

One person's pest is other's pet

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REPRESENTATIONAL PICTURE

Meeting a city-based bee conservationist was a real eye-opener

The beginning of a bee hive — about lemon-sized — suddenly made itself known in an enclosed sit-out of our home. All Pune residents are familiar with this word 'sit-out' — glorious little open-to-the-sky spots that the builder hard-sells to you. By the time you move in and buy those two cane chairs to enjoy the morning chai or kojagiri poornima moon, hair floats down and graces this spot, coming from people combing their tresses in the new building that suddenly crops up, looming over your sit-out.

But, I digress. Having shrouded my no-more private or pretty sit-out with blinds, I had proceeded to use it as a work area to dry and iron clothes. Suddenly, almost as if overnight, the hive appeared, at a point low enough to be disturbed were you to shake out your wet washed clothes (the Marathi word is zataknay and there is no English word for it).

The immediate response in my mind was to look for the bug-spray (yes, so bite me) and whoosh them off. Having vaguely heard that bees are vanishing, and this is going to create yet another silent ecological imbalance, I decided not to be so triggerhappy with the spray-can, and enquired with city NGO Kalpavriksh, what I could do about them. Amit Godse, they said, is an IT professional turned bee conservationist. Now, kudos to this soft-spoken young person, within half a minute of talking to him, it became evident that my killing them off would be an incredibly senseless thing to do. Passionate about the bee and its well-being, he quickly offered three choices that were nonviolent options: We will come and take it away, or we will relocate it to a less troublesome spot in your house if you have one, or why don't you simply leave it there, they will do nothing to you...they are not killer bees; and come monsoon, they will leave.

I found myself choosing option C, purely on the basis of this young person's evident passion for bees. And so the hive grew, and there they were, minding their own business, busily. We hung out our clothes carefully and they seemed to not care at all about our presence.

But, when two kids were expected to come over and stay through summer, we thought it best that the combination of two dogs, two children, and a lowhanging bee hive be best not tried.

Enter the bee-man. All he carried with him in his backpack was a knife, two foot-long small sticks, some slim coir rope and a small brush. Hoisting himself on a stool, he stood face-toface with a hive of over 200 bees. We watched, sure that we are now going to see them swarm him and tear into him! Nothing of the kind happened. He worked gently and reassuringly with them, calmly inserting the two twigs right through the hive material, to form a kind of clip. The small portion left above this, the honey-chamber, we learnt, was then neatly cut away, so that the hive was now moored to the clip and not our sit-out grille. With the brush, he gently brushed away some of the bees clinging to this cut-out part and plonked it into a plate. From this astounding piece of architecture, emerged a few tablespoons of honey that were intense in flavour to the point of being medicinal tasting. Obviously what we are getting in the market is made more palatable by the addition of molasses or simply sugar syrup. The bees went back to rebuilding and refilling that honey chamber — and here we learnt that it takes a bee over 10,000 visits to a bunch of flowers to produce one drop of honey. The honey, by the way, is food for the larvae and grubs.

This delicate operation completed and the bee-man then proceeded to spray some of the fallen bees with water, so that the honey that had spilt on them and was preventing them from flying was washed off! Now, if this is not seva and ibaadat of the Creator, I don't know what is.

During this time, he got several phone calls, and he would answer each one by gently urging people to give him a chance to non-violently address the issue, without a single bee being killed!

The hive is now left to rest for 24 hours, so that all the disturbed bees who fly off return to it, and it will be taken away in a box, to be relocated. We learnt that there are 'box bees' too, which some Pune city nature lovers nurture in their homes as a hobby, as well as in the service of nature, and for their own super-quality honey.

The words sting, attack, killer, poison, pain simply did not come up during this intricate and calm 40-minute operation. The only time that Amit Godse, the bee-man, mentioned it was while assuring us that if at all one is stung, all that it does is give you immunity from many chronic illnesses!

Spoken like a true bhakt of the bee! First published by

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