

PLAN BEE











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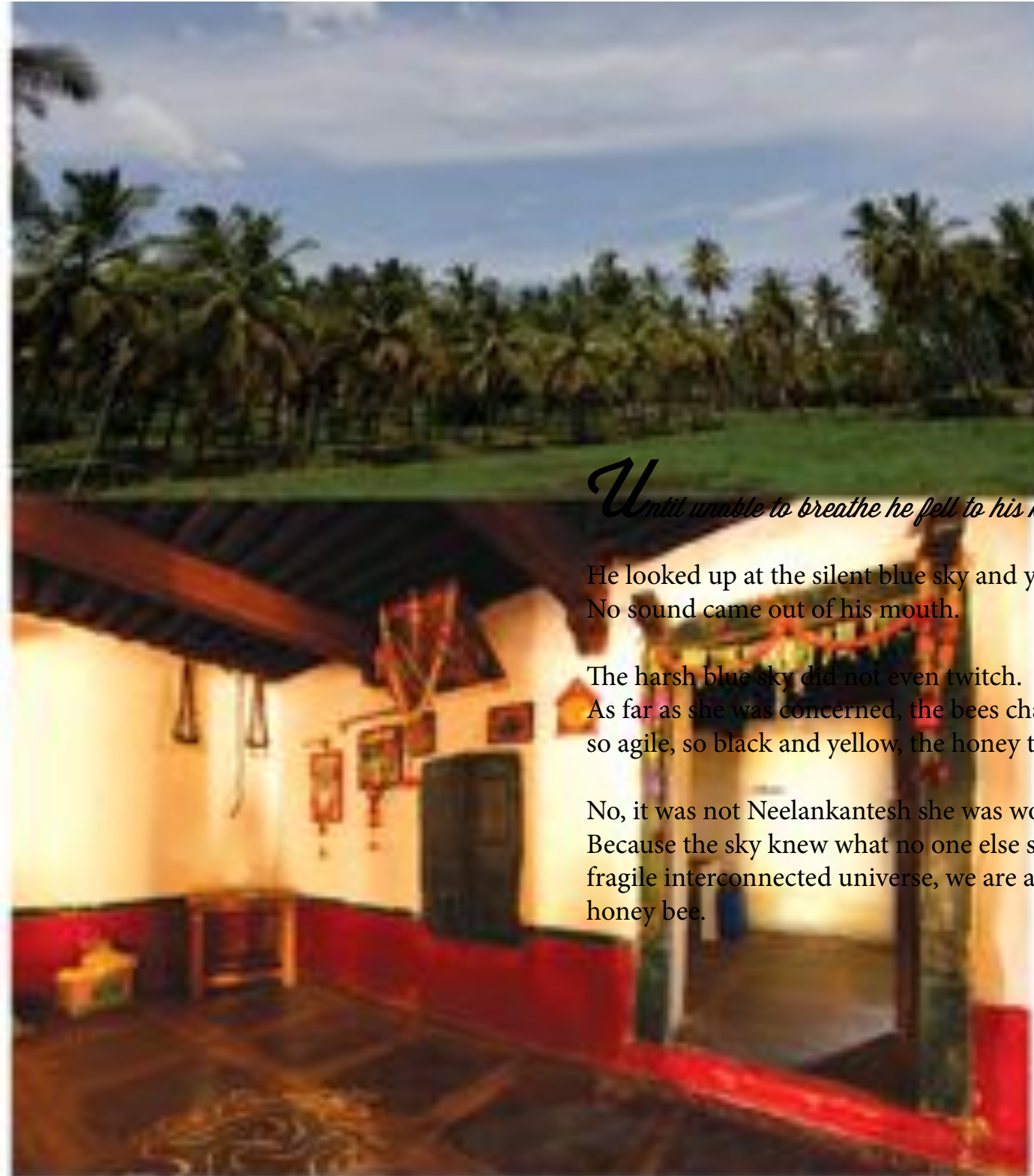


*There was a little bit of chaos, some might say, there was a rumble*

He ran.  
Barefoot.  
Tearing through the swishing jungle grass.  
Ripping his faded striped shirt.  
Exploding into a parched cotton field.





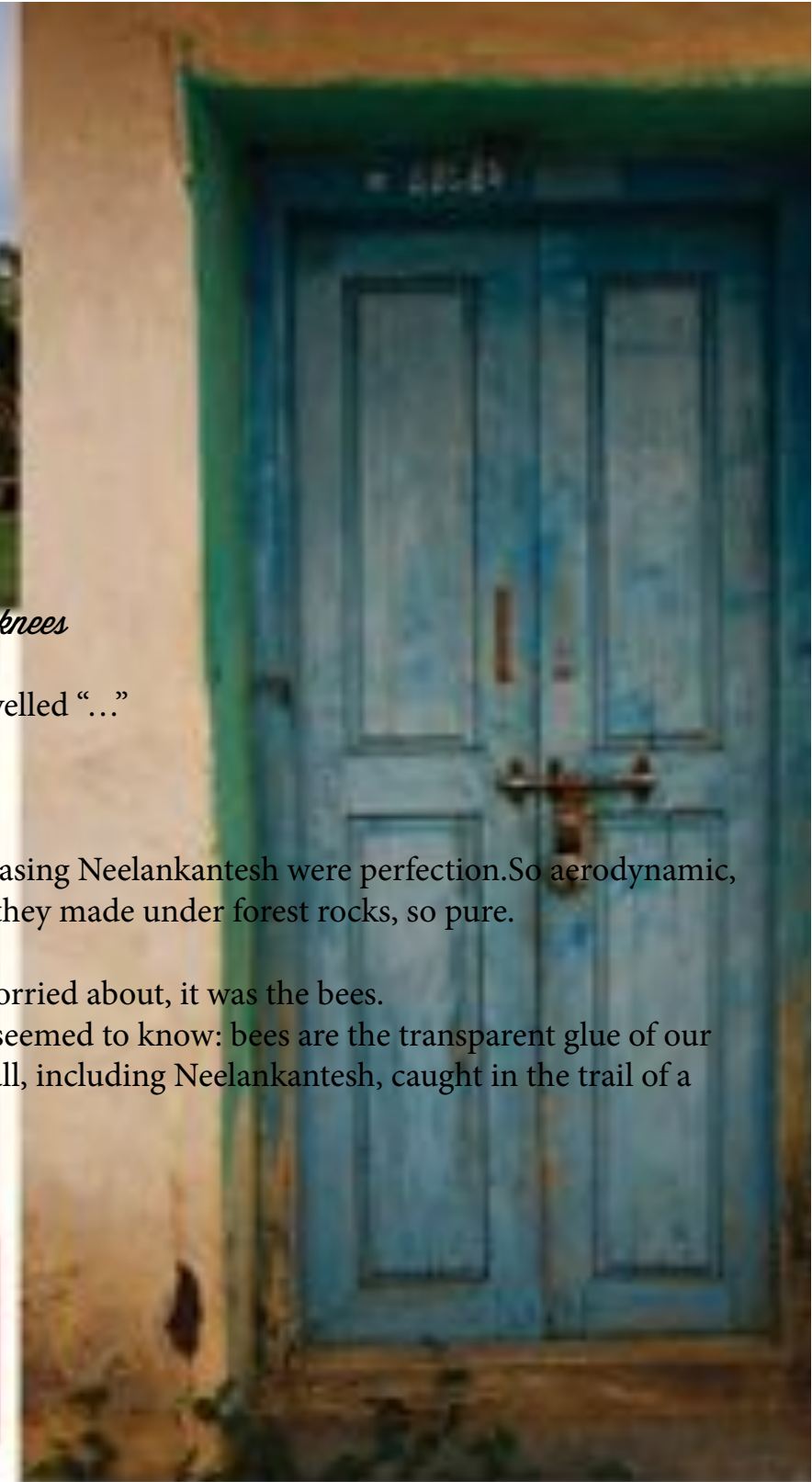


*Until unable to breathe he fell to his knees*

He looked up at the silent blue sky and yelled “...”  
No sound came out of his mouth.

The harsh blue sky did not even twitch.  
As far as she was concerned, the bees chasing Neelankantesh were perfection. So aerodynamic,  
so agile, so black and yellow, the honey they made under forest rocks, so pure.

No, it was not Neelankantesh she was worried about, it was the bees.  
Because the sky knew what no one else seemed to know: bees are the transparent glue of our  
fragile interconnected universe, we are all, including Neelankantesh, caught in the trail of a  
honey bee.



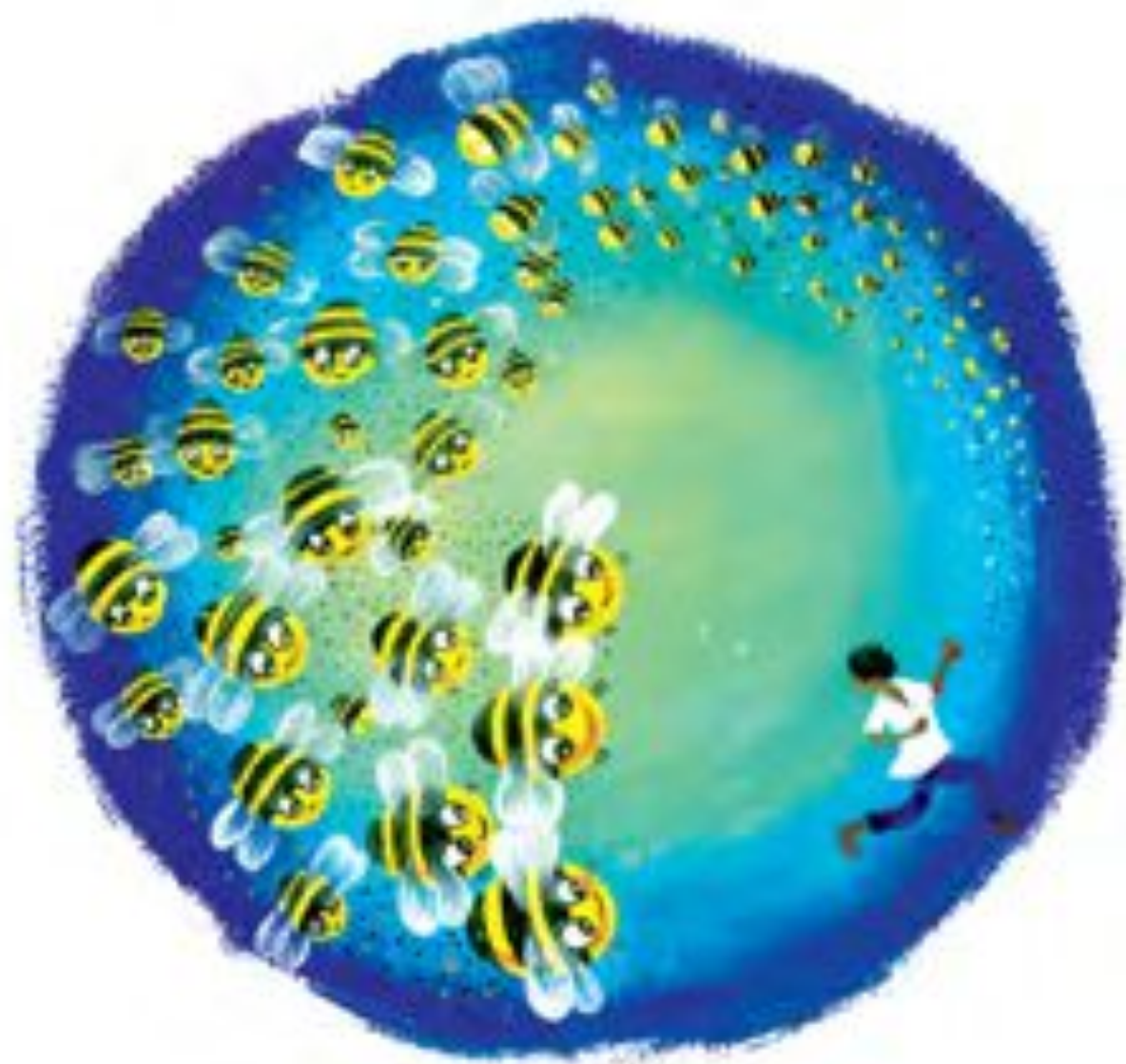












## *Before the rumble, there was a small misstep*

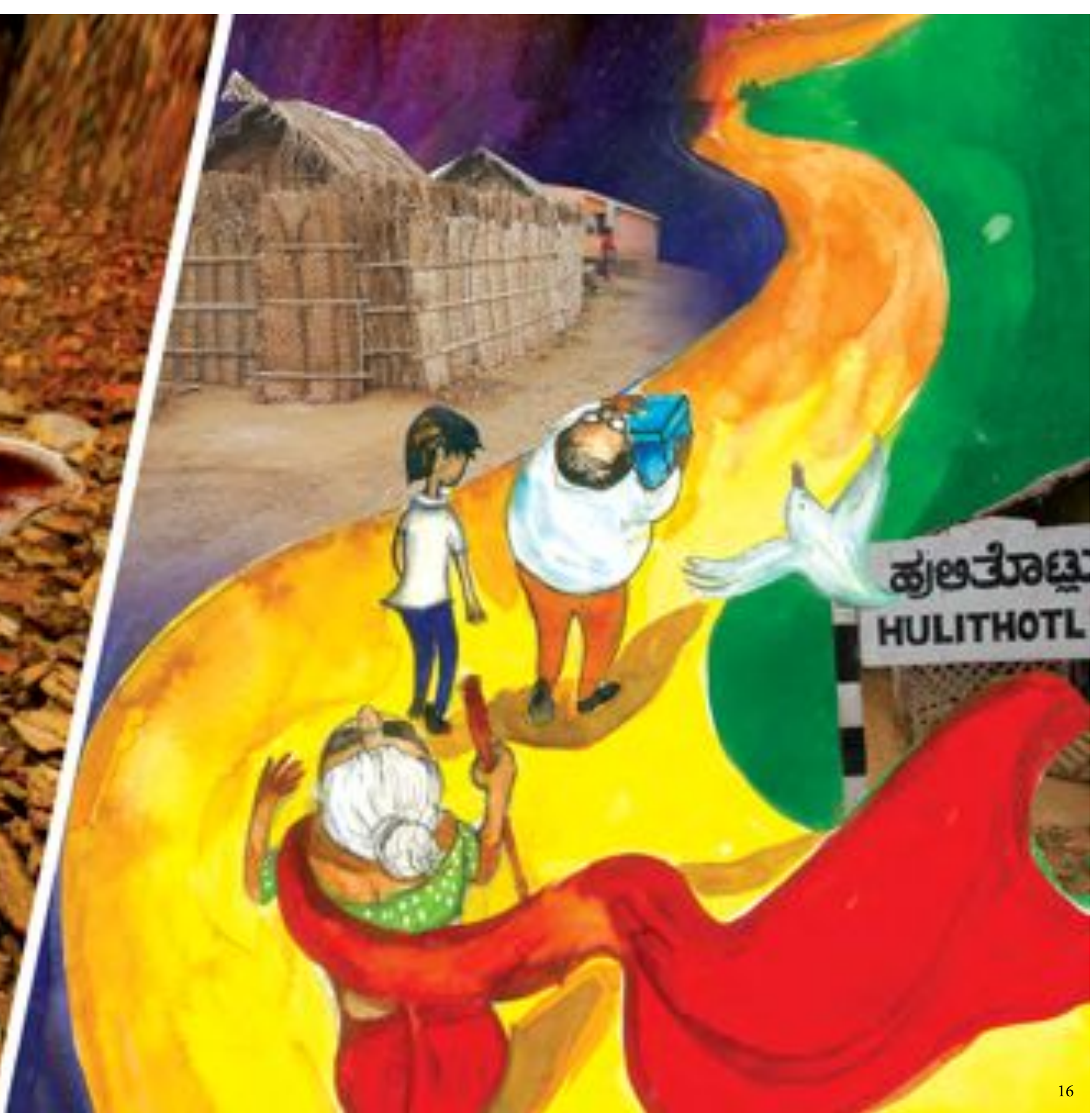
Shanti and Neelankantesh arrived in the village by the early dusty bus that was late by 1 hour and 46 minutes. Jamala was the oldest grandmother in the village, she liked sitting by the bus stop. Jamala knew what everyone who had lived for 89 years knew: village life was constant – sunrise, sunset. But people who came to town were always a good story. Today Jamala was absolutely right about people, as she was right about stories. She adjusted her thick glasses to watch two men step down from the bus. Jamala thought that you could say in a matter of speaking, they were not alone.
















“We’ve come to chat about bees. How good they are. How easy to keep. To make sweet honey and pollinate your fields. How good they are easy to keep. How they make natural honey, your fields will bloom bloom bloom too!

They were carrying two eggshell-blue boxes.  
Intrigued, Jamala swung herself off her stone and placed her walking stick firmly in the red earth to follow.

Neelankantesh cheerily said ‘hello’ to everyone he passed in dusty-village-lane.  
“Hello”

Neela’s boss, Shanti, was out-of-breath,  
struggling to keep up behind him.



Setting up the bee exhibition under a giant Mango tree Neelankantesh smiled widely at the gathering crowd, Jamala took her seat on a stone wall, and Neelankantesh's director lay down for a nap in the shade of the tree. It was up to Neela now.

More grandmothers and grandfathers and very young children came to watch. "Where are all the young people", Neela wondered to himself, but soon forgot his trailing thought and began.

*Bees are harmless.  
They are not scary.*

"There's nothing to be afraid of. All you have to do is gently smoke the bees out of the hive, like so..." Neela had lit a piece of material and waving it in the box. Nothing happened. He tried again. Nothing. "We need more smoke" Neela called to his sleeping director, who waved him away, "zzz enough," he murmured and went back to sleep.



*Boom. Two box lids flew up in the air.*

A swarm of very angry bees rose and...  
You know the rest... after all, that's how you met Neelankantesh.

"My sense is we have a lot to learn" said Jamala looking up watching the sky churn like a kaleidoscope from blue to violet to her favourite colour pink-red-blue. The sky nodded to her favourite grandmother and a lonely bee followed Jamala as she walked swayed back and forth to the bus stop.







*Neela with the family*









*197 stings*

*2 eggshell blue bee boxes*

*1 sore young man*

*1 angry young woman*

“You didn’t listen to me and he didn’t listen to you so I don’t care,” said Neela’s generally happy wife Sunita. She was sting angry and insisted on counting the bee stings because she knew Neela was terrible at maths and as far as she was concerned, maths, counting, sums, accounts were the keys to any success in life.

*You had to be able to count to live well.*

“I should make my own honey, run my own business, then I can do more than just show and tell—I can handle bees myself, and make pure honey, and show everyone that bees are wonderful. Show them what industrious marvels they are; how important they are to our farmers. They pollinate fields, ensure diversity, and make honey. Unbelievable,” said Neelakantesh, lost in thought about the sheer genius of bees.

*“My hero with 197 stings who will take on the market of 100,000 honey brands”*

Neelankantesh stared at his wife. Instead of trepidation, he felt oddly completely confident. Maybe it was the bee stings. Maybe it was the right idea.

*“Plan Bee”*

He said aloud with wild eyes and barreled on before Sunita could be more negative, “My honey will be pure! Organic! Made for medicine. Most honey in the market is adulterated with antibiotics and sugar. My honey will be a 100% pure and,” because he was not sure if she heard him, “ORGANIC!” Standing next to him Sunita yelled back.





## *Oh! organic*

“How is this different from every other job you’ve joined and abandoned when you got bored?” yelled a now spiraling red Sunita. In that moment, she reminded Neela of a bee. And, as she whirled towards him, in-stead of turning to run, he saw all of his previous incarnations—cowherd, dishwasher, cement layer, tile cutter, luggage carrier – and he stood his ground “They were not my business! This would be my own business. MY OWN.” Smiling happily at his angry wife the argument clearly now won, he could not resist adding under his breath, “I’ll be free like a honey bee”

“That’s enough Neela, quite enough” said Sunita banging the door as she strode into the cool night air.



# *Flashback: our soon-to-be bee hero as a child (how it all began)*

Neelankantesh cleaned tables. Washed dishes. Cleaned more tables Served food. Washed ever more dishes. He broke dishes. He try to count how many. He lost count.

Neela did lots of odd jobs. Countless, according to Neela. He carried lots of suitcases and trunks for people at the train station. So many you can't count how many.

Cowherd,  
Age 17



Dishwasher  
Age 19

Cement layer,  
Age 20



Neela laid lots of cement. How much he was not sure. He started in the morning, built houses till the evening. He would get paid for each day's work. This sure was not enough to sustain. Sometimes, he would not even get any work to do.



Luggage carrier,  
Age 21

Building Windmills,  
Age 22



A company came to his village to build windmills. Neelakantesh got a job to dig up the earth... transport mud and cement. But he never got to learn how to build a windmill (which is what he wanted to learn, he only wanted to learn how to build one, not so many).

This was Neelankantesh's first proper job. Heartbreakingly his father passed away suddenly, leaving behind a debt no one knew they had. Neelankantesh dropped out of school in Grade 7. His uncle told him "be a cowherd" So he did. But he always lost count of the cows. After two years, Neela was bored of cows (though he was never quite sure how many he was bored of).





*One late afternoon at the wind blew,*

Neela stood watching the windmills twirl, a single bee buzzing around him interrupted his line of thought, waving the bee away, he knew in that moment: I want to do so much more.

*He looked at the land around him.*

It was parched and dry. The plants were wilting in the harsh afternoon sun. There were no young people, because there were no jobs. Only the elderly looked after the earth. The bee floated by again and Neela knew, good things come in twos. Or was it one? You did not need lots of good ideas, just one Neela said, counting his idea as the number one. He decided to apply for a job in an organization supported by the Government that promoted beekeeping and farmer's land-registration, farmers rights. At least one out of three roles was about bees.





# *The tyranny of homework*











*Yuusraaj, age 7, is Neelakantesh's son.*

He pushed his notebook and pencil into his father's back. Neela caught his son from behind and flipped him upside down. "Do my homework" Neela looked disheartened at his son, it was maths, and maths he could not help with. Hugging his son, he said "Maybe you can help me do mine?"





*For five years Neela had learned about bees,*

He'd met countless farmers, he knew what their problems were, and how bees could solve it – Neela was increasingly bothered that he could not spend all of his time on bees and honey – so he said 'goodbye' to the organization and decided to start his own busi-ness. His wife, as you can imagine, was not thrilled. That's why Neela had enlisted the help of his son, to do his homework. Yuvraaj counted for his father, and his father wrote down his plan in Yuvraaj's notebook.







*Neela interviewed the farmers in his village*

The next day he took his son's notebook and visited all the farmers around him—some he knew, and some he didn't.

*He interviewed his farmer friends in detail...*



What's the biggest problem you face?

What do you wish to change, if you could?





He drew the size of their farms. He made notes about what they grew, the pesticides they used, their debts, their concerns, their barren fields, or full fields. He made notes whenever he saw bees, but he did not see many.

All of them said their farms were not doing well. They got less and less from their fields every year. The cost of seeds and pesticides kept going up. The price of vegetables went down and up.



*Neela had his plan. He'd be a beekeeper. He begin now.  
Well not right now, tomorrow that is, tomorrow.*







## *The next day*

Meet Veerabhadri.  
Neelankantesh's employee number 1.  
Neela handed him three  
bee boxes.



*Mission 1: "Collect wild honeybees"* said Neela with authority, and then explaining what he would be doing, "I have to make some calls. Marketing is key for business. You collect the bees and come back."

Veerabhadri never spoke up, because he didn't want to look stupid. He strode into the forest bee box under his arm.



Soon, Bhadri found a beehive, nestled between two big rocks. He set the boxes on the ground, opened the lid, and waited for the bees to fly in.

*He waited... and waited... and waited...*

*When Veerabhadri returned he did not have any bees.*



*Instead of getting angry, Neelankantesh realized that it was his fault.*

Marketing did not come before having enough bees to make honey (what was Marketing all about anyway? You can't sell what you don't have)

You can't expect your new employees to know something they don't know

If you want to get something done right, do it yourself

Train your employees to do it right before sending them on missions.

Communicate clearly and effectively and listen to your employees' silence (silence means often, that no one knows)

Being an entrepreneur was like going back to school sped up in super time (Neelankantesh half-wondered if this time he was going to learn maths, because he still did not know how to count)







## *Can you keep a secret???*

Sunita handed him a book.

Neela looked at her questioningly.

“Be a better entrepreneur,” Sunita said with a half-smile. Neela could not read. Sunita did not officially know that, but she knew that.

Not wanting to disappoint her, Neela started reading the book, very slowly, saying the words aloud as he read it. But there were big words. And lots of numbers. So he slammed the book shut.



## *You are who you don't quite know yet*

Neelankantesh called for help. He called Apoorva, an old friend in the city.

"Apooo  
I have a problem. I  
want to start a bee business  
but I only have three boxes.  
Honestly I can't count so maybe I have  
seven?  
But we know it's not enough boxes?" Neela  
went on to explain. It was about the ratio  
of boxes to acres. Every acre could support  
two bee boxes enabling the bees to fly in all  
directions (north, south, east, and west) in a 2  
km radius (or was it 1km or 6.5 km?)  
It was good for the honey, because it would  
taste of lychee and basil and mustard  
and mint. "So..." Neela trailed off,  
"I need more bee boxes"



"How much  
money?" Apoo laughed  
"A lot" Neela answered "How  
many bee boxes?" Apoo smiled. "175  
or maybe 67, no 59" Neela answered  
seriously "Neela, you're going to have to  
learn to count if you are going to be an  
entrepreneur. Everyone will ask you about  
numbers. But first take down this num-  
ber and call them. I have two words  
for you my friend, just two right  
now: Be! Fund."

*His farmer friends had several acres of land, more than 20 acres, according to his research. So that meant at least 40 bee boxes. Each box was Rs.1,500. He needed more money to get more boxes.*





*Rainbow mix of  
pollen from  
variety of  
different  
flowers*





## *Be! Fund*

“Be! Fund” he told Sunita that evening. “What? Now you’ve found that a fund that just funds bees?” She shouted and stormed out again.

Neela smiled. He hadn’t thought of it that way. Yes, it must be a sign, it’s the Bee Fund.



## *Bee-ing right*

Neela called Be! Fund. They were very nice. But they also asked about the numbers. He said he needed 75 boxes of bees. They, Be! Fund, did the numbers.

They realized Neela did not really think numbers meant very much– sunrise, sunset – it’s 6 o’clock – numbers were like ripe mangoes to be picked from the tree and offered to a friend – sometimes two, sometimes three. They decided he could begin with 25 boxes of bees. They asked him to make a calendar of all the seasons for beekeeping. This is what Neela gave to the number-crunchers at the fund.



# *My calendar for my first year of bees.*

<b>January</b> Preparatory stage- clean the boxes and get the setup ready 	<b>February</b> Collect all the honey recieved from the boxes. The heat season begins 	<b>March</b>  Set the boxes in the fields, for bees to pollinate	<b>April</b> 	<b>May</b> Feed the bees with sugar syrup in off season when the bees have gone away 	<b>June</b>
<b>JULY</b>	<b>AUGUST</b> Crack boxes with knife, wearing the gear and the mask. 	<b>SEPTEMBER</b>	<b>OCTOBER</b> Prepare the market strateging.	<b>NOVEMBER</b> Sell Honey in the market	<b>December</b>



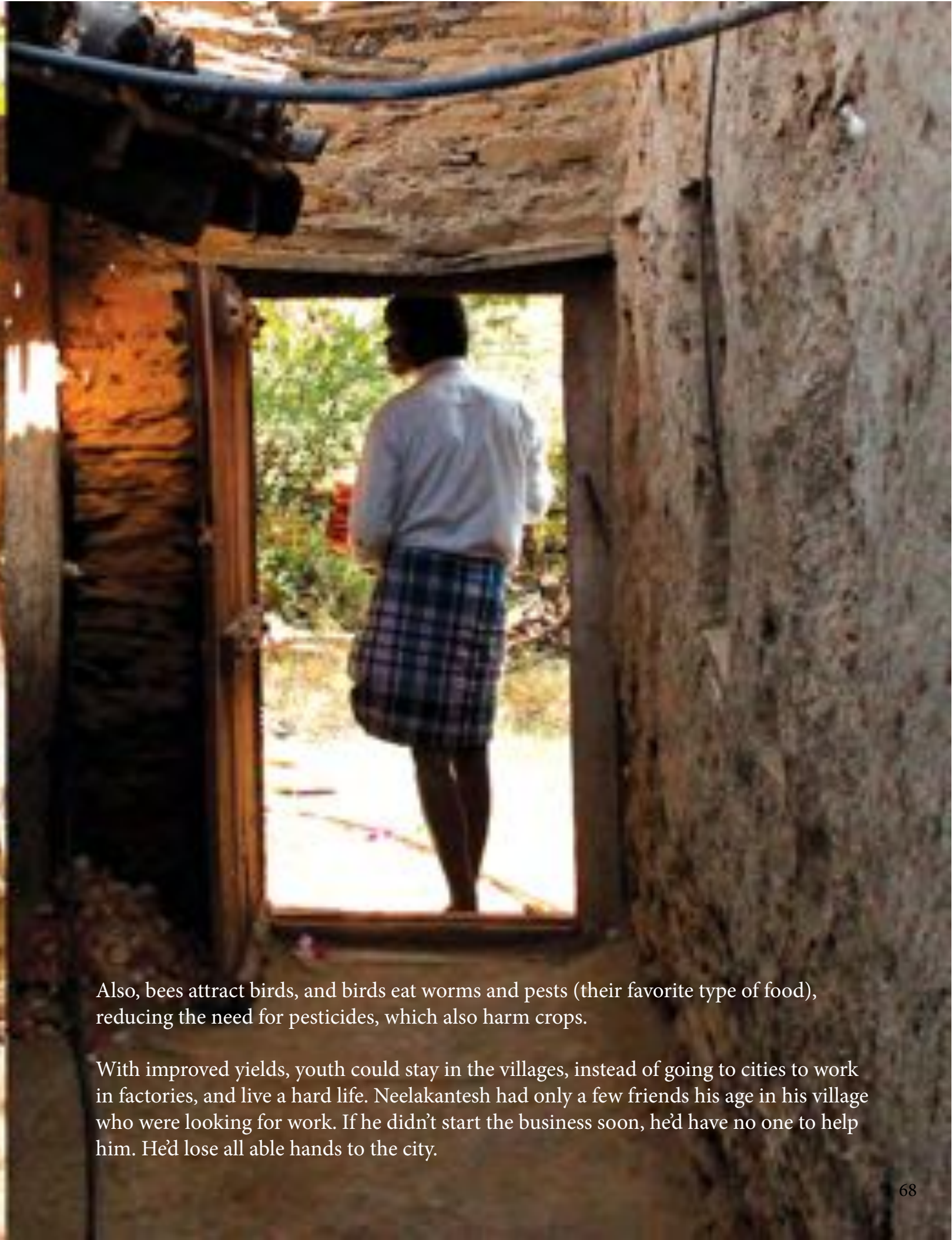




Some bee-keepers harvested honey every alternate month, but Neelakanatesh wanted to be sure of the quality. He knew that if the comb wasn't sealed all the way through, then the honey wouldn't be as good. He needed to be a little patient to get the best. He decided to start with 75 boxes- 40 to produce honey, and 35 for pollination, honey and cross-breeding. By cross-breeding bees would develop immunity, and build better resistance to viruses, and pesticides, and other harmful agents.

When bee boxes are kept in sunflower fields, for instance, their yield increases from 25 quintals per hectare to nearly 45 quintals per hectare! Increasing the yield is good for everyone—from farmers to consumers, everyone benefits. And all because of a few thousand bees.





Also, bees attract birds, and birds eat worms and pests (their favorite type of food), reducing the need for pesticides, which also harm crops.

With improved yields, youth could stay in the villages, instead of going to cities to work in factories, and live a hard life. Neelakantesh had only a few friends his age in his village who were looking for work. If he didn't start the business soon, he'd have no one to help him. He'd lose all able hands to the city.

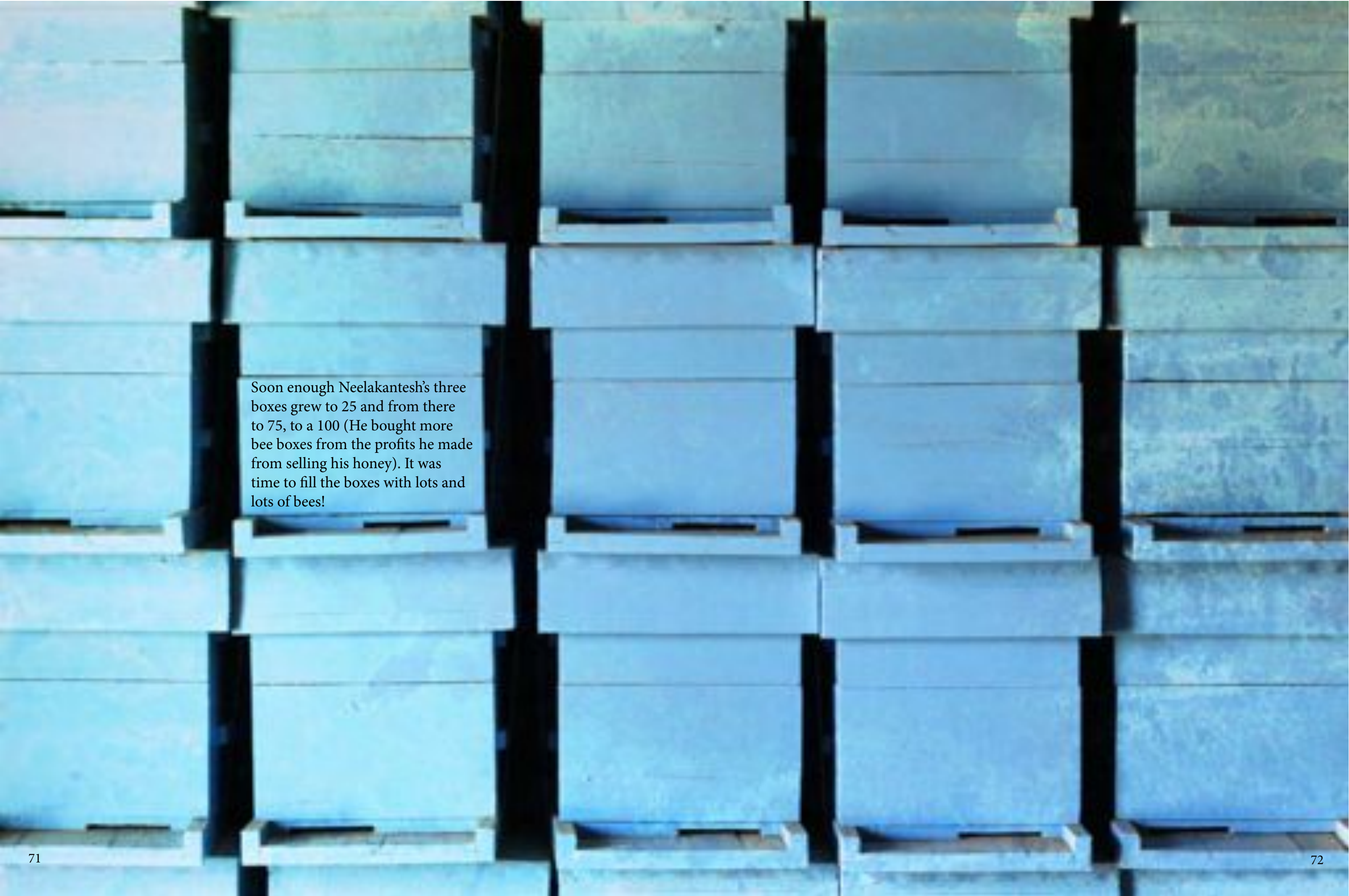


*“India’s life is in it’s villages,” he said with fierce determination.  
“I want to save the bees and save our villages.”*

He’d explained the numbers and figures to them, seeing his passion and sincerity, and very thorough research, Be! Fund could only say yes.







Soon enough Neelakantesh's three boxes grew to 25 and from there to 75, to a 100 (He bought more bee boxes from the profits he made from selling his honey). It was time to fill the boxes with lots and lots of bees!





*"First, we smoke the bees out of their hive. Then we cut the hive and attach it to the frames, using thin strips of a banana leaf."*







Collecting bees from the wild was one of the things he loved. Neelakantesh looked forward to exploring the wild woods for hives. He'd look under rocks, and in tree cavities, and in anthills. This time around, he took Veerabhadri along with him, to show him how the job was done. "Once I find a hive, it's only a matter of getting the bees into the box."





You say it like it's the easiest job in the world, how do you get the bees from their hive to the box?" asked Veeabhadri scratching his head. "First, we smoke the bees out of their hive. Then we cut the hive and attach it to the frames, using thin strips of a banana leaf."

Nodding his head furiously, "Which frame? There are 10 here," asked Bhadri.

"Hahahaha," laughed Neela, affectionately, thinking Bhadri was pulling his leg. And immediately sobered up when he realized Bhadri was serious with his question.

Hastily, Neelakantesh corrected his expression and said, "Any frame will do."






*"If you catch the queen, you'll have all the bees in less than 20 minutes,"*

"Bees know which hive is theirs, and by attaching a bit of the hive to our frame, the bees will come to the box." Indeed, as Neelakantesh was explaining all this, a few bees were making their way to the bee box. "All we need are 5000 bees in each box, and we're done."

The trick was all the bees follow the queen, so if you catch a queen bee, the rest follow like magnets.\*





“What do we with the remaining hive?”

In response, Neela sliced off a fat chunk of the bee hive, and popped it in his mouth. “Just suck out all the honey,” he said with his mouth half-full, offering Bhadri an equally plump chunk. “Eat it like you would sugarcane.”

Biting into the pure sweetness of raw honey, Bhadri corrected Neelakantesh. “This, Neela, is the easiest job in the world,” he said with a chuckle.





*And that's how Bhadri became the fastest bee-box filler in the village. He had eyes only for the queen bee.*





## *Idea (and Failure)*

Neelakantesh was thrilled with his full bee-boxes, and wanted to help his farmer friends. He'd used the boxes to produce honey, and was ready to expand to pollination and honey.

He approached his farmer friends, who grew a variety of crops—sesame, sunflowers, chickpeas, coriander, and more—and said, “I’ve been extracting honey for the past few months, and these bees are excellent. You will get honey, and your crops will benefit. Two boxes for an acre, and watch how your crops multiply.”





*“How will they do that Neela?” asked Ramappa*

But all the numbers of yield and hectares got completely jumbled up in his head and Neelakantesh was stuck. Instead he said, “Just you wait and watch Ramappa. But please remember to leave the slot open at the bottom of the box. Otherwise the bees will suffocate.” Neela knew this from experience. In his first weeks at the training he didn’t know much and had caught his first natural colony. Anxious that they not escape, he’d shut the opening. Sadly, the whole colony died, because of the heat and lack of oxygen.

But now he was confident of his skills. He dreamed of being as successful as Apoorva, with national and international clients. Of course, he never once asked other manufacturers who their clients were and what pitfalls to watch out for.

And soon enough, tragedy struck. When Neelakantesh went to visit the boxes two weeks later, only irate friends were waiting for him.









## Failure

“You gave us defective bees Neelakantesh! Give us our money back,” said one. “All my bees died in a week,” said the other. “Mine too! forget pollination, there was no honey to be had either,” said another seething with anger.

Neelakantesh couldn’t understand what went wrong. He couldn’t solve the mystery, so he called Shantveeraiah to ask for advice. “That’s strange,” said Shantveeraiah. “Colony Collapse Disorder is a problem in the West. Not here. Sometimes bees abandon their hives if there’s a virus... They die if pesticides are used. I’m sure you told your friends all this. It must have been something else, don’t blame yourself Neelakantesh.”

In his hurry to expand his business, he’d forgotten all about telling the farmers not to use pesticides and fertilizers near the bees. He sat with his head in his hands, dejected. “Your business plan was so precise and full of information. How can you have forgotten everything so soon?” asked Shantveeraiah with concern.

“Sunil’s right,” Neela thought to himself. “I can’t bring myself to tell her that I wrote that Apoorva’s help. Numbers are my enemy. I can never keep track of them. There are so many,” he despaired quietly.

Out loud, he only said, “I wish I could do something. If I’d attached a short how-to or instruction pamphlet with the boxes, the bees would be alive. And I’d have honey to sell. And the farmers would know exactly how much their yield would increase by. Oh I’m a fool!”

The thing is when you hit rock bottom, the only place you can go is up. So he embarked on a new secret mission...







## *Plan Bee*

He decided that he needed to read and write English, and also improve his Kannada reading and writing skills, so he could learn for himself, first-hand about everything. During the day his adventures with bees continued.

Every week, he made progress with the book his wife had given him on entrepreneurship. One day he chanced upon the Marketing section. He read it aloud, slowly and softly. “Meeting people is only a small aspect of marketing. Your product is the best agent there is. Its name, label, packaging, is what will take the business forwards. Customers will know the brand more than they know you.”

It was as though Neela was struck by lightening. While he’d been dreaming of a national and international market, his honey was known only in his small village. As ‘the-honey-Neela-makes’. That was no name. No, he needed labels, a proper name, and proper packaging.

Neelkantesh gave his honey a name—Wild Honey. A Karnataka Product. He bottled them in clear jars with bright yellow caps. He sealed the lids with foil, to ensure there was no spillage.

He printed labels for all the jars, identifying the goodness of pure honey, made without adulterants, and also suggested uses. On each bottle he gave a different recipe to use the honey. In cakes, biscuits, snacks, and more. “I want to show people there’s more than one way of using honey,” he said when his wife asked him about it.

“Shall I vacate the kitchen for you then?” she asked jovially.





But Neelakantesh was serious. He called all the people he knew and met during his time at the NGO, and told all of them about his honey and the benefits of natural honey. This time, Apoorva called him, and said, “How much honey do you get in season per box?”

“2 kgs. And 1 kg in off season,” Neela replied.

“Great! I’ll buy 50 kg during the season. This is an annual contract. I’m coming to Chitradurga next week, and we can finalise it then.”

“Will you sell it under my brand name? As Wild Honey, so people know it’s me?”

“Yes, of course!” Apoorva assured him. “Oh and one more thing, are you selling the beeswax as well?”

Neelakantesh hadn’t thought of that, so he shook his head. Realising that Apoorva couldn’t see him, he said, “No, I haven’t.”

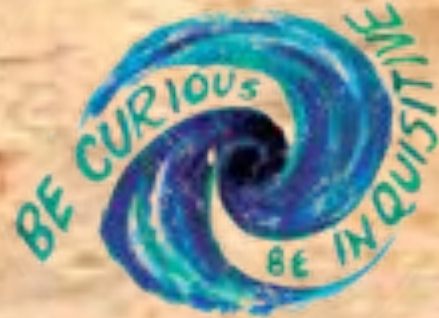




“Think about it Neela, I have buyers if you want to sell.”

Then it came back to him. The training at the NGO. What was it that Shantiveeraiah had said about beeswax? “It has various uses. It is currently used by cosmetic companies, and the food and pharmaceutical companies.”

And then there was the unprocessed honey. There was a market for that as well! So he added that to his labels, along with his address and phone number so people could reach him for orders. Suddenly Neela was a very busy man indeed. Buses were delivering Neela’s honey all across Karnataka—Tiptur, Mysore, Bangalore, and beyond.







Neelakantesh has travelled all over the country seeing how various beekeepers go about the business of making honey and raising the bees. Seeing Neelkantesh's success, his best friend Srinivas decided to start his own apiary. With 50 more boxes that Neela will look after.

Both Neela and Srinivas have big plans for their bees. They're planning on making Srinivas's plantation into a tourist spot, where visitors can spend the afternoon learning all about bees and beekeeping, and take home raw, organic honey, as much as they want!

Oh! and Neelakantesh has a secret he's going to share with the world soon, be he's telling us first—He's passed his classes! He can now fill forms in English and Kannada, and access information about bees and beekeeping first hand, without having to rely on others.





He's better with numbers now, and can keep accounts even when his wife is away. He makes a detailed list of all his expenses and income. He calculates his profit and loss (it still happens sometimes) down to the last paisa.

And he's still dreaming big. He wants to sell natural combs, preserved in glass jars, as a reminder of how integral bees are to our lives. He's rounding up his fellow farmer sangha members and spreading the word about the importance of bees. He has not given up on his plan to be known all over Karnataka and India, maybe even the world!

*As the man who saved bees. The one who brought India back to its villages.*









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