

The Hunter Gatherer Initiative

- *From economic development to Well being*

“Out of the Indian approach to life there came a great freedom, an intense and absorbing respect for life, enriching faith in a Supreme Power, and principles of truth, honesty, generosity, equity, and brotherhood as a guide to mundane relations.” *Luther Standing Bear, Oglala Sioux*

Indigenous people all across the world emerge from an age old history which has leant them a holistic philosophy. Often a confluence of the metaphysical, cosmic, spiritual worldview can be seen in their everyday life and relationships. In simple terms people call this their ‘link to nature’ or the extreme proximity with the natural world, where the relevance, meaning and existence of every living organism is known. Coming from years of experience, this knowledge has many forms and largely remains undocumented. Modern world has used a ‘road roller’ over this life, establishing the supremacy of classroom education over experiential knowledge. Today the world view of the *adivasi* has had to undergo massive changes. The influence of other communities, traders and new governance structures has been like an onslaught on their culture and living. They are now fathoming this new reality, a state of being ‘neither here nor there.’

Lately, a report on the hunting gathering communities of the Andaman & Nicobar islands, which talked about their small and shrinking populations got us thinking – why populations disappear? Even where there is no contact with ‘outside’ world and the islands are left untouched this happens. Is it Genetic? Environmental? Epidemic? This question is also relevant for us in the mainland, especially in the Western Ghats where hunter gatherer communities are dotted across the hills.

“Do hunter-gatherers still exist?” This is the normal question asked of us in complete disbelief. They do exist and have managed to retain their foraging lifestyle over generations. This is a subsistence based hunting of wild animals and gathering of wild plants with no cultivation or domestication of animals, except the dog. Nurit Bird established through her work that the Kattunaickens ‘viewed the forest as the provider’ where everything was in plenty and one that never failed them. Indigenous people of this type are classified along with agriculturists, pastoralists and artisans. The foragers being more remote, fragmented and socially unorganised often go un-noticed. They relate to their closest surroundings and develop some relationships with other communities living close by, with minimum interaction.

Anthropological research shows that there is diversity in this foraging lifestyle. Subsistence is coupled with gardening, herding animals or trading/barter amongst different communities. Therefore the three aspects to be considered are: Subsistence, Social Organisation and Cosmology or World View. All three criteria play a role in understanding hunter-gatherers today.

In India hunter gatherer communities are dotted across the country. Often living in clusters and integrated with the larger society, these people are part of an ancient civilisation. Some are known to be priests and with magical powers who have a role in old temples prayers. It has often been difficult to establish links between them. In the Western Ghats there seem to be many such links, as those between Malai Pandaram and Paliyans; but few have been studied in detail. Some communities like the Jarawa and Sentinelese in the Andaman Islands are hostile to outsiders and not contacted. The understanding about these communities is limited – often interpreted through the lens of the dominant Hindu caste society, which puts their own inferences into animistic practices. They are labelled as ‘poor and undeveloped’ needing special government aid programmes like settled housing and land for agriculture. Fortunately these measures have not succeeded in alienating the people from the forest.

In the Indian classification 75 communities are called 'particularly vulnerable tribal groups' and are often hunter gatherers. However, this classification needs to be re-assessed, as there are many communities like Paliyans, Malai Pandaram, Adiyans, Malai Malasars, Arnadans etc. which are not included. There are 8 such communities in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve in India. Another 15 practice some form of agriculture or are artisans.

Keystone has been working in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve since 20 years. We have worked with and known almost 23 different communities across this region. Working with the concept of balancing conservation with development, interventions till now focussed on the close link of people to the forest, indigenous knowledge, traditional crops and medicines, etc. How could we adapt their world in the forest and their little farms to make a ecologically sound livelihood option? An integrated approach of addressing indigenous cultural practices, ecological knowhow, generating a sustainable income from NTFPs and agriculture and acquiring rights of people is underway. Forest Rights Committees, Cultural groups, crafts revival, Farmers' groups and NTFP value addition and marketing; ecological monitoring volunteers, environment education; sacred groves; peoples' newspaper and radio are being addressed and work in this direction is growing.

So, what is not working?

Something seems to be amiss in all this. Amongst some communities we interacted with closely, there seems to be little impact or change. Small improvements can be seen but they seem short lived. The smallest health or social emergency can throw them into panic – bringing forth issues of survival. Their health seems poor, their populations are shrinking drastically and there is a constant erosion of the "forest culture". Some of their beliefs in 'good & bad spirits' causes internal enmities, resulting in further fragmentation of the group. Besides internal community problems - aspects of shrinking forests, lack of access to relevant health and education, poor living conditions, etc. have led to this heightened situation. Increase in income of families has not resulted in well being of the community as a whole. The market economy does not have all the answers for these people.

Today the populations of these communities range between 275 to 3000 people in number. Marriage customs have not permitted some communities to grow. It is difficult to get matches in the narrow confines of clan and community. Those who have ventured out and inter mingled with other communities or changed their religion are often better off, but have lost their position within the tribe. This adherence has also led to shrinking numbers.

To address these issues a concerted programme needs to be initiated.

This Initiative aims to address these communities, with small populations and having no knowledge of agriculture or animal husbandry.

It aims at the wellbeing of hunter gatherer communities, building pride and identity; capacities to interface with mainstream developments

Communities (priority) to be covered in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve

1. Cholanaickens (Nilambur) – Population 275
2. Kattunaickens (Nilambur & Gudalur)
3. Arnadan (Nilambur)
4. Alu Kurumba (Kotagiri, Coonoor and Attapady)

The Programme could contain the following elements:

1. Population, Clan and Habitations

- Census on a regular basis – Age, gender structure
- Document the Clans and marriage rules
- Map Habitations
- Track deaths and births and their causes
- Genetic Studies (medical anthropology) – whats actually going on? Is it DNA or environment?

2. Forests & the Hunter Gatherer

- Subsistence: Wild Foods – plants and animals; traditional medicine, house building, tools and implements, fuel, etc. Promote through festivals and increased use.
- Income: NTFPs – quality, sale, rates, knowledge on harvests,
- Rights: Community Forest Rights – the urgent need to recognise the ancestral domains & allowing them to manage and gain from resource harvests (eg. Bamboo). If change in forests – eg. Changed to plantations or become protected areas - what will the mode of revenue sharing be/compensation
- A forest worker

3. Health and Society

- Nutritional Status – especially women and children
- Traditional medicine
- Health Emergency Fund
- Alcoholism, drug abuse
- Customs, Beliefs and Superstitions
- Community leadership

4. Mainstream development & Governance/Policy

- Forum for interface – why the grip of the state is so strong?
- Discussion and debate on which way to go
- Government schemes for these communities – facilitation & adjustments required
- Education & Schools curriculum
- Work with Tribal Ministry to redefine and categorise PVTGs
- Influence programmes of tribal departments/ITDP

5. Cultural Revival

- Traditional Knowledge – documentation and enabling transfer
- Festivals and Gatherings
- Language

Note:

1. I would definitely like other communities from different parts of the country and world to join in this initiative. Many discussions with Jenne about the Agta and the Aeta, Negroid communities in the Philippines; Also the Penan and Punan; acceptance by Deepak to add Khadia and Makhadia from the Simlipal region. Who else???

Pando?

Chenchus?

Maria Gond?

Kolam?

Kamar?

Bondo in Malkangiri?

Amongst our network, this is the list that comes to me.

2. Though some elements in the list on pg 3 is being addressed sporadically or through a `hands off` approach – it may be necessary to start a concerted effort in this direction. This work will be new for us....but can think of the following team for the Nilgiris:

Rev. Mulley

Nurit Bird David

Seetha Kakkoth

Ashwini Hospital (Accord – Community Health)

Anita

Selvi & others in Culture and People Group

Ramu

Faseela

Sneh