

Realising market opportunities for marginalised producers of forest products



Khima Ram works in a team of five, who identify the hives and go at night to climb trees and harvest the honey.

Realising potential: natural forest products and people

In India, natural honey and other forest products are collected and sold by local people, who do not always get a fair market price for their goods from traders. There are several reasons for this: the collectors are not organised; there is an over dependence on local traders because of an absence of multiple market channels; and their communities are marginalised due to a combination of caste-based exclusion and poverty suppressing their voice.

However, the forest products that the collectors sell are the main means of their livelihood; they are high quality, unique and they are in high demand because their availability is limited due to their seasonality. With the right support, these producers could secure the full value of their productivity.

Change Alliance partner Support Society (locally called Samarthak Samiti) was

formed to support forest produce collectors overcome these challenges. It now works with 165 forest producer groups and eight cooperatives, with its membership totalling about 3,500. Samarthak Samiti works with these tribal communities, and others who depend on forest areas for their income, across six districts of southern Rajasthan including Udaipur and Pratapgarh.

Samarthak Samiti helps its members to process, package and market their products in order to secure better prices and increase sales. The success of this work has led to expansion to include a range of forest produce, including honey and black plums that are processed into vinegar. This success has also driven a desire to develop these enterprises so that they are commercially viable – honey was identified as a product of which there is potential for the members to produce up to 100 tons, a vast increase from the 12-14 tons collected at present.

Moving from income generation to commercialisation

Samarthak Samiti faced a significant challenge in developing honey production, as commercial analysis showed initial returns to be meagre. But assessments showed that improved organisation, training, and niche branding could turn honey into a marketable product. Relocating processing to the village level also offered the potential to add value – the price the honey is sold for can be increased, bringing extra income to households. The sustainability of the enterprises depended on increased production being achieved while protecting honeybees' local habitats through safe harvesting practices.

To address the challenges of organisation, forest collectors were first brought together in producer collectives called common interest groups (CIGs). Honey collector CIGs were supplied with beekeeping suits to protect collectors when collecting honey. In order to try to harvest honey without damaging the environment or killing bees, Samarthak Samiti has trained 750 wild honey collectors in safe harvesting. Collection and processing centres have been set up, equipped with facilities and essential machinery to process the honey into a better quality product. Presently more than 3,500 households use these centres to sell or trade their forest produce, including honey.

Organising the collectors has also enabled training to improve quality standard. For example, moisture meters are now being used to monitor honey quality before packing, at the level of collection (high moisture hastens spoilage and fungal growth). Official



Hansi Bai, 50, and her fellow self help group member Ladori Bai, 22, package processed honey.

food certification has been obtained and honey collectors now have an identity card, which is recognised by forest guards and police, giving them increased security.

The centres set up by Samarthak Samiti are used to collect and process honey. The collected and processed honey is sold and marketed centrally by Samarthak Samiti. Organising at the village level has also improved understanding and responses to changes in the honey market. Centres collate market trends and pricing information on local forest produce empowering producers to plan their production and sales more effectively.

An important part of the successful growth of honey sales has been the branding chosen for their product. The

honey is marketed under the Desert Greens brand and the marketing emphasises that it is sustainably harvested and is additive and preservative free.

Improving the local honey market for all producers

Samarthak Samiti has seen success in the development of the natural honey collection – increased production, increased sales and significantly improved prices for honey collectors in the state of Rajasthan.

In 2013, 10 tons of honey was processed, a tenfold rise from 2009. All of this honey is purchased on local markets and there is further scope to increase the procurement of honey from the collectors. All the collectors who received training have improved

the quality and quantity of their produce through adopting scientific and sustainable methods, resulting in a 25% increase in their income. They were also able to sell by-products like wax to the collection centre and other buyers. The scientific approach to collection, refining and packaging of honey has increased the incomes of collectors and people involved in processing by 20%.

A major success has been the project's wider influencing on the pricing of forest products. Since Samarthak Samiti has been consistently setting a fair price, there has been a steady increase in the minimum honey prices set by the local government-run agency and local traders, benefiting more than 2,500 honey harvesters in other districts. In addition, members of Samarthak Samiti say they are more confident about negotiating terms of sale.

Change Alliance continues to work with Samarthak Samiti as it further develops its honey enterprises alongside other natural forest products. The next phase of the project will focus on expanding the processing and storage facilities on a recently purchased piece of land by the Samarthak producer company (SPCL) registered under the leadership of Support Society.

The honey value chain intervention of Samarthak Samiti is well on the way to reaching maturity. Based on the success of the honey project, Samarthak Samiti is now assessing other forest products that can be developed for the benefit of local producers.