

Shiitake Mushroom

There is a quiet proliferation of the Shiitake mushroom — an edible, nutrition-rich mushroom mostly grown in Japan and China — in the northeastern state of Nagaland. In the beginning of 2018, Dr. Sosang Longkumer, a young scientist brought years of research in the fields of microbiology and applied genetics to his small mushroom spawn production laboratory in Dimapur. After months of experimentation, consultation with experts, references to research papers, the first fruit spawned in October 2019.

Dr. Longkumer has trained approximately 500 farmers in Shiitake and Oyster mushroom cultivation, and his team at his start-up, Konger Agritech, has made about 15,00,000 Shiitake dowel spawns and 10,000 kg of Oyster mushroom spawns.

The potential of Dr. Longkumer's project has not gone unnoticed. When the Nagaland State Rural Livelihood Mission (NSRLM) announced its 'Roadmap for Economic Development- Post [COVID-19](#) Pandemic' recently, mushroom cultivation was very much part of the plan.

The 'Mushroompreneurs'

In Aliba village, Shiitake mushrooms have saved the day for eight women of a local SHG. "During the lockdown, there was no special food, and this is what came to the rescue," says Atila Pongen, the 41-year-old president of the Pangjemer SHG. Earlier the group would cultivate tomatoes and potatoes, but ever since they trained under Dr. Longkumer and started Shiitake cultivation, the fortunes have turned, "Since August, we have harvested 38.5 kg, sold it at Rs 600 per kg — and earned nearly Rs 23,000," she says.

Similar success stories can be found in other parts of Nagaland, especially during the lockdown. "My aim is not only to spawn and grow mushrooms but to encourage a breed of entrepreneurs who can collectively contribute in building the economy of the state through farming," says Dr. Longkumer. He's decided to call them 'Mushroompreneurs'.

According to him, while demand for Shiitake is high (especially because of its medicinal properties known to fight [cancer](#), diabetes etc) in India, production is relatively low — many done in laboratories using synthetic sawdust logs as a medium in temperature-controlled rooms. "Of course, fruiting happens much faster via this method but the medicinal value of the mushroom is ten times less," he says.

On the other hand, Nagaland, with its hills, natural resources and suitable climatic conditions are optimal for natural shiitake. "The forests here are dominated by hardwood, like oak, alder, chestnut etc. And that is the ideal medium for Shiitake to grow in," says Longkumer, adding that the farmers use a method of tree "pollarding" — or pruning/cutting the branches in a certain way — so as to not harm the tree.