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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Why Iran War, Monsoon Worries Could Make 2026 India's Year of Millets

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CURATED & WRITTEN BY

Bharat Choudhary

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

linkedin.com/in/epicbharat

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"With global wheat prices up 35 per cent since the Iran-US war and an El Nino monsoon threatening domestic production, does India have both the agronomic case and the procurement infrastructure to make millets a genuine pillar of food security in 2026?"

EDITORIAL SUMMARY:

The Indian Express argues that the convergence of two crises – the Iran-US war disrupting global wheat and grain supply chains through the Strait of Hormuz, and an IMD-forecast below-normal monsoon in 2026 carrying El Nino risk – creates a rare strategic opening for millets. India, as the world's largest millet producer, has the agronomic asset. The editorial contends that 2026 could be an inflection point if procurement infrastructure, MSP signalling, and public distribution access are aligned urgently to convert a supply crisis into a food-security opportunity.

THE CONVERGING CRISES

Two shocks are bearing down on India's food economy simultaneously in 2026, and their combined effect is more consequential than either is alone.

The West Asia war. The Iran-US war began on February 28, 2026. Within weeks, the Strait of Hormuz – the narrow channel through which approximately 20 per cent of global oil and a significant share of regional wheat, barley and oilseed shipments pass – became a contested maritime zone. Freight insurance costs for Hormuz-transiting vessels have risen sharply. Iran, a significant wheat producer and the transit point for Central Asian agricultural exports to global markets, has been drawn into the conflict. The downstream effect on international wheat prices has been immediate: global wheat prices are up approximately 35 per cent since February 2026.

The monsoon risk. The IMD's 2026 southwest monsoon forecast is below normal. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and other global climate agencies project an elevated probability – in the range of 62 to 82 per cent – of El Nino conditions persisting through the 2026 kharif season. India's last severe El Nino years – 2014-15 and 2015-16 – saw kharif production fall by 5-8 per cent, with sowing contracting significantly in water-stressed states (Maharashtra, Karnataka, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh).

The intersection of import-price inflation and domestic output risk creates exactly the set of conditions that food-security planners fear most.

INDIA'S POTENTIAL IMPORT EXPOSURE

India's wheat imports are currently minimal – under 200,000 tonnes annually – owing to high import duties and a domestic production surplus built over several decades. India is not structurally import-dependent on wheat in the way that Middle Eastern or North African countries are. However, a failure of domestic production in a severe El Nino drought year could change this calculus rapidly. If kharif output falls sharply and FCI buffer stocks are depleted, India would be forced to enter global wheat markets at exactly the moment when war-driven price inflation has already pushed global wheat prices up approximately 35 per cent since February 2026.

This hypothetical scenario – not existing import dependence – is the vulnerability the editorial highlights. The structural risk is not that India is importing wheat today; it is that the safety valve of import access has become far more expensive and logistically complex simultaneously with the domestic production risk.

HYPOTHETICAL IMPORT SCENARIO (IF DOMESTIC DEFICIT MATERIALISES)	STATUS (MAY 2026)
Australia (alternative source)	Shipping corridors intact; elevated freight
Ukraine	Ongoing conflict; reduced output
Russia	Sanctions-related payment friction
Global wheat price change (Feb-May 2026)	**+35%**

Note: This table represents a hypothetical scenario of emergency import sourcing, not India's current import pattern.

The structural vulnerability is plain: India's buffer stocks of wheat have been under pressure since 2022. The Food Corporation of India's wheat procurement in 2025-26 was below target. A combined external-price shock and domestic output risk in 2026 tests the depth of that buffer.

WHY MILLETS ARE THE ANSWER

India is the world's largest producer of millets, producing approximately 17 to 18 million tonnes per year (2024-25: 18.015 million tonnes, per government data). The major varieties – sorghum (jowar), pearl millet (bajra), finger millet (ragi), and foxtail millet (kangni) – share a set of agronomic properties that make them precisely suited to the stress scenario India now faces.

CROP	WATER REQUIREMENT	DROUGHT TOLERANCE	NUTRITIONAL PROFILE
Rice	1,200-2,000 mm	Low	High calories; low micronutrient density
Wheat	450-650 mm	Moderate	High calories; some protein
Pearl Millet (Bajra)	200-400 mm	Very High	High iron, zinc, fibre
Sorghum (Jowar)	250-450 mm	Very High	High protein; gluten-free
Finger Millet (Ragi)	700-1,000 mm	High	Highest calcium among cereals
Foxtail Millet (Kangni)	200-350 mm	Very High	High fibre; low glycaemic index

Millets require 30 to 40 per cent less water than rice or wheat. They can be grown on dryland and rainfed soils where rice and wheat cannot. In an El Nino year, bajra and jowar are among the few kharif crops that can substitute for paddy in deficit-rainfall districts.

THE 2023 MOMENTUM THAT HAS NOT BEEN SUSTAINED

India proposed and secured the UNGA declaration in March 2021 designating 2023 as the International Year of Millets, and Prime Minister Modi made millets a signature soft-power export during India's G20 presidency in 2023. The momentum was real. Millet exports grew. International awareness of millets as a superfood increased. The policy push included:

- **National Food Security Mission (NFSM) – Nutri-Cereals component:** Targets area expansion and productivity improvement for millets
- **Mission for Integrated Development of Horticulture (MIDH):** Processing infrastructure support
- **MSP increases in 2023-24 Budget:** Pearl millet and sorghum MSP raised by above-average margins to signal procurement intent
- **POSHAN 2.0:** Millets incorporated into supplementary nutrition under ICDS

But the editorial identifies the gap between signal and system: MSP for millets has been raised, but **procurement infrastructure has not kept pace**. FCI does not procure millets at scale. State-level millet procurement through NAFED and NCCF is patchy. Millets are absent from the Public Distribution System (PDS) ration basket in most states. Farmers who grow millets cannot sell them at MSP because the procurement machinery does not reach their mandis.

THE STRATEGIC OPENING – WHAT 2026 DEMANDS

The editorial argues that 2026 offers a compressed window to convert agronomic potential into food-security reality. Three actions are required with urgency:

First, activate MSP procurement at scale. The Centre must direct NAFED and state agencies to procure pearl millet and sorghum at MSP in the major producing states (Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh) before the kharif sowing season ends. Procurement credibility is what determines whether farmers shift to millets.

Second, integrate millets into PDS. Even a partial substitution – distributing 1-2 kg of millets per ration card per month in addition to rice/wheat – would reduce PDS offtake pressure on the depleted wheat buffer and deliver superior micronutrient outcomes to beneficiaries.

Third, fast-track processing infrastructure. Millets require dehulling and processing before consumption; unlike rice (which can be milled at village level), millets need small processing units. MIDH and PM Formalisation of Micro Food Processing Enterprises (PM-FME) can fast-track grants to millet processing units in producing clusters.

THE IMPORT-SUBSTITUTION ANGLE

The editorial frames millets as an import-substitution play with nutrition co-benefits – a framing that should appeal to both food-security planners and fiscal hawks. Every million tonne of millet that replaces imported wheat in India's food basket:

- Reduces import dependence by approximately USD 220-250 million at current global wheat prices
- Reduces irrigation demand (millets need 30-40 per cent less water than wheat)
- Delivers superior micronutrient outcomes (iron, zinc, calcium) for low-income households
- Supports dryland farmer incomes in states where groundwater is depleting fastest

This is not a fringe argument. The NITI Aayog's millet strategy documents, the ICMR dietary guidelines update (2024), and the Ministry of Agriculture's Nutri-Cereal policy papers all support this direction. The 2026 supply shock provides the political urgency that administrative planning alone never generates.

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Key arguments:

- Global food supply shocks (Iran-US war disrupting Hormuz-linked grain trade, global wheat prices up 35 per cent) and domestic climate risk (El Nino monsoon probability 62–82 per cent per NOAA and allied agencies) converge in 2026 to create a food security stress scenario that requires India to draw on domestic buffers and resilient crops rather than rely on costly import access
- Millets offer agronomic resilience (30-40 per cent less water requirement, drought tolerance) and import-substitution value in exactly the crisis scenario India now faces
- India proposed and secured the UNGA declaration (March 2021) for 2023 as the International Year of Millets, but the momentum created brand value without building the procurement infrastructure (FCI procurement gap, absent from PDS) needed to translate farmer incentive into food security outcome
- MSP increases are necessary but insufficient – procurement certainty (via NAFED/state agencies) and PDS integration are the missing links

Counterarguments:

- Consumer preference for rice and wheat is deeply embedded; millet substitution in PDS may face uptake resistance
- Scaling millet processing infrastructure takes 12-24 months; the 2026 crisis window is shorter than the infrastructure lead time
- El Nino also reduces yield for some millet varieties in the most drought-affected districts – millets are more resilient, not immune

Keywords: International Year of Millets 2023, NFSM Nutri-Cereals, Pearl millet (bajra), Sorghum (jowar), Finger millet (ragi), Foxtail millet (kangni), MSP procurement, FCI buffer stock, El Nino 2026, IMD below-normal monsoon, Strait of Hormuz grain trade, import substitution, PM-FME, MIDH, POSHAN 2.0, food security, dryland agriculture, GS3 economy.

The Indian Express's argument cuts to a policy irony that India has experienced before: the country secured the UNGA declaration for the International Year of Millets (proposed in 2021, hosted in 2023) and championed millets globally during its G20 presidency, but failed to build the domestic procurement system that would make the crop meaningful to the farmer who grows it or the family that needs it. The Iran-US war and the El Nino monsoon forecast together do what no amount of advocacy could – they make millet procurement a fiscal and strategic necessity, not an aspirational goal. The question is whether the government's response is faster than the crisis.

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