

# THE BEEKEEPERS OF ARAKU VALLEY ARE LEADING A SWEET REVOLUTION IN ANDHRA PRADESH

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Economics of Animal-Rearing incl. White, Blue & Pink Revolutions

Rows of beekeeping boxes at Chaparai route near Araku in Visakhapatnam. November is the season when beekeeping picks up in the region. | Photo Credit: K.R. Deepak

Shades of yellow greet the eyes amidst the misty fields of Araku Valley nestled in the Eastern Ghats near Visakhapatnam. November is the season for niger flowers blooming in the region, and is also when beekeepers get busy. In a field lined with blue boxes on the Chaparai waterfalls route, V Naga Koteswara Rao carefully pulls out each frame from the box with a steady hand so as to not disturb the colony of bees in it. It has over a lakh of worker bees, a single queen bee and a few hundreds of drone bees in each box.

"I inspect the beehives once a week. To be a successful beekeeper, one has to understand the dynamics of the ecosystem that supports bees, the geographic location, types of honey bee, and available resources," says Koteswara, who was one of the first beekeepers of the region. He started his venture Mohan Honey Bees Industries more than 15 years ago and now has expanded to eight beekeeping units with a total of 2,500 beekeeping boxes at different places in Araku.

Honey bees are crucial to the dynamic ecosystem, but their numbers are on a decline due to loss of habitat and excessive use of pesticides. At a time when honeybee habitats are under threat, the beekeepers in Araku Valley are leading a sweet revolution.

For over a decade now, Araku and the neighbouring Eastern Ghats have supported an ecosystem of sustainable income and employment for the beekeepers. When it started a few years ago, there were just a handful of beekeepers. Today, the region is thriving with over 100 beekeepers who produce honey on a small as well as big scale. The undulating landscape with fields of niger flowers and other organically-grown agricultural produce supports the enterprises in a big way.

During the peak season, honey is harvested in 10 days and sold directly to tourists who visit the valley. The bottles go to retail outlets in other cities too. "One box gives us four to five kilograms of honey in this season," says Sravana Jyothi, who has been in the business for 12 years. She spent a considerable time watching her father work at his units and come out with successful produce every season.

"I find the entire process fascinating. It is important to understand that we share a symbiotic relationship with bees who are the main pollinators of the region. They work really hard, traveling four to five kilometres in the neighbouring fields, visiting lakhs of flowers," she says. Jyothi learnt the tricks to successful beekeeping from her father who gathered the knowledge at Krishi Vigyan Kendra in Guntur. "Keeping in mind some elements like changing the frames in the honey boxes every two years is important," she says.

The honey is produced in over 40 flavours that include jamun, mango, niger seeds, eucalyptus, neem and sunflower. It is sold right after it is taken from the boxes.

While the beekeepers suffered a setback during the initial two years of the pandemic, they are back with vigour this year. "Although the produce was good back then, marketing and

transportation was an issue,” says Sravana.

During the two years, the beekeepers experimented with by-products of honey to bring out products like beeswax cream and infusing honey with ginger, garlic, beetroot and carrot.

According to A K Goud, another beekeeper, beekeeping enterprises in the Eastern Ghats have been lucrative for farmers in many ways. “The bees live in highly organised communities, and help farmers in pollination and keep the ecological balance,” he says. Beekeeping has also lured youngsters exploring it as a profession. However, he adds that the government must spread awareness among farmers on the benefits of beekeeping and practising organic farming.

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