

## VIBIS NATURAL BEE FARM – A CASE STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

*Women entrepreneurs are constantly re-writing the history with their skills and confidence, and providing a new face of life to the rural population through innovative ventures. Here is a look at a bold women entrepreneurs who have made invaluable contributions to rural industry especially in the field of apiculture; an essential allied agricultural activity. Bee-keeping or Apiculture, in general, has been taken-up as hobby or at micro level as an additional income generation activity in rural folks. Undertaking apiculture as a full-fledged entrepreneurial venture by an individual, except certain business enterprises is rarely found. Not many find their way to the proverbial land of milk and honey, but Josephine Arokiya Mary's slow and steady steps took her there. Her enterprise called Vibis Natural Bee Farming has touched the annual turnover of Rs.3 Crore. Scaling to the greater heights of her entrepreneurship did not come easy. The study is a sweetening sweat story of a housewife turned agripreneur.*

### Introduction

Countless women around the world are building successful small businesses. But the odds against women entrepreneurs in many developing countries can be surprising. Often, they face limited access to credit and property, domestic obligations that consume their waking hours, and cultural standards that discriminate against them. A major part of the Indian economy still lies in the rural areas and villages of the country. Though, a huge mass of people are constantly moving to the urban sectors, development of the villages cannot be neglected. With their excellent managerial and entrepreneurial skills, few Indian women have taken up the duty to raise the standard of living in Indian villages and have been really successful at it.

Women entrepreneurs are constantly re-writing the history with their skills and confidence, and providing a new face of life to the rural population through innovative ventures. Here is a look at a bold women entrepreneur who has made invaluable contributions to rural industry especially in the field of apiculture (bee-keeping); an essential allied agricultural activity.

Bee-keeping plays an important role in the sustainable agriculture as it contributes significantly for diversification of agriculture. Beekeeping is an interesting hobby, an ideal agro-based subsidiary enterprise, providing supplementary and sometimes major source of income to the farmers, especially to the small farmers (Refer Annexure for Apiculture Market in India).It is an ideal, eco-friendly and non-land based rural enterprise, which does not tax the farm resources and provide sustainable livelihood to the rural people, including landless and women (Karan Bansalet *al*, 2013).

Bee-keeping or Apiculture, in general, has been taken-up as hobby or at micro level as an additional income generation activity in rural folks. Undertaking apiculture as a full-fledged entrepreneurial venture by an individual, except certain business enterprises is rarely found. Not many find their way to the proverbial land of milk and honey, but Josephine Arokiya Mary's slow and steady steps took her there. Her success is priceless as it comes after huge personal losses.

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## **Josephine Arokiya Mary –The Agripreneur (Entrepreneur in Agriculture and Allied Activities)**

The glory came to her life through honey bees. She dealt confidently with her personal losses and has overcome the barriers emerged unsurprisingly to the entrepreneurs; especially as a woman. Now, she earns on an average Rs.1 lakh per month and her venture touches an annual turnover of Rs.3 Crores. She is known popularly as “Queen Bee” in and around Madurai and sells honey to 23 districts in Tamil Nadu, through her enterprise called Vibis Natural Bee Farming. However, scaling to the greater heights of her entrepreneurship did not come easy.

Josephine, now aged 45, is presently a resident of Kondaiyampatti village in Madurai district. She was born and brought-up in Muthuppatti, a small village in Sivagangai district. She got married to Madurai based micro-businessman Mr.Selvaraj when she finished her higher secondary education. However, marriage did not stop her from pursuing her education and she completed her graduation in B.A. After her two children were born, she decided to find a way to earn some money and support her husband, as he was able to generate only very meager income.

While some personal family issues put the responsibility on Josephine, she always nurtured a dream of herself becoming a successful entrepreneur. Her husband motivated her to complete post-graduation in history and it has also fuelled her entrepreneurial spirit.

The breakthrough appeared in her journey when she saw an advertisement in a newspaper regarding a free training program for three days on bee-keeping at Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK) at Tamilnadu Agricultural University, Madurai. She registered with KVK for two courses; Bee-keeping and Mushroom Cultivation. *“I hadn’t seen even single bee until I walked through the doors of the agricultural university in Madurai for a workshop on bee-keeping in 2006. I was looking for a way to augment my husband’s income so that my children would benefit,”* she recalls.

Mary commenced her venture in 2006 with just 10 bee boxes at a tiny investment of Rs.5000/- on her father’s land. She would leave the boxes on her father’s land and would visit them every week to collect honey. To her surprise, the first harvest gave her 8 kg of honey, and she was able to make a profit of Rs.3000/- within the first three weeks.

Due to her sustained efforts, the venture started picking-up and became viable. She has sustainably increased her number of bee boxes into the nearby villages and resulted in increase of volume of honey collection. While her business was flourishing, there were two un-bearable subsequent fatalities she had to face. The first shock came as her 17 years old daughter died due to bone cancer in 2009. Even before recouping herself from such a great loss, her husband Mr.Selvaraj, who was a constant support to her, also died after a brief illness in November, 2012. The situation was griming and affected her business adversely as she spent more than Rs.3 lakhs for treatment and without much care and maintenance, her bees were also not in a good state. *“After their deaths, I retreated into myself. We had huge medical bills, and I wanted my son to become a doctor so he could help patients suffering from the diseases that took away my husband and daughter. I found encouragement from friends and family, and decided to restart the bee harvesting business. Ten years of bee harvesting has given me a livelihood”* Josephine says.

### **Vibis Natural Bee Farm - The Lucrative Business**

Gradually she gained experience and expanded her operations and currently her business has carved its own niche in the name of “Vibis Natural Bee Farm”. Now the farm has 700 bee boxes and produces 33 varieties of honey. She is approaching the farmers and setting-up the bee colonies. A well-kept bee colony of about 1000 bees is able to produce about 2 Kg of honey a month. When Josephine sees a field flowers with any type of flowers, be it neem, sunflower, gooseberry, or lichi, she seeks an appointment with the

farmers and establishes about 50 bee colonies there. She had set-up 7000 bee colonies across Tamilnadu and Kerala including 3000 of her own at Kondayampatti near Vadipatti in Madurai district.

In 2010, a year after her daughter's demise, she took a loan of Rs.10 lakh from Canara Bank to start Vibis Natural Bee Keeping Farming with 1000 bee boxes. Bee keeping is an integral part of the business of Vibis. *CeranaIndica* is the breed of honey bees nurtured for producing honey. *"Bees are like any other pet animals. Women should come forward to rear honey bees. It is suitable for them as 90 per cent of the work is done by the bees only. One needs to spend only two hours a week for maintaining 10 boxes,"* she notes.

She is harvesting honey from the boxes set-up in different flower catchment areas. It does not require large space and huge investment. For example, if more drumstick trees are found within 2 Kms radius, the bee boxes may be placed in between the trees and can harvest drumstick honey.

The Unique Selling Proposition (USP) of the Vibis Farm is harvesting different varieties of honey. The types of honey available depend on the season and availability of flowers; the varieties include tulsi honey, rose honey, naval (jamun) honey, neem honey, amla honey, pepper, lichi, and crunch (punnai). The honey harvesting is depending heavily on the seasons of flowers and fruits. All the honey varieties produced by vibis farms is organic and Josephine ensures that there are no fertilizers or pesticides involved in the honey produced on their farm. The taste, color and medicinal values differ, as it is based on the nectar and nature of flower. All the varieties have rich medicinal properties. Spices honey such as garlic, ginger, tulsi, cinnamon, amla etc., are excellent in curing explicit sickness like cold, cough, joint pain etc. According to her, honey facilitates good resistance, purifies the blood and its medicinal values protect the body from major health problems like heart ailment and cancer.

The farm generates 33 varieties of honey; of which 23 types of honey are developed through value-addition and rest of the 10 variants are of mono flower honey. Honey value-addition is the innovation of this farm. KVK extends its support to the farm by sharing technical expertise for bee-farming, value addition and honey processing.

She started the value-added honey production in the year 2010. In all fruits based honey they put the pieces of the fruit itself. For example, banana, mango and amla pieces are added with the raw honey and to get the authentic flavour. Tulsi, ginger and garlic honey is prepared using distilled water method. In some varieties fine grinded powder is mixed-up with raw honey; for example, best quality cinnamon powder is added in the honey processing machine to make cinnamon honey. Jamun, drumstick, neem and litchi are the most demanded honey varieties. Among the value-added segment, tulsi, cinnamon and fig are having good demand. Jamun honey generation is the specialty of the farm. In 2 Km radius where it has 60 per cent Jamun trees, they keep the bee-boxes during flowering seasons i.e., May-June. Honey bees collect the nectar of the flower and store in the boxes. Later, they process it and made honey. The same process has been applied for litchi, drumstick and neem honey varieties. Honey tested and certified by AGMARK, ISO and Indian Food Certification. Packed in eco-friendly containers weighing 50 gm., 100gm., 250gm., 500gm., and 1 Kg. The honey varieties are marketed under the brand name of VIBIS. The farm produces and sells more than nine tons of honey a month and the product is affordable with each pocket priced at Rs.80 per 250 grams, through which the farm is able to make decent profit.

Josephine has expanded her business into the foray of manufacturing and supplying bee-boxes. It has begun in 2007 with the order of 62 bee boxes through National Horticulture Missions (NHM) scheme. Now she supplies across Tamil Nadu. Four different types of bee boxes are supplied to all the people interested in bee-keeping. Half inch wooden box, one inch wooden box, plastic box and teak wood box are sold at Rs.1750/-, Rs,2000/-, Rs.2500/-, and Rs.3000/- respectively according to the sizes (inches). Approximately she is selling 10000 boxes per annum. All the boxes are sold with honey bees. The farm is

distributing honey boxes to various departments of Tamilnadu like, forestry, animal husbandry, industries and commerce, agriculture etc.

The farm is the first of its kind in the country in introducing plastic boxes, which is the innovation of this farm. Wooden bee box has its own set of challenges such as termite issues, warps and rots in rainy season. Consequently honey bees become very angry and sting the handler badly. Looking for the solution, the team of the farm experimented with plastic boxes. It was successful and able to design and develop plastic bee boxes. It resolves all the problems faced in wooden boxes. She is planning to get patent for her innovation very soon. At the same time it is important to note that the plastic boxes are not suitable to maintain under sunlight. So, these boxes are normally used in the areas where a severe cold climate condition prevails like Ooty, Kodaikkanal, etc.

Apart from selling honey Josephine extended her business by selling bee wax candles and the “pollen”; a honey bee secretion found in adult queen bees, which is widely marketed as a dietary supplement. She also sells stands, box’s frames and other equipment to extract honey to support bee harvesting. The pollen powder is available in the farm, at the rate of Rs.5000 per Kg. and Royal Jelly will be supplied on the basis of advance orders received and the price comes to Rs.1 lakh per Kg.

The farm sells honey to 23 districts in Tamil Nadu and also participates in number of exhibitions across the country. Farm’s honey is also supplied to other states like Bengaluru, Kerala and Mumbai. Even though there is huge export potential for her products, Josephine is discouraging and not interested to export justifying that the honey is extracted from our own natural resources and in turn the output should reach the nook and corners of our country. She says that there are so many places within India where her products have not yet reached.

### **Bee Venom Therapy**

Bee venom therapy is another innovative activity of the Vibis farm. Bee venom therapy is an indigenously popular treatment in which people go to the Centers just to get the bee sting. According to Mary, one need not be afraid of the sting. *“It actually helps in curing the nerve problems especially it is an excellent cure for arthritis and ligament tear and other illness,”* says Mary. Every second Saturdays the bee venom therapy is administered in the farm premises at free of cost.

### **The Impact**

Besides providing employment to over 50 people through her business, she is helping at present over 400 women to set-up honey bee farms. She routinely works for more than 18 hours a day; especially when she and her team have to transport around 250 boxes of bees during night time. *“Bees have to be shifted in the night when they are sleeping, else it is very difficult to transport them when they are awake,”* Josephine explains. Another routine that she follows is to offer free training to people across schools, colleges, housewives and spread awareness among as many people as possible. She does it on every second Sunday of the month at the farm premises and though she has trained more the 50000 people in bee harvesting under the NHM and creating awareness to save bees from going extinct. She is working extensively for capacity building on bee harvesting in Vadipatti town and nearby areas of Madurai district. Josephine’s personal obstacles and losses taught her the importance of women being self-reliant and financially independent. She started to teach bee harvesting techniques not only to women folk but also to college students. She has created more than 8000 new bee harvesters over the past seven years and has helped in creating more than 1800 entrepreneurs in her district who are engaged in small scale business of bee keeping. She is offering employment to 48 tribal women in the hilly villages of Oddanchathram, Malaiyur, Ellappara and Sirumalai, to tap rock bee honey.

She has also published two books on bee harvesting and is presently writing her third book. She has received 6 national awards and 36 state awards including 20<sup>th</sup>Jankidevi Bajaj Puraskar 2012, Best Entrepreneur Award from Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, Coimbatore, Best Women Entrepreneur from Women Empowerment Forum, and Best Organic Bee Keeper Award for her contribution to apiculture. She was also honored by the US Embassy at Chennai. “Bees help in pollination, which helps trees give more produce. If there is a bee box close to a lemon or a mango tree, the tree gives more fruit than an average tree. Through my workshops, I encourage farmers to harvest at least one bee box in their houses” she remarks.

## Conclusion

Josephine’s wishes, intention and passion towards nature and its preservation is the core value of the successful function of the farm and she is more concerned that people just do not realize the value of honey and importance of honey bees. When more and more bee colonies are established, it helps in pollination, enhancing the yield of crops, plants and trees. The honey is wholesome and healthy food which has also medicinal values. Therefore, the apiculture not only offers employment and income generation, but it also preserves the natural resources and ecological environment.

## Reference

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## Important Websites

[www.yourstory.com](http://www.yourstory.com)

[www.agricultureinformation.com](http://www.agricultureinformation.com)



**Mrs. Josephine Arokiya Mary – The Agripreneur**



**VIBIS Natural Bee Farm**



**Honey Extraction Process**



**Bottled Honey**

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