

Tour report of Dr. Gorakh Singh, Horticulture Commissioner of his tour to Meghalaya State

Visited Meghalaya State during 14-16 February, 2011 to review HMNEH programme to create mass awareness among the farmers.

Meghalaya (Shillong) – 14th February, 2011

Inspected pineapple and strawberry farmers' fields located barely 35 kilometers from the State capital of Shillong, in Ri-Bhoi District of Meghalaya, at the end of a dusty rural track, the sleepy idyllic hamlet of Sohliya seems an unlikely birthplace of a revolution of strawberry cultivation.

Interacted with farmers on the method of cultivation of strawberry including production technology for daughter runners. The commercialization of the fruit is visible in the daily lives of the strawberry growers of the state and nowhere else is this effect more pronounced than in the village of Mr.



Lyngkhoi, or Bah Os as he is affectionately known. Starting with him, Bah Os has expanded his cultivation of the fruit from a small patch of a few square meters five years back to his present area of little more than an acre and the income generated from his strawberries has enabled him to construct houses for his four children as well as his own and recently enabled him to buy a Maruti 800. His success, combined with the efforts of the Center of Excellence, has been the key factor for farmers of the District adopting new technologies like drip irrigation, mulching, post harvest grading and management and in reposing their faith in him as the General Secretary of the Ri-Bhoi Strawberry Growers' Association (RBSGA), a registered organization of growers formed through the initiative and support by the Dewlieh Center of Excellence.

In retrospect it was the formation of the RBSGA and the untiring efforts of its General Secretary that witnessed the rise of the Association from a conglomeration of farmers to a marketing force that now negotiates markets for its

growers nationally as well as internationally. Having captured almost the entire North Eastern market, the Association had in April 2009, signed an MOU with Seuji Agro Processing and Services Pvt. Ltd, Guwahati, in an agreement brokered by the Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship (IIE) and supported by the Dewlieh Center of Excellence to market strawberries to Chennai which has resulted in the halting of Sri Lankan import of strawberries into Chennai during the last season. The Association has also secured an export order to Bangladesh for the coming season.



Grading & packing

The hard work put in by the General Secretary and the members of the Association is paying dividends in more ways than one and Sohliya village is a model demonstration of the benefits that can accrue to a community through working together in cultivation of low volume high value crops. With 66 households out of 68 cultivating the fruit, Sohliya plays a major part in total production of strawberries. Now, many families have been able to afford TV sets, building houses, better schooling and healthcare, opened bank accounts and finally have a chance of improving their quality of life. Yushilda Nongbsap, an ordinary housewife, her weathered face reflecting her years of toil and worry proudly showed us the new bamboo house with a tin roof that she has gifted her daughter. Tiewdaris Lyngdoh, another housewife, has started construction of her new house and even though only the roof is up, she hopes to complete it by the next season of strawberries. Elberus Wanniang now has his own brick house and has moved out of his in-laws house. Desphiniel Wahlang, an old grower, has now extended his



New TV & Music system



Sohliya church

though only the roof is up, she hopes to complete it by the next season of strawberries. Elberus Wanniang now has his own brick house and has moved out of his in-laws house. Desphiniel Wahlang, an old grower, has now extended his

house to accommodate his growing family. Many more small but significant successes and examples of improvements in the lives of the people of Sohliya abound which are too numerous to cite here. Even the village church has benefitted with Sunday collections now touching Rs. 5000/- per week as compared to Rs. 2000/- per week during the pre strawberry years. I advised them to establish mother block in green house for mass production of daughter runners.

Visited Ri-Bhoi Experimental Centre and discussed with concerned officials about the important initiatives being taken in the field of rose, anthurium and strawberry production. The system for grading and packaging of rose and strawberry were also inspected.

On 15th February, 2011 inspected pear plantations being raised by farmers in Upper Shillong. They were guided about canopy management to maintain its tree height and canopy shape for enhancing productivity, profitability and sustainability.



Visited other farmers fields who are engaged in seed production of cauliflower and radish with the support of HMNEH Scheme. It was learnt that these farmers harvest seed as high as 80 grams per cauliflower. The seed is sold @ Rs. 12000/ kg. On the contrary, the farmers who are engaged in seed production programme of their own, harvest about 30 gm/ plant. These farmers are now adopting the improved seed production technology to earn enhanced income.

Inspected fields of women farmers engaged in cultivation of cymbidium. It is grown in greenhouses having excellent conditions.

Visited Sponge Gourd production in Umklai village of Re-Bhoi district. Presently, loofahs of different shapes and size, an impressive range of product diversification has occurred which have dramatically transformed the product range. To promote loofa, a farmer named



Shri Him synkli has formed a Umkali Area Integrated Cooperative Society at Ri-Bhoi district whose managing committee has seven members. He informed that his society has been regularly participating at trade fairs and Exhibitions in the region and also at the national level, where their sohprew products are proving to be quite a hit. As a vibrant, successful & dynamic cooperative society, besides providing regular dividends to its immediate primary members, this activity is also creating avenues of alternative livelihood for village residents and also playing a significant role towards augmenting additional income of not only for Umklai village but also for the surrounding areas. Employment and jobs are being created through teams of workers who give the finishing touch to the *loofahs* like plucking, cutting, soaking, drying and designing the finished products into various shapes and forms. Women are generally involved in sewing and stitching and in the more delicate aspects which go into giving the product a finished look. This has created a virtuous cycle, which in turn is emboldening the society to attempt newer and more creative products and designs. About 15 units were brought under area expansion in 2004-05. In 2010, the production capacity of this unit is 36000 nos. which were disposed off with a good price. However the real prospect of this project could be realized only by bringing new areas under cultivation with latest technical Know-How together with improving the production capacity of this unit by upgrading the machineries as well as post production. Out of 1 ha. of sponge gourd cultivation, an average income of Rs. 1.12 lakh is realized by a farmer.



Suggestions

The State Government has been advised:

1. to provide necessary subsidy for erection of greenhouse in cluster mode for mass production of vegetable seeds.
2. to encourage promotion of cymbidium in cluster mode especially in upper Shillong.
3. to increase area under sponge gourd (Loofah) to 50 ha. in Ri-Bhoi district.
4. to establish virus free mother block of citrus in green house for mass multiplication of disease free planting material.
5. to prioritize canopy management and rejuvenation programme in fruit crops for enhancing quality production, productivity, profitability and sustainability.
6. to create awareness amongst the farmers for latest production technologies in horticulture sector.
7. to enhance productivity of labour through effective tools and implements.
8. to promote cultivation of export oriented varieties of ginger with low fiber content.