

## MISSION LAKADONG: BECKONING THE WORLD!

By KN Kumar

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Genuine heroes who move societies toward progress are neither dramatic nor glamorous. The ever-toiling farmers or army jawans prepared to sacrifice their lives for the nation are not in the public domain while the loud and flashy people dominate media space. Fake narratives mislead the broader society so much that it starts worshipping the false gods. I have not much idea about the sociology of heroism, but I know for sure that Padma Shri Ms Trinity Saioo and Mr Nanandro Marak are our state's genuine heroes. Their steadfast commitment to progress, despite their humble backgrounds and limited means, makes them what they are – different from the rest! Some farmers I interacted with have felt that such a recognition restores their professional pride and personal self-esteem. While Trinity Saioo is known for her work in Mission Lakadong, Nanandro Marak is the man for Black Pepper in Garo Hills. The state department of Agriculture & Farmers' Welfare created an ecosystem that has let such unpretentious people emerge and be discovered by the country. My compliments to the Department. Evidently, the central government too has modified its process to unearth such people from the ground who indisputably deserve national recognition. Two consecutive Padma Shris and both farmers – who is leading us to progress?

First, let me take you back to early 2018 when a conscious view was taken to capitalize on the opportunity presented by Lakadong turmeric, the demand for which was growing, but the volumes were not. Farmers ready to cultivate had no seed rhizomes, entrepreneurs willing to process had no volumes, the technology was available for induction, but no one to invest, and the department's officers willing to work had neither a Mission nor funds nor guidance. Hence a decision to launch an exclusive Mission Lakadong was made, and the department sought the support of the Meghalaya Institute of Entrepreneurship (MIE) to prepare the Mission document, and the Hon'ble Governor of Meghalaya launched the Mission Lakadong on April 25, 2018. Hindsight teaches us many things. I think Victor Hugo was right when he said – 'nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come.' The time for Lakadong Turmeric had to come!

India produces 78% of the world's Turmeric. However, with a total production of 16,630 M.T. (including other varieties of Turmeric), the share of Meghalaya in the national turmeric production was just 1.79% in 2014-15. Though our production remained more or less the same, our share dropped down to 1.74% by 2017-18. What it means is that other states like Telangana and Maharashtra moved ahead with higher production.

The first challenge, therefore, was to increase the area and production. We knew we wouldn't count until the volumes were sufficiently large, and we also knew that until the farmers are sensitized about the value Lakadong offers to the world, it would not be possible for us to expand the area rapidly. At the launch of the Mission Lakadong in 2018, the number of Lakadong farmers in West Jaintia Hills was about 1000, and the production was 2,577 Metric tonnes. The numbers needed to go up manifold,

which meant more area and more farmers had to be brought into Lakadong cultivation. The department notified Trinity Saioo as a member of the 'Committee of Farmer Leaders' consisting of fifteen women leaders from West Jaintia Hills district whom we met periodically.

They were our ambassadors. There was continual communication between them and us, and the ground level difficulties were always discussed and shared with us, so we could attempt mid-course corrections if required. Trinity played a significant role in mobilizing the farmers and in reaching the government's message. She helped form and educate the SHGs, which now number 129, each with about ten active farmers. So, the number of Lakadong farmers through the SHG route alone is 1290, and another 6000 individual farmers came forward to undertake the cultivation, taking the total number of farmers currently drawn into Lakadong to 7290. That is a seven-fold increase in the number of farmers in three years. An additional area of 1075 hectares is now brought into Lakadong, and the additional production is now 6368 Metric tonnes (figures for 20-21 are estimates).

A lot has happened since the Mission's launch in 2018. An expensive component of turmeric cultivation is the seed rhizome. Its non-availability and high price are two significant constraints. Since Lakadong is unique to our state and the farmers cannot obtain seed rhizome anywhere else, procurement must be done only locally. At Rs. 40 per Kg. and the recommended seed rate of 2.5 M.T. per hectare, the cost of seed alone is Rupees one lakh per hectare- a significant deterrent for small farmers. So, the department tried out a rapid multiplication technology using single bud rhizome in pro-trays, a technique initially developed by the Tamil Nadu Agricultural University. Through this technology, more plants (5-6 plants) of good quality can be produced from a single rhizome, so the seed rate comes down to about 600 Kgs./ha, which can save the farmers up to Rs.76,000, per hectare. Since the process is simple, farmers or SHGs or entrepreneurs can take up the rapid multiplication. Technology is now good to go, and we have targeted to train farmers of ten villages this year. The idea is to minimize the cost of cultivation and maximize the farmers' profit. There are other initiatives. With the help of the Smart Village Movement, a Farmers Development Centre is being established at Shangpung. To be set up by e-Fresh, a company, this Centre will provide one-stop services to the farmers and help them market their produce with the support of the Samunnati Foundation. With the support of the National Horticulture Board, a programme to develop the Lakadong Cluster is being attempted. The NITI Aayog has identified West Jaintia Hills under its 'One District One Product (ODOP)' programme and has already facilitated an agreement with a Kerala-based procurement company. A ten-tonne order was negotiated, and the consignment was already sent. Apart from the domestic market, the export market is also slowly opening up. Last year, exploratory shipments were made to four countries – Netherlands, USA, U.K. and Russia. The total value of the exports was about Rs 30 lakh. Since the feedback is excellent, the volume of exports will be higher this year.

Two new FPOs are being formed in the district. The LIFE Spice Processing Co-operative Society, Laskein, has now become a Training-cum-incubation centre. The Spices Board, Kochi, has given us an instant Curcumin Testing Unit, which the farmers have already tested and is ready to be deployed. The process for obtaining the Geographical Indication for Lakadong Turmeric is on. We may receive the G.I. tag for Lakadong Turmeric in another six months, further improving our brand.

Let us now examine the status of the processing of the Lakadong Turmeric in the West Jaintia Hills district. The figures are inaccurate, but one estimate puts the number of pulverizing mills in the West Jaintia Hills district at 40. The cumulative grinding capacity is unknown, but we estimate it to be about a tonne per day. Our current value chain stops at the turmeric powder, and I believe that only about 10-15% of the total production is getting ground into powder, the rest being sold in the form of dried slices. The drying process is still in the open, neither scientific nor hygienic. So, ten young fabricators from the district were sent to Teewave Technologies, Hyderabad, to test-fabricate solar dehydrators. After a month-long training, they are now ready to fabricate them locally. Four such dehydrators were already locally fabricated and inducted, and the farmer feedback being excellent, 50 solar dehydrators are now proposed for induction this year. But the most profitable and critical product in the value chain is Curcumin, which we can't extract as of now, which is a loss of opportunity. As the Mission increases production, the time to establish curcumin extraction units is now. There is not a single curcumin extraction unit in the entire northeast. It is common knowledge that Lakadong is valued because of its high curcumin content. The global curcumin market valued at Rs 437 crore in 2019 is expected to grow at 12.7% per annum. The Corona pandemic has triggered massive demand for Curcumin globally. India will gain as the largest producer, and Meghalaya will gain even more because of our monopoly. While the farmers get Rs.150 per kg. of Turmeric dried slices, 95% pure curcumin extract is sold at Rs. 6400 a Kg. As the curcumin content of Lakadong is averaging at 7%, we may need 14 Kgs. of Lakadong to produce a Kilo of Curcumin. The procurement cost of Lakadong is Rs. 2100 while the Curcumin fetches three times that of it. The extraction units are not that expensive to establish, and a loan can be mobilized under the Agriculture Infrastructure Fund, with an interest cap of 9% and an interest subvention of 3% provided by the Government of India. So, the effective rate of interest is just 6%.

Through this article, I urge the state's entrepreneurs to establish Curcumin extraction units in the state. We have just begun our journey. Hugo may well be right. After all, the time for Lakadong has come.