

The honeyhunters of Tamil Nadu: Climbing through a period of change

by Snehlata Nath, Mathew John & Pratim Roy

This article is based on a much longer and more detailed report¹ of the honeyhunters and beekeepers of Tamil Nadu. During a nine month study in the hills of this state the authors from Keystone, a group for ecodevelopment initiatives, met with many honeyhunters and beekeepers who told their stories. This article provides an insight into the lives of honeyhunters. It illustrates the rich diversity of both the people and nature, looks at the changes that are affecting their lives and discusses some of the important issues that have been identified.

Taking an innovative look at development - background to the survey and the region

Keystone, during March - October 1994, covered 15 hill ranges in the state for a survey on honeyhunting and beekeeping. These hills are home for 11 distinct tribal groups, who are still practicing some amount of hunting-gathering. The survey was, among other things, meant to:

- document and understand honey-hunting in its context - as part of these people's customs, living conditions, attitudes, knowledge and use of natural resources - in a changing world;
- explore with these people the changes that are affecting their communities today and identify steps to create effective options.

The survey, apart from giving an insight into this lesser known group of honeyhunters and beekeepers, has thrown open a wide range of development issues.

1. Honeyhunters & Beekeepers of Tamil Nadu - A Survey Document. Keystone, October 1994. The diagrams in this article are from this report.

honey cutting lords of the woods. Traditionally the Naickens are credited with supremacy over the forest and supernatural powers. Even the Kurumbas are said to hold them in as much awe as the other tribes hold the Kurumbas.

Today the Forest Department controls the commercial trade in these products but the people have the right to collect any product for their own subsistence use. Now some of them have started working in coffee plantations.

The story of traditional honeyhunting

Kurumbas hunt for honey in the season from mid April to mid July when the husbands and wives go together to look for hives. Once located, they put a mark - an indication to other hunters that it has been reserved by them. Nobody takes honey from such identified and marked hives which are identified through mantras or chants.

A date is set for harvesting the honey. Twelve days before, the honey-hunter begins a fast - praying and bathing regularly. He contacts his brother-in-law and another trusted person to accompany him. Neither the wife nor any other women should be seen while going for honey hunting.

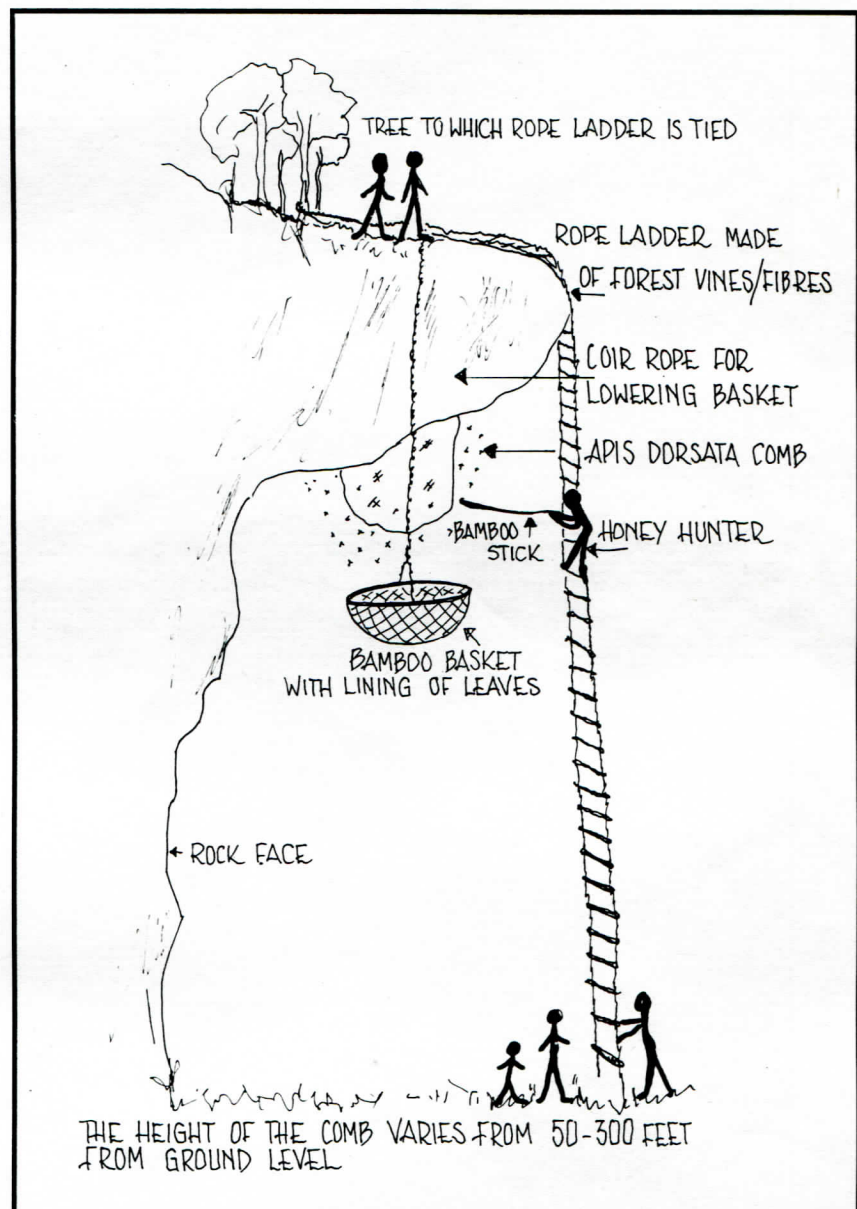
On the day of the harvesting the hunter does not eat anything, least of all anything non-vegetarian. He does not talk and chants mantras continuously, invoking God to keep him safe. While he climbs the ladder, he sings 'bee songs' in praise of the bees.

The ladder made of vines from the forest is made during the day and the honey is harvested in the evening at dusk. The brother-in-law holds the rope on the top of the cliff when the hunter climbs down the rope ladder to reach the honey comb. The brother-in-law occupies a vital role as the maximum trust is placed in him to guard the ladder of the honeyhunter. This is because, if any harm befalls the hunter, his sister will become a widow.

“ The honeyhunting activity requires a lot of concentration. The vine on which I hang is like my mother/Lord. As we climb down we sing praises of the vine and remember God constantly. Only those combs are harvested that have less brood. The young brood which we do collect is mixed with honey as a paste and eaten later. We also collect bees wax and use it for making candles for the village and for lighting the torches when returning home from hunting.”

Sivaranan - a Kurumba

Traditional honeyhunting techniques



Irulas

Known for their ingenuity these people are involved in a variety of activities. They work as tea/coffee plantation workers, are good cattle rearers, agriculturalists and horticulturists, each household having their own plot of land for cultivation. They still collect many forest products - myrobalams (*Terminalia chebula*), vembadam bark (*Ventilago madraspatana*), avarum bark (*Cassia auriculata*), soapnuts, etc. - as well as honey. They are known as suppliers of *Apis dorsata* and *Apis cerana* honey. Although they retain some of their old traditions they have left behind some of their old super-

stitions, strict rituals and beliefs. Today they are being encouraged by the Tamil Nadu Forest Department to form cooperatives.

Sholagars

The Sholagars live in the forest and are largely dependent on it for their food and income. They grow small amounts of food and hunt wild game for consumption but collecting non-timber forest products (NTFP) has been their main occupation. Now, with the restrictions on forest collection they are engaged as contract labourers in

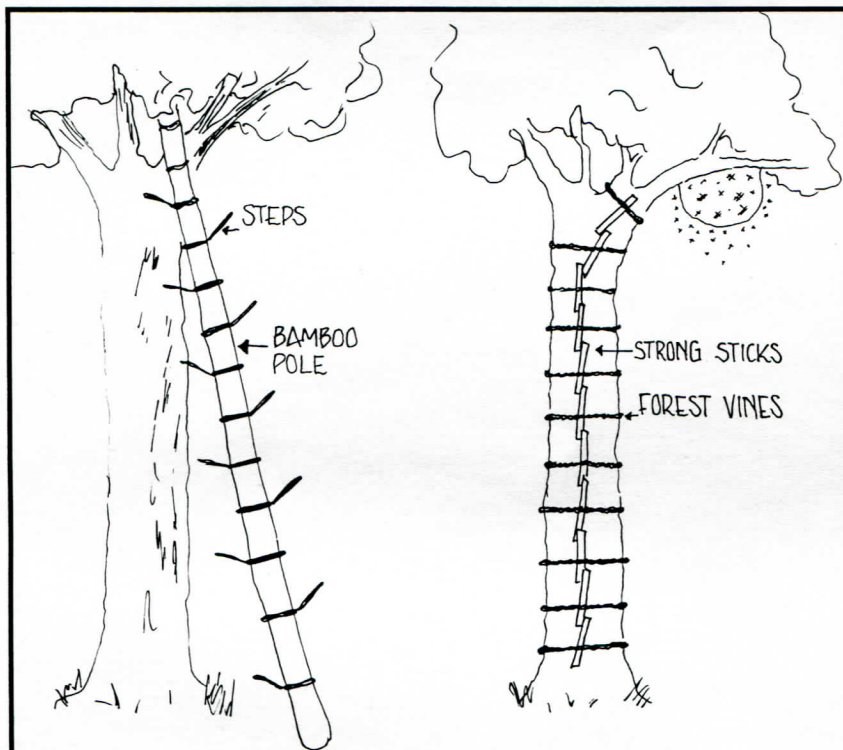
plantations of eucalyptus, wattle, sugarcane, coffee, etc. Men and women leave their homes for long periods to work in other districts and states.

Discussion - major issues in Region 1

This region, falling as it does in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, is an important area due to its rich diversity of flora, fauna and indigenous people. Because it is such an ecologically sensitive area the Forest Department has taken control and placed restrictions on the collection of NTFP. At the same time there has been a major change in land use from forests to plantation crops by both the Forest Department and private owners. Extensive tea, coffee, eucalyptus and teak have reduced the natural forest considerably and the right of control of the land and its resources has moved from the local people to the Forest Department and private owners.

The tribal economy which earlier depended on hunting, forest collection and pastoralism has now become more dependent on often unprofitable crop production (on land provide to them by the Forest Department which is often marginal and in areas where elephants are a problem). As their subsistence economy has been undermined they are now more dependent on earning cash, both from the sale of forest products and from wage labour. The earlier strong links between these people and the forest - cultural, spiritual and material - are being replaced by a commercial value attached to their produce.

Techniques of the Irulas



Conventional bamboo poles are used to climb trees for reaching honey combs; climbing of big trees is done by tying sticks to the tree trunk; forest vines are used for hunting on rocks; for protection from stings, leaves of 'Raja tulasi' or Unjal maram (*Albizia amara*) is used as paste; the smoker is made from herbs which calm the bees.

Region 2: Zone of protection and degradation

The region includes the Annamalais, Palni, Andipatti, Varshunad, Saduragiri, Sirumalais and Mahendragiri Hills. It includes some large stretches under protection (eg. 958 sq. kilometers in the Indira Gandhi Wildlife Sanc-

tuary, etc.), as well as commercial tree plantations of eucalyptus, wattle and pine owned by the Forest Department. The cardamom plantations were wiped out by cadamom mosaic in the 1940s, the banana plantations by the bunchtop virus in the 1970s. Today tea, coffee and fruit tree estates owned by the Thevars, Chettiars and Nadars and other land owning classes (including absentee landlords) cover large areas. The natural vegetation in this area ranges from patches of tropical rain forests to patches of grassland and shola vegetation to dry deciduous areas. Large areas are severely degraded.

The Paliyans, Kanis, Kadars and Malaimalasars live here but their NTFP collection activities, including honey-hunting, have been restricted to varying degrees. Honey is, for all, an important item in their diets and honeyhunting is of cultural and religious importance.

The Kadars are a hunter-gatherer community and the collection of honey and beeswax is of special importance to them and is linked to a special ritual that is carried out during a particular season.

Discussion - major issues in Region 2

This region is a mixture of protected areas and areas of extreme degradation. The issues faced by the various tribal groups in this area include:

- lack of income sources as NTFP collection has been banned;
- dependence on the Forest Department and estate owners for any wage labour;
- subsistence cultivation is practiced only by a minority;
- reduced diversity of the area due to plantations;
- change in land use and deforestation, including the felling of big trees;
- use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides;
- severe land degradation at lower elevations.

“ There are 2 to 3 main honeyhunters in this area, who are strong and calm people. A total of 15 persons accompany them for honeyhunting and stay in the forest for 7 - 10 days. They only take tins, rope, matchbox and knife and provisions to eat for their stay in the forest.

On locating the colonies, the system of the rope will be designed - whether it will be a rope ladder or a rope with a basket or just a rope. The smoker is also prepared on site. Before climbing, the main honeyhunter will eat a bitter root which will prevent bees from stinging. Moving from colony to colony, on the same rock, is possible by pushing against the rocks. Once the comb is cut, he will tug at the rope for it to be pulled up.

They still believe that the night before going for honeyhunting a spirit comes and informs them about when and where to hunt and which are the God cliffs where honeyhunting should not be done. They do not see women before going and follow a strict set of norms regarding bathing and praying.

According to them there are less colonies now in the forest, with less honey. A good colony should have 5 kg in 1 cu. ft. of comb. In a year they earn up to Rs. 6000 in a good season after spending on coir rope and a battery torch.

T. Mani from Varagaraparai village in the Palni Hills

“ We have come down from the mountains and were settled by the Forest Department, in these foothills. Prior to this our life in the hills was hard.

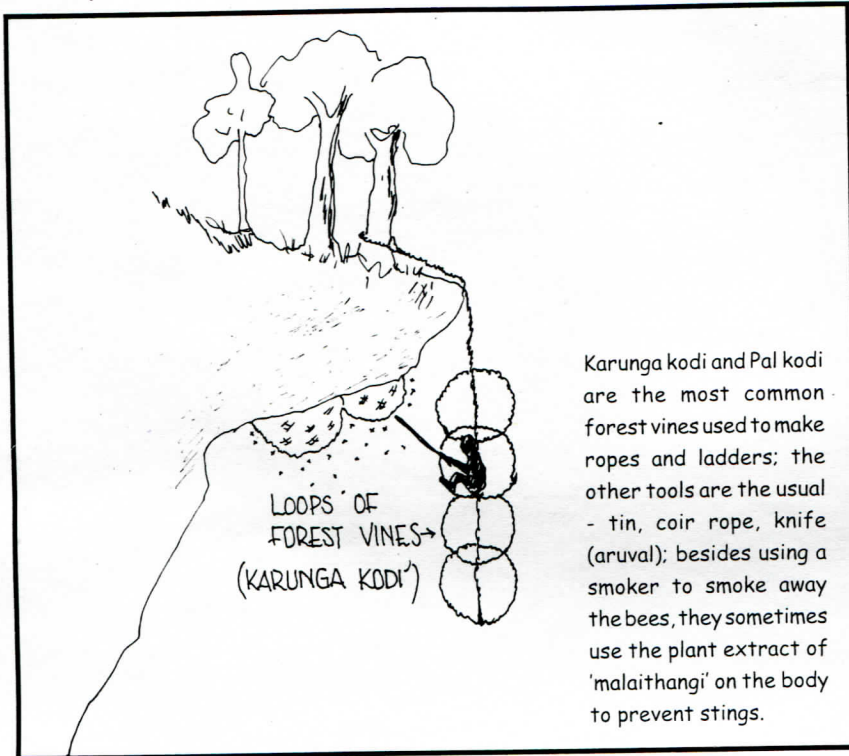
We go for honeyhunting, if the cliff is big as many as ten people will form a team. In these forests there are 4 different types of vine. After assessing the location of the rock bee colonies we decide which vine is to be used. The preparation from the vine to a proper rope for climbing will take a full day. There are only a few people in this village who can climb up to a colony. Some of them will go half way and help in passing the tools and other items to the honeyhunter. The brood that will be cut away in the beginning, will be roasted later and eaten with honey. This is a delicious dish for us.

Despite regular honeyhunting the bees will settle in the same location every year. We, the younger generation, do not know bee songs. During the harvest we will offer the first honey comb in four directions.

We have just been settled here about six months back. Our hopes and attitudes have changed. Our interest in the forest is declining and now, the city life, the bus rides, and the cinema appeal more to us. Yet, if we are supplied with modern equipment such as helmets, steel/nylon ropes, lighting gear we will think of starting honeyhunting again.

Sinnakaruppiah - a young Paliyan

Techniques of the Paliyans



“ In our area, the honeybees arrive in large numbers during the flowering of sesame plants. In these hills each village has a particular rock and no villager can go and take honey from another village's rock. Since our ancestors, our village has 3 rocks in its custody. No one in the village is allowed to hunt these colonies individually. During the honeyhunting season, the whole village (30 families) participates. From each family, one male member will be deputed on the day of honeyhunting. They hunt all night under starlight. If a honeyhunter is stung too badly he has another replacement ready. Experienced old hunters will sit on the rock to guide the honeyhunters. A 'pooja' will be performed and a goat or chicken is sacrificed on the honey cliff once a year. The expenses of this pooja are borne by the village. The system of honeyhunting is with bamboo ladders. Sometimes if the colony is very high, ten full grown bamboo stalks (6 - 7 m. each) will be joined together. Five ropes will come down the rock to the honeyhunter each with a specific function: for support of the bamboo, around the chest of the honeyhunter, for the honey tin, for the smoker and for a large spade. We wear a shirt and a veil made out of a lungi, as protective gear. The night before, the main hunters will observe complete abstinence by not sleeping on a mat, not take a bath and no association with women who are in their menstrual cycle.

The money earned from this activity will go towards the village common fund - which may be utilized to build a temple or fund a festival.

Thangarasu Perumal, a honeyhunter from Perumparapu

Region 3: Hills of agri-business

The region is characterised by large flat plateaus with dry deciduous to scrub forests. Except for higher elevations which support coffee and fruit crops like citrus and pineapple, this is a region of scrubland, poor pastures and rainfed agriculture. The major rainfed crops are millet, cassava and pulses. The Malayalis, the only tribal group here, are not an ancient hill tribe but have migrated from the plains. They are agriculturalists and they have a limited dependency on the forest, with few being involved in collecting NTFP. Beekeeping is an important income generating activity for them. A few also hunt wild colonies and collect honey for trade.

Discussion - major issues in Region 3

This area differs from the other two in that the Malayalis are mainly occupied with agriculture, making beekeeping more important than honeyhunting in these hills. The Malayalis are also much more involved in Government sponsored programmes. This area has a much greater degree of commercialization and agriculture trade and much of the forest cover has been replaced by crop production.

However, due to the problems facing beekeepers today (decrease in bee colonies due to the spread of the Thai Sac Brood Virus, and, changes in land use leading to less crop diversity and more use of pesticides)¹ they are producing less honey. As a result the honey from the honeyhunters (i.e. *Apis dorsata* - Rock bee) is playing a very crucial role and in fact supplying the bulk of the honey in the market.

1. More details about the situation of the beekeepers and the problems they are facing are provided in the full report.

Issues facing honeyhunters

Socio-economic and cultural

There are many challenges facing honeyhunters today. Their practices are changing both as a result of new techniques which they have chosen as well as external factors over which they have little control - eg. changes in land use, economic opportunity, government schemes, Forest Department rules, etc.

Both the number of honeyhunters and their adherence to traditions has decreased to a certain extent. Several rituals, eg. the 'bee songs' have been dropped by some. Elaborate prayer ceremonies have been simplified. Traditions are pitted against modernization as new technologies like coir rope and battery operated torches are becoming more common and as honey becomes more important as a source of income to replace other activities that previously provided a livelihood.

The socio-economic fabric of the honeyhunters community is under threat. They are no longer isolated, cutoff and leading a hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Today their culture is influenced by mainstream economy. The loss in tradition, beliefs and customs go hand in hand with increasing commercialization. For example, in the Shevaroy hills one honeyhunter now gets a contract for the whole hills area and harvests this commercially.

Earlier these communities had both rights over and responsibilities for certain areas - for example each village used to 'own' a honey cliff but this is no longer always the case. These rights were balanced by responsibilities that were often couched in terms of what we call superstitions. For example, many hunters believe that any violent movement of the rope was an indication of the God of the Honey Rock's refusal to give permission to hunt. In these areas they would not go for honeyhunting stating that an evil fate would befall anyone who did.

Superstition? Yes perhaps but the end result was that not all colonies were harvested. This helped to ensure a good population of bees in the area as well as provide conducive ecological conditions for a swarm to return to the same area every year.

Many honeyhunting areas now fall under the jurisdiction of the Forest Department and in protected areas, honeyhunting is not even allowed. There has been a change from a forest based economy to a wage oriented economy, marginalising their old skills and social customs. Their efforts at crop production have met with only partial success and traditional activities which brought food to the house have been replaced by plantation work which brings cash instead.

Marketing

The honeyhunters are not organized for marketing their products and therefore, though they face a variety of hazards in their work, they get low returns. The price of honey in the urban markets ranges from Rs. 75/kg

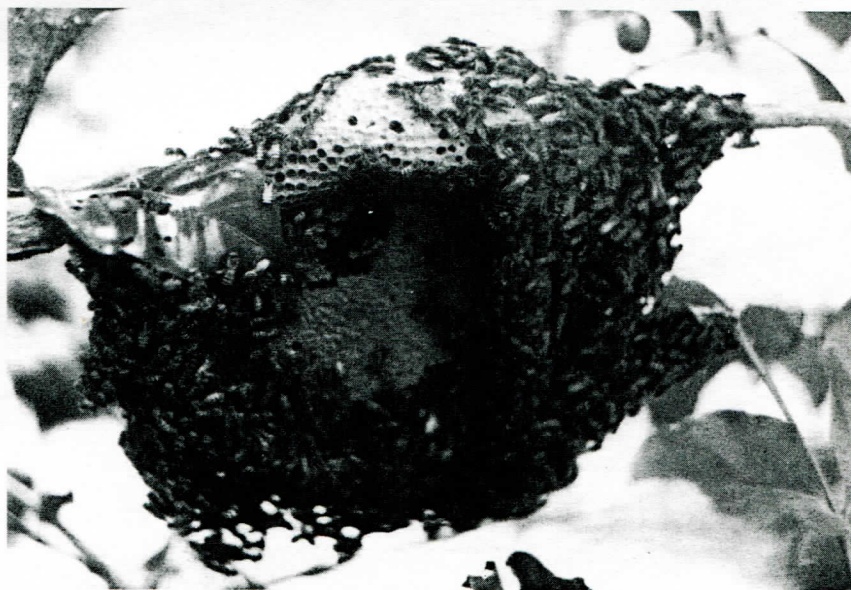
to Rs. 120/kg, honeyhunters only receive between Rs. 11 and Rs. 38/kg. Only in areas where they have possibilities to sell directly to tourists or private people do they have a chance to get higher returns.

Technology

There have been almost no changes in technology in the honeyhunting practice and the methods and practices adopted by their ancestors are still practiced. Minor modifications - such as the use of battery torches and coir rope - are the only exceptions.

Ecological

Changes in bee habitat - less land under forest cover, intensive cultivation practices, etc. have reduced the potential for honeyhunters. The advent of cash crops is a critical factor contributing to this change. Large tracts have been converted into monocultures which have vastly reduced the bee foraging capacity. Previously millet was grown in mixed cropping systems in Pachamalais, for example. This has now been replaced with cassava



An *Apis florea* colony. Photo: Keystone

monocultures reducing nectar sources drastically. Monocultures also often require the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides which are killing the bees.

Another reason for fewer bee colonies in many of the hill ranges is deforestation or the replacement of diverse natural forests (rich in nectar producing trees at a variety of times during the year) with plantations. Areas which were once bee-rich are today sterile.

Building for the future

Given the importance of honeyhunting to the people living in this area as an important source of food and cash as well as being an integral part of their culture, it is essential that it continues. For this to happen will require activities being based on the indigenous knowledge that presently exists.

Outside support must recognize and build on this. In discussions with the honeyhunters the following aspects were identified as being areas for follow-up:

- Set up a honeyhunters network for exchange of information and collective action.
- Develop technology for easier and safer honeyhunting.
- Develop training to upgrade the quality and the value of honey and beeswax.
- Initiate appropriate action research programmes on honeyhunting systems and bee habitat.
- Document on video, the practices of honeyhunting.
- Provide an opportunity through honeyhunting to initiate other associated development activities.

As we have began our work with them now, we realize what support they want and what is appropriate to them. We feel this is the result of our

style/'culture' of working which has evolved with them. Perhaps most important has been our initial approach. This is probably the first time that a group of people has gone to them asking about bees and honey gathering, their forest vines, their priorities, techniques, customs, etc. And it is these discussions that have formed the basis for the project work which has been initiated in the villages. Rather than coming with predetermined ideas about their development needs it is their views, perceptions and knowledge that determine the agenda. They are the central actors.

We feel this approach is of vital importance because it allows them to value and be proud of their own knowledge and their culture in which it is embedded. This is the crucial first step to their retaking control of their own lives. It will give them strength.

Today, for some of them, going to the cinema is more 'developed' than



A meeting with the Malaimalasars. Photo: Keystone

climbing down a rock. The root of the problem is how society looks at them, who sets the standards? Their ethos, their code of values by which they live, is getting torn apart by an outside influence. The two, the traditional and modern, are at conflict. The same forefathers who have followed strict traditions do not want their sons to follow the same road. Why?...

So the success of our work will be measured by their gaining a voice in decision making. This will take time. We start with a small but concrete activity, their activity - honeyhunting - which today is under threat. We will work with them to strengthen it by encouraging their interaction with other honeyhunters, by working for a fairer price, for respect for this activity, and for other improvements in techniques that they feel are necessary.

It is important to establish two-way communication links between the modern and traditional groups, but the time has not come for this to happen smoothly. Their traditions which have

been marginalized are too weak to stand the onslaught of the modern world. They have to become strong, robust and resilient so they can extract the best from the modern world and enrich their traditions. The alternative is losing them forever and meeting a honeyhunter who has become a textile worker because of circumstances. This is the change we hope to bring about - the creation of new opportunities so that they can continue their function in better conditions, on their own terms and in their own way. This would then contribute positively to enhance their quality of life - and enrich ours as well. □

KEYSTONE is a group for Eco-development Initiatives. Those who would like more information about both the situation of beekeepers as well honeyhunters in Tamil Nadu can contact the authors at the following address: **Keystone - CINTRA, P.B. No. 35, Kotagiri 643 217, Nilgiris (T.N.), India. (Fax: 91-4266-72277).**



Tea cultivation - part of the new wage based economy. Photo: Keystone

Value of Bees

The different species of honey bees found in Tamil Nadu (both indigenous and exotic) are:

The rock bee -
Apis dorsata fabricius

The Asian honey bee -
Apis cerana fabricius

The little honey bee -
Apis florea fabricius

Dammar bees -
Trigona spp. and Melipona spp.

The western honeybee -
Apis mellifera Linné

A major role played by the bees in the ecosystems for millions of years has been pollination. This means better yields in agricultural and horticultural crops, i.e. more food produced in the same area.

The effect of sufficient pollination on natural vegetation is even more important. It is a way to secure floral diversity which makes ecosystems less vulnerable. more vegetation increases the carrying capacity of the area and allows associated life forms to evolve.

Besides natural feral colonies, beekeeping is a way of involving people, to give an opportunity to earn an income on activities that promote environmental well-being. The multiple gains of beekeeping are that it:

- increases floral diversity
- increases food production
- provides a source of income
- requires no land investment
- requires a low initial capital investment for hives and basic equipment
- is eco-friendly and helps to protect the ecological balance
- gives other gains in terms of honey, bees wax, more natural colonies, pollination, allied products for many industries.