

SLOW THE MAGAZINE OF THE SLOW FOOD MOVEMENT

Slow Food Italia, 101, August 2006, Poste Italiane, Spedizione in A.P. 41596, A.L. 2 Canale, 300, legge 662/96 art. 1, n. 17, 2004, D.D.S. 1/925, E. 100, Contrasto P.

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# Kurumba and Irula

**Mathew John India**

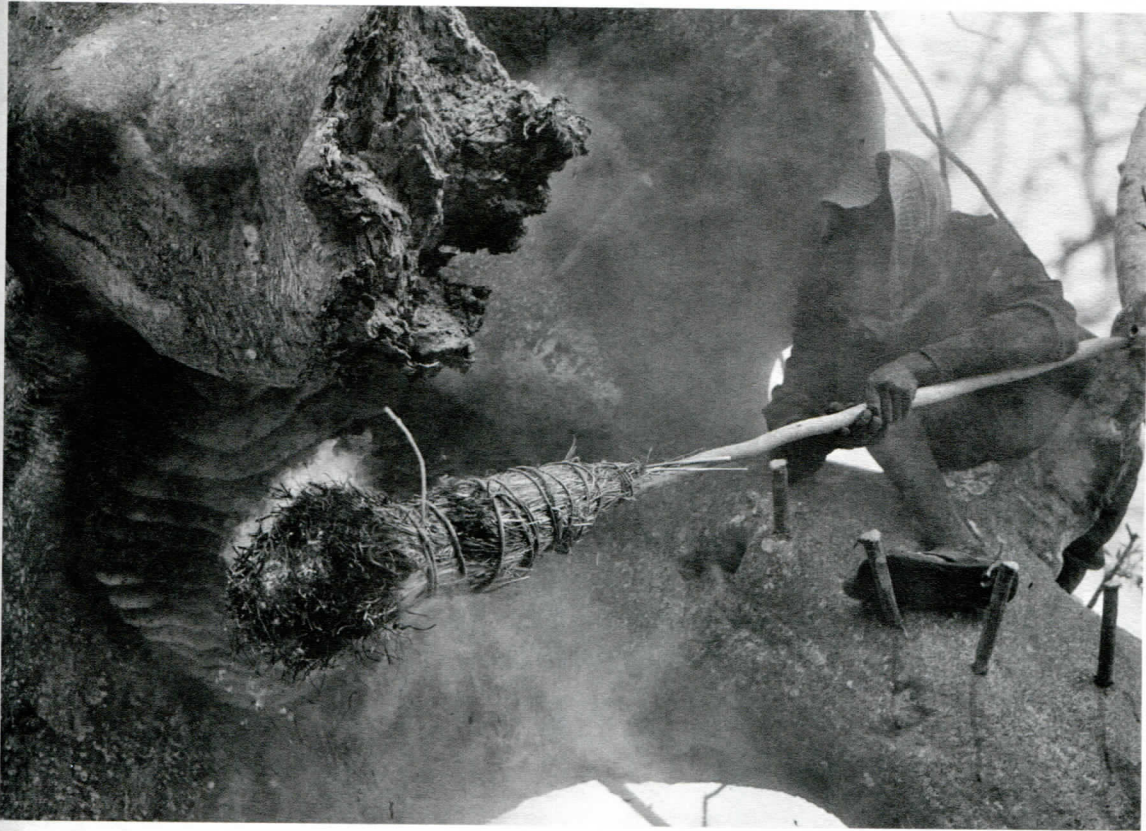
*Director of the Keystone Foundation whose mission is to improve the life and environment of the indigenous communities of the Nilgiri Mountains. He specializes in the business development and organic certification of small farmers.*

## THE STORY OF TWO HUNTING AND GATHERING COMMUNITIES THAT LIVE IN THE NILGIRI MOUNTAINS IN SOUTHERN INDIA

Rengasamy took his time preparing the ladder. It was honey collection season again and time to leave all sorts of routine activities for others to look after. It was a time of the year that he looked forward to, a time when he could once again roam around the forests and be one with nature around him. Much had changed over the past couple of decades, since he had hesitantly accompanied his elders on a trip for the first time. He was a young boy of just seven or eight and his uncle had taken him along — how proud he was! His dad had never liked the activity; he felt it was too dangerous. But for Rengasamy, it was his dream to be among the skilful honey hunters. As he helped and later grew up learning the intricacies, he felt a bonding that he had never known before with the group members, with the bees, with the trees and so much more ... He couldn't explain this to anyone. Though it was hard work to go for honey collection, he wouldn't miss it.

He had seen in the last few years that the plantation owners had illegally felled some areas to extend their holdings, while some of the vegetable growers had increased chemical inputs to increase their yields. He could never understand why people did not respect the environment around them. Couldn't they see how they had lived a tough but gainful life and nature had given them back much more? Anyway, it was time to be off with his group, to leave his family and friends behind, but he would be back. This was a part of his existence ...

The Nilgiris are part of the Western Ghats, a mountain range which goes all the way down peninsular India. Reaching an altitude of 2,600 meters, they form an ecosystem that is diverse and rich in flora and fauna, but also fragile and under threat due to the increase in the number of tea estates and the soil erosion in prime forest areas caused by commercial plantations of eucalyptus and wattle. These plantations and fields normally use large doses of chemical fertilizers and pesticides that further jeopardize the water retention capacity of the soil. This scenario has brought international attention to the area, which was recently recognized as a hotspot under UNESCO's Man and Biosphere (MaB) program.



### Honey

The Kurumba and Irula communities are hunter-gatherers who still collect many non-timber forest products which differ from season to season. Among these is honey, which is collected during the summer months, the exact duration of which can differ from area to area. Honey is central to the lives of indigenous communities in many parts of India. It is not only part of their diet but also has other very important functions for the economy, the forest ecosystems and ecological indicators. It also creates a cultural bonding that brings communities together.

The collection of honey from the combs of *Apis dorsata*, the giant rock bee, is a fascinating process. It is a skill that is usually not hereditary and may involve only a few people from the village. Groups of honey hunters can range from 5-8 persons, who then move around scouting for cliffs and trees. The giant rock bee, as the name suggests, is the largest of the four honey bee species found in the area, the others being *Apis cerana* (Indian honey bee), *Apis florea* (dwarf honey bee) and *Trigona laeviceps* (dammer bee). The rock bees are a migratory species and normally return to a particular area for its rich nectar and pollen sources. Most colonies are found close to forests, either on cliff overhangs or on tall trees. The Kurumbas are skilled honey hunters and usually harvest from cliffs. The honeycombs on trees are left for the Irulas, who are sometimes from the same settlement.

The Kurumba and Irula communities consume honey in many ways. The multi-floral pollen contains healthy protein and honeycombs, eaten complete with bee larvae, are believed to rejuvenate the whole system. Honey from the dammer bee is highly prized as the nectar comes from small flowers, many of which are herbal and hence contain medicinal properties. Certain types of honey produced by the smaller bees are never sold or exchanged on the market, but are kept for pregnant mothers and young children. Honey collected from nectar sources such as *Syzigium cumini* spp. is said to contain the same medicinal properties as the plant itself (the local tribal community uses the bark to cure stomach aches and disorders and toothache).

The diet of the communities also includes grains, roots and tubers and some vegetables, shoots and fruits. Different kinds of yam are consumed during the winter months when there are no crops in the fields. A new addition is that of rice thanks to the government's Public Distribution System. The traditional 'slash and burn' agriculture system used to be an integral part of the communities' free-moving lifestyle, but government intervention has now restricted their movement to their village lands. Today, they grow small patches of either cash crops such as tea, coffee and pepper, or of grain.



Raghu Rai, Magnum/Contrasto