

MEET THE DYNAMIC ENTREPRENEUR DUO FROM SIKKIM

The Shoten Group with a farmer network of about 190 farmers across the length and breadth of Sikkim is an enterprise worth emulating

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Sikkim has emerged as India's first fully organic State and organic value chains across the country are trying to emulate its example. But there is a silent revolution brewing in the State, a path-breaking coming together of agriculture and enterprise.

The Agripreneurs

Abhimanyu Dhakal and his brother Abhinandan run the Shoten Group – a venture based on a 'Contractual Buy Back Guarantee model' for producers, so the entrepreneur siblings can understand supply capabilities, keep a fixed price for both producers and buyers and control the quality of the product from sowing to processing.

Abhinandan has been an agri-enthusiast for long, and truly believes in the power of partnering with communities. When he started his venture in 2013, Abhimanyu christened it

'Shoten Group' one of the Japanese names of Lord Ganesh. And, two years down, in 2015 he joined his brother.

The Product

The brothers have started their entrepreneurial journey by cultivating a root that is called Yacon. Described as a purple fruit that resembles a cross between a sweet potato and purple yam in appearance and is categorically sweet enough to be called a fruit, Yacon is actually a root and is not native to Sikkim. Its home is in the faraway South American mountain country of Peru.

But it wasn't the only crop intended for cultivation by the Dhakals. Yacon figured in the list of about 20 products the brothers wanted on their farm. Says Abhimanyu, 'We knew that we wanted to work only with organic products, Himalayan products and partner with rural communities'. The brothers researched on various locally sourced crops and horticulture products. They carried out a SWOT (Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, Threats) analysis for each individual crop and ended up selecting Yacon to begin cultivation.

The Dhakals didn't do all this without acquiring knowledge and guidance. They took help from the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), who guided the Shoten

group in creating strategies for approaching farmer clusters and creating a sustainable livelihood business model.

Spreading Far and Wide

Today, the Shoten Group has a farmer network of about 190 farmers across the length and breadth of Sikkim. The business model takes the approach of working with market influencers and based on the product characteristics (taste, texture and health benefits), create opportunities for sale. The market influencers include Nutritionists, Dieticians, Star Hotels and Restaurants and Gourmet Retail Stores who help further the story of Yacon and its many benefits.

Yacon truly is a health wonder. It is an amazing root which is not just great in taste but also possesses numerous health benefits. It helps to cure, prevent or control anything from diabetes to even certain types of cancer. It aids with blood sugar regulation, weight loss, cutting bad cholesterol, boosting immunity and most importantly, calcium absorption – something that makes it ideal for our Indian women inching closer to menopause who often suffer from acute types of arthritis and osteoporosis all due to inefficient or inadequate calcium absorption.

The Dhakals speak with confidence, 'Currently 40 diabetic patients are consuming Yacon



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regularly and finding it beneficial. It has a Glycaemic index of below 1 which is a major plus point for the diabetic consumers. Yacon improves digestive system immensely and helps increase bowel movement. It also helps in reducing hunger pangs and is very low in calories, earning the nickname of Diet Potato'.

Moving Forward

In the coming months and years, the brothers want to take their produce to markets across India and the world. While they haven't started export operations yet, groundwork has already started. They realise that all of this is going to need skills that go beyond the knowledge of produce and people, and it is one of the reasons why they joined the IEF MasterClass. The class was conducted in partnership with a local community of entrepreneurs in Sikkim called the Startup Harbour.

Says Abhimanyu, 'I joined IEF MasterClass because I felt our ideas and plans needed nurturing from the people who have been through what we are going through.

Starting up is fun but it isn't easy and it can't be done alone. The class connected to my business problems instantaneously and I understood certain areas where I needed to bring about changes in my current path. The bottom line is that I learned how to deal and cope with the challenges of my business. As my teacher puts it, "Entrepreneurship is about Firefighting."

Inspiration is Within

Inspiration is everywhere. One needs only to look within – small scale businesses derive sustenance from the small wins. It only helps the cause further if there's someone to buck you up as well as goad you on in your endeavours. If that someone happens to be your own sibling, well, the chemistry of two decades translates into an innate understanding of each other as much as the business.

There are many such opportunities across the Northeastern states and young passionate dreamers can partner with local community, local environment and create business value for themselves and their



communities. The Dhakals have led the way but thousands can follow.

As far as the Dhakals are concerned this is just the beginning and in Abhimanyu's own words, 'I see our company well established in the market dealing with a lot more than just Yacon and benefitting a lot more lives. I see myself as an example within my own community as well as other youngsters'. More power to them.

The writer is Chairperson, IEF Entrepreneurship Foundation