

In Conversation with the People of Meghalaya



*Entrepreneurs bringing you food
from Farm to Table*

Foreword

The Integrated Basin Development & Livelihoods Promotion Programme (IBDLP) is the Government of Meghalaya's award-winning, statewide, flagship programme, popularly also just called the "Basin Programme." It focuses on empowering entrepreneurs across the state and facilitating micro and small enterprise particularly within rural communities as a means to achieving economically inclusive and ecologically sustainable development in Meghalaya.

A key objective for the Basin Programme is to identify "thrust" sectors in the state: sectors in which the people of Meghalaya are most keen to take up enterprise and which hold the most market potential to ensure returns to these enterprises. As Meghalaya has a tremendous wealth of natural resources and a significant majority of its people are engaged in farm-based enterprise, these high demand, high potential "thrust" sectors are linked to natural resources – Agriculture, Horticulture, Livestock, Apiculture, Aquaculture, Eco-Tourism, value-added Agri-business, and even Renewable Energy.

Tourism or "Eco-Tourism" – implying ecologically sustainable tourism and developing tourism around the state's natural resources – cuts across all these sectors. Meghalaya's forests, farms and orchards or its lakes, waterfalls and rivers, all have tremendous potential for synergy between tourism and other sources of livelihoods for communities. Meghalaya's fresh air, pristine water and traditionally organic soil have much to offer tourists and much to offer farmer-entrepreneurs.

Further, across the world and in India today, tourism has evolved such that discerning tourists no longer simply want to "visit" a place. Rather they want to immerse themselves in local culture, enjoy local food and produce – organic fruits and vegetables, healthy indigenous cuisine – and if possible, look for health and wellness benefits of their holiday getaway.

Meghalaya can offer regional, national and international tourists with an incomparable experience that matches all of these evolving requirements of the tourism sector. Just ask the people who came from all corners of the world to throng the food stalls at the International Terra Madre and Slow Food Festival last year!

Fascinated by how the rich cultural heritage of Meghalaya is intertwined with its unique biodiversity and ecological heritage and how the two of them together offer tremendous possibilities for tourism, a number of entrepreneurs and both public and private sector initiatives are emerging within the state.

Our goal at the Knowledge Management Unit within the IBDLP Programme is to start compiling the stories of these entrepreneurs, the vision of these initiatives, and the scope for doing more and better within Meghalaya's tourism sector. Thus this issue focuses on the "Food Entrepreneurs" in Meghalaya, who are all successful pioneers in bringing unique, indigenous and remarkably healthy and sustainable food and produce straight from the farm to your table. This issue highlights stories of coffee, cashew, and pineapple entrepreneurs on the one hand, and stories of culinary entrepreneurs who specialize in indigenous Khasi, Garo and Jaintia cuisine on the other.

Together, these entrepreneurs are keeping alive the remarkable "Farm – To – Table" tradition of food in Meghalaya that is organic, ecologically sustainable and ultimately, delicious to the palate! We believe that highlighting the stories of these entrepreneurs and their enterprises is an important first step toward building statewide partnerships with these entrepreneurs and together making Meghalaya's tourism sector the strongest in the country.

We look forward to continue bringing you on a quarterly basis, many more such inspiring stories across many more sectors! If you have questions for us, please do not hesitate to contact us. Our updated contact details can always be found on the back cover of our publications.

Warm Regards,

Knowledge Management Unit
Meghalaya Basin Development Authority
The "Basin Programme"

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The case of

Wefstar D Shira

and his Integrated Organic Farm

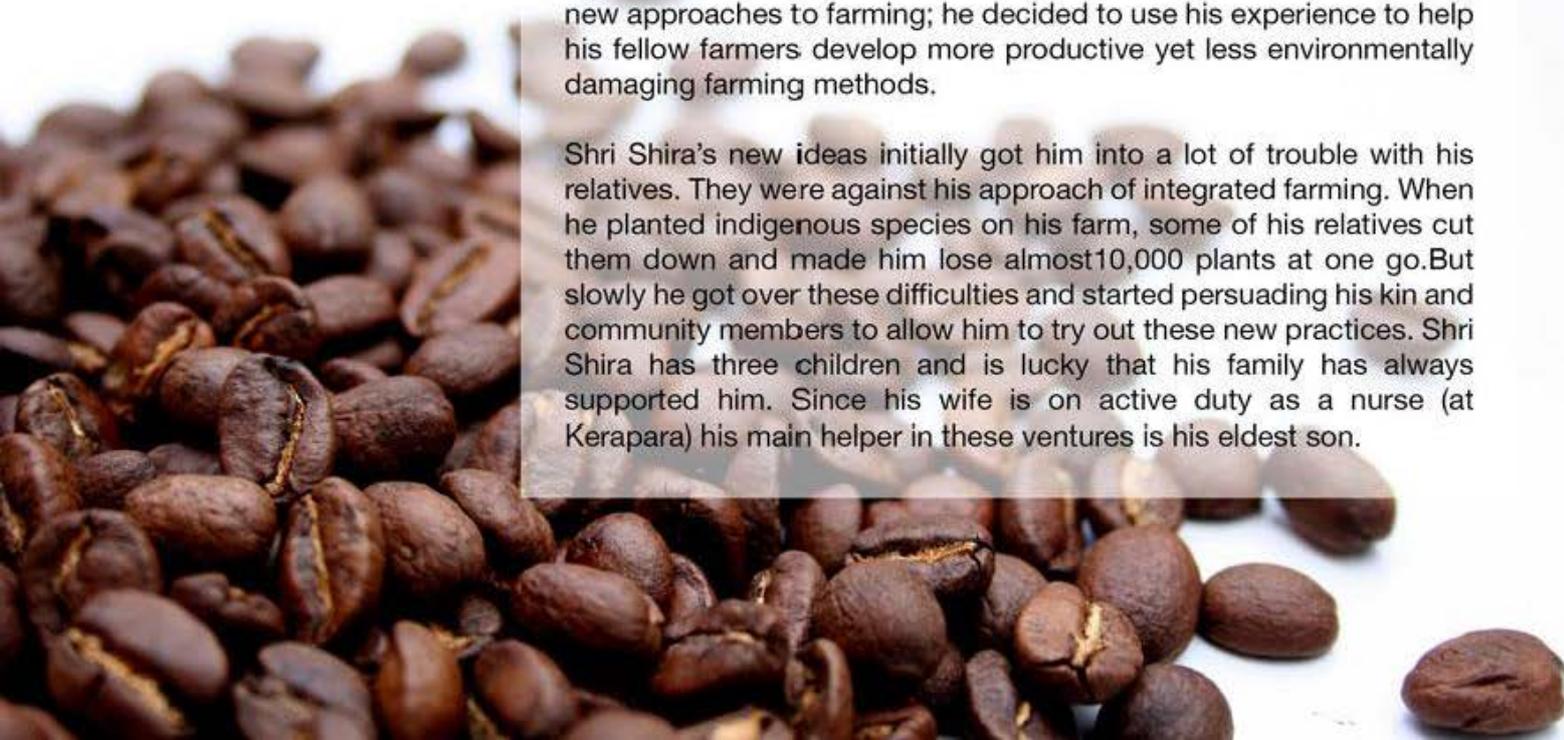
Organic Farming:

A key point to note about Shri Shira's farming approach is his strict belief in organic farming. He does not use any fertilizers except using cow dung as manure.

Shri Wefstar D Shira, who is from the small village of Rongbilbanggre in the Gambegre Block of West Garo Hills, Meghalaya, is a Chief Minister's Awardee for Green Campaign and one of the most successful and pioneering entrepreneurs of the state. Remarkably ambitious, he was the very first person to start coffee plantation in this part of Meghalaya and start developing ideas around eco-friendly and organic farming methods. Today Shri Shira has a large coffee plantation and a number of other plantations including black pepper, arecanut and various fruits, he successfully engages in apiculture, and has even set up a rubber plantation that he is trying to develop further. In fact, today Shri Shira is the Coffee Board Association secretary, an inspiring trajectory for an enterprising farmer from a remote part of Meghalaya.

Before getting so deeply engaged in farm-based enterprise, Shri Shira was a primary school teacher. Finding that he was not enjoying teaching as much as he thought he would, he left the job and started his own mixed cropping farm. When he looked around, he saw that people were mainly using slash & burn or Jhum cultivation that was traditional to the region. With greater population in this region and more pressures on land, this traditional farming practice had begun to adversely affect the environment through extensive deforestation. Further, agricultural productivity and income from farming were not high. These observations made Shri Shira interested in developing new approaches to farming; he decided to use his experience to help his fellow farmers develop more productive yet less environmentally damaging farming methods.

Shri Shira's new ideas initially got him into a lot of trouble with his relatives. They were against his approach of integrated farming. When he planted indigenous species on his farm, some of his relatives cut them down and made him lose almost 10,000 plants at one go. But slowly he got over these difficulties and started persuading his kin and community members to allow him to try out these new practices. Shri Shira has three children and is lucky that his family has always supported him. Since his wife is on active duty as a nurse (at Kerapara) his main helper in these ventures is his eldest son.





Wefstar D Shira

COFFEE PLANTATION

Shri Shira started his coffee plantation back in 1999 as an experiment in farming that could also help conserve the local ecology and also be taken up for organic farming. Knowledge about these farming issues was very limited in those days however; he got little help from anyone. So, his idea of growing coffee started taking shape when the Coffee Board took an interest in supporting him and sent him for training to various parts of India. Extremely excited at finally getting this opportunity, Shri Shira poured his heart into learning everything he could about growing coffee and eco-friendly coffee farming in particular. By 2005 his coffee farming business was finally underway in a viable manner, and started allowing him to generate sufficient income to support his family.

In 2011, Shri Shira went to Chennai again with the support of the Coffee Board. There he came across a number of ways to do integrated farming on coffee plantations. As this story shall show, this allowed him to then start a number of other farming activities to supplement his coffee growing and start the integrated farming of which he had always dreamt.

Currently Shri Shira grows Robusta coffee – The ripe yields per plant is upto 18 kg, but after drying it comes upto 10 kg – and also Arabica coffee – It yields 8 – 10 kg (ripe ones) but after drying it comes only 3 kg. He also has procured mechanised implements for basic processing of the coffee beans, such as an extractor. Shri Shira harvests coffee at least 5 times in a year. Along with Coffee plants, he grows blackpepper. He gets around one and a half quintal of black pepper per year.





APICULTURE

As Shri Shira's reputation grew because of his coffee plantation, one of his relatives who are actively involved in politics suggested that he get linked with the Integrated Basin Development & Livelihoods Promotion (IBDLP) Programme. Upon interacting with people working in the IBDLP Programme, Shri Shira thought that Apiculture could be an interesting supplementary livelihood activity to start. Thus in 2014, Shri Shira went for a beekeeping training programme held at RRTC Umran last year.

Initially Shri Shira only invested in a couple of bee boxes that he installed in his orchard. At this point he thought of beekeeping more as a hobby. But just a few months later he noticed a remarkably positive change in his coffee plants. Suddenly it seemed as if his coffee plants were flourishing and doing much better than they had ever done! He didn't understand the reason for this at first but then it suddenly struck him that it must be the bees! He then tried to learn more about bees and discovered how critical they were for pollination and how especially important they were in the case of organic farming. Grateful for the bees' contribution, he decided to expand this activity and bring more bees into his farm.

Currently Shri Shira has many different kinds of bees and 25 bee boxes including both wooden and earthen ones. As he explained, during the flowering season honey could be harvested at shorter intervals, within a month. This year for example, he got 6 litres of honey at one go. Shri Shira believes that having a multicropping organic farm allows his bees to make honey in larger volumes and of better quality. For example he discussed how even broom grass could be used by bees to make honey.



To get different varieties of honey from his bees Shri Shira has planted a lot of broom grass and hundreds of fruit plants of local varieties of fruits such as litchi, jackfruit, neem, many types of indigenous berries, grapefruits, banana, and a citrus fruit for which the Garo region is famous – Memang Narang (Citrus Indica).

Shri Shira has invested in some mechanisation and value addition toward this activities. For example he has procured a honey extractor for more efficient honey collection, and he also does his own packaging for honey. He typically sells his honey in 350 gram bottles which he currently sells at an average price of Rs 150, 200 gram for Rs 100 and 100 gram for Rs 50. Shri Shira sells his honey to the nearest market and in Tura. Otherwise there are people from in and around who comes to his farm to buy the honey particularly during festive seasons when 100 to 200 bottles of honey can be sold in a short time.

In fact apiculture has taken off in a fairly big way in Shri Shira's community at present. There are even 4 Apiculture Master Trainers in his village today. During the flowering season, honey is collected by a number of entrepreneurs in the village but is typically sold out within just 3 days! It is a testament to the growing demand for honey, especially high quality natural or organic honey from local and indigenous plants

OTHER CROPS ON THE MULTI CROPPING FARM

As described earlier, Shri Shira grows a number of high value crops and fruits on his farm in addition to coffee. For example he grows *Black Pepper* and gets an annual yield of around one and a half quintal which he sells typically at Rs 600 per kg. He also has around 2000 Arecanuts plants which yield approximately 80 kg. Shri Shira also loves growing different kinds of fruit, particularly for personal consumption and for his bees to make honey. At present he grows Pineapple which was mainly consumed by him and his family last year, though he sold a bit of surplus for a total of Rs 5000 at the nearest market. Shri Shira especially loves growing different varieties of *Mango - Alphonso, Amrapali, Maldai, Lengra* and many others. Shri Shira even grows some *Oranges* and some *Vanilla*. As of now however, he does not grows these to sell. Finally, Shri Shira has also started a *Rubber* plantation and currently has around 5000 rubber trees. However he hasn't started his rubber farm business yet and is only engaged in trial production.

Farm-based business challenges and opportunities in Garo Hills – Discussion with Shri Shira

According to Shri Shira, possibly the most useful thing he has ever done has been to broaden his exposure to the area of farming via travel to farmers all over India. So far he has travelled to Bihar, Karnataka, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh to directly interact with others who are involved in farming and agri-business to learn new methods of farming, understand value addition possibilities, and get ideas for diversifying his livelihood activities. He attributes almost all his success at coffee and integrated farming overall, to his efforts at meeting new people and finding opportunities to learn new things.

Life has come full circle for Shri Shira since today people from all over the country visit him to learn about integrated farming. In fact just last year around 20 - 30 people came to visit him under an exposure trip activity facilitated by the Coffee Board. Additionally, people came to him to learn about integrating apiculture into a farm-based venture, the Soil Department sent people to visit him and learn about mixed cropping, a team from Bangalore came to him to spend some time learning via hands-on farm work and so on.

Challenges:

However, Shri Shira has a number of challenges to contend with. Some of them are social; support from his and neighbouring communities is not always forthcoming and affects his business in small ways (Shri Shira declined further questioning on the subject). His plantations for Cashew and Rubber have still not taken off, and he is finding it difficult to access technical support for the same.

Lack of manpower is also a problem for Shri Shira as his land is large but its continuous maintenance fencing, guarding against stray cows and goats, weeding and cleaning etc. – requires costly manpower support. This was a big contributor to his crop loss in the past year.

While today things have turned out well for Shri Shira, he admits that he should have acquired far more technical knowledge and training before he started his ventures in order to have prevented both financial losses and mental stress. In his case he started as a novice and gradually acquired learning through trial and error based experience.

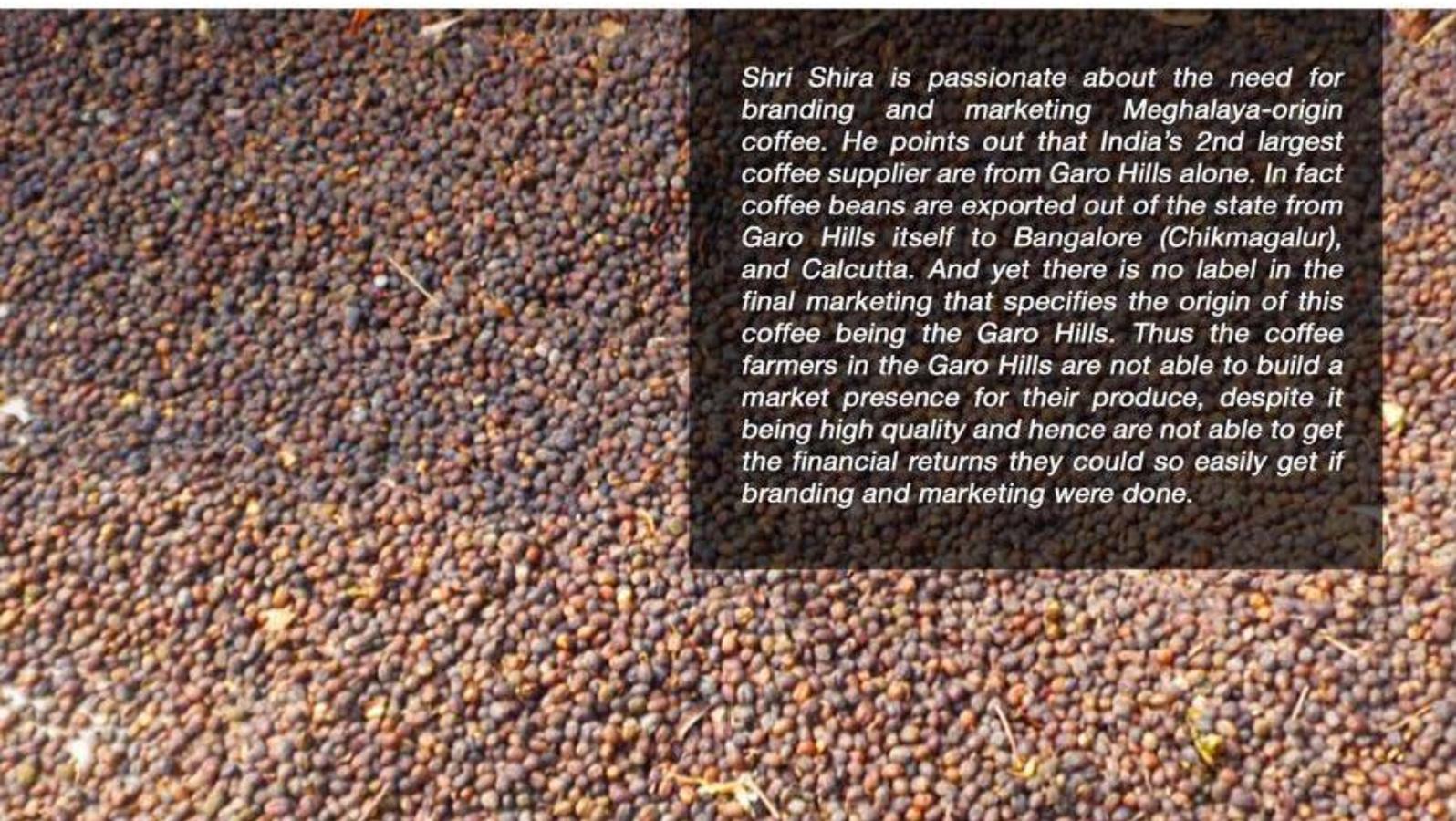
He strongly emphasizes the need for conducting Awareness Programmes and basic training across a number of livelihood sectors for farmers, and thinks that this should be a key activity done by the government.

The way forward and recommendations for government action

Of all the things Shri Shira has done and continues to do, he wants to primarily focus on Apiculture going forward. When asked why, he says that his farming activities are physically demanding and extremely time consuming. Conversely, bee keeping is not hectic, has turned out to be very enjoyable, and is reasonably lucrative as well. He is working at present on designing movable stands for his bee boxes so that he can easily migrate his bees from one orchard to the other (the distance between his coffee and rubber plantations for example is nearly 5 km).

In terms of recommendations for government interventions, *Shri Shira emphasizes that there should be greater and more systematic focus on both rubber and coffee plantation at the state level, since there are resources available from the central government that the state government could help leverage.*

BUILDING A MARKET FOR MEGHALAYAN COFFEE



Shri Shira is passionate about the need for branding and marketing Meghalaya-origin coffee. He points out that India's 2nd largest coffee supplier are from Garo Hills alone. In fact coffee beans are exported out of the state from Garo Hills itself to Bangalore (Chikmagalur), and Calcutta. And yet there is no label in the final marketing that specifies the origin of this coffee being the Garo Hills. Thus the coffee farmers in the Garo Hills are not able to build a market presence for their produce, despite it being high quality and hence are not able to get the financial returns they could so easily get if branding and marketing were done.

This is a point upon which Shri Shira has often tried to generate awareness, both among government representatives and his fellow coffee farmers. During his interview, Shri Shira expressly requested the Knowledge Management team to help him reach his voice to the Hon'ble Chief Minister of Meghalaya, and convey the immense potential that the coffee sector has for building economically strong and ecologically sustainable livelihoods for the state's farmers.

Jakarius Sangma

the Integrated Farmer



Shri Jakarius Sangma is a practitioner of “Integrated farming”. Hailing from a moderately well to do background, Shri Sangma’s family had traditionally been engaged in paddy cultivation. He himself had learned about paddy cultivation methods from his parents. Shri Sangma owns 13 bigas of land in addition to the land that he utilises as paddy fields. His wife works with him at farming their fields. Very hard working and driven, she is the one to take the lead in contacting government offices for any kind of assistance or training under various schemes. The couple have four children of which three are in school and the eldest one is in college. While the paddy cultivation initially allowed Shri Sangma and his wife to support their family, over time it became apparent that engaging in a single livelihood activity would not provide adequate income for the growing needs of their household.

Shri Sangma gradually started learning more about ways in which he could introduce other food and cash crops into his existing farm. In around 2011 or 2012, he started becoming serious about the practice of integrated farming. Right from the beginning, he decided never to take a loan to start these new activities but to manage with whatever resources he already had.

He started integrated farming by initiating a cashew nut plantation. He started growing pineapples, arecanut and local varieties of jackfruits and citrus fruits soon after this but his key target for income generation were to start and scale his cashew nut harvest and sales. He knew he would have to be patient, because these crops yielded harvests only after a few years. So he put in the effort and waited. He had to wait for 7 to 8 years for harvests from his cashew and arecanut crops. Pineapples were easier, and took just over 3 years. Now that this expanded farming venture has stabilised, he has also ventured into livestock. More recently he has also bought cows, pigs, ducks, and kroiler chickens from the profits of his integrated farming or “Multi Cropping”.





Jakarius Sangma



Cashew Nut Plantation

Shri Sangma first got interested in the cashew sub-sector when he started hearing from people about how highly in-demand it was. He did not have much knowledge of how to go about taking care of his cashew plantation and there were no government interventions that he knew of. Luckily he came across IFAD representatives and got to know about some of their training programmes. As a result he got the chance to attend cashew nut “binding” training for a week at Tura.

Even at present however, Shri Sangma faces a number of difficulties with maintaining the viability of his cashew plantation, including the lack of manpower and financial constraints. For various plantation maintenance activities, Shri Sangma hires workers twice or thrice during the year i.e. summer, pre-rains and post-rains. His cashew plants have fully matured as of today, and he can sell his produce at the nearest market at a price of Rs. 50-70 per kilo. However, this is the low end of the cashew nut sales price. Shri Sangma is forced to sell his produce at a lower price because he sells the raw cashew and that he did not have cashew extractor machinery as well as the knowhow and financial support for better packaging.



Pineapple

Shri Sangma initially grew pineapple mainly for his household consumption but slowly started expanded his pineapple farm through interventions carried out under the Horticulture Mission. Manpower is required for working on this farm as well, and Shri Sangma typically hires 10 - 15 people to tend to the farm. While working on the pineapple farm is very time consuming, pineapples yield lower profits for Shri Sangma who sells it at the nearest market or to traders and vendors from Tura at about Rs 10 to Rs 15 each (the prices depend on an individual fruit's size).



Arecanut

As with pineapple, Shri Sangma already had arecanut plants on his farm primarily for his household consumption. But now he has slowly expanded arecanut production as well and currently sells at the rate of Rs 25 per kilo.

Vermi Compost Production

Shri Sangma received training and exposure about vermicomposting methods from a Block Development Officer about 5 or 6 years ago. In fact it was not Shri Sangma but his wife, Smt Esta S Sangma who went for vermicompost production training at Guwahati for a week with the support of an IFAD intervention. The couple have a vermicompost pit on their farm into which they regularly deposit all the dry leaves and waste organic material from his pineapple, arecanut, cashew and other plantations. The vermicompost takes about 3 months to formed after which the couple package it in a simple plastic packet and sell it for Rs 10 per packet.





Rice Mill

About 5 years ago Shri Sangma purchased a rice milling machine from Mankachar, a town close to Tura. The idea of procuring a rice mill occurred to him and his wife when they thought about how difficult it was to take their paddy harvests to a far off village for milling. Now they not only meet their own milling needs but also get some extra income by doing this business. For example on market days and during the harvest seasons he easily earns Rs 1000 at the very least. He charges Rs 20 per tin or Rs 80 per 4 tins (i.e. 1 quintal). Shri Sangma runs the machine himself so no extra cost is incurred by hiring manpower for the work.



Piggery

At the time that Shri Sangma first acquired pigs around the year 2012 – he lost 3 out of 5 pigs to disease as he did not know much about pig rearing at the time. As his experience increased, so did his knowledge. Today even without ever having received formal piggery training, Shri Sangma rears enough pigs to sell and generate a fair income. Of course as he himself notes, pig rearing is a traditional livelihood activity in a Garo community which is why he naturally took it up and which is also why he found support for his piggery activities and a ready market for his pigs in the local region. Today Shri Sangma sells a 2 year old pig from his farm at Rs 8000 - Rs 9000, and his piglets for Rs. 1000 or sometimes more.

Cows

Shri Sangma also breeds cows to sell. Once a cow has given birth and is large enough, he sells it for around Rs 7000; the price can be higher during the festive season.



Duckery

In addition to rearing pigs, cows (and even goats), Shri Sangma and his wife also keep a few ducks on their farm though this is for household consumption and not for the market.



Challenges and Looking Ahead

In his conversation with members of the Knowledge Management Unit under IBDLP, Shri Sangma admitted that it had been very difficult to start multi-cropping and that it was still a night and day struggle. Owning land was not sufficient to feed the entire family adequately, and it took time for them to understand how to viably utilise the land that they owned. Shri Sangma discussed that while they had always been prepared to work hard, lack of knowledge and exposure to new ideas for farming had a lot to do with their initial struggles, perhaps even more so than finance. He summarised their key challenges as follows:

No savings – Since Shri Sangma diversified his farm so rapidly and did not take external loans, this scaling up ate into most of their savings. This makes their current economic scenario difficult.

No Loans – There is no easy access to financial assistance even now that the farm is doing well. In the absence of access to loans, this poses a big financial constraint.

Costly Manpower – Children are young and the large farm requires additional manpower, which means additional work. Most of the farm work at present is done by Shri Sangma and his wife but regular maintenance of the farm is a major challenge.

Some of the smaller diversification activities such as rice milling and vermicomposting are not proving viable enough, and might need to be closed down. The rice mill for example yielded good returns at first but with growing diesel prices cannot be operated on the scale required for profit.

Despite these challenges, Shri Sangma remains positive and optimistic about the future of his farm. He is happy that his cashew, pineapple and arecanut plantations are doing well and he intends to strengthen these areas first. He thinks of himself as an entrepreneur, but is not very keen on identifying a business partner at present. It is just him and his wife who are in this farming business for now, and he sees them becoming even more successful in the near future. Very enterprising, very hard working, and full of grace, Shri Sangma and his wife are leading the way for more success stories out of the Garo Hills in the future.

The Allagre SHG

Allagre is a village in the Rongram C&RD block of West Garo Hills District in Meghalaya, and is located about 17 km from Tura. Recently, the members of this village community have come together to form a Self Help Group called "**Bakrime**" with the aim of participating in bringing about socioeconomic development of the community and enhancing the socioeconomic welfare of community members.

Before the SHG came about, the people of Allagre often talked about the problem of buying chickens for consumption in the village's households. People would have to travel all the way to Rongram market which takes about half an hour to reach on foot just to buy chickens because the volume of locally grown chickens was inadequate, particularly during high demand seasons such as Christmas. The people often discussed how wonderful it would be if someone could just start a hatchery in the village itself.

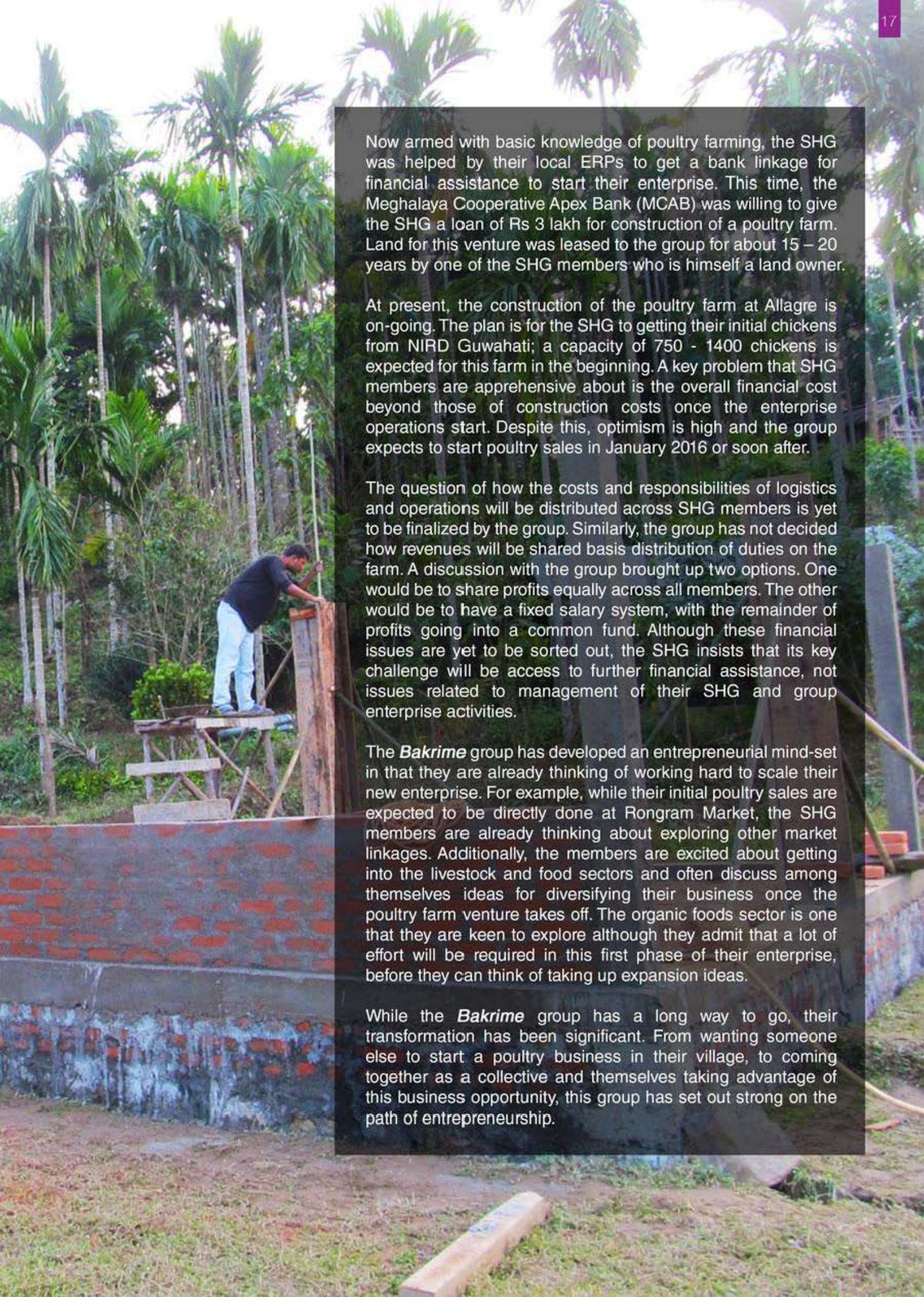


Around the time that the SHG was formed, a few of the community members suggested that since poultry rearing presented a seemingly viable local business opportunity, why not use the SHG platform to apply for financial assistance and start a poultry farm together? Thus the agenda was set and 10 community members came together to set up Bakrime.

Following up on their initial idea of starting a poultry farm, the SHG members collectively went to nearby banks multiple times to discuss about and apply for business loans. Unfortunately, their proposal kept getting rejected over and over again.

It was at this discouraging time that the SHG members came across the Integrated Basin Development & Livelihoods Promotion (IBDLP) Programme. Under this Programme, an Enterprise Facilitating Centre (EFC) has been set up at Block Headquarters, in each of the 39 Blocks in Meghalaya. The Enterprise Resource Persons (ERPs) stationed at these EFCs work with aspiring entrepreneurs to identify and facilitate access to opportunities for skill training and capacity building, linkage to basic equipment, physical resources and technologies, and access to financial assistance wherever possible whether through government schemes or bank loans. The SHG members came across the ERPs in their Block during one of their local market days, during which the ERPs were conducting an awareness programme. Realizing that this was an opportunity to get support for their poultry farm idea, the SHG members then visited their nearest EFC (in Rongram Block Headquarters) and with the EFC for poultry sector related support. Soon after, in April 2015, a few of the SHG members were sponsored under IBDLP for a one week beginners' training in poultry farming at the National Institute of Rural Development (NIRD) in Guwahati.





Now armed with basic knowledge of poultry farming, the SHG was helped by their local ERPs to get a bank linkage for financial assistance to start their enterprise. This time, the Meghalaya Cooperative Apex Bank (MCAB) was willing to give the SHG a loan of Rs 3 lakh for construction of a poultry farm. Land for this venture was leased to the group for about 15 – 20 years by one of the SHG members who is himself a land owner.

At present, the construction of the poultry farm at Allagre is on-going. The plan is for the SHG to getting their initial chickens from NIRD Guwahati; a capacity of 750 - 1400 chickens is expected for this farm in the beginning. A key problem that SHG members are apprehensive about is the overall financial cost beyond those of construction costs once the enterprise operations start. Despite this, optimism is high and the group expects to start poultry sales in January 2016 or soon after.

The question of how the costs and responsibilities of logistics and operations will be distributed across SHG members is yet to be finalized by the group. Similarly, the group has not decided how revenues will be shared basis distribution of duties on the farm. A discussion with the group brought up two options. One would be to share profits equally across all members. The other would be to have a fixed salary system, with the remainder of profits going into a common fund. Although these financial issues are yet to be sorted out, the SHG insists that its key challenge will be access to further financial assistance, not issues related to management of their SHG and group enterprise activities.

The *Bakrime* group has developed an entrepreneurial mind-set in that they are already thinking of working hard to scale their new enterprise. For example, while their initial poultry sales are expected to be directly done at Rongram Market, the SHG members are already thinking about exploring other market linkages. Additionally, the members are excited about getting into the livestock and food sectors and often discuss among themselves ideas for diversifying their business once the poultry farm venture takes off. The organic foods sector is one that they are keen to explore although they admit that a lot of effort will be required in this first phase of their enterprise, before they can think of taking up expansion ideas.

While the *Bakrime* group has a long way to go, their transformation has been significant. From wanting someone else to start a poultry business in their village, to coming together as a collective and themselves taking advantage of this business opportunity, this group has set out strong on the path of entrepreneurship.

An Interview with

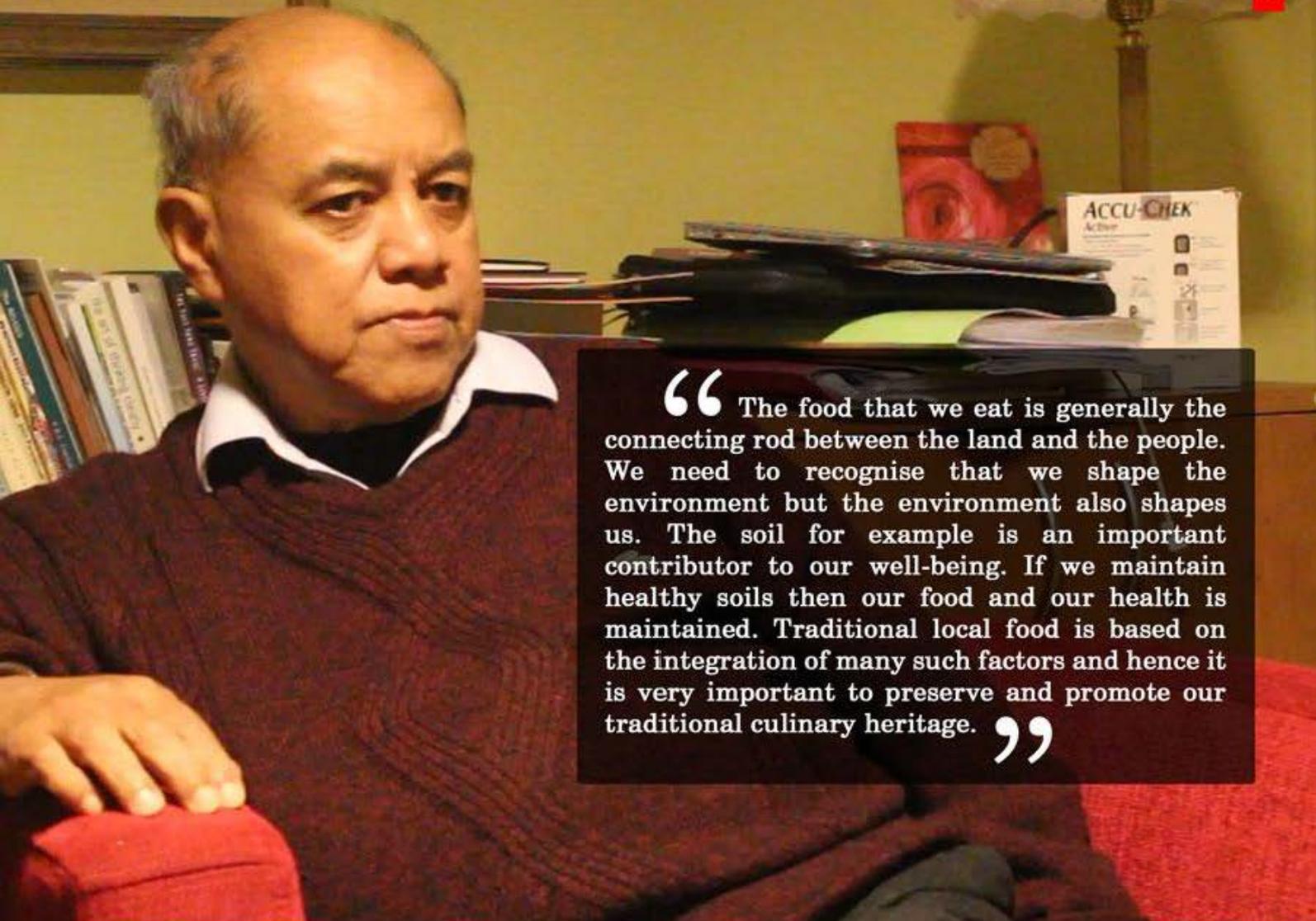
Mr. Phrang Roy

Chairman (NESFAS)

The North East Slow Food and Agro biodiversity Society (NESFAS) is an organisation that focuses its activities in the north eastern states of India especially dealing with promoting indigenous cuisines and enhancing the agro biodiversity of the North East. NESFAS also works for the welfare of the local indigenous people by empowering them to defend their diverse food and agricultural practices. With its headquarter in Shillong, NESFAS is trying to facilitate local people through community level network by creating a platform where grassroots people can voice their opinions, exchange knowledge amongst each other and restate pride in their local food systems. Therefore, in its attempt to look after agro biodiversity, NESFAS brings together partners from different sectors that are engaged in enhancing it. As a platform, NESFAS believes that traditional ecological knowledge is equally important to modern science and therefore facilitates a mutually respectful dialogue for sustainable progress.

Mr Phrang Roy has served in high professional and managerial positions. He has gained rich and varied international experiences in supporting rural development, small scale and indigenous communities' agriculture for more than 30 years: which is not only his vocation but also his passion. He has served as Assistant President of IFAD (the International Fund for Agricultural Development) and Assistant Secretary General of the UN(1981- 1990 & 1997-2002), Division Chief of UNOPS for Asia in Bangkok (1991-1995) and Kuala Lumpur (1995-1997). After retiring from IFAD at the end of 2006, he joined the US-based Christensen Fund, which is working for a more ecological and sustainable approach to development with a special emphasis on indigenous communities, and is currently leading the global Indigenous Partnership for Agro-biodiversity and Food Sovereignty, Rome. He was also conferred with India's highest civil service cadre - the Indian Administrative Service - after ten years tenure in Maharashtra. At present he is the Advisory Board Member of the International Fund to Amplify Agro Ecological Solutions (USA); International Councillor of Slow Food International; Chairman of the Meghalaya State Water Foundation; Chairman of the North East Slow Food and Agro-biodiversity Society (NESFAS) of Northeast India.

The KM Team in its quest to know more about the status of the indigenous cuisines of the local people in the state of Meghalaya met Mr. Phrang Roy, Chairman NESFAS. During the course of interview, Mr Roy highlighted the key role that indigenous food plays in the lives of Meghalaya's people. In this interview, he discusses how indigenous cuisine needs to be popularized within the state and how their rich nutrient profile has contributed to people's health for generations. The interview also discusses how NESFAS works with grassroots communities to preserve Meghalaya's rich heritage of sustainable farming and food.



“ The food that we eat is generally the connecting rod between the land and the people. We need to recognise that we shape the environment but the environment also shapes us. The soil for example is an important contributor to our well-being. If we maintain healthy soils then our food and our health is maintained. Traditional local food is based on the integration of many such factors and hence it is very important to preserve and promote our traditional culinary heritage. ”

Q&A with MR. PHRANG ROY

Convenience food can play a useful role in our increasingly hectic lives today so there is high demand for them. But what are the key negative impacts of this mass produced, factory produced, processed food that most of us eat so frequently nowadays?

When you do mass production you do it for commercial purposes. Nobody mass produces food without a profit motive. To make profit, you start thinking of longer shelf life, how to distribute at low expenses over long distances, additives, preservatives and so on. So preservatives become a very important aspect of mass produced foods. Unfortunately most of these common preservatives are chemicals. Our bodies are significantly affected by these chemicals that we ingest in the form of pesticides and preservatives. Commercial firms have also mastered the art of adding excessive sugar and salt to give the twang and taste to the processed food that people have started thinking is so important. But these companies don't remind us that sugar is one of the causes for diabetes, obesity and other health problems. Or that excessive intake of salt impacts blood pressure.

NESFAS did a recent study on 500 local households that primarily eat indigenous food to analyse their nutritional status. The study was done for the occasion of the International Terra Madre and done in collaboration with McGill University (Canada) and The National Institute of Nutrition (Hyderabad). The study showed these individuals who were eating indigenous food, traditional food, had no indication of abnormal blood pressure or diabetes.

Fast food on the other hand, brings with it very large amounts of sugar, salt and chemicals. Add to that lifestyles of people today, all this becomes a major cause of all the illness that people are suffering today.

But when we go to the villages, we don't use oil at all. We use water and that makes so much of sense. The taste is so much more. With the use of oil we tend to kill the sense of taste. The taste of meat sort of emerges when cooked with water or no oil. With our modern development, we have killed the taste. So we want the people to realise that we don't need to follow the world in everything, instead you can contribute to the world and can show them.

How would you define environmentally responsible eating? Does indigenous cuisine facilitate ecological sustainability?

You know, one of the major global problems today is modern agricultural methods. About 30% of the total carbon emissions are from modern farming practices which are highly dependent on chemicals, fertilizers and pesticides which in turn often release harmful gases into the surrounding air.

With globalization, we eat apples from New Zealand and export our strawberries and oranges from Shillong to different parts of the world. This massive scale at which food is transported across the world is hugely responsible for climate change and its negative effects. We have reached a state where even in Paris, in December the whole world came to recognise that we can't live in a way like we are living today. Scientists have calculated that if all of us were to live the "American" way of life, we would need 5 planets to sustain us. Indigenous food by comparison, is based on local foods, on foods that are available in the local environment and on plants that are adapted to the local environment.

What is the current demand of local indigenous cuisines by tourists and locals in Meghalaya?

People who live in these areas, we are not a part of the mainstream. By virtue of not being in the mainstream, many things that we do are often not known or ignored. The average tourist coming to Meghalaya, unless very knowledgeable will not usually go for local food. But here I should say that in my personal opinion, we shouldn't look to simply increase the footfall of tourists in our state. Rather we should look for tourists who come here and want to spend money on our local foods and other local things

Another problem with demand from tourists is that many of the small food stalls that we have here or even the commercial food outlets are not perceived as being hygienic. Khasis for example are known to be clean. We should encourage people in the tourism sector to set and meet higher standards for hygiene, food and accommodation. Otherwise things will continue as they are now - a person coming from Guwahati packs his own food, he comes in a bus, he eats his food in Mawlynnong, he throws all the plastic food wrapping and garbage in that area, then he returns home.

What role does NESFAS play in preserving and promoting the indigenous cuisines and what are the kind of activities or campaign NESFAS has taken up?

The first thing we want to do is to create pride in the local people that your food is not secondary. For example, if you tell people that much of the tribal community eats insects, many parts of the world are horrified; they think that someone who eats insects is uncivilized. But you know what? Today even the developed world has realized that at the rate with which we are going with our unsustainable practices, the best and most easily available source of protein will soon become insects. Also, insects if eaten in a small amount gives more energy and protein than what is received from a cow. Further cows requires so much land, water, costs of management etc.

In Western countries, some of the best hotels have started serving insects. The Food & Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations has been setting up a Department to further work on how insects can be a source of protein for the future. So the world is following what we have been doing as part of our old traditions! Thus we want the communities in our region to become conscious of the fact that they have tremendous knowledge about food and sustainability that they should be aware of and proud of.

We are living in a world that is pretty much shaped by urban areas and by what we see urban people do on television. But why should this be? So we are trying our best to see if rural people can also develop their local indigenous cuisine with similar pride. Towards this we are first planning to create a number of Mei Ramew Cafes in which regular people from villages can cook local food but under a number of conditions such as availability of clean water, hygienic cooking conditions, sourcing of all produce from local farmers, pesticide-free raw materials etc.

Another thing is we are trying to do is to form a Chef's Alliance which will help chefs incorporate local foods into their dishes. At the Indigenous Terra Madre Slow Food festival for example, we wanted to create some modern dishes with 'Millet', which so many people don't use because they say it is difficult to cook with. We had a chef from Sheraton Hotels who said he could try making pancakes with millet. He did that, put a banana and a little bit of honey on the pancake and it became a big hit! So certainly locally grown fruits, vegetables, grains etc. can be incorporated into a variety of modern and fusion dishes as well, not just used for traditional cuisine.

"MEI RAMEW" : Mother Earth in Khasi language.

North Indian food has become very popular in urban centres, say in Shillong. But the traditional food from Meghalaya has not been popularised in other parts of the country. Why do you think that is?

Our traditional food of this region has a quite unique taste. For example, a lot of our ingredients or dishes are fermented. Fermentation is the traditional method of preservation but it is also very healthy for the body. But it leads to a specific taste that may not be preferred by those used to mainstream north or south Indian cuisine. But there's another reason that is important. See, Western foods are highly publicised. Even if American food is not tasty and something like a McDonalds burger has less taste and no nutritional value, it is still publicised heavily. We see most popular Indian stars advertising for instant foods such as Maggi. So an impression is created on the consumer's mind through this constant branding and advertising.

Where is the support for Local Food ?

In just one small place like Khweng, when we visited we found that there are 10 varieties of Yam, 10 varieties of Rice and 10 different kinds of vegetables grown and consumed. Certainly our production might be low but there is so much scope for just popularising our own indigenous produce and cuisine among our own people in the state and in the NE region overall.

What ideas could you share for ways in which different State Government Departments like the Tourism Department, Industries Department or programmes such as the Integrated Basin Development & Livelihoods Promotion (IBDLP) Programme could promote Meghalaya's rich heritage of food and farming?

The single most important thing is for all of us who are involved in rural development, is to spend time with rural communities and learn from them. All too often we go to a village telling them what to do as if we know everything and they do not know anything at all. Our education that we have received is just one kind of education, the knowledge that the local people have is from generations of real world experience in that region. It is very important for us to recognise the people of Meghalaya as a tremendous source of knowledge, for us to take pride in this collective knowledge, and to act upon this knowledge. Whether this is for food, farming, or tourism.

Traditional knowledge can also be incorporated into various other sector for development of the state and its people. Take the example of the War area. Here the community grows betel nuts using irrigation. The irrigation is drip irrigation where they take water from one point to another point through a bamboo with a small hole. Forget Western countries, even in other parts of our country, our own people spend so much money on drip irrigation, take bank loans etc but these people here do it with a small bamboo! These are the small kinds of traditional practices that need promotion. Local enterprises and local innovations should be promoted.

I remember that some of our international guests during the International Terra Madre had gone to visit Sohra, suddenly they remarked that we had "Amaranth" growing wild near all the houses. They asked us, "Do you cultivate it? Do you eat it?" I said, "No we never eat these". But imagine, we learnt that people chase after Amaranth in Western countries because of its nutritional benefits, so it is a very expensive food for them! So there are tremendous economic opportunities for us even in the areas of indigenous foods and farming, if we take the time to learn.

Do you think one solution could be to encourage "Food Entrepreneurship" in Meghalaya? Say we encourage more youth to develop enterprises in areas of organic farming especially of local varieties of produce, or by setting up food outlets focused on indigenous cuisines etc?

Yes I think so. I myself have met so many young people who are interested in cooking professionally, becoming chefs. Take the example of Quinoa. This is a traditional grain from Peru. A few people in Peru started promoting it through restaurants. When their government saw the success, they started helping them scale up. Some people came up and gave them traditional recipes. Within a short time Quinoa dishes became so popular that it was able to compete with fast food businesses in Lima, Peru's capital city. This then further led the Peruvian Government to promote Quinoa cultivation. And now look at its global popularity! All over Europe and the United States, Quinoa is not just mainstream but all the rage because of its health benefits, especially compared to wheat etc.

When it comes to food outlets or restaurants though, hygiene and overall cleanliness is very important. Anyone who eats Indian food gets "Delhi Belly"! But you know, maybe we should begin by changing our understanding of "Entrepreneurship". Most people, including the government, think that enterprise means a factory, or a processing centre. But enterprise can be small as well, it can be based upon our traditions as well. If we alter our thinking of entrepreneurship and then promote it, I am sure we can make a significant change for the better.

Meghalaya's Traditional Food Culture

Population in the state of Meghalaya is at least 86.1% tribal, mainly comprising people from the Khasi and Garo tribes who together account for 91% of the total tribal population of Meghalaya. The other main tribal groups are the Hajong (1.6%), Raba (1.4%) and Koch (1.1%), followed by smaller tribal groups like the Man, Dimasa, Chakma, Pawi and Lakher.

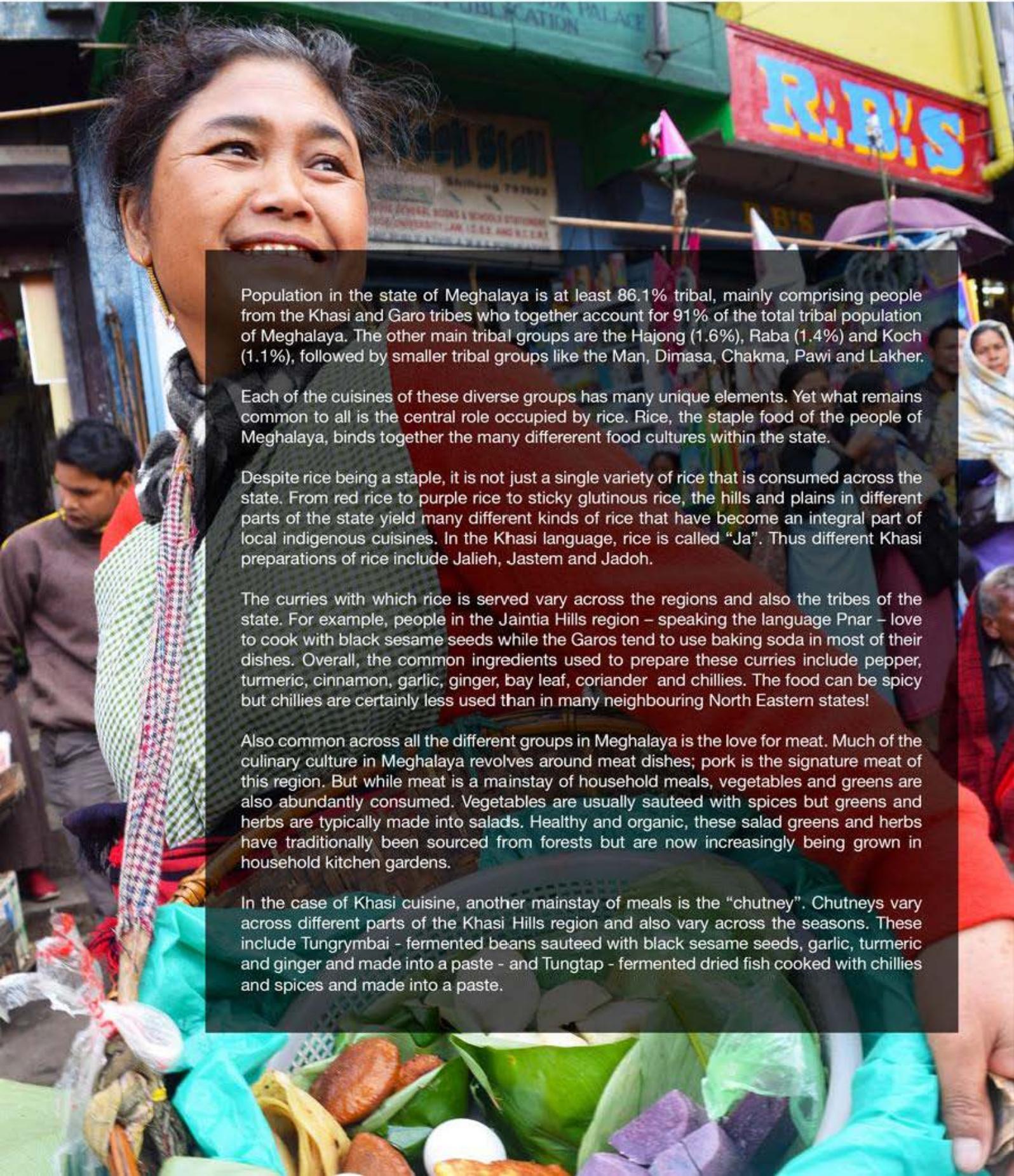
Each of the cuisines of these diverse groups has many unique elements. Yet what remains common to all is the central role occupied by rice. Rice, the staple food of the people of Meghalaya, binds together the many different food cultures within the state.

Despite rice being a staple, it is not just a single variety of rice that is consumed across the state. From red rice to purple rice to sticky glutinous rice, the hills and plains in different parts of the state yield many different kinds of rice that have become an integral part of local indigenous cuisines. In the Khasi language, rice is called "Ja". Thus different Khasi preparations of rice include Jalieh, Jastem and Jadoh.

The curries with which rice is served vary across the regions and also the tribes of the state. For example, people in the Jaintia Hills region – speaking the language Pnar – love to cook with black sesame seeds while the Garos tend to use baking soda in most of their dishes. Overall, the common ingredients used to prepare these curries include pepper, turmeric, cinnamon, garlic, ginger, bay leaf, coriander and chillies. The food can be spicy but chillies are certainly less used than in many neighbouring North Eastern states!

Also common across all the different groups in Meghalaya is the love for meat. Much of the culinary culture in Meghalaya revolves around meat dishes; pork is the signature meat of this region. But while meat is a mainstay of household meals, vegetables and greens are also abundantly consumed. Vegetables are usually sauteed with spices but greens and herbs are typically made into salads. Healthy and organic, these salad greens and herbs have traditionally been sourced from forests but are now increasingly being grown in household kitchen gardens.

In the case of Khasi cuisine, another mainstay of meals is the "chutney". Chutneys vary across different parts of the Khasi Hills region and also vary across the seasons. These include Tungrymbai - fermented beans sauteed with black sesame seeds, garlic, turmeric and ginger and made into a paste - and Tungtap - fermented dried fish cooked with chillies and spices and made into a paste.



Where to find traditional food in Meghalaya

Dukan Sha and Ja

Small eateries and roadside food stalls serving traditional food can be found in all corners of the state. You will typically see a sign above these local food stalls saying 'Dukan Ja Bad Sha'. Translated, this means a shop that sells rice and tea – dukan means shop, 'Ja' means rice, 'Sha' means tea. What this means in practice is a one stop shop for food that serves full meals as well as tea and snacks. The food is typically freshly cooked in these tiny eateries and meals are served in the form of what is called a thali in other parts of India – a large serving of rice accompanied by a variety of meat curries and side dishes of choice. Seating can be cramped as most of these eateries only have space for a couple of wooden benches and tables; meal times are a shared experience!

As food is an important part of life in Meghalaya, most of these eateries get a fair number of daily customers and can be a good source of livelihood. These eateries are usually run by women. With traditional sling bags across their shoulders, these female food entrepreneurs directly run all aspects of their operations, from buying raw materials to cooking to serving customers and of course washing up and stall maintenance. If you are a regular customer you will be familiar with the singsong manner in which these entrepreneurs greet you as they tell you the menu: 'Dohsniang, Dohsiar, Doh Shain, Doh Masi...'.

In this age of fast food, convenience food and unhealthy processed food, what is commendable in Meghalaya is the continuing popularity of traditional, freshly cooked food. Most office going professionals – even youth – prefer home cooked food; these "Dukan Sha and Ja" outlets cater to that demand with hygienic, fresh, delicious and extremely reasonably priced meals. In Shillong for example, such outlets are particularly numerous near private or government office hub locations and absolutely packed with customers particularly at lunchtime.

But lunch is not the only popular mealtime in Meghalaya, whether in cities or in rural areas. Given the people of Meghalaya's love affair with tea, it is common to find these eateries full of people at non-meal times, chatting, sipping tea and nibbling on rice cakes or other traditional snacks.



Restaurants

Given the demand for traditional food in urban areas and particularly in Shillong, many fine dining and even casual dining eateries incorporate at least a few local, indigenous dishes into their menu. Some of these restaurants focus entirely on indigenous food while others serve a mix of Chinese, Continental, North Indian and local dishes. In Shillong for example, cuisines from other parts of the North East can also be found; restaurants serving Naga food are especially popular with locals and tourists alike. Of course the food at these restaurants is priced higher than at the local food stalls, but it can be a good introduction to traditional indigenous food particularly for tourists.



Tungtap - is made out of small fermented fish roasted, ground to paste with onion and seasoning.



Ja Stem - rice cooked with onion, ginger and turmeric giving it the characteristic yellow color.



Jaduh Suam - rice cooked in meat stock.



Jhar Sbeh - Mixed fried vegetables.



Soh Baangon Chutney - burned and ground brinjal chutney.



Ja Shuhia - sticky rice.



Muli Khleh - radish salad.

Achar Laangsiq - Bamboo shoot pickle.



Tungrymbai - fermented soya bean cooked in oil and seasoned with onion, garlic, ginger and pork.

Padina Chutney - grinded mint leaves with oil, salt and chilli.



Doh Syiar - local khasi chicken curry.



Age: 38 years
 Type of Enterprise: Traditional Food Stall
 Location: Fruits lane, lewduh

Ila Dkhar

Between hordes of oranges and pineapples, in the middle of lew-Duh, lies a bright yellow tea and rice stall of Kong I. Dkhar. As is common to tea stalls in the state, we find people sipping Sha and discussing the latest news items, prices of goods in lew-Duh, and life in general. Serving them tea and rice, is Kong Ila, as she is lovingly known, a smart, good natured woman in her late 30's. Kong Ila sits behind a bright glass cupboard that displays various dishes her stall offers, quickly dishing out the specials of the day to hungry customers.

Kong Ila's shop is quickly gaining a following, with its bright and spacious interiors, shiny clean plates lined up against the wall, her friendly nature and most importantly her delicious servings of Ja-doh, Dohjem and the like, for most of her regulars, a visit to Kong Ila's shop is a must while in lew-Duh.



SHA - Tea in Khasi Language
 JA-DOH - Ice cooked with meat (Khasi delicacy)
 DOH-JEM - Incised intestine cooked in sesame seeds (Khasi delicacy)

An Interview

with Kong Dkhar

- **Hi Kong Dkhar! Quick questions to follow up on the delicious meal that you have just served us! Okay, so tell us please, how long have you been running this business?**

A full eight years! We have been running this shop for eight years now.

- **More questions about the operations of your business. Can you tell us what your usual working hours are?**

We start cooking and preparing the shop at 7 A.M sharp. We close our shop at 7 P.M. So every single day we spend 12 hours here in the shop.

- **That's such a long working day Kong Dkhar (she nods, a little wearily).What dish would you say is the specialty of your shop?**

Well, no one particular speciality. The standard dishes remain my most popular items – Dohjem, Doh khlieh, Doh syrwa, Dohsniang etc.

- **At what price do you sell a typical meal?**

I usually charge Rs. 50 for a meal. That includes a plate of rice, one piece of meat, one serving of a vegetable dish and a serving of chutney.

- **What time do customers start coming in?**

Usually only after 11 A.M. Then it continues throughout the day.

- **What about festival or holiday season? Do you get extra customers then?**

Yes we do. Still, the market is not so good at present. It feels like ever since the NGT banned coal mining, even our business has been suffering.

- **How is your business suffering due to NGT banned on coal?**

Because my shop is in the fruit section and recently there has been very less people in the market to buy fruit. It has affected not just my business but everyone's business.

DOHKHLEH- Pork Salad

DOH SYRWA- Pork Stew

DOHSNIANG- Pork

NGT- The National Green Tribunal banned coal mining and transportation of coal in Meghalaya since April 2014.

- **How did you decide to start this enterprise, Kong Dkhar?**

My father is a heart patient and he was the only breadwinner of the family. I have younger siblings who were still studying at the time. If I had not start earning then my siblings would have had to stop their studies and we would not have been able to afford treatment for my father either. That is why I decided to start something. This was what came to my mind.

Today because of my food stall I am able to take care of my father and my entire family. You know what? This year two of my younger sisters will graduate with a nursing degree from an institute in Bangalore!

- **Who taught you these culinary skills?**

Some from my mother, some from my father, and some from various other people over time I guess.

- **Do you run this entire enterprise yourself or do you hire any outside helpers?**

Well, I cook all the food by myself but I have very recently hired one more person to help me with washing up, serving customers and so on. Back when the business was doing much better I was hiring two to three more people to help me, that is how much work was going on.

- **What is business like now? In terms of revenues?**

Now since the market seems to be down I hardly earn Rs. 1000 to Rs. 1500 per day. This is very little compared with what I earned earlier, which was usually Rs. 3000 per day and sometimes even more.

- **Approximately, what would monthly profit be for you?**

I dont really keep a detailed record of net profits or monthly profits, so I can't give you a number actually.

- **Not a problem! Okay, next question. Where do you buy all your raw materials from - meat, vegetables etc?**

I buy all my cooking ingredients from Iewduh (Shillong's main market which is commonly called bara Bazaar).

- **Is it easy to get all the traditional ingredients you need?**

Yes thankfully it is. It is a traditional market so I manage to get all the ingredients I need from there.

- **Do you think traditional food is still popular among local people in Shillong?**

Oh yes. And with non local people as well. They love my food!! Also, I don't usually cook and serve beef so I get a lot of non local customers as well.

- **What about young people? Do they enjoy your food too?**

Yes a lot of young people come to my stall.

- **And tourists?**

Tourists also come but only sometimes.

- **Do you think we should make an effort to preserve our indigenous foods in Meghalaya? And also, have you ever considered including fast food or north Indian food in your menu to increase sales?**

Yes, preserving our food and culture is important, I think. I have not really thought of serving fast food. Too spicy, oily, not healthy at all.

- **Have you thought of growing your business? Maybe opening another branch?**

Right now I am satisfied with my shop as it is. I don't think I can start another food venture at this time. But maybe in the future I would think of starting another shop.

- **What kinds of help would you want - whether from the government or from private sector - for making your enterprise even more successful?**

I do not expect anything at all! Is there help?! Okay, if there is such help then I would like to get my shop painted! I mean some funds to make the shop exterior look better, attract more customers, something like that would help me.





Age - 53 yrs old
Enterprise - Traditional Food Stall
Location - lewduh, Shillong

Synshar Phawa

Amidst the hustle and bustle of busy lew-duh (Shillong's Main Market) also commonly known as Bara Bazar, allegedly the largest traditional market in the Northeast, lies the shop of Kong Synshar Phawa, (Known just as "Dukan ka Bei " or Bei's Shop because in Shillong local/traditional eateries do not have a name, they are just called 'Dukan Sha bad Ja'). Seated inside her shop in a Khasi Mura, behind a glass cupboard displaying her food items, Kong Synshar Phawa, warmly greets you with her friendly smile and asks what would you like to have.

All though her shop is small and quaint, it attracts a large number of customers daily because of the wide variety of authentic cuisine it offers. The shop has been in Bara Bazar for more than 35 years now, and regulars in this area swear by Kong Phawa's food. A trip to "Dukan ka Bei" is a must for people who wants a taste of authentic Jaintia cuisine.



An Interview

with Synshar Phawa

- **Kong Phawa, how many years since you started this business?**

Well, I started this shop when I was just 18 years old and I'm 53 years old now. So it has been what... something like 35 years that I have been running this stall !

Kong Phawa, we have a few questions regarding the operations of your enterprise. First, what are your hours of operation? When does a working day start for you?

Well let's take today for example. Today I started cooking at 6 AM, with the help of my husband and my two children. We finished cooking around 9.30 A.M and are ready for customers to come eat. This is the schedule every day except Sunday.

- **Everything looks so delicious at your stall! What kinds of food do you serve?**

We serve both Khasi and Jaintia cuisines. As you can see, we have cooked up than ten kinds of meat, three kinds of rice, and half a dozen vegetable dishes including both stir-fries and salads. Not only that, we have dry fish, fish, chutneys, pickle and so much more.

- **What would you say is the most popular item on your menu?**

That would be the basics - Dohkhlieh with Jadoh or Jalieh.

- **How do you price the various dishes?**

See, we have a fixed rate for a standard meal which includes a plate of rice and one piece of meat from any meat dish being served that day. The fixed rate is usually Rs. 40. But if the customer wants an elaborate meal with vegetables, salads, chutney and so on, then we charge anywhere between Rs. 80 to Rs. 150 per plate.

- **At what time of day do you get most customers?**

Customers don't come before the afternoon, so peak time for us would be around 12.30 P.M. to 3 P.M

- **Do you get more customers during festival or holiday season or fewer?**

More for sure. During the days leading up to Christmas we get very crowded. Most weekends as well.

- **So Kong Phawa, the big question! How did you get into this business of food?**

Well I happened to own this shop. I didn't have any other source of livelihood and I didn't know what else to do, so I started a food business.

- **And who taught you these culinary skills?**

My mother. She was such a good cook herself.

- **Do you run this business alone or with the help of your family? Have you hired any assistants?**

No, this is entirely a family-run business, no external helpers. My family helps me a great deal, we run this enterprise together.

- **On a typical day do you make a net profit? Do you keep track of your accounts on a daily basis?**

Yes we do keep track of our costs and our profit. We do not always make a profit of course. Sometimes we gain, sometimes we lose. Usually we earn a minimum revenue of about Rs 700-800 per day.

- **Where do you buy all your raw materials from - meat, vegetables etc?**

All our ingredients are bought here from Iewduh itself. It's our local market and the biggest one here, so all our supplies have always come from here itself.

- **Do you find that some traditional ingredients are becoming difficult to find? Or you notice no change?**

I don't think there is a change. The ingredients we need and use are always available here in the market.



- **Do you think traditional food continues to be popular among local people in Shillong?**

Oh yes, very much! People are still flocking to my shop so it must mean that people still love traditional food!

- **What about young people? Do you think they prefer fast food nowadays?**

Well we get a lot of young people at our eatery too!

- **And tourists? Do tourists tell you that they like the traditional food you cook?**

Oh yes! We get both domestic and international tourists here in our shop. Especially in the winter season

- **Do you think it is important to preserve our indigenous food cultures in Meghalaya? Would you ever include more continental or north Indian foods in your menu to attract more customers?**

I believe that yes we should do what we can to preserve our indigenous foods. And as for myself, I am content with running this business. We do not have any more energy to cook north indian food as well. Let others do that!

- **Are you thinking of growing your business? Maybe opening another branch of your eatery or making this one bigger?**

As of now, the answer is no. We would not be able to take care of a bigger business.

- **What kinds of help would you want - whether from the government or from private sector - for making your enterprise even more successful?**

To be honest, we do not want or expect any help from anyone. We have done this fully on our own. If you ask me, I can't think of how anyone could help us actually. Even the government. So for now, we're content with what we can manage on our own.

Red Rice

Restaurant

Located in the heart of Shillong's shopping area – GS Road, Police Bazaar - is "Red Rice", a modern restaurant that serves traditional Khasi cuisine. While the indigenous foods of Meghalaya are typically found only in the small 'Tea and Rice stalls' that dot the streets and alleys of the city, 'Red Rice' is one of the few restaurants that also offers the same fare in an effort to make traditional food a part of the commercial mainstream.

By bringing traditional cuisines to the notice of national and international tourists who often bypass the small roadside food stalls, restaurants like Red Rice are consciously playing an important role in promoting Khasi cuisine and ensuring that Shillong is a foodie's paradise. We sat down for an interview with Ronjoy Shahoo, the 26 year old entrepreneur who runs the business along with his wife Melody Marineh.



An Interview

with Ronjoy & Melody

- When was Red Rice started?

Ronjoy: Red Rice was started by my father, Shri. S.K Shahoo in August 2014

- Since when have you been helping your father run this restaurant?

Ronjoy: I completed my MBA in the same year that Red Rice was opened and right after that, I decided to help my dad run this restaurant since I am interested in food and also have a degree from IIHM.

- Most restaurants serve Chinese and North Indian food. What made you think of Khasi Cuisine?

Melody: See in Shillong one finds Khasi cuisine only in the small traditional stalls; most restaurants do not offer Khasi dishes on their menu. However, we felt that there is a lot of potential for Khasi cuisine and the demand for it is very high. So, we included Khasi food and it became a big hit!

- What kind of customers order Khasi Cuisine in your Restaurant?

Melody: A lot of tourists from outside the state who want to sample local cuisine order our Khasi dishes. They end up absolutely loving it because traditional Khasi food is not that spicy and certainly not too oily or greasy. They love the variety of meat dishes that we offer and the different flavours of every single dish. But lots of locals frequent our restaurant too. Maybe it is because of the hygiene and the ambience we provide as compared to typical Jadoh stalls.

- What about young people, do they also come in looking for traditional Khasi Food?

Melody: Oh yes for sure. Khasi food is still very popular among the local youth. In fact we have just finished serving lunch to a large group of college students who wanted a meal of "Jadoh" , "Tungrymbai" and "Dohsniang Neihong" .

JADOH - Rice cooked in pork stock

TUNGRYMBAI - Fermented beans

DOHSNIANG NEIHONG - Pork cooked in black sesame seeds

Ronjoy



Menu

RED RICE
ETHNIC
KHASI
FOOD
CHINESE
RESTAURANT

- What is your speciality dish in Khasi Cuisine? Or what is your restaurant's most popular dish?

Ronjoy: We prepare all type of Khasi dishes, although the standard all time crowd favourite remains Dohsniang Neiiiong and Jadoh.

- What about the ingredients? Is it easy to get them?

Melody: Yes. All the ingredients that we require for our dishes are bought from the nearby Bara Bazaar.

- How popular would you say your restaurant is?

Melody: On average we serve about 700-750 meals a day!! So I guess we are doing pretty well?! (laughs)

- How many people does your Restaurant employ? How many chefs do you have?

Ronjoy: We have two chefs to prepare Khasi food and three chefs to prepare Chinese food. We also have two waiters who have been trained at IIHM, Shillong.

- How many people can your restaurant accommodate at a time?

Melody: Right now the restaurant can accommodate up to 60 people at a time.

- Any plans to expand your business?

Ronjoy: Right now we are very focused on serving good quality food, and focusing on maintaining or upgrading the variety and quality of food that we serve. So for now we are happy with what we have in terms of business size, but perhaps in the next two-three years we will think of expanding.

- Is there any help that you would like to get from external agencies or government?

Ronjoy: Actually yes. What we perceive is that restaurants such as ours have low visibility, particularly when it comes to tourists. If the Government or an agency in the private sector could help us with publicity and outreach to tourists, that would greatly help us. And in fact it would help us continue to promote our state's indigenous cuisine in whatever way we can.

The Unique

Pusaw

The Traditional Khasi Cake



Whether eaten hot and steaming as part of every meal or made into cakes and crepes and eaten with sweet red tea, rice occupies a central place in Khasi cuisine and indeed the cuisine of all tribes in Meghalaya. But the unique thing about rice dishes in Meghalaya is how their taste varies across different regions of the state, deriving as much from the innumerable indigenous varieties of rice grown here as from a particular recipe.

Pusaw is one such traditional Khasi snack. Made from a very special variety of red rice grown in the hills and paddy fields of Khasi Hills, the most famous Pusaw comes from the small village of Mawranglang in the South West Khasi Hills district.

Since this snack has no artificial ingredients or preservatives and neither does it have excess sugar, it is a healthy and delicious accompaniment to the sweetened red tea popular among the Khasis. In Shillong one can find authentic Mawranglang Pusaw in Motphran and lewduh, but also in a few local tea stalls.



Making *Pusaw* the Traditional Way

The rice is first thoroughly cleaned then soaked in water for at least two hours. After the water is drained using traditional baskets known as *Khoh* or *Shang*, the rice is pulverized to powder using a mortar and pestle. While the rice powder at this stage looks fine to the untrained eye, only the most fine grained rice powder will do for good *Pusaw*. The rice powder is thus sieved multiple times before it is used for cooking.

The traditional method of making *Pusaw* involves first making a paste by mixing the fine rice powder with a small amount of warm water. Then, edible soda is added in the proportion of 1 kilo rice to a pinch. A minimal amount of sugar is also added to the mixture at this time.





Next, the cooking pot is heated on a traditional clay stove and oil is slowly added. Once the oil is hot, the paste is poured into the pot and the pot covered. On the cover are kept a few pieces of hot charcoal so that the pot is evenly heated from all sides and the rice cooked from the top as well.



Local Flavours:

There are two types of Pusaw - Plain and 'Special'. The 'Special' Pusaw is where local variations in this dish comes in, but common additional ingredients include orange rind and egg. Since the West and South West Khasi Hills areas are famous for their oranges, the flavour of these local oranges and the texture of the local rice make for a beautiful, extremely aromatic combination.





Making a Livelihood out of *Pusaw*

Today, nearly 70% of the households in Mawranglang are engaged in making and selling *Pusaw* as a key livelihood activity, and have begun passing this livelihood tradition to the next generation.

The *Pusaw* from Mawranglang is especially popular and highly demanded even by urban consumers. It is supplied to several big markets including Mawkyrwat, Nongstoin, Mawngap, Mawsynram, Nongjri and Shillong.

Each household in Mawranglang cooks 20-30 *Pusaw* cakes per day during summer and almost 80-100 during various festive seasons. Plain *Pusaw* is sold at Rs. 80 an average sized piece while Special *Pusaw* is sold at Rs. 100 for an average sized piece. This gives them a profit of about Rs. 20-30 per *Pusaw*.

Preserving the Brand Value of *Mawranglang Pusaw*

A key challenge that the people of Mawranglang face in marketing and selling their traditional snack is that a number of other communities have also begun making and selling their versions of Pusaw after seeing the success enjoyed by Mawranglang. While the basic recipe stays the same, the difference between Pusaw from Mawranglang and that from other villages lies in the taste. Connoisseurs of Mawranglang Pusaw can spot the difference and say that Pusaw from elsewhere can often tend to be too sweet or too tough in texture.

The community members of Mawranglang village have decided to form a Pusaw Society to collectively address this challenge and create a marketable brand for their authentic version of Pusaw. By forming a Society, Cooperative or a Self Help Group, the community members believe that they will be better able to access marketing and funding resources under formal government schemes, bank schemes or NGO programmes. The Enterprise Resource Persons (ERPs) at the Mawkyrwat Enterprise Facilitation Centre (EFC) are guiding them through this process.

In addition to initiating better branding and marketing, the Mawranglang community is also trying to explore possibilities of creating a Geographic Indication (GI) (or patenting) for their Pusaw and currently in need of help for the same.





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