

# HONEY HUNTERS OF THE NILGIRIS ON A ROAD TO SUSTAINABILITY

*A paper presented by Keystone, Nilgiris, India at Apimondia, Antwerp Sep 1st to 6th, 1997*

---

## **Abstract/Summary**

Keystone is an NGO working with tribal communities in the Nilgiri Hills of Tamil Nadu, India. It has chosen to work among honeyhunters 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 seasonally, for their livelihood. Over the past two and a half years, Keystone has initiated a constant interaction and effort in the honey hunter villages to be able to address the issues facing them, in a holistic manner. This paper deals with their traditional honeyhunting practices, the economics, efforts on the micro-enterprise front and Keystone's experiences.

## **I. HONEYHUNTERS' REGION**

The southern state of Tamil Nadu, has hill tracts spread over in the North and along its western boundary, which form a part of the Western Ghats. Nilgiri district lies in the north-western part of the state and is home to a diverse range of flora, of the semi tropical & 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 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, who are unorganized, face a variety of hazards in their work and get low returns.

The honey flow season is dependent on rainfall, flora and the topography of the region and can be broadly divided into two periods - from April-June and September-November. The *Apis dorsata* is economically important as it is a producer of honey and bees wax in substantial quantities. An informal estimate of honey collected from these colonies in two-three valleys is close to 4 tons.

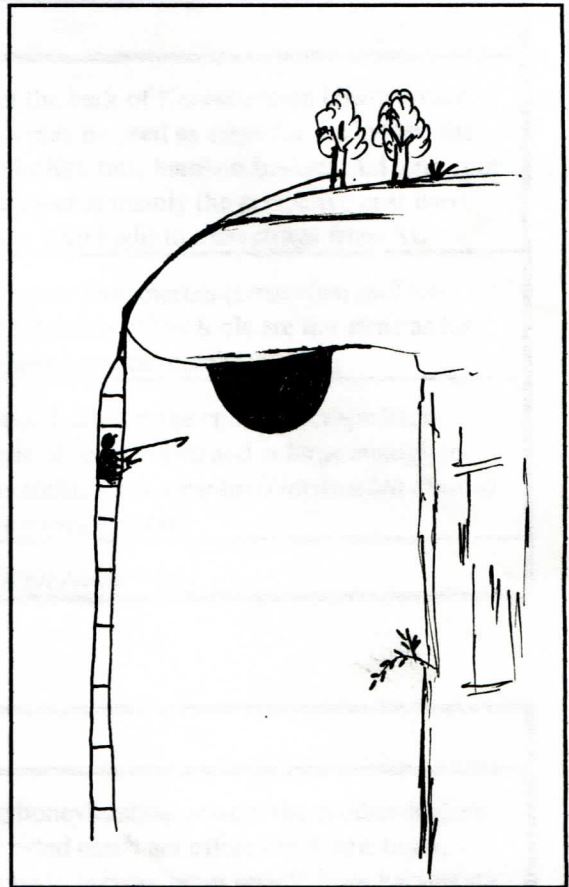
## **II. HONEYHUNTING PRACTICES**

The tradition of honeyhunting has been going on since time immemorial. Honey hunting is practiced by the tribals such as the Kathunaickens [also called Jenu (honey) Kurumbas], Irulas & Kurumbas, in the Nilgiris. These communities, in the past, collected roots, barks, gallnuts, myrobalams, honey and wax from the forest and bartered it for food grains. They also practiced slash and burn cultivation, growing millet, pumpkins and chillies. Their settlements are still deep inside forested areas, though now, increasingly accessible. However, these tribals still depend on minor forest produce collection (honey & wax collection being a significant component) and wage labour for their livelihood.

## *The Story of Traditional Honeyhunting*

*Kurumbas hunt for honey in the season from mid April onwards to mid July, when the family (both husband & wife) goes to look for hives. Once located, they put a mark - an indication to the other hunters that it is reserved by them. Nobody takes honey from already identified and thus marked hives, which are identified through 'Mantras' or chants.*

*A date is set for harvesting the honey. Twelve days before, the honeyhunter goes on fast - praying & bathing regularly. He contacts his brother-in-law and another trusted person and goes for hunting the comb. The wife or any other woman should not be seen while going for honey hunting. On the day of harvesting the hunter does not eat anything, least of all, anything non-vegetarian. He does not talk but is all the time chanting mantras and invoking 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 on top of the cliff when the man swings on the rope ladder, made of vines i.e. creepers from the forest. This ladder is prepared during the day time and the honey is harvested in the evening (dusk). The main equipments used are a forest vine rope ladder, knife, smoking by leaves and bamboo baskets and sticks to collect the comb. They cut the brood part first and it falls off; only the brood with the young comb is eaten. The rest of the comb is collected in tins and squeezed out by hand in the village. It is sometimes filtered through cloth. The first honey is tasted by the priest of the village. The rest is shared between all villagers and partly sold to known people.*

*Note: 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 based on the reason that if any harm befalls the hunters, his sister will become a widow. This factor is very common and important in many tribals' practices.*



## Tools and Techniques

TRIBE	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; the other tools are coir rope, aruval(curved knife), tins, bamboo baskets and long split bamboo sticks with a sharpened end; smoker is mainly the protective gear used; some tribals apply honey or plant extract (suti kodi) to treat stings from AD.
Irulas	The rope ladders are made out of the fibre of Panamaram ( <i>Oroxylum indicum</i> ) and Karasamaram ( <i>Hardwickia binata</i> ); the rest of the tools are the same as for Kurumbas; smoker is used so that the bees leave the comb.
Kathnaickens	They 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 honeyhunter with his tools; Karasamaram ( <i>Hardwickia binata</i> ) is the most common fibre used to make ropes/baskets.

*Source: Keystone Honeyhunters & Beekeepers Survey - Tamil Nadu, 1994*

## Beliefs, Superstitions & Traditions

TRIBE	DESCRIPTION
Kurumbas	A simple pooja (prayer) is done before honeyhunting season; the brother-in-Law factor exists; pieces from the first harvested comb are offered in 3 directions; marking of colonies with tobacco is done to prevent other people from harvesting; they believe that some cliffs are 'God's cliffs' from where no honey is harvested; they also pray at the graves of their ancestors prior to hunting
Irulas	Marking of colonies with tobacco is done to prevent other people from harvesting; Spirits exist on some rocks from which no honey can be extracted; a simple prayer is done at the honey-rock before the harvesting season
Kathnaickens	They have a prayer using items like coconut, incense, etc.; they do not cut the colonies with an iron knife as they believe that 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 Honeyhunters & Beekeepers Survey - Tamil Nadu, 1994*

Information gathered during the Honeyhunters and Beekeepers Survey (Keystone, 1994), revealed that there are a few such groups still practicing honeyhunting in the Nilgiris. This information was also vital for Keystone to base its activities here as it felt the need for documentation, action and support of their traditional activity and lifestyle.



### III. KEYSTONE'S EXPERIENCES OVER THE PAST 2 YEARS

Keystone set up a field office in Kotagiri taluk of the Nilgiri hills and has initiated work with the two main hunter gatherer tribal communities - the Irulas and Kurumbas, since 1995. The past years have opened a number of avenues which look at the intricate relationship between tribal communities and natural systems.

To be able to effectively conserve and develop the honey hunters of this region, efforts have begun on the following lines:

# **Information documentation/dissemination:**

Today, there is a lack of substantial information on this disappearing activity. Availability of other soft options like wage labour have weaned the younger generation away from this traditional activity. Efforts are being made to document through sketches, photos, slides and a film this entire activity and through this, provide an identity for the group.

# **Sustainability studies** - ecological indices to understand the processes/dynamics of harvesting. To understand the impact of honey gathering on the *Apis dorsata* populations, a mapping of honey cliffs, is being carried out. Nearly seventy honey cliffs have been mapped with the information gathered from different honeyhunting groups. Also, a monitoring of select cliffs for no. of colonies, amounts of honey is being done, during the season:

e.g. *Name of cliff : Swarnavalli verai*

**Year Number of Colonies Honey harvested**

1995	7	20 kgs
1996	8	30 kgs
1997	9	5 kgs*

\* according to the honeyhunters, early monsoons have made the bees consume most of the honey

# **Marketing support:** Keystone has initiated a project for developing an effective marketing strategy for honey. Honey has been marketed, both locally and in various other cities of the country. Today, more than 60 tribal families are being helped and the price increase has been nearly 100%. Also, more awareness has been created about quality amongst villagers. e.g. through improved methods of harvesting, squeezing of honey combs has been reduced significantly. This has helped the honey to be clearer & more fresh and the chances of contamination to be reduced.

The project has also explored experiments in value addition to bees wax - a valuable natural resource, which was wasted earlier. Bees wax is being refined and made into candles and earthen lamps. Experiments to make soaps and creams are going on. An encouraging market seems to be opening up for these products - a case of small volume-high value. The items embody high quality and information about the people behind it. These efforts aim not only to give competitive prices to the honeyhunters but also help create a stake in the resource, to aid sustainable harvest.

During the past year Keystone has handled over 1.5 tons of honey from a few honeyhunting groups. However, there are several honeyhunting groups in the Nilgiris, each having their own select areas for honey collection. Typically, a group consists of 5-7 persons who share the income from the honey. Each honeyhunting area has an average of 10 bee colonies, each colony yielding 5-6 kgs of honey. The overall potential in Kotagiri area (260 sq.kms.) can be judged from the following figures:

Honey availability	:6 tons
Total value of honey	:Rs. 7.2 lakhs (approx \$20,570)

Wax availability	:1.7 tons
Total value of wax	:Rs.1.27 lakhs (approx. \$ 3642)

- # **Development of the honeyhunter** It is important to address all the facets of the honey hunters' life - his income, his habitat, his family etc. Past experiences in Beekeeping & Development projects show that an overall interest in them has helped the honey hunting programme and vice versa. Activities such as beekeeping, value addition to silk cotton, bringing in drinking water and micro irrigation, have been an integral part of the work.
- # **Village institution & Honeyhunter network:** A network would enable them to strengthen their identity as a group and exchange ideas on techniques of harvesting & filtering. All activities to sustain it, finally require a certain system through which it can operate. The interest shown by several groups, the progress made through contacts, visits and projects is gradually developing through the villages and the honey hunter network - informal yet effective. The fact that today they know that there is a group interested in providing them with a competitive price for their produce, that the honey hunter gets known as an important link between the forests and the people - this message needs to be evolved & developed further for the future generation.
- # **Policy** - protected honey cliff areas, honeyhunter sanctuaries. The formation of national parks and sanctuaries and the consequent legislation forbidding them to gather from such areas has been an on-going problem. There are still a number of areas which have not yet been addressed by a group like ours - only advocacy about these indigenous groups with decision-makers and the Government can bring about a new perspective to the problems of honey hunters. Conservation of honey cliffs and bee habitat could begin under a protected area system, where the honey hunter is permitted to collect his share. Improved systems of collection, harvesting and value addition will bring them a larger share of the profits - yet meeting conservation needs.



#### IV. CONCLUSION

Keystone is addressing the issues of the Honeyhunter from the perspective of:

- \* Ecological indicators (habitat)
- \* Economics (micro-enterprise)
- \* Village institution or Honeyhunter Network (a participatory system to sustain the activity)

The importance of this activity for the cultural identity of the people and the local economy is critical. The honeyhunter also plays a major role in the maintenance of regional biodiversity through his sustainable harvest, every year leaving designated areas untouched. The ensuing years will see changes that threaten the very existence of this activity in the Nilgiri Hills.

The honey hunters of the Nilgiris, and indeed of the world, are at a cross-roads. Alarming changes are threatening to wipe out this activity. Landuse change and forest destruction, growing economic activity and restrictions on the use of forest produce are all working to change the lifestyle of the hill people.

During the past year, Keystone has handled over 1.5 tons of honey from 50-60 honeyhunter families. Gradually, it plans to bring in a much larger number of people in the network providing them with competitive prices and initiating other need based projects in their villages. The honeyhunters cannot be sustained by honey gathering alone. Apart from the honey activity, there is a need to address his basic needs issues such as shelter, education and health at the village level. Each of these areas have to be integrated into the larger picture, making it interesting and relevant to their milieu.

A paper presented by:

**Pratim Roy, Mathew John & Snehlata Nath**

Keystone - A Group for Eco-development Initiatives,

Post Box 35, Kotagiri - 643 217,

Nilgiris, Tamil Nadu, INDIA

Telefax : 91-4266-72277

e-mail : keystone.ktg.@smy.sprintrpg.ems.vsnl.net.in