

Chaudhary Charan Singh once said, "The farmer is the master of this country, but he has forgotten his power."

Kisan Diwas, which translates to Farmers Day, is celebrated in honour of Chaudhary Charan Singh who was a ferocious farmer's leader and later went on to become the country's fifth prime minister.

To remind the farmers of the power they hold, The Meghalaya Farmers' (Empowerment) Commission (MFEC) was created in 2019, as an outcome of the pilot Meghalaya Farmers' Parliament (MFP) to plug into the loopholes and shorten the distance between the farmers' voices and the policy and law-makers.

The Commission, therefore, is a statutory body created by an act by the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly.

Why was there a need for such a commission?

BK Sohliya, Executive Advisor, MFEC, stated, "Farmers from Meghalaya, like their counterparts from the North East, have never had a voice. Here in our state, farmers never got to voice out their concerns about their needs. Consequently, a lot of the policies are based on assumptions and some data from the ground. Therefore, this commission acts as a voice of the farmers."

On how effective it has been, he added, "The reports that came out recently said that farmers from Meghalaya are better off compared to other states. It, in fact, came as a surprise to us as well. That said, I think that the survey has probably clubbed livestock and agriculture together."

"Compared to the condition of the farmers 10 to 20 years back, I would definitely say that our farmers are doing better, but how much... is a matter of debate," he pointed out.

Sohliya mentioned that certain interventions on the part of the department includes encouraging farmers to not stick to monoculture, in order to stabilise their income. To some extent, it has probably helped the farmers.

"Farmers in Meghalaya don't depend only on agriculture, it is clubbed with livestock rearing, fishery, bee keeping and other activities. All this contributes to the family income," he said.

Other factors have also contributed. The farmers in Meghalaya and north-east, are in general, blessed with fertile soil, good rainfall, but the lack of infrastructure and good connectivity is a downside. Back in the day, information isolation was



ON OUR LANDS, THEY TOIL!

In highlighting the several pertinent issues that plague the farmers of Meghalaya, **Abha Anindita** explores the role played by The Meghalaya Farmers' (Empowerment) Commission to honour *Kisan Diwas*, celebrated on December 23.

prevalent, however, with the advent of smartphones and internet, farmers are easily able to access markets.

One of the major interventions by the Commission has been Buckwheat. Buckwheat is a pseudo cereal and was not one of the mainstream crops. It is similar to millets in the sense that the latter can be grown in adverse climatic conditions. The crop has a very short growing period, possesses nutritional value, and is a much better protein profile compared to rice and wheat.

Sohliya said, "Buckwheat, as a crop, was ignored; it was never on the radar. The blinkered focus on rice and wheat is indeed causing a lot of problems that we see today (hypertension, diabetes). As a country, the attitude towards food has to change and that's the reason we picked up a crop like buckwheat."

The commission is mandated to look at the food security of people in general, and not only limited to the farmers. It has to also identify avenues whereby farmers'

livelihoods could be supplemented and increased. Buckwheat has the potential for all of it.

But what if the youth do not want to take up farming anymore? Who would put food on our plates then? What would this planet be without a farmer? What would happen if nobody wanted to take up farming?

"This is indeed a disturbing trend. The children of farmers, especially from rural areas, are educated and they do not want to take farming anymore. They have seen their parents struggle, including the labour and turmoil that comes with farming, which makes them believe that this is not something for them," Sohliya said, referring to the comprehensive survey that was done a couple of years ago that suggested that 60 percent of the population of Meghalaya is under the age of 30.

The young population is aspiring and in the prime of their productive years, looking for opportunities and avenues. "When the youths have nothing to chan-

nelise their energies towards, what you have is a ticking time bomb. It, therefore, leads to social unrest, tension and antisocial behavior," he stated, adding that once shown the way, they are quick to learn.

At present, the commission is working towards achieving this.

A lot of reluctance on their part also has to do with the drudgery that comes along with it. The youths do not want to be involved in jobs like these as they think that farming is not glamorous enough for them.

He further added that labour in Meghalaya and the entire Himalayan belt is scarce and expensive. 40-50 percent of input cost is labour across crops. Hence, for cheap labour, there is migration – people come from outside, which gives rise to a whole different set of problems.

"A possible solution to this could be mechanisation of agriculture. But here's the catch. A lot of equipment targeted for agriculture is specific to plain areas. There's hardly any equipment that has

been made for the mountain belt," he said.

Sohliya highlighted the initiatives being taken by the commission to enlighten the rural youth with programmes like Revamp Training of Rural Youth for Self-Employment in Agriculture (TRYSEFA) to teach them about farming and related activities. The commission is also intervening to empower women by customising equipment and making the best of the herbs available in the state.

The commission has also worked towards reducing the wastage of jackfruit that went to about 10 lakh metric tonnes per year. In this regard, The Jackfruit Techno Incubation Centre, one of the two in the state under Mission Jackfruit, will serve as a common processing center for jackfruit and provide hands-on training to beneficiaries.

"It began when the commission was still being put into place, with KN Kumar as the principal secretary. I was the director of Meghalaya Institute of Entrepreneurship, and we put together the jackfruit mission to actually turn jackfruit into a value-added commodity," he said.

Additionally, the commission also has promoted indigenous products such as long pepper (*sohmarit khlaw*).

While speaking about how the commission works, Sohliya said the commission has a holistic view of the entire ecosystem as it is not limited only to agriculture.

It delves into the issues within the system and the ways in which practical solutions can be reached at.

He said, "Like mechanisation will help livestock and agriculture, we are focusing on buckwheat from a health perspective, with the focus on food security. The fruit wines can address problems of wastage, and at the same time, give high value returns to processors. We are also working to encourage entrepreneurs to come into the value chain."

Our farmers ensure food on the table. Despite the numerous economic and social issues that continue to plague them, the presence of MFEC shows that an entity is out there, working towards their betterment. This is definitely a good start.



The writer is a Senior Reporter with *The Meghalayan*

WOMEN IN PODCASTS!

New age digital entertainment and technology company, JetSynthesys along with Warner Music India and Spotify, has launched EkWomen's first podcast series that enthralls listeners with heart-warming stories of inspiring South Asian origin women.

The series is conceived and produced by Medha Jaishankar (formerly at BBCWorld and Reliance Entertainment) and host Monika Patel, along with Sheetal Bapat, Head - Social Impact, JetSynthesys. The podcast launch was celebrated in Pune, in the presence of Anu Aga, Bollywood choreographer Rujuta Vaidya, JetSynthesys Founder Rajan Navani, Suman Tai, and Alpana Kirloskar, business-woman Uma Ganesh, author Sudha Menon, food consultant Karen Anand among other well-known women.

A global podcasting, networking, and mentoring space for women, EkWomen will feature uplifting stories about the struggles and successes of interviewees like celebrity chef Maneet Chauhan; Shalini Vadhera, serial entrepreneur and founder of cosmetics firm Global Goddess Beauty; Shaheen Mistri, CEO of Teach for India and founder of Akanksha;

Payal Kadakia, founder and executive chairman of Class Pass; Yoga Guru Ira Trivedi; award-winning author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni; Seema Anand - storyteller and mythologist; Bollywood choreographer Rujuta Vaidya; and award-winning science journalist Bijal Trivedi, among others.

Talking about the launch, Navani, CEO and Founder, JetSynthesys said, "We are happy to launch this podcast with Warner Music India. Diversity and inclusion are the key focus areas under Jet Social Impact where we aim to scale impact through enterprise and innovation. EkWomen is a global sisterhood platform for women to inspire and get inspired. I appreciate Medha and Monika's vision in bringing this idea to life. We look forward to seeing the response the episodes will be receiving and we hope they provide some thought-provoking takeaways for all."

Leading the initiative, Jaishankar, Producer, EkWomen, said, "I have always been an ardent supporter of women empowerment and wanted to bring to the forefront, stories of their struggles and success so they reach a larger audience. Monika and I are happy the podcast is now alive

and grateful for the support of Rajan, Sheetal, Warner Music India, Spotify, and all our interviewees. I hope the audience enjoys the conversations as much as we did."

"As a community, EkWomen seeks to empower and mentor women, and inspire others to follow their own path to success. The project enabled us to connect with diverse South Asian women and hear their motivational stories. We are excited to share their experiences with people across the globe and hope listeners find the stories as interesting as we did while recording them," added Patel.

Sheetal Bapat, Head of Social Impact, JetSynthesys said: "It is an honour to be a part of this team and be able to share such insightful conversations with the world. At Jet Social Impact, one of our goals has always been to create social networks and communities to shift narratives and create an impact and this is just the right step in that direction. I hope the audience also finds something that they can relate to in these stories leading to feeling inspired and encouraged to strive to do bigger things." (*IANSLife*)



KENTUCKY FOR CHRISTMAS

The Japanese celebrate Christmas in an interesting way. Following a successful 1974 marketing campaign named, "Kurisumasu ni wa kentakkii!", Japanese families eat Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) instead of a traditional, family dinner consisting of turkey. People order party barrels in advance and those who don't pre-order wait in long queues to get their special KFC boxes. Colonel Sanders statues, dressed as Santa Claus, usher in the festive spirit. It is said that December 24 is the busiest time of the year for KFC outlets in Japan, with commercials blaring on the TV.



CHRISTMAS SPIDER

Primarily celebrated in western Ukraine, Christmas trees are decorated with spider webs. Here's the catch – they're not real spiders but ornaments that look like webs. People believe this to be a sign of good luck. While no one can say how this started, a tale revolves around a poor family who could not afford decorations on their tree. Sad, they went to bed, only to wake up on Christmas day to find the tree covered with spider webs, making their tree stand out. This belief is prevalent in Poland and Germany, too.

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

We write for the slow reader, for those who want from their weekend supplement an intimate glimpse of the people that make the state of Meghalaya.

If you're a writer or artist, and you share our philosophy of giving readers a relaxing, advertisement-free experience of immersing in local stories, shoot us an e-mail with your pitch.

