

## **SOHLIYA – THE STRAWBERRY VILLAGE**



Sohliya is a pretty village that nestles in the lush green hills of Ri-Bhoi district of Meghalaya. In less than a decade, its inhabitants have transformed their village from a sleepy, nondescript hamlet to a vibrant model of horticulture-led development, and the originator of Meghalaya's strawberry revolution.

Ten years ago, their energetic and effervescent headman, O. Lyngkhoi brought a few strawberry plants to the village. For a few years, small patches of strawberry cultivation brought a little extra income to the people.

From 2004 onwards, the Technology Mission on Horticulture – North East (TMH-NE), the North Eastern Council (NEC) and the support extended by the State Government's Centre of Excellence for Strawberries at nearby Dewlieh has enabled this to grow into a C2C Agri-Business initiative that is a commercially successful model for emulation, and a vehicle for the economic upliftment of the people. From small beginnings, Meghalaya has emerged as one of the largest producer of strawberries in the country.

Mr. Lyngkhoi, or Bah (Brother) Os as he is affectionately known has expanded his own cultivation from a few plants, to more than an acre of immaculately contoured strawberry cultivation; all of it with well laid and maintained drip irrigation. He has experimented with new forms of mulching, and brought the other farmers together into an association that carries out post-harvest grading and marketing operations. The Ri-Bhoi Strawberry Growers Association (RBSGA) is now a market player and exporter and a force to contend with in the delicious world of strawberries.

Leading the way, of course, is Sohliya village. 66 of the 67 households grow strawberries. The village is an example of the benefits that can accrue to a community that works together on the cultivation of low volume high value crops, and of the catalytic impact and change that well implemented Government Schemes and a dedicated group of horticulture officers can bring about.

Sohliya village is now booming. Villagers proudly show off their new acquisitions – TV sets, pukka houses, two wheelers, and in some cases, even cars. Proud mothers point to their children, who have gone beyond the village school to higher studies in Shillong and elsewhere. Yushildap Nongbsap has built a new house, complete with shiny CGI sheets. Elberus Wanniang has a new brick house. Shrinly Lyngkhoi has cleared her debts, and looks forward to a new and bright future for herself and her family. Barihun Lyngkhoi has opened a tea stall-cum-grocery shop in the village. These stories are repeated in many villages across the district. Villages like Umktieh, Umran, Bhoirymbong, Umsaitsning, Khliehumtrew, Raitong, the list goes on. These successes have sparked off similar adoption of the crop in districts like East Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills, West Khasi Hills and the Garo Hills with farmers in these districts jumping onto the strawberry bandwagon with East Khasi Hills leading the way by initiating a two hectare clustered cultivation of the crop in Mawpran village which has brought the village together in a spirit of solidarity.

On 30<sup>th</sup> January 2010, a Rural Business Hub (RBH) was inaugurated by Dr. Mukul Sangma, Deputy Chief Minister in charge Horticulture, Meghalaya. The Hub is being setup through the auspices of the Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship (IIE), Guwahati, in coordination with the RBSGA for the benefit of strawberry farmers of the district. On the same day and occasion, the village Durbar of Sohliya in collaboration with a private agency, Nakliar Tours, also inaugurated a Horti-Eco Adventure Tourism project with strawberries as its USP and non motorized eco friendly adventure tourism sporting activities like mountain biking, trekking, paintball shooting and river rafting. The RBSGA is also doing its bit for Sohliya village by establishing, in 2009, the Pratlynti English Medium School in the village for nursery students to class VII.

In fact so confident are the Strawberry farmers of Ri Bhoi today that in 2010 the RBSGA has gone in for an outright crop loan of ` . 91.5lakhs to enable them to expand the cultivation of this “fruit of change”.



Picturesque Meghalaya is now the land of strawberries and is the third largest producer of the fruit in the country with total dominance of the Eastern and North Eastern market.

Indeed, Sohliya village has shown the way!





O. Lyngkhoi

