

Bee biz may be on track with easing curbs

Sunday, 07 June 2020 | Archana Jyoti | New Delhi

Stung by the Coronavirus pandemic-triggered restrictions, quarantine requirements and border closures, beekeepers are now, as the lockdown eases gradually, exploring ways on how to move their bee boxes from one place to another across the country.

While the tough regulations have already disrupted their earnings particularly of those engaged in exports, it also suggests that their bees could not be fed as usual on seasonal flowers, neither will they pollinate this summer, warn experts.

Gopinathan Maheswaran, scientist with Birds section of Zoological Survey of India (ZSI) said that the Covid-19 lockdown presented a peculiar problem for the beekeepers and the bees. "As countries went into extended lockdowns, movement of non-essential vehicles also came to a standstill. In India, the restrictions made it difficult for the farmers to move the huge number of beehive boxes from one State to another or even within the States. As a result, the bees are starving to death."

He explained that during the summer months between February and July, farmers, especially in Northern India, go from one state to the other with their bee boxes to feed the bees (*Apis indica*) on seasonal flowers of mango and litchi trees.

"Bees feed on the flower honey for nutrition and farmers sell the honey the insects store in their hives. The bees also help pollinate the mango and litchi trees, thereby increasing the production of these two cash fruit crops, and also a variety of other plants," he said in a report published in Nature India recently.

In India, there are more than 9,698 government-registered entities – individuals, societies, firms, companies and a few self-help groups who are engaged in beekeeping. A whopping 15, 59, 771 registered bee colonies are spread across various states in the country. Rakesh Gupta, chief advisor with Lucknow-based Golden Hive Foundation talked about challenges faced by those selling their products in local market as abroad. "With all their movements' restricted inter-state and intra-state, many apiaries were trapped in areas which had nothing to offer to the bees. Many apiaries were left with none to care for them for an extended period of time. Though bee keeping was under essential services, it was not easy for the farmers to take up the risk in view of mandatory quarantine period and scare spread all across the country.

"As a result, the strength of the bees depleted. Lots of beekeepers were unable to migrate their apiaries to different regions as per their planned movement calendar and lost on honey production. The inability to do anything in the face of looming crisis was indeed stressful."

Satinder Singh, a small time beekeeper from Punjab too said that they could not travel across State lines to move the hives around and feed them. "As the temperature increases, we have to shift the bee boxes to the shade" otherwise they will die from the heat, he said.

Rakesh Gupta pointed out that even though lockdown has eased, seven days compulsory quarantine period cross-border will add up to the input cost, even as natives of the respective states are also not keen welcoming the outsiders, unlike earlier, fearing Covid-19 spread.