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by Arnab B. Chowdhury (reprinted from Positive News Hong Kong)

40-year-old Pratim Roy is a man with a mission. At five feet six inches, we might not expect any leadership trait in his wiry unassuming figure but his small sharp eyes and simple mile emerging from a French beard portray a different story. They tell a story of courage, conviction and persistence, of how one can create value in ones life only by creating intrinsic value for someone else.

It has been ten years since Pratim Roy, Snehlata Nath and Mathew John decided to co-found Keystone Foundation in Kotagiri a sleepy village nestled among pristine Nilgiri hills in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

While the word Nilgiri translates into blue mountains in Sanskrit, the name Keystone evolves from a concept of the same word which signifies the nest-building behaviour of some birds in nature. These permanent nest structures serve as habitat for several life forms and illustrate the ecological principle of the interdependence of natural systems.

Keystone Foundation essentially works closely with the Kurumba and Irula tribes who live in the Nilgiris and have been traditional honey hunters for several generations. They live on the fringes of mainstream society economically, socially and politically. Keystones objective has been to nurture in them a sense of empowerment, worthy economic sustenance and dignity in who they are.

Over the years, some of the projects in progress have concentrated on improving traditional apiculture techniques, promoting micro-enterprise development and nurturing non-timber forest produce. Additionally, the micro-enterprise development led to the production of candles, artisan products and honey created by the indigenous communities (labelled as 'Last Forest') that are promoted across cities in southern India.

What distinguishes Keystone from other development groups working with indigenous communities is the amazing synergy it has built by creating a 30-person team with several tribal members. It acts as a catalyst between the foundation and the community at large.

The team includes Balasubramaniam, a young Kurumba man who has evolved from a purist tribal painter to an Adobe Photoshop aficionado and advocate of local governance to his community!

In June 2006, Keystone Foundation in alliance with bee and pollination experts from the University of East Anglia and Overseas Development Group, won the Darwin Initiative grant for a project entitled Bees, biodiversity and forest livelihoods in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve (Western Ghats, India). This project seeks to elucidate the interdependencies between bees, biodiversity and forest livelihoods in the Nilgiri Reserve.

The honey hunting adventure among the Blue Mountains surges on!

<http://keystone-foundation.net/web/>

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