

Madhubhai Bhoia

Technical Assistant, Tutarkhed, Dharampur, Gujarat

“My bees are like my cows, they know when their master is around.” says Madhubhai, affectionately speaking with the familiarity he has developed with his bees over the years. Madhubhai Bhoiya is a 40-year old beekeeper from Tutarkhed village, near Dharampur in Gujarat. He is one of the first technical staff to be employed by UTMT in 2012, rising up the ranks from a Master Trainer to a seasoned Technical Assistant in a span of 3 years.

Madhubhai was one of only 5 farmers who attended the BAIF-supported beekeeping training in his village in 2009. At the time, he was employed fulltime with BAIF, taking care of 125 wadis distributed to his fellow farmers. In 2012, the BAIF project ended, and with it Madhubhai's main source of income. It was then that UTMT hired him, seeing his technical potential.

He began beekeeping in 2009 with 4 beehives and all the bees absconded. Even after re-filling them several times, they would still abscond. In mid-2011, he was selected to travel along with other trainees to Dehradun in Uttaranchal on an exposure visit where they interacted with people practising beekeeping for decades. Madhubhai spoke of his often fruitless attempts at maintaining bees, but they urged him to persist. He decided he would give it another try. By end 2011, two years after training, Madhubhai filled 20 beehives with bees from the nearby forest, and extracted honey from his beehives for the first time – 250 gm. He felt more capable of continuing the activity.

Madhubhai today has 17 beehives of his own, that stand on his farm and wadi. He is entrusted with overseeing the 100 hives in the village. Till 2014, he was actively involved in training new farmers in UTMT's new project areas not only in Gujarat but also Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. **He feels the biggest challenge in working with new farmers is to keep them motivated.** During the initial period when bees abscond regularly, the farmers need to be kept motivated to persist keeping the bigger picture in mind. Madhubhai says that people need instant money and they ~~get~~ are unconvinced until they see honey in their hives. ***“They don't understand that once you get used to the work, it doesn't even feel like work. Beekeeping brings profits in the longterm, but to reach there you have to invest time in the initial days”.***

In 2014, Madhubhai extracted 20 kg of honey from his hives, of which he sold 16 kg to UTMT for Rs.320/ kg, earning a good Rs. 5100. Despite Tutarkhed having relatively low honey productivity as compared to the villages nearby owing to its much hotter climate, the village has been able to extract 88 kg honey in 2014. ***“Honey is always in great demand”***, beams Madhubhai, stating that people pay advance money to book a bottle. ***“There is no dearth of customers who call me for orders.”*** Honey fetches anywhere between Rs. 300 to 350/ kg.

But honey is only a by-product of beekeeping, says Madhubhai, explaining the extent of impact on agricultural yields. Madhubhai used to often purchase oil, masalas, vegetables before he started keeping bees. Since the yields have improved, their purchases are much lesser,

because larger quantity of oil can be extracted from khursani (oilseed) harvest, and vegetables quantity is higher. The village too saw effects of enhanced pollination, **“2013 was not a good year for the mango crop in this cluster. But there were mangoes in the wadis having beehives, the other mango wadis had no fruit.”**

Crop	Before beekeeping	After beekeeping
Mango	15 man ¹ (Kesari & Rajapuri)	35 man
Cashew	90 kg	150 kg
Tuvar	50kg	60kg
Chana	50 kg	60kg
Khursani	50 kg	100 kg
Sunhemp	<i>Not grown</i>	Increases of 50-60% across years, plus quality improvement (<i>The crop used to not survive earlier, now it does</i>)

Madhubhai says the cropping pattern in Tutarkhed has changed after beekeeping took root. **Sunhemp**, a valuable fodder crop commanding a good price at local milk dairies, and requiring little water – was not cultivated much as it did not grow well. However, the few farmers growing it noticed it flourishing after beekeeping began. Word spread, and today sunhemp is widely grown in the cluster. Even **bitter gourd**, another bee-friendly crop, is cultivated more than before. **Chickpeas**, cultivated by a few in the past, have become part of routine cropping and diet, since the bees arrived.



Madhubhai (left) teaches Junior Master Trainer Ambelal the ropes of colony rearing

¹ “Man” is a unit of measurement. 1 man= 20 kg

The bees have turned Madhubhai into a far more hardworking person. “**Earlier I used to be quite lazy, relaxing after farm work ended. Now the bees have taught me to make the best use of my time**”. In his new role as Technical Assistant, he does not merely look after the village beehives, but is required in technical aspects of the programme and also manages and coaches a team of junior Master Trainers under him. The people skills he learned during trainings, hold him in good stead at such times.

Madhubhai shares an interesting anecdote about his family’s reaction, when he began beekeeping. They believed that the buzzing of bees brings chaos to families, serving as a bad luck sign, to which Madhubhai countered with the fact that since honey is auspicious (used in religious *pujas*), it means the activity will be beneficial for the family. On seeing his success, his family members have begun to assist him in small tasks although they are sometimes displeased when he neglects his home duties to attend to the bees.



With his beehive

Madhubhai spends the income mainly on his children’s education which constitutes a major household expense. His two daughters study in an ashramshala and his sons are enrolled in school in Surat and Bhavnagar. Affording better quality clothes for the family is next.

He says he is fortunate to be employed with UTMT, because on his own he would not have been able to learn a new skill or go beyond Valsad for work.