

# Beekeeping: Self-employment Opportunity for Mountain Women

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Woman plays a pivotal role in mountain farming communities although her status is the lowest on the socio-economic ladder. Her role in the society is not of a bread-winner although she shares the burden of earning through indigenous farm activities while performing her principal role of bearing children and looking after the family. Her physical and socio-familial needs require avenues of income-generation that do not interfere with her primary obligations but supplement the family purse. Beekeeping has the essentials of such an occupation. In mountain communities where horticulture/agriculture is the mainstay, it is all the more beneficial to involve women in beekeeping for integrated socio-economic development (Verma, 1990; Kumar, 1993).

### Area of Study

Rural women who participated in horticulture training programmes at the University were the subjects of this study. Interactions with women trainees brought to light the following factors limiting women's involvement in beekeeping.

- Beekeeping and honey-hunting were regarded as a men-only activity.
- Fear of stings.
- Lack of knowledge about simple and scientific beekeeping methods.
- Lack of awareness of the benefits of integrating beekeeping into mountain farming systems.
- Many duties at home and in the field.
- Ignorance of the scale of operation.
- Lack of funds.
- No interest or time.

This attitude and the problems of mountain women were analysed. The women were made aware of the cultural, economic and ecological aspects of beekeeping. Basic information with respect to methods of beekeeping and its income potential was given to them.

### Scope and Prospects

Beekeeping can fit into the busy routines of all categories of women: rural/urban, educated/illiterate, white-collar worker/farm women/

housewife, rich/poor. It opens an important avenue of income generation for the following reasons.

- Beekeeping provides a self-employment opportunity close to home. Honeybees can be easily kept a few metres from home in kitchen gardens, backyards and even house tops, balconies and verandas. A busy woman or a woman restricted by socio-cultural norms of the community does not have to go far from home or even leave her doorstep.
- It entails little work; even the most-worked women can manage five honeybee colonies. Bees are clean in their habits and do not add extra cleaning hours to a woman's daily routine. They even collect their own food. Simply check them once or twice a fortnight for stores and diseases, and they will work efficiently without you.
- Horticulture is the principal occupation of a mountain woman. Beekeeping can broaden her income avenues. Besides obtaining bee products such as honey and beeswax, she can use bee colonies for pollination of crops. Bees do not compete with agriculture/horticulture for resources but augment it. Bee pollination improves the quality as well as quantity of fruits, vegetables, flowers and seeds giving increased return for a small investment.
- It gives both an economic and moral boost. It raises a woman's status and esteem in the society and improves her general quality of life.
- If business is her interest, bees have many avenues for a woman to exploit monetary gains.
- Beekeeping helps to diversify the food base and provides a nutritious high-value food to what can be otherwise under/malnourished hill-dwelling children where beekeepers are mothers.
- Beekeeping provides a woman with out-of-door recreation that may be otherwise impossible amidst her family chores.
- Honeybees have lessons of good housekeeping, frugality and child-rearing

hidden in the organisation of their commune that are well-matched to the psychological needs of a woman.

- If it is for the love of mother nature, the aesthetic value of beekeeping is unmatched in learning and enjoyment.

### Diversification of Beekeeping

The honeybee industry has vast income potential for a mountain woman depending upon the extent of her involvement and the level of operation. If she plunges into it full time and on a large scale, she can extend her enterprise to other products such as beeswax, pollen, royal jelly, bee venom and package bees.

### Marketing of Bee Products

Marketing of bee products is an art in itself. When woman is the producer of honey and she is also the principal consumer: she can devise a good advertisement for the regular addition of honey to the family menu. She can pass on to other women her experiences with the use of honey as a domestic remedy for numerous ailments of children and adults. Further, her artistic aptitude can go into packaging of bee products. Attractively displayed eye-catching posters can attract buyers to the doorstep. She does not have to exert much effort to find a market. Travellers who visit the hills in all seasons are always on the lookout for farm-fresh products and are easily attracted to orchard-fresh honey. Specific-source honeys such as litchi, citrus, rose and *Plectranthus* are even more attractive.

Women beekeepers can form co-operatives and societies. The co-operatives can facilitate the sale of honey, beeswax, pollen and royal jelly. This will ensure security of investment and provide a ready market throughout the year.

### Low-cost Beekeeping

Scientists working in the University have developed low-cost, eco-friendly hives to help

women living at or below subsistence level. Besides bringing beekeeping within the reach of marginal budgets, construction of these hives creates another employment opportunity for women. Three designs were developed (Kumar and Verma, 1996; Verma *et al.*, 1997).

#### Straw hive

This is made of rice straw or local grass tied to form thick sheets. The sheets are joined to form a brood chamber. A top cover forms a sloping roof to drain off water. Ten movable comb frames are provided.

#### Mud hive

This uses a mixture of clay and wheat husk to form the brood chamber. A thatched sloping roof is provided for a top cover. There are ten movable comb frames.

#### Orchard hive

This is made from waste stones or broken bricks plastered with mud. A flat piece of stone or slate forms the inner cover. Top cover is made from dry grass forming a sloping roof. The brood chamber has ten movable comb frames.

All three types of hives make use of material that are easily available in the farmer's field. They can be made at a nominal expense of US\$ 1-2 and can be constructed by women themselves. Catching and hiving a swarm of the native honey bee, *Apis cerana*, in a low-cost hive can make initiation of beekeeping almost cost-free. The interest and benefits generated can be re-invested to increase the scale of operation.

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