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The Local

A U N I Q U E P E R S P E C T I V E O F T H E N I L G I R I S



College aspirant:
Which way ahead?



Honey hunting:
A local tradition



Honey hunting *a unique tradition among indigenous people of the Nilgiris*

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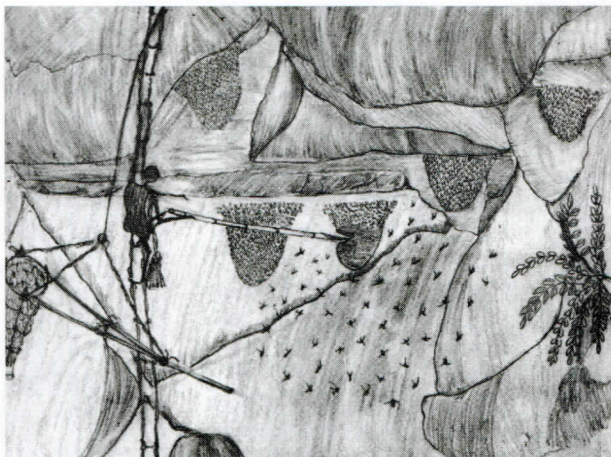
Not many of us have had the opportunity to see how honey is collected in the villages of the Nilgiris - an ancient eco-friendly tradition still surviving.

The rock paintings from Singanpur, Uttar Pradesh, which are more than 2400 years old, show honey-hunters collecting honey from a nest of *Apis dorsata*. With the indigenous people of the Nilgiris - the Kurumbas, Kadunaikas and the Irulas, honey collection is a unique activity blended with a number of customs, traditions and folklore.

In the Nilgiris, honey is collected from the honeycombs of the *Apis dorsata*, commonly called as the Indian Rock Bee.

The bee makes a nest on the cliffs or high trees. This bee migrates from the plains to the hills, pollinating trees and plants. Pollen and nectar collection is a full time job for these bees. The foraging radius is approximately 1 km from the comb, which gives them an opportunity to forage more and thereby have a volume of honey as large as 16 -17 kgs. The Kurumbas perform a simple pooja before the honey-hunting season (April-July) when the family goes to look for hives. Once located, they put a mark (as an indication) with tobacco, that the hive is sacrosanct. Nobody else would

take honey from marked hives, which are guarded by mantras and chants. Twelve days before the set date for honey hunting, the hunter goes on a fast, praying and bathing regularly. On the



Cliff hunt - using a bamboo pole

day of hunting too, the hunter fasts and chants mantras, invoking God to keep him safe.

For collecting honey, the main honey-hunter ascends the ladder to harvest it off cliffs that soar beyond visibility. While he is doing so, he sings 'bee songs' in praise of the bees.

The rope ladder is made of flexible forest vines from trees of Karasamaram (*Hardwickia binata*) and Manali kodi and Biscoti climbers. The ladder is tied from one end to a tree or a rock above the cliff, while the other end is hung loose above the cliff to a height of 250-400 ft. This sight will give the toughest of rock climbers a deep sigh! (mind you, no plastic ropes are

used). A unique practice followed by the tribe is that the brother-in-law of the hunter is responsible for the process on the top of the cliff..

Five stings from this bee are enough to knock down an adult! But what protects the honey-hunter from these bees? Is it magic or faith? This unique symbiosis remains a mystery...

The first honey collected while on the ladder is offered in all three directions and when brought to the village, it is tasted by the Priest of the village. From the comb, the villagers eat the brood with the young larvae, which is a good source of protein. Not all cliffs are harvested; the tribe believes some of the cliffs are 'God's cliffs'.

Likewise, other tribes have different beliefs, superstitions, traditions, tools, techniques and customs associated with honey harvesting. Over ten different techniques are used by honey hunters to harvest honey, with adaptations and improvisations, depending on the type of local material available, height of the nesting and the skill required.

For instance, the rope and stick method is mainly used for high rocks, the bamboo peg method used in high trees, only rope for colonies located on trees; cane looping system and bamboo pole system, to name a few.

Honey hunting is intrinsic to the livelihood of the tribal folk. Apart from the medicinal value of this golden nectar (The Nilgiris is endemic to certain species of plants which makes it's honey unique), it's collection is part of the tradition, which is handed down from one generation to the other.

The writer is a heritage interpreter.

(References taken from Honey Hunters & Beekeepers of Tamil Nadu- a survey document by Keystone Foundation. The sketch in the article is also provided by the organisation).

awareness initiatives

Keystone Foundation has been working with these indigenous people, all honey hunters and beekeepers, for the last 10 odd years striving to secure fair prices and a year round income source for the honey hunters. "We have a network of over 200 honey gatherers benefiting from our training, assured markets, better prices and good quality," says Robert Leo, Coordinator, (Implementation), Keystone Foundation. A commendable initiative of the Foundation has been the setting up of a Honey and Bee Museum. Located in Ooty, it functions as an interpretation Centre of the Nilgiris and is a platform for the 'Honey Tribal' Network across the country. The Museum interprets the various kinds of bees found in Nilgiris, their role in the Nilgiris as pollinators and how the traditional honey-hunters have lived in co-existence with the bees. The Museum also has two live colonies of bees on display. The 'Wax room' at the Museum is where various types of candles are rolled out from wax collected from the honeycombs. 6 p m film shows, which screen award winning movies on honey hunting and development are a regular affair at the Museum, in the audio-visual room.