Indians yet to taste the potential of organic honey

Vishwanath Kulkarni
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WHILE THE demand for organic honey is catching up fast in the West, the Indian beekeeping industry seems to be largely unaware of this particular concept. Though India has a vast potential to produce and export organic honey, there seems to be no effort from the promotional bodies to create awareness about this aspect.

Organic honey has, of late, become a hot-selling product in the West as most of the honey produced commercially contains insecticide residue. Organic honey is sold at a premium, particularly in Europe and America. According to M C Suryanarayana, chief editor, Indian Bee Journal, "The concept of organic honey originated in Africa during the late eighties, where the Europeans funded the beekeeping development projects. The honey collected from the wild bees of the African jungles was in the purest form and was free from any type of chemical residues and was promoted as organic honey in Europe. It was sold at a premium and over the years it became popular not only in Europe but also in America."

Mr Suryanarayana says there are two ways of possible contamination of honey, either from the pesticide sprayed on various crops such as sunflower and orchard crops from which the pollen is gathered or from the insecticide used to treat the bee hives infected with mites and diseases.

With the high incidence of the varroa jabsconi (the varroa mite on the bee colonies in Europe and America), a considerable amount of insecticide is being used to combat the mite. The treatment of mite-infested bee colonies is done by fumigation. Smoke and chemicals are also used to treat the mites. "When the fumigation is done, there is a possibility of chemical residues getting into the honey combs, traces of which may be found later in the processed honey. However, in India, there is a possibility of DDVP, the well-used pesticide, getting into the honey that is produced," Mr Suryanarayana says.

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Pratim Roy, Official, Keystone

According to Mr Jagjit Singh, managing director, Kashmir Apiaries Pvt Ltd, the demand for the chemical residue-free honey is very high abroad. Countries like Germany and the US are very particular about the quality standards and frequently ask for certificates to the effect that the honey exported is produced from disease-free colonies.

Mr Singh, one of the largest honey exporters, says organic honey should not only be free of chemical residues but be produced by adopting special practices. To begin with, the bee boxes should be made only of wood without being painted. Of late, plastic and thermocol boxes are being used to rear the bees as they are cost-effective.

He feels that there is an element of being contaminated by using the plastic and thermocol boxes. Mr Singh said that both the equipment used for extracting honey and the storage tanks should only be of stainless steel.

According to Mr Pratim Roy of Keystone, an NGO working among the honey hunters of Nagiris, "Organic honey is location-specific. The bee farms, which are ideally away from the industrial zones in isolated pockets in dense forests with wide foraging areas, can allow pure organic honey. There is a need to create awareness about the concept of organic honey. You cannot expect beekeepers to be organic overnight. Also, a systematic effort should be made towards labelling the produce and providing a certification."

Keystone's produce, which is mainly collected from the traditional honey hunters of the Nagiris, is already carrying an eco-label. Mr Roy says that the niche areas in the Western Ghats and the Himalayan forests are ideal to promote organic honey. However, most of the beekeepers plead ignorance about the organic concept. A few of them argue that the process of honey production is itself organic. Mr Suryanarayana notes that the chemicals that may be harmful to human beings may not be harmful to the bees.

Asked about the efforts made to promote organic honey in India, Mr R C Mishra, project co-ordinator, All India Coordinated Project on Honeybee Research and Training, says, "We have not found some beekeepers on how to use chemicals judiciously to combat pests and diseases". These booklets were, however, not so much being distributed but sold at the honey festival in Dharwad. To revitalize the honey bee industry, the government should give the beekeepers to the honeycomb and you can make them work!"