



The merchants of nectar

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Mandeep Kaur Virk, 36, a farmer, owns about eight acres of land along NH-1, near Rajpura in Punjab's Patiala district. Not content with growing wheat and rice, Virk decided to take up beekeeping.

Four months ago, she took the plunge and enrolled for bee-keeping training at Punjab Agricultural University (PAU), Ludhiana. While still learning the fine art of being an apiarist, Virk started keeping 10 boxes of bees at her farm; this has already grown to 20 boxes. The enterprising lady is now busy chalking out marketing strategies for honey products. "There are enough beekeepers around; the real challenge is to market the produce and maximise returns. I am also entering into floriculture as it will help enhance honey production," says the prudent entrepreneur, who is a college graduate.

Hard-working farmers in Punjab, such as Virk, have found an equally diligent partner in honeybees. Honey is valued as one of the most natural sweets (the National Honey Board of the US defines honey as "a pure product that does not allow for the addition of any other substance"). Honey gives amazing health benefits, and commands an international market. Perhaps because of this, its prices have been on a gravity-defying northward run.

"A seemingly insatiable worldwide demand for honey and honey products has depleted whatever excess supply was available throughout the world. Raw white honey prices are already over 30 per cent higher than last year, and these are expected to rise another 50 per cent," says a March 2008 report of S. Kamberg & Co., a US-based food broker.

A sweet deal

Though the farmers belonging to the Punjab chapter of Progressive Bee-keepers Association (PBKA), who work under the guidance of PAU at Ludhiana, do not know much about the global market and prices, their produce is increasingly finding its way overseas. India was ranked at #9 among honey exporters in 2006, selling \$27.67 million (Rs 124 crore then) worth of the produce, according to the latest APEDA (Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority) data. "Punjab accounted for over one-third of 52,000 tonnes of honey that India produced last year. The state has played a key role in efforts to commercialise bee-keeping," says Gagandeep Singh, Vice Chairman, National Bee Board, who also advises the PBKA. That explains the sudden interest of farmers like Virk in bee-keeping.

Punjab's tryst with bee-keeping dates back to late '60s. A.S. Atwal, a biologist, working at PAU started importing, breeding and marketing Apis Mellifera, a high honey yielding European bee, which is now the mainstay of commercial honey production in India. And farmers of Doraha, a town in Ludhiana district, were the early adopters of bee-keeping. Since the 1980s, when PAU began to market Apis Mellifera, commercial beekeeping has also spread to other districts of

Punjab and other states.

The state now accounts for about 450,000 out of India's 1.4 million bee colonies (in bee-keeping parlance, a colony consists of a wooden box that has many movable frames in which bees are made to build honeycombs).

Sticky issues

Bee-keeping continues to be largely an unorganised activity in India and most farmers take it up on a small scale as a way of supplementing their incomes. Large bee-keepers (who own 500-1,000 boxes containing bee colonies) make up a small proportion of their fraternity, which is dominated by those who own 10-40 boxes. In Punjab, average annual production of honey per box (colony) is about 40 kg.

"The potential of bee-keeping in a region or country is measured in terms of availability of flora. By that standard, India has not realised even 10 per cent of its potential to support 16 million bee colonies," says National Bee Board's Gagandeep Singh. In R&D and dissemination of knowledge and technology, India is still a baby in the world of honey. Various aspects of commercial honey production like productivity, disease management, quality assurance, packaging and marketing require large knowledge inputs from experts and also sophisticated tools and machinery. "There is very little research on bee-keeping in India.

There is also no database and coordination among the government agencies," says L.R. Verma, an entomologist, who is now Director of Lee Bee Institute of Bee-keeping, which has been set up recently by Doraha-based Kashmir Apiaries, one of India's largest honey exporters. While universities like PAU are trying to help, bee-keepers are largely alone in contending with problems like diseases that afflict bees, technology gaps, and poor marketing.

Troubleshooters

There are spirited bee-keepers, like Jaswant Singh Tiwana, who have devised their own ways of dealing with problems. This 49-year-old inventive bee-keeper has a knack for machines; he has not just built his own machines for filtering, centrifuging and bottling honey, but even exported some of his mechanical wonders to Asian and African countries.

Tiwana started with 20 boxes in 1983 and is now a commercial bee-keeper with about 1,500 boxes at his Tiwana Bee Farm in Doraha. Tiwana produces and markets his produce and also trades in honeybees.

PAU, for its part, is trying to organise farmers and encourage them to come together and help each other in production and marketing. "We have developed attractive gift packs for honey, and are trying to induce people to use them as replacements for the boxes of sweets that they gift their relatives with wedding invitations.

A gift of honey is much healthier than traditional sweets and it will be a huge market for us," says Ramandeep Singh, an Associate Professor of Business Management at PAU, who is helping PBKA members market their produce.

According to market estimates, 50 per cent of honey produced in India is exported. J.S. Kapoor, Managing Director, Kashmir Apiaries, which exported honey worth Rs 100 crore in

2007-08, says the domestic market gives him better value than exports but fewer orders than the latter.

“Overseas demand for honey is growing almost 50 per cent per annum. Domestic demand, on the other hand, is growing at only 15-20 per cent,” he says, adding that he has already tied up with organised retailers like Reliance Retail and Pantaloon to boost sales.

Beyond honey, however, the world of honeybees reveals a disturbing story of how humans are upsetting the very building blocks of the environment that sustains them. Pollination, which is considered the most important service that honeybees render to living beings, is crucial to the flowering of all plants and, thus, food security. (In fact, the Centre’s programme for promoting bee-keeping is based on the need to tap honeybees’ pollination services—not their honey-making skills.) As pressures of population and global warming destroy the quantity and variety of flora, the world needs the diligent honeybee all the more.

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