

Sirārahong Hāthei Chillies: A Fiery Heritage of Manipur

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The Sirārahong Hāthei chilli, grown exclusively in the remote hills of Ukhrul district, Manipur, is one of India's most distinctive indigenous spices. Celebrated for its fiery heat, deep crimson colour, and unique smoky aroma, this chilli embodies the rich biodiversity of the Indo–Burma hotspot and the cultural heritage of the Naga community. Beyond its culinary appeal, Hāthei chilli represents traditional knowledge, rural livelihoods, and the importance of geographical identity. Its recognition with a Geographical Indication (GI) tag in 2021 elevated it to national and global prominence, positioning it alongside India's finest spice varieties. Today, the chilli stands as both a treasured agricultural product and a symbol of Manipur's heritage, showcased proudly on platforms such as the Republic Day Parade.



Origin

Nestled in the remote hills of Ukhrul district in Manipur lies Sirārahong village, a small settlement situated within the globally recognised Indo–Burma Biodiversity Hotspot. From this ecologically rich yet geographically demanding landscape emerges one of India's most distinctive indigenous spices—the Sirārahong Hāthei chilli. Known for its intense heat, deep red colour, and unmistakable smoky aroma, Hāthei represents far more than a culinary ingredient. It embodies indigenous knowledge, regional identity, and an important livelihood resource for hill farming communities. The significance of Hāthei chilli is inseparably linked to its place of origin. Although cultivation has been attempted in neighbouring villages, farmers and traders consistently observe that the chilli grown in Sirārahong alone exhibits the desired aroma, pungency, and colour. This highlights the role of terroir, where altitude, soil composition, microclimate, and traditional cultivation practices interact to create qualities that cannot be replicated outside this region.

Indigenous Knowledge and Traditional Processing

One of the most defining aspects of Sirārahong Hāthei chilli is its traditional method of processing. Unlike many commercial chillies harvested while green, Hāthei chillies are allowed to mature fully and dry naturally on the plant. This practice intensifies flavour and heat prior to harvest. After harvesting, the chillies are traditionally smoked on bamboo mats over wood fires. This slow smoking process, preserved through generations, imparts a distinctive smoky depth layered with subtle fruity undertones. The resulting flavour profile is often likened to chipotle-style chillies, yet remains uniquely rooted in local tradition. This indigenous processing method is central to the chilli's sensory identity and premium market positioning.

Local oral histories trace the origin of Hāthei chilli to the ancestors of the Naga community, who are believed to have discovered the plant during a hunting expedition generations ago. Since then, the chilli has been conserved through backyard gardens and terraced fields, forming an integral part of local food culture.

Morphological, Colour and Quality Attributes

Sirārakhong Hāthei chilli is visually striking and easily distinguishable from other long chilli varieties. It typically attains a length of 8–9 inches and develops a glossy surface with a deep crimson hue. Its bold aroma, intense pungency, and smoky character make it highly valued among chefs and spice connoisseurs. Scientific quality parameters further reinforce its premium status. The chilli exhibits a high ASTA (American Spice Trade Association) extractable colour value, reported in the range of approximately 151–165, indicating a high concentration of natural pigments. Such values place Sirārakhong Hāthei chilli among the colour-rich chilli varieties of India and make it comparable to the widely known Kashmiri chilli, which is traditionally prized for its strong red colour. Information on the ASTA colour range of Sirārakhong Hāthei chilli has been documented by specialty spice suppliers and quality assessments associated with GI-tagged produce, reflecting its suitability for culinary and food-processing applications where colour retention is a critical quality attribute (as reported by premium spice trade sources such as Veeha Foods, a GI-produce retailer).



Geographical Indication Recognition

Recognising its uniqueness and strong geographical linkage, Sirārakhong Hāthei chilli was awarded the Geographical Indication (GI) tag on 14 September 2021 by the Geographical Indications Registry of the Government of India. The application was proposed by the Manipur Organic Mission Agency (MOMA), Imphal, following its submission in January 2017. With this recognition, Sirārakhong Hāthei chilli became the first chilli variety from Manipur and the seventh product from the state to receive GI status. The GI tag ensures legal protection of the name, allowing only chillies cultivated within the designated area to be marketed under the “Sirārakhong Hāthei” identity, thereby safeguarding farmer interests and product authenticity.

Northeast, National and Global Importance

Sirārakhong Hāthei chilli holds exceptional importance at multiple scales. At the regional level, it represents one of the most significant indigenous agricultural products of Northeast India, showcasing the region’s rich agrobiodiversity and traditional farming systems. At the national level, it stands out as a unique Indian chilli variety combining high colour value, traditional processing, and strong market potential—placing it alongside established varieties such as Kashmiri chilli in terms of quality recognition. At the global level, Sirārakhong Hāthei chilli is particularly noteworthy because it is exclusively found in Manipur. Its restricted geographical distribution, combined with high ASTA colour value and distinctive smoky flavour, positions it as a rare, origin-specific spice in international markets. This exclusivity enhances its global value while emphasising the need for conservation and responsible promotion.

Market Value and Price Dynamics

GI recognition has given Sirārakhong Hāthei chilli a new identity. It’s no longer just a local treasure; it has become a spice with international appeal. In Manipur, local brands like Chingtam and Enat have earned a good reputation for selling dried Hāthei chillies. They offer

consumers a taste of authenticity from Ukhrul's hills. Their efforts keep the product visible and valued in local markets while also boosting pride in regional produce. Outside India, the chilli has entered the world of premium spices. The farmer-led collective Hill Wild has teamed up with ethical trade networks to bring Hāthei to international shelves. Through Diaspora Spice & Co. in the United States, it sells for about \$14 for 45 grams. This price places it among elite global spices. For chefs and culinary enthusiasts abroad, this indicates quality and exclusivity. For farmers back home, it means fair pricing, greater recognition, and a livelihood that connects their heritage to global cuisine

Showcasing GI Heritage at Republic Day Parade

On 26 January 2026 in New Delhi, Sirārakhong Hāthei chilli was proudly showcased at the Republic Day Parade as part of Manipur's tableau, alongside other organic GI-tagged products from the state. This national platform highlighted the chilli's cultural and agricultural importance, bringing visibility to indigenous crops and reinforcing the role of GI recognition in promoting India's agrobiodiversity. The parade not only celebrated Hāthei chilli's fiery uniqueness but also positioned it among India's most treasured GI-certified produce, strengthening its identity at regional, national, and global levels.



Conclusion

Sirārakhong Hāthei chilli exemplifies how indigenous crops, when protected and promoted responsibly, can generate economic opportunity while preserving cultural heritage and biodiversity. Its high ASTA colour value, exclusive geographical origin, and traditional processing methods distinguish it at regional, national, and global levels. As demand grows for authentic, traceable, and ethically sourced foods, Sirārakhong Hāthei chilli offers not only heat and colour but a compelling story rooted in land, people, and tradition—making it one of Northeast India's most valuable agricultural treasures.