

FACE-TO-FACE

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“Inspiring youth to take up agriculture is my dream, and I am trying to be the change I want to see, through my enterprise.”

Sonam Angmo, Founder, Ladakh Mushrooms
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THE MUSHROOM MAVERICK: A CONVERSATION WITH LADAKH'S INSPIRING YOUNG WOMAN ENTREPRENEUR

Ditty Maria Dominic and Bhuvana N interacted with Sonam Angmo from Leh, Ladakh to understand her journey as an entrepreneur, and how digital innovations help her sustain her business. Excerpts from the interview are given below.

Ladakh Agritech is an enterprise established in 2021, having its registered office located at Likir, Leh, Ladakh. It is engaged in the production and marketing of fresh mushrooms grown in the pristine environment of Ladakh under the brand name of Ladakh Mushrooms.

Can you tell us about your cultural and educational background?

I belong to an agrarian family in a small village called Likir in Ladakh. We have a family farm and though my parents are holding government jobs, farming is something they engage in unflinchingly. As a child I was very fond of helping in my family farm. After my schooling in Ladakh, I went to Jammu for pursuing BSc (Agriculture) from Sher-e-Kashmir University of Agricultural Sciences and Technology (SKUAST). Further on I got my Master's in Agriculture Biotechnology from UAS-Dharwad. After completing my Master's I came back to Ladakh in 2018. That year I took a break to discover myself and learn things at my own pace as I was not sure of pursuing higher studies. I knew I had to do something on my own, but being just out from college I lacked clarity. As part of my learning journey, I joined an NGO called 'Ladakh Ecological Development Group' and worked in a European Union project on decentralised sanitation, in collaboration with a renowned NGO called 'Bremen Overseas Research & Development Association' (BORDA). My short work tenure at the NGO gave me an overview of the problems in my society and the changing scenario in Ladakh.

What inspired you to be an entrepreneur?

Being a student of agriculture, I was able to notice the drastic shift of Ladakh from an agrarian community to a tourism-based community. Migration of youth to cities and the predominance of tourism as a livelihood strategy has left Ladakh with barren lands which were once lush green with nutrient-rich crops, such as buckwheat, barley and other fruit crops. I was moved by these abandoned agricultural fields and startled by the ongoing cultural shift. Youth were either finding jobs in other

cities or waiting for government jobs. I knew that although I may not be able to make that big a change to this situation, I can be the change and inspire others. Yet I continued clueless about what I should do. During that time, one random day, my brother and I were having our favourite mushroom dish in a downtown restaurant. He started talking about how people in Ladakh had a huge appetite for mushrooms as most of them are vegetarian. And then he asked me, “Can we grow mushrooms in Ladakh as the demand is huge and it is met by supplies from cities outside Ladakh?” As I was an agri-graduate, he used to test my knowledge by asking random questions on agriculture. This made me realise that I did have basic knowledge about mushroom cultivation, so, considering the huge demand-supply gap, there was indeed scope for mushroom cultivation.

After conceiving the idea how did you kick-start your enterprise?

I realised that the climatic conditions of Ladakh were not conducive for mushroom cultivation throughout the year. The initial days were challenging. Though I had the basics in mushroom cultivation gained from my studies, I understood that undertaking it as a business called for further learning and guidance. Hence during the initial days, my focus was on learning, and that led me to do a SWOT analysis. The first formal training I had was from the KVK Leh’s Dr Vikas Gupta who was experimenting with the cultivation of oyster mushrooms in Ladakh.

After the KVK training, my intention was to set up a cultivation unit at Leh town since it would be easier to supply to the nearby cafes. But later I realised that my real intention was to inspire youth to take up agriculture, of course the monetary benefits I would gain were also important. Hence, I dropped the Leh idea and decided to start the cultivation at my family farm in the village. In October 2018, I started cultivating around 10-15 bags of mushrooms in a small makeshift room – measuring 4-5 feet – in my village. Sadly, the first set of bags got fully contaminated, and seeing my distress my parents realised that mushroom cultivation was not just my hobby, but a serious venture. Though it was a difficult time I learned about potential causes of contamination and prepared well for the next set. The second time it was a success and I cultivated around 30 bags of mushrooms.



Dried mushrooms

What are the many things you tried after the successful cultivation of your first batch of mushrooms?

In 2019, I carried out a trial on button mushroom cultivation as there was good demand for them and the supply was coming from Srinagar and Punjab. It was bit difficult as button mushrooms need compost as growing medium, but given Leh’s extreme weather conditions composting takes around 6-7 months. So, I continued with the cultivation of oyster mushroom.



Delivering hands-on training on mushroom cultivation to farm women of Tarchit, Khatpu and Hemaya villages in Ronga valley of Ladakh

Another trial I did was in 2020, during the COVID-19 days, to replace plastic bags with reusable plastic bottles. Being an environmentalist the extensive use of plastic bags bothered me very much. While looking for alternatives, I came across an article that discussed the scope of reusing plastic bottles for growing mushrooms. So, now I collect empty plastic bottles and even buckets and upcycle them for mushroom cultivation. In 2020, I got a chance to collaborate with an NGO called 'Local Futures' for conducting a hands-on training workshop on mushroom cultivation for the youth of Ladakh. This introduced me to an area that I had not yet explored. I found it very satisfying to train and impart knowledge to people, so that they can take up mushroom cultivation and find a source of income. Currently, I have trained around 600 farmers by collaborating with various organizations such as State Bank of India-Rural Self Employment Training Institutes (SBI-RSETI), ICICI Foundation, The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), GB Pant Institute-Leh, and other NGOs.

In 2021, while conducting one such training on oyster mushroom cultivation, I realised that a lot of farmers are interested in growing oyster mushrooms but availability of quality spawn was the major problem they faced. This led me to start spawn production. In July 2022, the spawn production unit became functional, and currently I am supplying spawn to farmers as well as to KVKs. Last year I also enlarged my production unit for both spawn and mushroom cultivation. Currently, the production unit has a capacity of 400 kg, but due to financial constraints I am able to produce only 100 kg, with one casual labourer to assist me. This year I am planning to produce 200 kg.



Mushroom cultivation in reusable plastic bottles

Where and how do you market your mushrooms?

I have registered my enterprise as 'Ladakh Agritech' and 'Ladakh Mushrooms' is the brand name of my mushrooms. In the initial two years when cultivation was on a small scale, I was just distributing the mushrooms to my family, relatives, friends and villagers. This was to introduce them to the taste and nutritional benefits of oyster mushrooms. This helped me to get feedback about my produce as well, and since it was mostly positive feedback I had people asking for more of my mushrooms.

As mentioned earlier, before starting the enterprise my proposed market was the cafes in Leh town. The demand is very high there and I thought I would be able to supply to a few cafes. There are 2-3 restaurants to whom I supply regularly. Other than these regular customers, I have a list of customers who purchase occasionally, so if the harvest is more, I will call them and supply. Most of the produce goes within a 10-15 kms radius.



Inauguration of Ladakh Agritech on July 2022 by Dr Rajbir Singh (Director KVK North Zone) and Dr Vikas Gupta (Scientist, KVK Leh)

Other than that, I keep my products for sale in the stalls at the District Industries Corporation (DIC) Leh, where they sell the products of many entrepreneurs like me under the brand 'Ladakh'. I also sell buckwheat, rajma, barley and vegetables which I cultivate in my farm.

Furthermore, I participate in exhibitions that help immensely to enhance the visibility of my products. I have not gone for any exhibitions or fairs other than in Leh town, but the UT administration takes the

products of entrepreneurs from Ladakh to Delhi and other cities for exhibiting and selling at different fairs and exhibitions. They have taken my products to expos conducted by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) in Chandigarh and Delhi.



Promotion and marketing of products at Ladakh Agritech Mela in August 2022

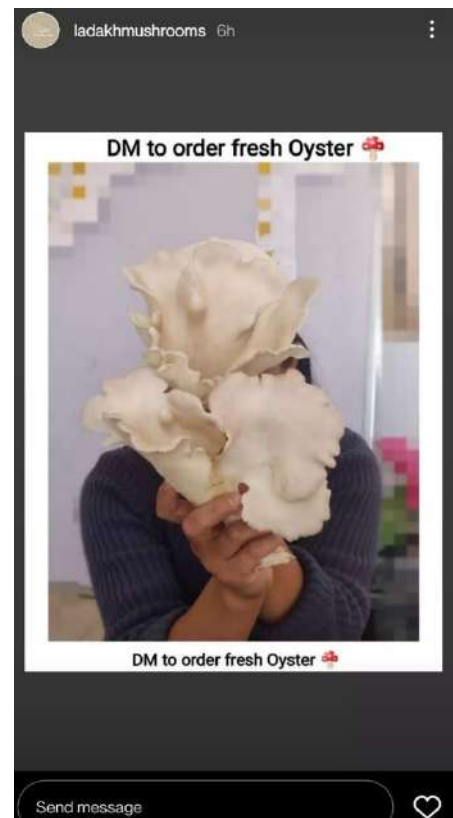
Are you also making value-added mushroom products?

I have been selling dried mushrooms in Leh market on a trial basis on a very small scale. I've been seriously thinking of starting value-addition activities as it can increase the shelf life of mushrooms and also provide higher returns. But, as I said earlier, currently my scale of production is very low and I am not even able to meet the existing demand. So, value addition can be taken up only if I produce more, and that is constrained by financial and infrastructural limitations at present. Expanding my scale of production requires more investment in infrastructure and labour, which at the moment I am trying to find. If I get financial assistance, I will certainly get going on the value addition unit.

What are the digital tools you use and how can these tools help in promoting your enterprise?

I am active on social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram. I gave several interviews on mushroom cultivation through All India Radio and Doordarshan Kendra-Leh. Once I went to train women of Tarchit-Khatpo villages on mushroom cultivation as part of a UNDP initiative. They did not recognize me initially and before I was introduced to them, they started telling the co-ordinator from UNDP that they want to learn about mushroom cultivation from Sonam Angmo, to whom they listen regularly on radio. I was surprised to know that I have many regular listeners, that too mostly women!

I would say, digital tools are excellent for increasing the visibility of enterprises, learning from peers and finding markets. Coming to the use of digital tools to promote my enterprise, I have an Instagram page called 'Ladakh Mushrooms' through which I share



Online marketing of mushrooms through Instagram

the activities of my mushroom unit. After seeing my Instagram posts, many youths are reaching out to me for advice on starting their own mushroom enterprises. Also, students from the Himalayan Institute of Alternative Learning (HIAL) visited me twice to learn about mushroom cultivation. So, I would say digital tools are helping me to achieve my dream of inspiring youth to take up agriculture.

On WhatsApp I am part of many farmer groups. Through WhatsApp I get orders as I put availability of mushrooms on harvest days on my Status. When my first spawn lot was ready, I had put it on Status and within 2-3 days I could sell all of it. So, in a place like Ladakh where villages are scattered, social media platforms enable excellent connectivity. Today I have customers from the remotest of villages in Leh and I am able to reach fellow farmers – this is possible only because of these digital tools. I have not yet tried digital marketing and e-commerce website marketing, considering the small scale of my business. But in the near future I plan to increase production and will explore digital marketing. Other than social media tools, I use Canva software to design posters and Instagram posts. In future I am planning to start a YouTube channel too, as I think it will help me reach out to more people.

Did you get any support through schemes or grants?

In 2018, I applied for a loan for setting up my unit through Jammu and Kashmir Entrepreneurship Development Institute, and I did a one-month training programme under that institute as well. I was very hopeful about getting financial assistance through that scheme, but due to bifurcation of J&K and Ladakh all the funds got cancelled.

Then in 2021, I took support of 15 lakhs with 31% subsidy for the spawn production unit from District Industries Centre (DIC) Leh, but I did not get any financial support for mushroom cultivation. The room for the mushroom cultivation and spawn unit was constructed with financial help from my family.



Harvesting of oyster mushrooms

What challenges do you face as a mushroom entrepreneur, and particularly, as a woman entrepreneur?

I admit that being a young woman entrepreneur is not easy, but I have always made it a point to strive forward whatever challenges come up in my way. As an unmarried educated woman, people seem to be very bothered about my marriage. I know they are my well-wishers, but rather than acknowledging my hard work, when they bring everything down to marriage, I feel very insulted. I strongly believe a

man of my age would not be bothered with such concerns, rather his achievements would have been hailed. Coming from a family where I am a first generation entrepreneur and both the parents are government employees, the default expectation from me is to get a government job. Advice like “Government jobs are the safest jobs for women as ultimately raising children is a woman’s lifegoal” is always there. So at these times, my motto is, ‘Hear everybody’s opinion but do only what I want’.

The other major challenge I faced is financial. The climatic conditions are conducive for mushroom cultivation only from April/May to October, as after October it will be extremely cold (below zero). So, making year-round income from mushroom cultivation is hard in Ladakh, and usually I engage in activities at my family farm or volunteer with NGOs during winter.

During last winter I experimented with a new mushroom growing room for checking if it is possible to cultivate mushrooms in winter or not. Fortunately, I see a good opportunity to grow even in winter months.

Your future plans?

I usually don’t make long-term plans. But I certainly have plans to scale up my enterprise. I hope to increase my production at least to the full capacity of my unit. For this I will need to employ more people and I am planning to give employment to women. Also, training more women in mushroom cultivation and mobilising them into an FPO is something that I want to do. I feel women will get more support and guidance if they form an FPO.



Workshop on mushroom cultivation at Stok for youths

Learning about digital marketing and increasing the digital footprint of my enterprise is another major item on my agenda. This can be done only after I increase the scale of production. But I believe digital marketing can scale up my enterprise and it is a pressing need.

Being a nature enthusiast, I also have plans to promote cultivation of the heirloom crops of Ladakh – buckwheat, local white rajma, local pea and barley – as I feel these crops are commonly neglected by farmers even though they are highly nutritious. So, I would like to expand my enterprise into the production and marketing of these crops as well. Opening a farm school that children, youth, farmers and aspiring farmers can visit, volunteer, and learn about farming is also something I hope to do in the future.

What is the turnover from your enterprise?

As I am unable to produce mushrooms year-round my turnover is less than one lakh per month. Last season, I had a net profit of around 70 percent. In the coming year I am expecting a threefold increase in the business.

What awards and recognitions have come your way?

In 2021- I received 'ICAR-Krishak' award under the Farm Entrepreneurship category. During the 2020 Kisan Mela organised by the Defence Research Institute they presented me with a Certificate in recognition of my work. During Kisan Samman Diwas 2021 organised by the Directorate of Extension, SKUAST-Kashmir, I got Champion Farmer Award. I was also awarded LSF Entrepreneurship Award by the Ladakh Science Foundation in 2021.



Promotion of products at farmers mela

What is your message for aspiring entrepreneurs?

I believe in the Gandhian quote 'Be the change you want to see'. When we are trying to do something different, many will come with problems and advice. At those times focusing on your own goals and vision is what matters most for success. Entrepreneurs have to be problem solvers, which is what they should be focussing on rather than on finding problems.

As far as Ladakh is concerned, youth should recognise the rich culture of Ladakh and take up farming as an enterprise. Unlimited scope exists for agricultural enterprises in Ladakh, be it mushroom cultivation or any other enterprise. Rather than abandoning Ladakh's agriculture and leaving it to older generations, youth should build their own enterprises in Ladakh for its betterment and a brighter future.

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