

The
journal for
sustainable
beekeeping

&D

Beekeeping &D Development

NUMBER 45

DECEMBER 1997



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APIMONDIA APPRAISAL**

Keystone is an NGO working with tribal communities in the Nilgiris Hills of Tamil Nadu, India. Keystone works with the honey hunters who live in the lower elevations of tropical dry deciduous forests of the Western Ghats. There are a number of communities who depend on honey for their livelihood. Over the past two and a half years, Keystone has initiated a constant interaction and effort in the villages to address the issues facing the honey hunters.

HONEY HUNTERS OF THE NILGIRIS: THE ROAD TO SUSTAINABILITY

by Pratim Roy, Mathew John and Snehlata Nath, Keystone, India

Honey hunters' region

The southern State of Tamil Nadu has hill tracts in the north and along its western boundary forming part of the Western Ghats. Nilgiris District lies in the north-western part of the



Making the ascent to the rockface

State and is home to a diverse range of flora of semi-tropical and dry deciduous type, and a rich diversity of fauna. These hill tracts are also home to several tribal groups whose lives are intricately linked to the forests.

Apis dorsata, the largest of the honeybees, also known as the Giant Rock Bee, gets its name from its habit of nesting beneath overhanging rocks. It is a tropical species found throughout south-east Asia and the Indian sub-continent. The considerable honey stores in its single comb nest, built in the open, are harvested by honey hunters.

Apis dorsata is economically important as it is a producer of honey and beeswax in substantial quantities. Approximately four tonnes of honey is collected from these colonies in two or three valleys.

The honey flow season is dependent on the rainfall, flora and topography of the region. The season can be broadly divided into two periods: April-June and September-November.

The story of traditional honey hunting

Kurumbas hunt for honey from mid April to mid July, when the family (both husband and wife) go to look for colonies. Once located, they put a mark - an indication to other honey hunters that the colony is reserved. Nobody takes honey from marked colonies, which are identified through 'mantras' or chants.

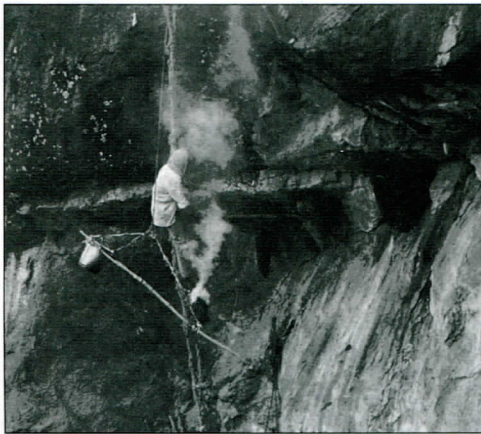
A date is set for harvesting the honey. Twelve days before, the honey hunter begins a routine of fasting, and praying and bathing regularly. He contacts his brother-in-law and another trusted person and prepares to hunt the comb. His wife or any other woman should not be seen before he goes honey hunting. On the day of harvesting the hunter does not eat anything. He does not talk, but will chant mantras and invoke God to keep him safe. While he climbs the ladder he sings 'bee songs' in praise of the bees.

The brother-in-law holds the rope for the ladder at the top of the cliff. The rope ladder is made during the day from vine creepers, and the honey is harvested in the evening. The equipment used is the rope ladder, a knife, leaves for smoking the bees, and bamboo baskets and sticks to collect the comb. The brood section is cut first. The honey is squeezed from the comb by hand and is sometimes filtered through cloth. The honey collected first is tasted by the priest of the village. The rest is shared between all the villagers and some will be sold.

Keep holding that rope! The brother-in-law has a vital role to play in guarding the honey hunter's ladder. The hunter's trust is based on the knowledge that if any harm befalls the hunter, his sister will become a widow and the rope-holder will be responsible for her. This factor is very common and important in many tribal practices.



Honey hunters in Tamil Nadu



Smoking the colony

Honey hunting practices

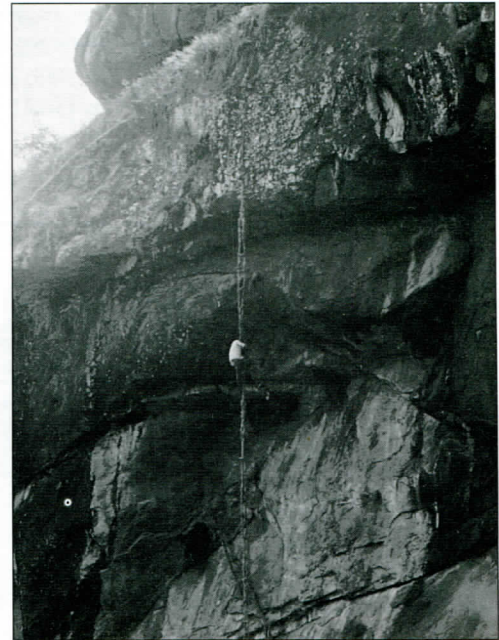
Honey hunting is practised by the Kathnaickens (also called Jenu), Kurumbas and Irulas tribes. In the past these communities collected bark, gallnuts and myrobalams, as well as honey and wax from the forest and bartered it for grain. They also practised "slash and burn"

cultivation, and grew chillies, millet and pumpkins. Their settlements are still deep inside forested areas, though now increasingly accessible. These tribes still depend on minor forest products (honey and wax collection being a significant component), as well as waged labour for their livelihoods.

Information gathered during the *Honey Hunters and Beekeepers Survey* (Keystone, 1994) revealed that there are a few groups still practising honey hunting in the Nilgiris. Keystone felt the need for documentation, action and support of these traditional activities and lifestyle.

This article is taken from a paper presented by the authors at the Apimondia Congress in Antwerp, September 1997.

PHOTOGRAPHS © KEYSTONE



Making the descent - Brother in law! Hold that rope!

TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Tribes	Description
Kurumbas	Rope ladders are made from the fibre of the bark of Karasamaram (<i>Hardwickia binata</i> or 'manali kodi'). Bamboo sticks may be used as steps for the ladder. Other tools are coir rope, aruval (a curved knife), tins, bamboo baskets and split bamboo sticks with a sharpened end. A smoker is the major piece of protective equipment used. Some honey hunters apply honey or plant extract ('suti kodi') to treat for stings from <i>Apis dorsata</i> .
Irulas	The rope ladders are made out of the fibres of Panamaram (<i>Oroxylum indicum</i>) and Karasamaram. The rest of the tools are the same as for Kurumbas. A smoker is used to encourage the bees to leave the comb.
Kathnaickens	Make a platform or attach a bamboo basket at the end of the rope from which they hang. The basket is also made of forest vines and is large enough to accommodate the honey hunter with his tools. Karasamaram is the most common fibre used to make ropes and baskets.

BELIEFS, SUPERSTITIONS AND TRADITIONS

Tribes	Description
Kurumbas	A simple pooja (prayer) is made before the honey hunting season. The "brother-in-law factor" is recognised. "Marking" of colonies with tobacco prevents other hunters from harvesting. These people believe that some cliffs are 'God's cliffs' from where no honey is harvested. Kurumbas pray at the graves of their ancestors prior to hunting.
Irulas	Colonies are "marked" with tobacco to prevent other hunters harvesting the combs. Irulas believe that spirits exist on some rocks from which no honey can be taken. A simple prayer is made at the honey rock before the harvesting season.
Kathnaickens	Kathnaickens have a honey hunting prayer involving special items like coconut and incense. Combs are never cut with an iron knife, otherwise, Kathnaickens believe, the bees will not make their combs in that place again. In some cases the village priest decides who will go hunting, when and where.

Source : Keystone Honey Hunters & Beekeepers Survey, Tamil Nadu, 1994

Honey hunters and beekeepers of Tamil Nadu

Keystone, Tamil Nadu, India (1994)
85 pages. Softback. Available from
Bees for Development
price £20.00

Honey hunting has been a traditional part of life for the people living in the hills of Tamil Nadu in southern India. Keystone undertook to discover the various honey hunting groups and to document what is done with the harvested honey and beeswax. As Keystone describe in this book, the survey opened a range of development issues related to changes in traditions, in the economy, and in the accessibility of the hill areas.

Honey hunting and beekeeping in Tamil Nadu have been drastically affected by ecological changes, and changes in the market for bee products. The survey discusses appropriate ways to help.

This survey cannot be too highly commended for the unique information it has documented and its excellent presentation.