

Transforming rural lives, one Agri-Entrepreneur at a time



Author: Dr. Shachi Gurumayum, co-founder of the MaolKeki Foundation, through which he has been transferring the skills and knowledge he has gained over years of studying and working in Europe, America and Africa. Shachi is also a Director of AgriMayum GmbH, a company based in Switzerland and, in January 2021, he received the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award, the highest honour for an overseas Indian conferred by the President of India.

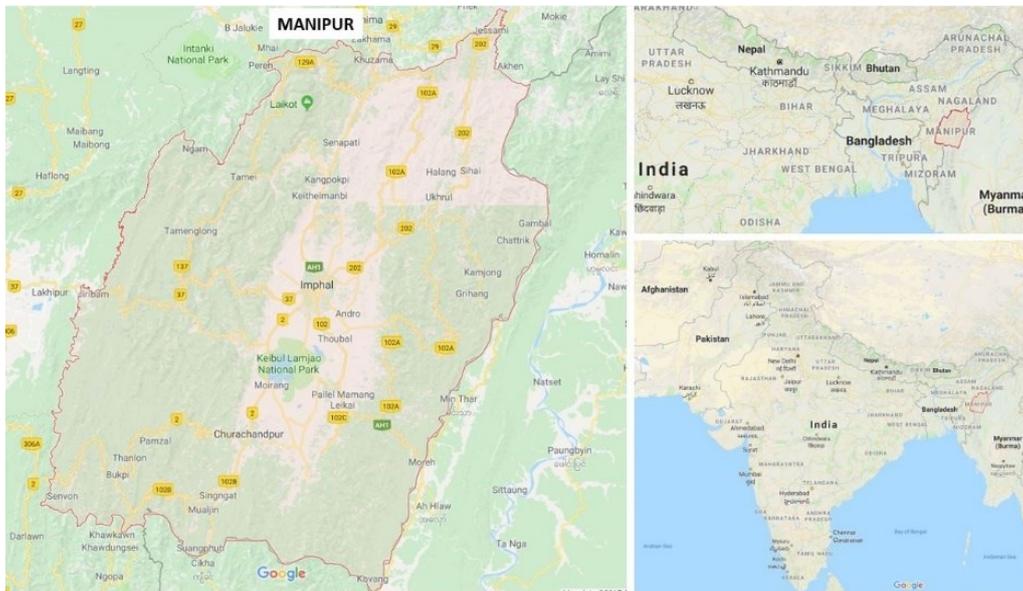
In Manipur, India's North-Eastern region which is devoid of much of the industrialisation seen in the rest of the country, catalytic funding through donations, philanthropy or grants, in conjunction with in-kind support to transfer skills, can make a huge difference. Yet, in most instances, the impact of many such initiatives remains limited when sustainability is not factored in during the design process. It is with this in mind that MaolKeki Foundation has focused on a model of entrepreneurship from day one where individuals take ownership for their own success.



Imphal Valley © Dr. Shachi Gurumayum

Manipur

Manipur is primarily an agrarian state. Once described as the Switzerland of India by Lord Irwin, Manipur is part of the tail end of the Himalayan range with altitudes varying from 40m to 3,000m above sea level and characterized by warm summers and cool winters. The length of the Growing Period exceeds 270 days in a year, and rainfall ranges from 900mm in Imphal valley to 2,600mm in Tamenglong in the hills, with temperatures ranging from 0°C to 35°C.



Source: Google

Most of its population of ca. 3 million people rely on agriculture for their sustenance. Out of 2.2 million hectares of land, Manipur has an approximate net cropping area of 231,570ha with a cropping intensity of 148%, according to the latest state government figures.

However, Manipur has very limited infrastructure and access to the outside markets, with only some basic processing of local raw materials, and faces low productivity levels. Tomato prices in Manipur can be sometimes similar to those in Swiss supermarkets! Add to this the fact that current unemployment is as high as 11.5%, with many employed in the informal sectors, agribusiness could play a transformative role, particularly for those living in rural areas. MaolKeki Foundation has set up an Agri-Entrepreneurship (AE) program precisely to this end.

The Agri-Entrepreneurship Program

From hundreds of farmers trained on Good Agricultural Practices and various crop programs, a handful are selected and trained in the basics of entrepreneurship. Beyond just training, they are also given the opportunity to develop their ideas into pilot projects.

In 2020, training was conducted online by the Agri Entrepreneur Growth Foundation to adapt to Covid-19 lockdowns. Each trained agri-entrepreneur was then provided a small support of Rs25'000 (CHF310) to pilot their ideas. These ideas included delivering farm fresh vegetables from rural farmers to urban consumers, composting local raw materials to amend farmlands organically, raising young plants in greenhouses to sell to farmers, growing mushrooms or

renting machinery to save time and labour for farmers who could not afford machinery individually.

The Agri Entrepreneurship (AE) Program in pictures



Once an idea is piloted successfully, MaolKeki Foundation helps to secure funding by leveraging some of its own contributions with that of donors to turn the ideas into commercial ventures. For example, the farm fresh vegetables delivery business became *Veg-in-a-Basket* (for more details, see image below). The machinery rental and compositing business became *Pukkei AgriBusiness*, and the young plant raising business became *Ingudam Nurseries*.



Veg-in-a-Basket

Veg-in-a-Basket connects smallholder farmers to urban customers by providing them with farm-fresh vegetables.

During the many Covid-19 lockdowns in Manipur, markets were closed for long periods of time so *Veg-in-a-Basket* became the lifeline for many urban dwellers who relied on its services to access healthy fresh vegetables.

Even though deliveries are normally made in traditional baskets, *Veg-in-a-Basket* became *Veg-in-a-Bag* to ensure safety during the pandemic.

Beyond just activities in agriculture, the MaolKeki Foundation also employs a nurse to provide door-to-door health assessments. She is being assisted by another nurse, who has been left unemployed by Covid, and a health technician to establish a private Primary Healthcare Centre which will provide affordable last-mile healthcare to the farmers and their families, while building a sustainable enterprise for themselves.

Commenting on the AE Program, Dr. Baskar Reddy, Executive Director of Syngenta Foundation India said: "Syngenta Foundation works exclusively on agri entrepreneurship, so there was a natural alignment in working with the MaolKeki Foundation which also focuses on developing entrepreneurs. In a short span, MaolKeki Foundation was able to motivate rural youth to take up entrepreneurship and successfully anchor the program. Credit would go to Shachi and his team for their passion and commitment in working tirelessly with rural youth and transforming them."

Ms. Nirupa Sanjenbam, Project Coordinator of the AE Program concludes, "The AE Program is helping build an ecosystem of agri entrepreneurs who will feed, clothe and educate a number of people within the community impacting lives and livelihood. They are the first generation of people taking up agri entrepreneurship and leading their agricultural communities by example!"



Dr. Baskar Reddy (R) and Dr. Shachi Gurumayum at the celebration of two years of partnership, December 2019

The MaolKeki Foundation is a pioneering organization established with the purpose of catalysing positive development in Manipur. It is registered under the Indian Trusts Act, 1882. With the support of key stakeholders and partners, such as the Basel-based Syngenta Foundation for Sustainable Agriculture, especially its Indian arm Syngenta Foundation India, the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute, Anaha Trust, Sattva, NABARD, and others, MaolKeki Foundation has grown from a small entity of 1 employee in early 2018 to nearly 20 full- and part-time employees today impacting thousands of smallholder farmers and their families along the journey.

MaolKeki Foundation works primarily in the areas of agriculture, education and healthcare incorporating basic health assessments in last-mile agricultural activities with the firm belief that *Only a Healthy Farmer can Provide Food Security to a Nation*.

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