

Vitthal Choudhary

Badagi village, Peth block, Nashik, Maharashtra

For Vitthal Choudhary, a 23-year old beekeeper from the small village of Badagi 3 hours away from Nashik city, keeping bees has proved to be a huge boon for his mango *wadi* (orchard). A diploma in Agricultural Science from a college in Nashik, he currently juggles his Bachelor of Arts studies with a part-time job at a private company in Nashik. Vitthal's father assists him in tending to his mango wadi and ensures that he gives special attention to the wadi alongside routine farmwork, watering and tending to it devotedly through the seasons. Vitthal attended Under The Mango Tree's beekeeping training in a neighbouring village in December 2013. He liked what he learnt, accompanying the technical staff on searches for bee colonies in surrounding forests, and learning to transfer the bees into his beehive.

Vitthal has 2 beehives in his *wadi* since February 2014. The 12-year old wadi, given by the NGO BAIF in 2003, holds 20 mango trees, 15 cashew trees and 9 amla (Indian gooseberry) trees. His MANGO trees are of two popular mango varieties – the Kesari and the Rajapuri. Until 2013, his annual mango harvest was 5 to 10 carats, with each carat fetching Rs. 200-300 in the local market. Vitthal's mangoes thus brought the family an income of **upto Rs.3000 annually**.

In 2014, they noticed a marked increase in mango output – 25 to 30 carats - a threefold increase compared to previous years! Also noticeable was a **stark difference in quality** – the mangoes were larger in size (each Rajapuri mango weighed nearly a kilo), and their flesh much sweeter in taste. The quality **improvement was evident from the better rate** they commanded in the market – **each carat sold for Rs.400-500, nearly double the previous years' price, bringing the income that year to around Rs. 10,000, a three fold rise!**



Vitthal's father points to the blooming mango tree that promises to yield a bountiful mango harvest



(L) Vitthal with a frame of his beehive; (R) Vitthal's father gestures to the beehive

Vitthal's father is effusive in his delight, **"Till 2013, the mangoes tasted slightly sour, and did not look like high quality fruit.** You have to see last year's mangoes crop to know the difference!" He credits his bees for the incredible change, quite confident that it's the bee-effect, **"I tend to the farm throughout the year, and know my crops and trees. The change occurred only after the beehives came."**

The family used the extra money earned to pay Vitthal's annual college fees of Rs.5000 and his travel costs to and fro Nashik to the village. They are happy they did not need to borrow from family and friends towards this, like they used to before.

Vitthal and his father have become firm believers in the pollination value of bees. Having witnessed firsthand the results, they hope the brinjal, tomato and fenugreek in their small vegetable patch, will also bear similar bumper yields next season. Vitthal is careful to practice the information he has gained from UTMT trainings. **Having learned of the harm certain chemical pesticides pose to bees, he shared the information with his father who has stopped using chemicals for tomato plants.**

Vitthal expresses eagerness to expand the number of beehives he owns, aiming for a total of 4 by 2016. If he manages to find 2 bee colonies, he will achieve his goal. He has already thought through the plan, intending to build a small make-shift house on the farm for ease of beehive caretaking. Their current house is situated half a km away from the farm's location, making monitoring difficult. His enthusiasm with beekeeping shines through as he signs off, **"Even if UTMT stops coming to teach us and check my beehive, I will continue to keep bees.** Just the way the NGO BAIF came, taught us how to cultivate a *wadi* effectively and then exited the village after a year, I will similarly persist with beekeeping in the event of UTMT support reducing."