

Honey Bees

Inevitable for our survival

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Bee pollination is a primary low cost input in sustainable agriculture. Honey bees render pollination in almost all plant species especially in crops increasing the yield upto 50%. It is reckoned that the returns from pollination is about 20 times of the total returns put together from all other bee hive products. Bee keeping enterprise while helping to generate income for farmers will also serve as a provider of pollination services to crops.

My interest in bees dates back to the period while I was serving the agriculture department in Coorg. While in service I had witnessed bee keepers bringing honey in buckets – literally honey flowed in Coorg district. I decided to learn bee keeping. Fortunately, I got an opportunity to learn about beekeeping while I was associated with IDS, an NGO in Dharwad. I was given the responsibility of Bee Keeping Programme. I visited places like Yellapur, Ankola, Gokarna etc., to study the bee keeping activity. This was the beginning of my journey with bees.

I am happy that I am able to help many individuals and institutions in bee keeping activity. People call me and ask me to give hints about Bee keeping. Normally, I invite them to stay with me for a day, learn preliminaries of bee keeping and go back with two bee colonies. If there are any problems they come back to solve them and learn more. I also visit their places and teach them on their farms. I travel all over the state, I visited almost all bee keepers and I have continuous contact with them. Let me illustrate one such case.

I received a call from Usha Chinnappa a Lawyer from Somavarpet (Coorg). She owns a Coffee Estate near Hundli village. Coffee blossoms for a very short period. Usually coffee crop is pollinated by honey bees. Usha asked me to provide her with Honey Bee colonies and help pollination in coffee.

**While a person having a unit of 25 to 50
bee colonies can earn his bread
independently, he will also be serving the
farming community by providing
pollination services to crops**

On request, I transferred 10 colonies to Belur Mutt and another 10 to Changadihally. I visited the places after 30 days. Honey was accumulating. Some boxes were packed with honey and about 10 kg honey was harvested. I returned happily with good hope. I visited again. This time the colonies were found dwindling instead of honey. I observed Brood disease. During my third visit, I packed the empty boxes and stored them securely.

The next season, I continued my efforts. I transferred another twenty bee colonies, sterilized the old boxes and replaced colonies. In my follow up visit I understood that there was scarcity of food for the bees. I arranged for artificial feeding and returned home with hope. Next visit was very sad, no brood disease, but adult bees were dying. I enquired the cause. I was shocked to learn that the coffee estate is sprayed with a weedicide (Glycel). Infact, Coffee and Cardamom plantation need pollination support. Forest flora and weeds support the honey bees by supplementing nectar and pollen during off season. I migrated the colonies to a most secured organic farm. By this time, monsoon had set in. Again arrangements were made for artificial feeding. I visited again during December 2011 to see the situation. Luckily, 5 colonies at one place and 2 colonies at another place had survived. Honey also was getting accumulated and about 2 kgs of honey was extracted.

Monitoring is most crucial in bee keeping. Whenever I notice some trouble with my colonies. I alarm the fellow bee keepers, prepare them and guide them to solve the problem. For example, mites are serious pests on Honey Bees. Periodical treatment with an acaricide is a must. If this effort is delayed we lose the colonies. Also, we need to be alert during the time of swarming (Sept to Dec), or else we may lose them.

Challenges

Now, honey bees are in danger. With declining honey bee population, the food production will also diminish. The two major threats are: unscrupulous use of pesticides and weedicides which has reduced the bee population; and lack of suitable places for bees to survive. Instead of traditional tree plants like Athi, Basari, Thare etc., planters are going for Silver Oak. Unable to find suitable places (hallows) to survive, the bee colonies die as soon as the monsoon sets in. Another threat is the brood disease attack .

If this situation continues, we may not get a drop of Coorg honey in the coming days. We may have to search and hire bee colonies for crop pollination. Its high time that we put our coordinated efforts and conserve our Honey bee species, before it is too late.

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