

Glimpses of nature

Honeytrap by Rhododendrons

In 67 B.C.E, at Trabzon near Black Sea famous general, Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus (Pompey the Great) and his Roman army faced an unprecedented situation. While chasing the Persian army of King Mithridates of Pontus, they were exposed to full pots of local honey, undoubtedly lucrative drink for exhausting soldiers. The result was devastating after a happy sip to that special honey, a literal “honeytrap”. The soldiers became disoriented, unable to stand on their feet and the very next day it was a cakewalk for the hidden Persian army to massacre nearly 1000 soldiers who were still in that unstable condition. The warfare history repeated at A.D. 946, when 5000 Russian soldiers were killed under the same “honeytrap” by the followers of Olga of Kiev and in 1489, 10,000 Tatar soldiers had the same fate planned by the Russians at the same region. However, these ghastly experiences and other small scale incidences did not impact the popularity of this honey aka. “Mad honey”, “Poison honey”.

Considered as one of the costliest honey in the world (\$129.95/kg www.miel-fou.com), it has medicinal and hallucinogenic properties owing to the presence of Grayanotoxin. The source plants mostly belong to the Ericaceae family, i.e., our Rhododendrons, Azaleas with their dazzling bright coloured flowers. Very well-known examples are *Rhododendron ponticum*, *Rhododendron maximum*, *Rhododendron flavum* and Azaleas in the Black Sea and Caucasus region. Similarly, Mad honey incidences are not restricted in the Black Sea region, these intoxicating properties have been reported from Asia Minor, southern Russia, The Himalayas (Nepal), the eastern United States and the Pacific north-west. In the Himalaya, *Apis dorsata laboriosa* the largest honeybee of the world produces red honey from Rhododendron species at the higher altitude region which is also famous for its intoxicating property. However, dosage standardisation and awareness on its excess consumption arrested the mortality rate in recent time thus skyrocketing its popularity. So, next time, don't allow the honey to decide your destination either “hallucinogenic heaven” or “monstrous hell”



Photo: Eiffel/Google Image



Photo: <https://www.theguardian.com>

Source: Adrienne Mayor (1995). *Mad Honey*. *Archaeology*, pp. 32-40

Image: A) *Rhododendron ponticum* (Source: Eiffel/Google Image)

B) Honey hunters in Nepal. (Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/travel/gallery/2014/feb/27/honey-hunters-nepal-in-pictures#img-4>)

Collector: **Rajasri Ray**