

## Reviving the bees of Bundelkhand

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JUNE 12, 2020 12:12 IST



**A population of bees and the farmers in some villages of Madhya Pradesh are faithful friends**

The revival of local bees in the drought prone villages of Dhava, Panchbara, Gauhani and Luka, Madhya Pradesh, has meant that honey has become a source of nutrition and a prospective income generator for struggling small farmers.

These villages are home to native honey bees like *Apis Cerana* (the Asian Honey Bee), known as *chatiyav*, and a species of stingless bees, called *bhunag*.

The rich biodiversity of this land was not being fully utilised until INTACH, an organisation that looks after tangible and intangible heritage, partnered with Golden Hive Foundation, to reverse the process of declining bee densities.

From December, hands-on training has been given to farmers in Chhatarpur and Khajuraho. The farmers now realise the role played by bees in farming.

At present, the honey produced is enough only for the farmers' consumption. "This *amrit* (nectar) takes care of malnutrition in families of villagers. It has minerals, enzymes that the human body requires. First, it is consumed by communities and then put on sale. Whatever money they earn will be utilised for the local community," says Rakesh Gupta, Chief Advisor of Golden Hive Foundation.

Previously, annihilating bee colonies while extracting honey was the regular practice. This gradually led to a decline of the pollinators.

"Earlier, while extracting honey from the Rock bee, *Apis Cerana*, *Apis Florea* and the stingless bees, farmers would use fire to smoke out the bees. In the process the eggs, the larvae and the pupae and the entire generation of bees were destroyed. This resulted in dwindling of bees in the natural habitat and had an adverse impact on the biodiversity and the ecosystem," says Gupta.

To ensure that the bees are not harmed, farmers have been consciously trained to shift from the traditional way to a more responsible way of managing bees to extract honey. "Through the use of queen excluders, we ensure that the queen bee does not have access to the area called 'super' where honey is being stored. The queen is in effect, prevented from laying eggs in the supers. Naturally, with no eggs, larvae or pupae stages in the super, there is no destruction of the generations of the bees and only the honey, in its purest form, is extracted," explains Gupta.

Dhava village is the centre for beekeeping. It is early days but farmers are confident that more of their neighbours will join them. The project, currently in its first phase, has two dozen farmers on board.

"In this drought prone area, it was prudent to create skills and generate income for farmers. The presence of bees will also increase crop productivity. There is a slight increase of 10% to 15% in productivity of pulses, moong, chana, urad dal. We are hopeful that sesame, mustard, brinjal, tomato, chilly, bajra, maize will show an increase," says Ritu Singh, Director, Natural Heritage Division, INTACH.

Badri Singh, a septuagenarian who practises organic farming in Dhava, is a picture of resilience. Called Badri baba by all, he says: "My curiosity about bees was aroused after participating in the workshop. As a farmer, I find the tips simple yet useful. These will go a long way in the welfare of our people. Now that I have realised the importance of native bees for better crop productivity, I will ensure that bees are never killed," he says.

However, the weather poses a challenge with temperatures soaring in the harsh summer. "To ensure survival of colonies, we want to have natural food available to bees. We are ensuring that enough nectar and pollen is available for bees throughout the year," says Dr Singh.

Gupta, who speaks chaste Hindi while conducting training sessions with the villagers, says, "Honey is secondary; the bees are our priority. I feel that the success of our collaboration lies not only in producing honey but in creating awareness and sensitivity."