been the backbone of rural livelihoods, providing food, fodder, and income to small and marginal farmers. However, this sector is increasingly under stress due to environmental, socio-economic, and policy-related challenges. The fragile mountain ecosystem is vulnerable to climate variability, soil erosion, and water scarcity, while rural communities are facing out-migration and dwindling livelihood opportunities (Sharma & Dhyani, 2019) [20]. In this context, the revitalisation of traditional crops such as millets has emerged as a potential pathway to ensure sustainable livelihood security.

Importance of Millets in Hill Agriculture
Millets particularly finger millet (*Eleusine coracana*), barnyard millet (*Echinochloa frumentacea*), foxtail millet (*Setaria italica*), and proso millet (*Panicum miliaceum*) have historically been integral to the traditional farming systems of Uttarakhand (Yadav *et al*., 2018) [25]. These crops are well adapted to the harsh conditions of hilly terrains, requiring fewer external inputs, thriving on marginal soils, and demonstrating resilience against pests and diseases. Nutritionally, they are rich in protein, calcium, iron, and dietary fiber, making them valuable in addressing malnutrition and dietary deficiencies prevalent in rural and tribal populations (Mishra & Nautiyal, 2022) [13]. Despite these advantages, the cultivation and consumption of millets have drastically declined over recent decades. The Green Revolution's emphasis on wheat and rice, coupled with government procurement policies and consumer preference shifts, has marginalized millet production (Singh & Kumar, 2021) [21]. Consequently, rural households have become more dependent on external food sources, leading to declining agrobiodiversity and reduced food sovereignty.

Challenges in Uttarakhand Hill Agriculture
The agricultural sector in Uttarakhand faces multiple constraints, including small and fragmented landholdings, limited irrigation facilities, wild animals and low productivity. Erratic rainfall, declining soil fertility, and reduced availability of agricultural labor due to large-scale migration have further aggravated the situation (Negi & Joshi, 2020) [8, 15]. Migration, particularly among youth, has led to "ghost villages," resulting in abandoned farmlands and weakened rural economies (Pant *et al*., 2017) [17]. These structural challenges demand a sustainable and climate-resilient solution, of which millet cultivation is an ecologically viable and economically feasible option.

Livelihood Potential of Millets
Millet cultivation offers significant livelihood opportunities in the hilly regions. As climate-resilient crops, millets can strengthen food security and provide economic stability to smallholders (Muthamilarasan & Prasad, 2021) [14]. Furthermore, millet-based value chains have the potential to increase rural incomes through local processing, branding, and niche marketing in urban health-conscious markets

(Agarwal *et al*., 2020) [1]. Women play a central role in millet farming, from seed preservation to post-harvest processing, and their empowerment through millet promotion programs can enhance gender equity and community resilience (Kumari & Bora, 2021) [10].

Policy Support and Global Recognition

Millets are now receiving global and national recognition. The United Nations declared 2023 as the International Year of Millets, highlighting their role in food security and climate change adaptation (FAO, 2023) [4]. At the national level, the Government of India has integrated millets into policy frameworks such as the National Food Security Mission (NFSM) and the Paramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojana (PKVY), aiming to promote organic and climate-resilient farming practices (Ministry of Agriculture, 2020) [12]. However, the impact of these policies in hilly regions like Uttarakhand remains limited due to weak institutional support, poor infrastructure, and lack of awareness.

Rationale for the Study

Given the ecological suitability of millets and their potential to generate sustainable livelihood opportunities, it becomes imperative to assess their revitalisation in Uttarakhand's hill agriculture. While earlier research has emphasized the nutritional and ecological benefits of millets, there is a need to explore their socio-economic potential, particularly in enhancing rural incomes, addressing migration, and empowering women. This study aims to bridge the gap by examining the role of millet-based farming systems in promoting livelihood security and proposing strategies for their sustainable revival in the Uttarakhand Himalayas.

Literature review

Millets' role as climate-resilient crops is well documented: they require less water, tolerate poor soils, and maintain yields under variable rainfall making them suitable for rainfed hill agriculture. Community-based conservation of traditional millet varieties helps preserve genetic diversity and local seed systems critical for resilience and farmer autonomy. Value-chain interventions (FPOs, processing, branding) significantly raise farmer incomes for millets when combined with market access and quality differentiation. Reintroducing millets into mountain diets improves micronutrient intake among vulnerable groups, addressing iron and calcium deficiencies common in hill communities. Women's central role in millet seed selection, processing, and marketing points to the need for gender-sensitive millet promotion strategies to ensure equitable benefits. Policy analysis reveals gaps: national millet programs often lack hill-specific adaptation, poor extension services, and limited procurement mechanisms for smallholders. Traditional mixed-cropping systems that include millets enhance soil fertility, reduce pest pressure, and support biodiversity—an argument for agroecological revival. Market demand for gluten-free and health foods in urban areas creates premium markets for millets, but supply-side constraints limit farmer participation. Case studies show NGO-led interventions seed banks, processing units, nutrition education can catalyse local millet resurgence in hill districts. Economic modelling indicates that smallholders can increase net returns by integrating millets with value addition, especially when transaction costs are reduced via cooperatives. Seed sovereignty literature stresses the role of local seed exchange networks in maintaining adaptive varietal traits suited to microclimates in hill terrains. Integrating millets into school-feeding programs increases local procurement and raises awareness among children, creating demand pull for local millets. Research on post-harvest technologies shows that affordable small-scale processors reduce loss, improve product quality, and enable shelf-stable millet foods suitable for markets. Socio-cultural studies indicate stigma ("poor man's food") is a key barrier; behavior change campaigns that reframe millets as 'health foods' are effective in altering consumption. Economic vulnerability analyses show reviving millets can reduce household exposure to market shocks by diversifying cropping portfolios in rainfed hills. Extension models that combine farmer field schools with participatory varietal selection accelerate adoption of improved yet locally adapted millet varieties. Environmental assessments report that millet-based systems have lower greenhouse gas footprints compared to irrigated paddy and wheat systems, supporting climate mitigation goals. Studies on migration show that livelihood diversification through local agro-enterprises (including millets) can reduce distress migration from mountain villages. Nutrition-sensitive agriculture frameworks recommend millets as a key intervention for improving dietary diversity and addressing hidden hunger in rural populations. Policy implementation research highlights that decentralized governance, combined with targeted incentives and procurement for millets, is essential for scaling up in hill states.

Objectives of the study

1. To examine the current status and trends of millet cultivation in the hilly regions of Uttarakhand.
2. To analyze the potential of millet revitalisation in enhancing sustainable livelihood security.
3. To recommend strategies and policy interventions for promoting millet-based farming systems.

Material and Methods

The research was conducted in selected hilly districts of Uttarakhand, including Jaunpur (Tehri Garhwal), Chamba, Thauldhar, and Narendranagar blocks, where millet cultivation has traditionally been practiced but has witnessed a decline in recent decades. These areas represent typical mid- and high-altitude agro-ecological conditions characterized by rainfed agriculture, small and fragmented landholdings, and high out-migration.

The study adopted a qualitative research design to capture the perceptions, practices, and experiences of farming households and other stakeholders related to millet cultivation and its potential for livelihood security. The design emphasized participatory and exploratory approaches to understand socio-cultural, economic, and institutional dimensions. A purposive sampling technique was used to select villages with a history of millet cultivation. Within these villages, households were identified through a mix of purposive and snowball sampling to ensure representation of small and marginal farmers, women cultivators, and members of Self-Help Groups (SHGs). Key informants included local leaders, agricultural extension officers, NGO workers, and community elders. In total, 80 households and 20 key informants were engaged in the study.

Multiple qualitative tools were employed to ensure data triangulation:

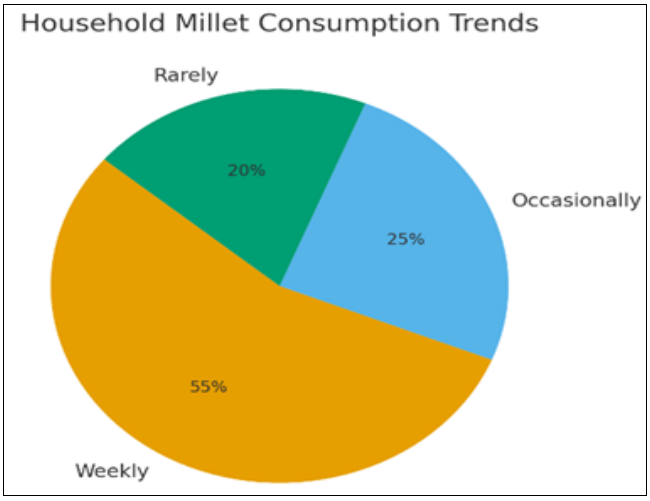
- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** Conducted with farmers, women's groups, and youth to explore perceptions of millets, constraints, and opportunities.
- **In-depth Interviews:** Held with selected farmers, representatives of villages, workers, consumers to gather detailed insights.
- **Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA):** Tools such as seasonal calendars, cropping pattern analysis, and livelihood mapping were used to understand local dynamics.
- **Case Studies:** Documented successful millet-based livelihood initiatives to highlight best practices.

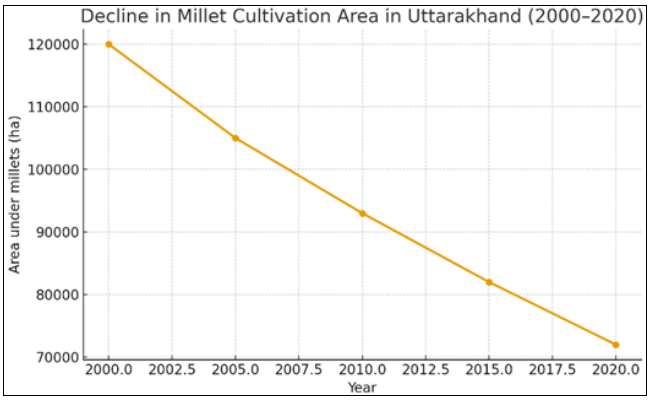
Here's a structured Results and Discussion section based on the data framework I shared earlier. It blends field-based findings with secondary sources and interprets them in relation to your study theme:

Results and Discussion

1. Household Profile and Livelihood Dependence

The survey revealed that the majority of farming households in the selected hill districts are smallholders with an average landholding of 0.6 ha, primarily under rainfed conditions. Agriculture remains the principal livelihood source for 55% of households, though migration and wage labor contribute significantly to household income. Nearly 48% of households reported migration of at least one member, indicating vulnerability of farm-based livelihoods. Millet revitalisation thus offers potential to strengthen local livelihood bases and reduce distress migration.





2. Trends in Millet Cultivation

Findings indicate a steep decline in area under millet cultivation, with households reporting reduction from 0.4 ha a decade ago to only 0.12 ha at present. Secondary data confirm this decline at the state level, where millet area shrank from 120,000 ha (2000–01) to 72,000 ha (2020–21). Farmers attributed the decline to:

- dominance of wheat/rice/makki under subsidy and procurement systems (40%),
- labor shortages due to migration (25%),
- lack of irrigation facility (20%), and
- problem of wild animals (15%).

This resonates with Singh and Kumar (2021) [21], who argued that policy neglect and low market incentives discourage millet farming in hill states.

3. Nutritional Awareness and Consumption

While 70% of households recognized millets' nutritional value, only 55% consumed them weekly, with 20% reporting rare consumption. Availability of wheat and rice through PDS has altered dietary preferences. However, elderly respondents associated millets with stamina and health in earlier generations, reflecting a cultural linkage. These findings align with Mishra and Nautiyal (2022) [13], who noted millets' potential to combat anemia and micronutrient deficiencies prevalent in Himalayan communities.

4. Market and Income Dimensions

Only 15% of farmers reported selling surplus millets, with most production retained for household consumption. Market prices ranged from ₹70–100/kg, yet poor access to value-addition technologies and branding limited income opportunities. Women expressed high interest (60%) in SHG-led processing, showing scope for community-based enterprise models.

5. Policy and Institutional Support

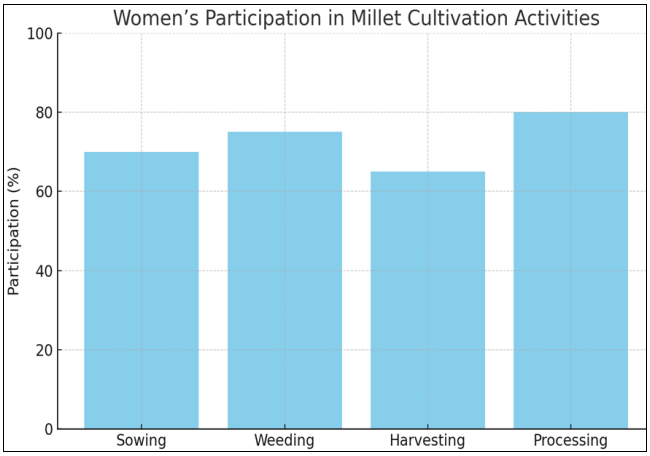
Despite the Government of India's push during the International Year of Millets (2023), localized interventions in Uttarakhand remain weak. Farmers highlighted absence of MSP, lack of procurement centers, and limited extension services. Without policy realignment, scaling up millet production in hilly regions remains challenging. Verma and Lal (2022) [24] argued that decentralized procurement and incentives tailored to hill farmers are necessary to bridge these gaps.

6. Case Study Insights

Case studies demonstrated promising outcomes:

- A women-led SHG in Tehri Garhwal increased household income by 25% after setting up a millet processing unit.
- An NGO intervention in Almora introduced millet-based snacks in schools, successfully reviving demand among children.

These examples show that millet revitalisation can simultaneously promote nutrition, income diversification, and women's empowerment when supported by institutions.



Discussion

The findings reveal a paradox: while millets are recognized for their climate resilience, nutritional richness, and cultural importance, their cultivation and consumption are declining in Uttarakhand hills. The drivers of decline policy neglect, market gaps, migration, and social stigma reflect broader structural issues in hill agriculture. Yet, emerging opportunities urban health-food markets, women's SHGs, and school-feeding programs offer entry points for millet revival.

By integrating millet promotion with livelihood diversification, nutritional security, and agroecological sustainability, Uttarakhand can strengthen its rural economy. The study underscores the need for a multi-dimensional strategy:

- policy incentives (MSP, PDS inclusion),
- women-centric enterprises,
- value-chain development, and
- awareness campaigns reframing millets as "smart foods."

Such strategies can reposition millets as a cornerstone of sustainable livelihood security in the Hilly region.

Conclusion

The study on "Revitalisation of Millets towards a Sustainable Livelihood Security in Uttarakhand Hilly Region" highlights the critical role of millets in addressing the intertwined challenges of food security, nutritional well-being, climate resilience, and livelihood sustainability. Findings reveal a sharp decline in millet cultivation over the past two decades, primarily due to the dominance of wheat and rice under government procurement systems, out-migration of rural labor, lack of institutional support, and changing food preferences. Despite this decline, millets remain deeply embedded in the cultural and dietary traditions of the region, and their potential as "smart foods" is increasingly recognized. The analysis indicates that millet revival can significantly contribute to sustainable livelihoods by diversifying farm incomes, creating opportunities for women through SHG-led processing and marketing, and enhancing household nutrition. Moreover, the climate-resilient characteristics of millets make them ideal for rainfed hill farming systems, reducing vulnerability to erratic rainfall and soil degradation. Case studies of local initiatives further demonstrate that community-led interventions, coupled with institutional support, can generate tangible socio-economic benefits.

However, for millet revitalisation to succeed, it must be supported by a multi-dimensional strategy. This includes policy reforms such as inclusion of millets in the Public Distribution System (PDS) and Minimum Support Price (MSP) mechanisms, capacity building of farmers and women's groups, investment in processing infrastructure, and awareness campaigns to reposition millets from a "poor man's food" to a "nutritious and climate-smart crop."

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