

THE LOCAL & NATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF INCOME FROM HONEY HUNTING

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I. Background & Introduction

Keystone - a group for Eco-development initiatives based in the Nilgiris works with honey hunter groups of tribal communities such as the Irulas & the Kurumbas. Keystone has been working in different parts of Tamil Nadu with indigenous groups on beekeeping extension and development work for the past 8 years. We bring to this meet, experience and information the present work with honey hunter communities.

Bees are often only associated with beekeepers - people who have boxes, stands, bee feeds and various tools and equipment. Generally a beekeeper in the Indian context is one who is a farmer - with some land, communication skills, access to markets and information. He is often part of a Beekeepers' Cooperative - which gives him a variety of support. Beekeeping in India has also been influenced by the European system of beekeeping. Father Newton a keen beekeeper looked at the Indian bee and made modifications to the volume and size of the Langstroth hive - and today one has the Newton hive spread almost across the Indian sub-continent.

Traditional hives have not been given much importance - the reason being that they are primitive and may not be a sign of development. This is where the roads bifurcate - between the beekeeper and the indigenous bee-keeper/or honey gatherer. In most cases, the beekeeping extension system be it the KVIC or the state boards have not been able to have a significant impact on the tribal communities mainly situated in remote areas. Relevant delivery mechanisms and interaction models have to be devised for each region and concerted long term effort has to be put in for success. This is from our experience of working in Tamil Nadu.

The first thing that any beekeeping project attempts to do is to under-estimate the potential of the traditional beekeeping industry. This comes in several ways - the non-acceptance of another system of beekeeping; the technology - primitive, rudimentary, not acceptable, the unhygienic method of honey collection, filtration - where is the extractor? All this paraphernalia - makes the honey hunter to disclose that he is not a honey hunter but a beekeeper - at least this will make him accepted in the "learned circle".

During the 1994 survey - which took us around 15 hill ranges and making a contact with 11 different tribal groups practising honey hunting and beekeeping - one of the most striking aspects was the initial refusal and stonewalling of knowledge and interaction with us - who wanted to know about their system of honey gathering. This was something that very few were interested in knowing, " climbing down steep rocks with the help of forest vines, sticks and bamboo poles was not beekeeping /management in the true sense".

II. The Honey Hunters

Honey hunters are spread across several states of India - which house a good population of tribal or indigenous communities living close to forested areas. There are groups in the Sundarbans, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, the Soligas of Karnataka who are honey hunters - and make a significant income during the season. In Tamil Nadu, there are several groups - e.g, Kanis, Paliyans, with distinct ways of honey collection. Getting access to these communities is not easy - repeated attempts and a constant interaction with them will gradually help them to make a contact with an outsider. It has taken us almost one year to build up a working relationship with the honey hunters of the Nilgiris. These people live in scattered clusters on high hill slopes overlooking good forests. They practice subsistence farming and work in the nearby tea or coffee estates as daily wage labour. Traditionally they grow millet and hunt small slow wild game. Their houses are mainly out of grass, bamboo packed with mud and mud walls or stones. Some of them have also tiled houses given through the Government programme.

These indigenous people have an intrinsic quality of roaming the jungles - they move from year to year and during seasons - and often one finds that a Kurumba house or village has shifted to

another area. This shift comes due to mainly access to better roads, better communications or better opportunities to natural resources. During a large part of the year - they will collect Non Timber Forest Produce which will be sold to traders for a pittance. During the honey flow season - Early April to mid July, they will stop all work and fully devote their time for honey collection. Quite a lot of time and planning goes into the honey hunting - the selection of the group, the tools, the estimate of the quantum of honey to be harvested and the marketing outlet. All this is discussed informally and then the date set for the action. The exact location and time is kept a secret so that no ill omen come on their way from any other envious people.

Honey hunters are :

1. Disorganised and informal
2. Located in remote locations
3. Silent, shy people who help each other in the honey trade through word of mouth

III. Income through Honey Hunting

Every year, during the beginning of the honey flow season, almost all the tribal communities will get ready to go for honey collection - either on the cliffs or in trees. They will mainly go for *Apis dorsata* collection and sometimes *Apis florea* and *Apis cerana*. According to one of the tribal "this season is unstoppable for us, something beckons us to the Honey cliffs and we have to go".

ECONOMICS OF HONEY HUNTING :

Costs :

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| 1. Food expenses for a group of 5-7 persons for 7 days @ Rs. 20/person/day : | Rs. 840.00 |
| 2. Honey given free to Forest guard (2 bottles) : | Rs. 130.00 |

Rs. 970.00

Labour (free)

1. Making forest vines 3 days for 5-7 persons :
2. Time taken to reach the location and survey for bee colonies :
3. Planning & organising the action - who will do what :

Benefits :

On an average calculation :

1. For 1 honey cliff 10 bee colonies (7 -10 kg per colony - 85 kg @ Rs.65/kg) : Rs. 5525.00
2. During a season honey hunting will take place in 6 cliffs : Rs. 33150.00

Taken the actual costs incurred : 970.00

Group earning is : $33150 - 970 = 32180.00$

Per person for a successful season he can earn during the season Rs. 5516.57

Limitations :

There are a number of uncertainties and risks involved in this venture. Many times the honey harvested may not be 5 - 7 kg per colony. Could be much less than that and sometimes may be more. If the flowering has not been good and the rains have been erratic, the bee colonies do not stay for a long period - the honey hunters will not take the effort to harvest all if they find the comb is already dry. This is a good way of ensuring an ecological balance of keeping colonies without harvesting the honey. There are several areas which are earmarked as God cliffs - any number of honey bee colonies nesting will not be touched even if they are accessible. These are internal mechanisms for ensuring good honey bee population.

In the our region of work in the Nilgiris there are more than 125 honey cliffs with a total of at least 75 honey hunting groups operating during the season. Each honey hunting group consists of 10 persons. Bulk of the honey collected from *Apis dorsata* finds its way through a chain of middlemen to large bottling companies in bigger cities. The value addition along the way is more than 200 %.

Honey business, especially the wild honey collection is informal, therefore exact figures are not known. According to our findings in the Nilgiris from one area 6 tons of honey is collected by a trader every year. There are several key traders who have been working with these communities for the past 20 years and have established a good rapport. We have brought some of them in our network - thereby working through them and reaching a good number of tribal communities and spreading awareness on hygienic ways of extraction and filtration.

IV. The Importance of *Apis dorsata* in the Indian Honey Industry

There is no doubt that the bulk of the honey found in the Indian market is from *Apis dorsata*. During the 1990s, when TSBV struck Southern India - it was wild honey from *Apis dorsata* which saved the honey business and the cooperatives. Today for a range of traditional medicine - like Arya Vaidya Sala, Ayurvedic institutions and health shops - *only Apis dorsata* honey is used.

Honey from Bihar also finds its way to different markets and is sold as bottled bee box hive honey. Interesting labels to convince consumers that is garden fresh, machine extracted honey is also elicited through pictures and with words such as "scientific". For several consumers in India, *Apis dorsata* honey is not honey from beekeeping, some of them say this is a wild product and not honey from proper management.

If there is a reduction today in honey production from traditionally good areas such as Tamil Nadu & Karnataka, it could be because of low nesting occurrence of *Apis dorsata*. No other bee in Indian tropical areas produce so much honey in such a short period.

Apis dorsata honey has a natural high water content (21-24%) and most honey dealers pasteurise it to get a longer shelf life. This according to one school of thought is "changing the real value of good natural honey content".

Apis cerana and *Apis mellifera* only in few states and areas (Punjab, Himachal, Kanyakumari district) produces a significant amount of hive honey.

An indicator of low volumes of honey in rural markets signify a low population of *Apis dorsata* - could be due to environmental or ecological factors. *Apis dorsata* bees support a huge industry

for the wholesale and retail markets and also the honey hunter communities. In Tamil Nadu alone the population of tribal communities living in hill areas would be significantly high. During the three months they will be generating significant business in the local region.

V. Socio-economic & ecological significance

Income from honey hunting through sales of honey and bees wax (at times) has a direct link to their socio-economic conditions and the overall ecology. Culturally, they are intricately attached to the honey gathering system. Songs, rituals, abstinence and associated arrangements in the village pay an important part of honey gathering till date. In terms of income there are two options

1. Direct bulk sales to the trader

The traders keep a constant contact with this community for a range of Non Timber Forest products. Before the season, they advance some money for their livelihood, so as to adjust it later against the produce. This ensures a debt-trap and the high produce still goes for a pittance. Large groups of honey hunters harvest several tins of honey. 1 tin = 25 kg. When they sell it the traders, they do not make any real profit. They sell it at 300 Rs per tin. On the whole they just get a daily wage and breakeven. In case they can put it bottles, then the problem of marketing is theirs - they can earn per bottle rate of 50-65 Rs/kg. This is dependent on several factors. If the honey is dirty, the buyer will bargain quite a lot.

2. Enterprise

Since the last 3.5 years, Keystone has set up a marketing system for honey and bees wax. Honey is bought from a large number of people at fixed prices. A system of hygienic and clean filtration has been devised - honey brought clean will fetch a better price. Payment is immediately made. The enterprise has focussed to become a professionally run marketing outfit. Each bottle or batch goes through a rigorous quality control.

At Keystone, marketing and enterprise development aims to become a major part of our work -

finally funding small initiatives in the ground. We aim to sell honey from the honey hunters at a premium and not because it is a charity or for a cause. Products have to primarily sell on good quality, the development aspect can be a corollary. Several Beekeeping projects in the country have failed because of a complete lack of marketing and good ideas. Beekeeping brings in income directly - and this is one of the most tangible benefits to the people - one should find ways to value add and package to bring out in the world a very special item. This would insure interest amongst beekeepers, small farmers and honey hunters - if they can get a good price for their unique produce. Building this connection and bridging the gap between the modern and traditional is one of the main thrust areas of Keystone. This could be a good strategy to developing a good marketing system for honey and bees wax in India.

Large companies get all the honey from all over India - all types of honey and mix it to bottle in one brand. It would be better if small yet effective enterprises come up in different regions - producing low volume but high quality honey. The network and partnership amongst these units will bring out a unique range of honey from different ecosystems and regions of this country. Each honey would have a special background, a story to tell and with that will bring out also the life and habitat of the beekeeper or honey hunter.

VI. Conclusions - Unanswered Questions:

- # The future of honey hunting and honey hunter communities
- # Ecological sustenance and economic gain
- # What could Development mean for a honey hunter

Honey hunter stands isolated today in a Beekeeping world - he prefers to say that his honey is from boxes and not from rocks. Why is he in a dilemma? Is it only due to prices or is it a beekeeping status. Is it similar to the trawler fisherman and the catamaran owner in the fishing sector. How do we as a group of academics, Government, NGOs, enterprises bring this sector of people - the honey collectors into the mainstream in a sustainable manner - constantly evaluating and monitoring our actions whether it is in the larger interest of biodiversity and rural development.

The triad of the Honey hunter - Bees - Forests play an important role in maintenance of local Biodiversity in the region. These small clusters of people who are located in edges of forests perform a crucial function in keeping up the land use of forests and bee ecology. If for some reason, the honey hunter becomes extinct (today their numbers are relatively small) two things may happen :

1. The huge quantity of *Apis dorsata* honey will not flow in Indian markets - the honey industry will face a crunch. There are very few people who are real honey hunters - who like to climb down 800 feet of sheer cliff to face the music of the bees and collect Rock bee honey. This technology and management exists only with a select group. Therefore the honey hunters have to be recognised, their identities have to be known, people need to show them respect - then there are chances that they may continue the activity with appropriate changes to make it safe and environmentally sustainable.

2. The ecological role of the bees for pollination is not fully understood today. *Apis dorsata* has a foraging radius of 10 km - they pollinate huge amount of crops and wild species. If honey hunting is stopped by the tribal, these forest areas could be cleared for other activities such as tea, the bees will not come back, pollination systems will be affected irreversibly.

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