

(DRAFT FOR COMMENTS)

BUZZING IN THE BLUE MOUNTAINS

**The Strategies and Dilemmas of Voluntary Social Action
Among Tribal Communities in the Nilgiris**

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An Assessment of the Work of Keystone, Kotagiri

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1. INTRODUCTION

Anthropologist Verrier Elwin's book "Philosophy for NEFA" contains a Foreword written by Jawaharlal Nehru. He spells out five principles for working with tribal communities which are interesting to examine against the background of all that has been undertaken in the name of tribal development and welfare in India. They are reproduced here in full:

- 1. People should develop along the lines of their own genius and we should avoid imposing anything on them. We should try to encourage in every way their own traditional art and culture.*
- 2. Tribal right in land and forest should be respected.*
- 3. We should try to train and build up a team of their own people to do the work of administration and development. Some technical personnel from outside will be needed, especially in the beginning. But we should avoid introducing too many outsiders into tribal territory.*
- 4. We should not over administer these areas or overwhelm them with a multiplicity of schemes. We should rather work through, and not in rivalry to, their own social and cultural institutions.*
- 5. We should judge results, not by statistics or the amount of money spent but by the quality of human character that is evolved.*

If even a small effort had been made by the numerous, zealous, state agencies which have been created for the cause of tribal development in India to follow these guidelines, the conditions of the numerous tribal communities in this country would have been a lot, lot better.

Tribals account on average for about 8 percent of India's population. These proportions vary from state to state. In Arunachal Pradesh it is 64 percent, in Madhya Pradesh 23 percent, in Gujarat 15 percent and in Tamilnadu just over 1 percent. Not only are tribal communities spread across the country, they are also by no means homogenous. As many as 642 different racial strains at different ecological niches in various population sizes covering diversified stages of socio-cultural, linguistic and economic background have been reported in India. These populations have for millennia persisted in a state of almost complete self-sufficiency, having developed their own way of life and cultural identities without any need for outside assistance. Only one or two generations ago many tribal communities enjoyed the advantages of a well balanced ecology fully in tune with the natural resources of their environment and could boast an overall quality of life superior in many ways to that of large sections of the Indian rural population. Adequate food supplies, a non-exploitative social structure, freedom from indebtedness and other forms of dependence on non-tribal outsiders, equality of the sexes and a remarkable tolerance in all interpersonal relations were outstanding features of tribal societies. Given that their populations were not growing so rapidly there was no threat to the ecosystem in which they lived.

Today after having spent crores or rupees and provided over five decades of positive discrimination, the condition of the majority of the tribals has probably worsened in relative terms. They have neither been absorbed into mainstream society, nor have they been empowered to continue in their traditional occupations with a sense of human dignity and honour. We, non-tribals have only ourselves to blame for creating this condition. In our own small ways, we owe it to them to rectify our faulty assumptions and approaches. The efforts being made by several voluntary social action groups all over the country in their various struggles to support tribal communities to re-establish a new identity must be seen in this light. Tribal identities are not only to be seen in the outward expressions of their culture. There are the deeper, inner facets of their collective lives and their relationships with nature that form the essence of their identity. It is the challenge to re-establish these, within the context of a globalising world that warrants closer attention.

This assessment of the work of a voluntary social action trust located in Kotagiri, in the Nilgiris, in Tamilnadu is basically an effort to examine the work and approach of a team of idealistic young people in their search for relevant expressions in their work with the tribal communities.

Having commenced their work in its present form in 1995, they have thought it appropriate to undertake a participative assessment of the directions which they have taken; an assessment of the dilemmas they face at the present and a vision of the possible futures they can help to build. (See Appendix A for itinerary of visit)

2. THE CONTEXT

The Nilgiris District of Tamilnadu is a very special bio-ecological region. It is situated in the Western Ghats at an altitude ranging from 800 to 1800 metres above mean sea level at the confluence of the three states of Karnataka, Kerala and Tamilnadu. Ecologically and culturally it is therefore a distinct administrative territory and part of the larger UNESCO declared Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve.

It is in this context that a group of three young people, Snehalata Nath, Pratim Roy and Mathew John set out to work in the areas of natural resource and rural development with a conscious goal to enhance the quality of life and the state of the environment. They wished to work with the tribal communities with whom they had established contact. They wanted to break new paths that were innovative yet relevant so as to deal with diverse issues in an integrated manner. This team for eco-development initiatives called themselves KEYSTONE. Keystone is an idea that has emerged from the nest building behaviour of some birds in nature. They build permanent nest structures in trees, which serve as a habitat for several life forms. Such keystone species in nature become crucial in providing opportunities for other associated beings to grow and evolve. It highlights the simple ecological principle of the interdependence of natural systems.

3. THE TEAM: SEPARATE PASTS, INTERTWINED FUTURES

The discussion with the individual team members about their life histories and their motivations of work and involvement was both a refreshing and rewarding experience. Here were three people, born in three different parts of the country; brought up in families with vastly different social, cultural and religious perspectives; professionally qualified in different disciplines finally meet and strike up enduring personal and professional relationships. Their separate pasts are as important as their intertwined present and future. Crucial in cementing these relationships have been a certain common commitment to larger "people causes." The urge to put to use their professional competencies for larger social concerns is at once a fulfillment of altruistic aspirations and egoistic yearnings. Making no fuss about these seemingly contradictory positions allows them to function outside the rigidities that characterised many social activists of the past – both the simple Gandhian and the radical Marxist. In fact, this permits them to engage in a completely new form of social practice – more open, more passionate, more professional, more creative and yet more humble. Parts of this dynamic combination of qualities of the Keystone team have been perceived by many with whom they work in Kotagiri, the tribals, and other representatives of civil society and government officials.

There has been a growing rapport between Keystone and the tribal population in the Nilgiris. It must not be assumed that this has happened overnight or without reservation. There is no reason not to expect this either. Having been largely at the adverse receiving end of exploitative relationships with traders, government officials, private investors, plantation owners, moneylenders, to name but a few, it is natural that the tribals were initially weary of striking up new relationships. The tribals have been cautious of all offers of "outside" assistance. In this context, it must be noted that one of the important reasons for the Keystone team's present success is importantly due to their past approach. One significant example of this was the first honey hunters survey of ¹⁹⁹⁴~~1992-93~~. ~~At that time they were all working for an organisation called Development Alternatives.~~ ^{we left} They approached the survey as a means of "learning from the tribals" by getting to know about their skills and knowledge. This was in sharp contrast with the traditional approaches to surveys and social work which either try to "get something from the tribal" in the form of information or resources or "give to the tribal" something of our products or understanding of the world. Pedagogically this helped to establish a relationship where the tribals became the "central subject" of concern rather than the "objects and recipients" of doles and misplaced sympathies.

Continuing the work along these lines in committed manner over the years has paid rich dividends. This has helped forge a whole network of relationships—between Keystone and the tribal communities, as well as between the communities themselves. This was expressed best during my discussion with a group of tribals when they talked about the former. They referred to it as an "urumaiyana bendum" which roughly translates to mean a "right and mutually respectful relationship."

There is the flip side of this sort of relationship. It carries with it a rising tide of expectations on both sides: those that Keystone has of their tribal friends on the one hand,

and those which the tribal communities have of Keystone. Charting the contours of these mutual relationships and expectations will be the greatest challenge which both Keystone and the tribal communities that relate to them will face in the near future. Much of this assessment report will deal with this central issue.

4. VILLAGE WORK: MICRO SUCCESS RAISING MACRO ISSUES

To work with tribal communities in selected villages of the Nilgiris was one of the conscious strategies adopted by the Keystone team. The rationale for this approach was spelt out in their foundation document called "The Tree Fall Gap" thus:

A deeper understanding of natural resource processes, local management methods, traditional knowledge and development trends required a presence, in the field. Thus, the setting up of a base in Kotagiri has allowed a dual opportunity – to be able to work in villages, yet with communication facilities remain in touch and network with others so as to understand this local part better. It means, designing a strategy, which takes into account the specifics and leads to the larger issues.

In this assessment we have been able to visit and raise issues relating to the work in three of the nine villages in which Keystone has concrete programmes of work and good contacts.

4.1 Keelcoupe: The Small Forest Settlement

Keelcoupe is a small village tucked away in the reserve forest. During the early 1900s, Irula tribals from adjacent villages were brought by British forest officers to work in the coupes inside the forests that had valuable tropical timber. This timber was extracted and replaced by teak and sandalwood. Due to the lower elevation of this coupe – it was named Keel (lower) coupe. The village is approachable by a forest footpath, which is jeepable if the gate at the reserve forest boundary is open.

My visit to Keelcoupe was interesting since it was a revisit to this village after a gap of two years. In May 1997 it had 11 families and Keystone had been involved for three years. During that first visit the impression was that villagers were very reserved and a bit standoffish both to the members of the team and to visitors. The women were certainly invisible on that occasion. The housing condition was poor. Two men were sick. But for the area of habitation, the rest of the surroundings were full of bush and bramble. The bee keeping activity had commenced and the participative scheme of getting water to the village had just been completed. These were signs of a good beginning.

The change that has come about in Keelcoupe in the last two years is remarkable -- physically, socio-culturally and economically. The women greeted us since many of the men had not returned from work. The conversation was cordial and easy. The fact that the team members had established very close personal rapport with the families was indeed evident from the fact that they knew all the names and the kinship ties between the families and about their relationship in the other villages.

The village had acquired a new face with the new houses constructed by the forest department as part of "their responsibility to the forest dwellers". This "responsibility" was discovered by the Forest Department after almost a century when ~~the~~ Keystone

arranged for the visit of the District Forest Officer to the village. Five houses were completed. The work on the others were at various stages. We saw one family whose house was razed, the family had constructed the foundation with the materials supplied by the Department and they were awaiting the construction of the walls and roof. The man of the house mentioned to the Keystone team member that the contractor had not been seen and that despite several visits to the Forest Office the construction had not commenced. They were living in a poorly fabricated makeshift structure of bamboo, cardboard, plastic sacks. The saving grace was that the water supply pipe ensured clean water. It was the woman of the house who, in cordial but matter-of-fact manner, requested the Keystone team member to use his good offices with the forest department to speed up the matter.

The water supply system set up in 1997 was very much in place and reaching water to every house. A significant achievement in its own right considering the implications that clean water has on the overall quality of life of any community. The children we saw were healthy and bright, including the two-week old newborn.

The apiary set up under a DFID (UK) programme is certainly a major step in promoting apiculture. The two acre plot that lay unused was cleared by the families and given on lease to the Keystone for the apiary. The apiary is certainly a major collective innovation in the strategy of Keystone to spread beekeeping among the tribals. As a demonstration centre, it has been attracting tribals from other villages who visit it to make enquiries about bee keeping. Children from the tribal schools also visit the apiary. The apiary also houses a nursery for coffee saplings and other pulses that are meant for distribution/sale to other tribal settlements. The office at the apiary was also being used as a small employment centre for women of the village. They were making bee wax candles from the sheets, which were brought down from the HIVE in Kotagiri.

The Keystone village volunteer (Chandran) was at the neat little office rather elegantly built with mud walls, bamboo and wooden rafters and tile roof. The posters on honey keeping and photographs of various hives, including the ones in the village, adorned the walls of the office. The posters were all in English, which made them irrelevant. Apparently, measures are being taken to translate them into Tamil soon. This is a priority. Along with this, some very simply illustrated leaflets (with minimal number of words in Tamil) on a variety of issues such as – beekeeping, how to gather bees wax, candle making, irrigation, organic farming etc – can be kept in the office for explanation and distribution.

4.2 Semmanarai: The Big Irula Village

When Keystone were making their initial honey hunter survey, they were informed about this large and spread out village on the eastern slope of Kotagiri Taluk in Kengarai Panchayat. It is situated at 1400 MSL just below Cliffy Estate and accessible seasonally by a steep and muddy (now tarred) but jeepable road. It was characterised by Keystone advisors as a “difficult village.” This was the challenge.

This village had just six Kurumba and over 90 Irula tribal families all of whom are landed. Moist and dry deciduous forests surround the village on two sides. The environment is ideal for growing a variety of crops and the forests and hills provide the resources for an active hunting and gathering economy in which honey hunting is an

important occupation. The presence of tea estates in the vicinity also provides the scope for wage employment for both men and women.

Keystone's work in the village has included introducing bee keeping; associating with honey hunters; land development for growing traditional crop for self consumption and nurseries for cash crops like coffee, to name a few.

The visit revealed several facets of the work that will be touched upon here.

At one level it highlighted the selective success of the appropriate technology project for apiculture development. Those tribals who take to beekeeping do so with conviction. They are willing to learn and teach others. The examples of persons like the village headman Ramaswamy and others like Raman in this village point to the fact that Keystone efforts should be concentrated on those who have exhibited demonstrable aptitude and skill to make the change from the gathering mentality to that of the settled agriculturist. These key persons should then be encouraged to be diffusion agents in their own right. The necessary training and information on bee keeping strategies should be provided to them.

A second realm of success has been the facilitation of the land development activity and the growing of traditional crops for own consumption. The revival of the use of some of their traditional foods like ragi was certainly significant. The association between these efforts and good health as well as autonomy from market processes was evident in this village. This was heartening. The discerning role of women in the productive activity and meaningful translation of this into better food for children was also evident from the physique and alertness of the children of all ages in the village.

A third realm of gratification has been in the nature of collective action, which the land development activity has fostered. Cooperative labour is an indispensable prerequisite for success in a realm where the terrain is difficult and the need to have protection for the crops from small and large animals is paramount. These innate reasons apart, the intangible impact of building camaraderie cannot be underestimated. Assessing the land development project from the perspective of harvest levels and food for self consumption is one indicator of success or failure of the project. This is a short term measure. The more meaningful and long term measure is the degree of social cohesion and cooperative spirit which the project fosters. This is the foundation on which the future will rest. The beginnings of this are evident in the 10 Irula families who are collaborating on the land development project in this village. With a small assistance of Rs.1000 per family they had cleared 34 acres of marginal lands on steep slopes overlooking the plains 1500 metres below.

For all the success of Semmanarai there is one big arena of failure which will cast its shadow onto the future: the lack of sustained motivation to keep children in school. The facilities available for this are provided by both the state and voluntary organisations. For some unrevealed reason, many families have not been able to take this extra effort of educating the children. Also, the impression one gets is that this is a realm in which Keystone has not sufficiently interacted with the families to facilitate some critical thinking on the matter.

One other interesting insight from Semmanarai has been the manner in which Keystone had been able to make a clear distinction between giving support to the villagers in their development initiatives and being a mediator between them and the functionaries of the state. The group involved with the land development project had sawn down a large tree on the land cleared by them for cultivation. This was a clear violation of forest laws and Keystone's own environmental perspective. The forest guard swung into action threatening the villagers for this illegal act. Keystone had made it clear to the villagers that what they did was wrong and that they should sort this issue out by themselves. The tribals apparently handled the matter in the shrewdest manner by pandering to the forest guard on the one hand, and pitching him against other representatives of the state who, at this juncture, come in the garb of saviours of the tribals. The question remains whether Keystone can long remain aloof from these issues? Beyond what threshold will the tribals expect Keystone to take a stand by their side, irrespective of the question of the "honesty" of the matter?

4.3 Banglapadi: The New Village

Banglapadi is situated in the Kengarai Panchayat one of the poorest in the Nilgiris District. It is a village of 40 Irula families locked between aggressively expanding private estates and the steep slopes under the foot of the pilgrimage centre of the Irulas – Rangaswami peak. The two-hour ride to Banglapadi village was bad on the spine but invigorating to the mind and spirit! Banglapadi was not one of the villages in the earlier scheme of involvement of Keystone. One of the Keystone members had visited the village during a survey on non-timber forest products over a year ago. She had left her address with the village headman.

The reception we received in the morning was indeed cordial. Seeing us at the village at 9.00 am had created an impression with the villagers since these inferred that we had probably set out even without our breakfast! The tribal headman Nanjan was a short and open-faced man with a permanent, disarming smile which we found later even when he was irritated. He was the person that persevered to convince the Keystone to involve in their lives. The address unsuspectingly left by the Keystone member during the survey visit was his basis for contact. This gifted man, through his initiative and grit, had been able to fight a legal dispute through the government's legal aid process and recover 80 acres of land belonging to the village commons that was usurped by a private plantation company. With the government bearing the costs of the litigation and the assistance of a lawyer who is a Kurumba, this victory came as a great morale booster for the community.

Using the regained village commons for some productive use became a paramount priority. The choice between growing tea and crops meant for self-consumption was settled by the example of the neighbouring village of Vagapanai which they could see in the distance from their village. Moreover, contacts and relatives from there had informed them about their relationship with Keystone. This was the basis for Nanjan's many visits to Keystone to convince the team about the need to help his village. Keystone provided a small financial assistance (Rs.20, 000), much of it in kind (irrigation pipes) and as a matching grant. Nanjan was able to get 20 families to cooperate to start land development and organic farming of beans, millets, ragi and vegetables for local sale and self-consumption. A portion of the seeds for the crops they borrowed from the group in

Vagapanai village on the agreement that it would be returned two folds after their respective harvests. Discussions with the group of 20 revealed the great degree of team spirit and interest to make the project a success. The first harvest of beans in one of the plots had already been sold. This revealed to the group the great possibilities ahead.

Unlike in Semmanarai, all the children in Banglapadi village were attending the government-run tribal residential school in the neighbouring village called Gerkiyoor. The balwadi of the Nilgiri Adivasi Welfare Association was also functioning well in the village. Though most of the tribals were illiterate they saw the need for educating their children in the hope that they would be able to get out of the poverty and the social disablement of tribal society. As discussions revealed, this was more an issue of simple faith on their part than a matter of proven possibility. The women and children were healthy and births took place in hospitals or in the home under the care of an elderly women of the village in case trained nurses could not be reached.

The villagers had a very meager level of awareness of the issues in the world at large. There was never even a newspaper read by anyone in the village. (Comparing to Kerala this is unthinkable). No efforts had been made to provide for some supplementary, structured awareness creation among the children of the village who returned from their schools to spend the weekends with their parents.

Walking through the newly planted fields with the 20 cooperators, the strong sense of self-respect that goes with the achievement of autonomy over one's life's affairs was evident. Faced with low wage rates in the plantations (Rs 25 to Rs. 40 per day) the option of higher incomes, better food and health were more attractive. The discovery of a group of "outsiders" who had a sense of fairness and established a "right relationship" with them was all the more reason for confidence.

Despite what seemed an excellent example of harmonious collective action amongst a fairly small, homogeneous group of collaborators, there was a voice of dissent. This by itself was no surprise, but the fact that the leader Nanjan himself, keeping his smile intact, encouraged the person (who was accusing him of partisanship) to express it openly to the Keystone team was the important element in the socio-cultural dynamics of the situation. This is a healthy sign. It speaks volumes about the quality of democracy, transparency and honesty in the group of villagers and the relationship they maintain with Keystone.

In Banglapadi too, the success of collective action for creating self-sufficiency and autonomy may unravel a whole new set of socio-political issues for the villagers and for Keystone. When the next 20 families in the village also take to organic farming (they plan to do so as soon as they complete some of their obligations to those who have lent them money etc), the labour market in this remote area is going to be disrupted. The question will remain if the capitalist class, its representatives and manifestations, will just accept this situation as a *fait accompli* or take measures to curb these tendencies of tribals asserting their autonomy by opting out of the labour market. The socio-political milieu, as well as the history of response to such organised efforts by tribals to withdraw from the "accepted" land and labour relations of the plantation and forest economy of the district point to the possibility of conflict.

Will the Irulas of Banglapadi be equipped to face this situation, should it arise? Will they seek the assistance of Keystone at that juncture? How will/should Keystone respond?

5. NETWORK FOR HONEY HUNTERS

The entry of Keystone into the Nilgiris was prompted by their fascination for the skill and daring of the honeyhunters. The well documented study on the Honeyhunters and Bee Keepers in Tamilnadu undertaken in 1994 provided the base for this.

Interacting with the honeyhunters provided a good basis for entry into the tribal villages and more importantly for establishing a different order of relationship with them – one in which the “outsider” is keen to learn from the tribal before offering them help. The observation of the methods and detailing of the customs and practices of the group helped to assess the sustainability of this activity and provided an “indicator” for assessing the health of the overall floral environment of the region. It also led to giving suggestions on how the wild honey could be extracted in a more hygienic manner with very minimal changes in traditional practices. When these changes brought measurable increases in income they were quickly adopted.

Linking the efforts of the honey hunters to the possibilities for earning more income from both honey, and products such as bees wax which they had earlier been unaware about, created opportunities for both commercial (see below) and awareness creating interventions. Over the years their contacts with honey hunter villages has expanded. (See Appendix B)

In 1996 a good interaction took place between the honey hunters of Dharmapuri District and those at Keelcoupe village. In 1998 about 30 Irula and Kuramba honeyhunters from the villages of Kotagiri and Coonoor Talukas came together at the HIVE to learn and discuss better methods to collect honey from the wild, how to extract and clean wax, how to protect the brood from damage and so forth. The training was undertaken with the help of posters, live demonstrations and illustrations.

Keystone has estimated that there are about 560 honey hunters in Nilgiris District. Federating them into a network is a task that they would like to initiate. The far flung nature of the villages and their relative inaccessibility create some hurdles to the quick realisation of this goal. The question also arises as to whether this network will be coordinated by Keystone or the tribals themselves. There are the advantages and disadvantages of both approaches. However, given the newly perceived commercial success of the marketing of wild honey, a collective approach to asserting the priority rights of the tribals over wild honey will become an issue which will have to be confronted sooner or later.

6. APICULTURE IN THE HILLS

Making beekeepers of honeyhunters is certainly a big challenge which Keystone has embarked upon from the very beginning of their activities in the Nilgiris. This project was titled the “Appropriate Technology” project considering that it envisaged the development and diffusion of a new type of basket bee hive which Keystone called the Mountain Hive. This was originally found successful in Bangladesh. In the first three years of the project many efforts were made to innovate, test and closely monitor several

variations of the basket hive with the full participation of the tribal beekeepers themselves. Extensive data was collected and samples of these are to be found in the Annual Reports (1994/95, 1996 and 1997). The observations in the field however indicate that the rate of diffusion of the Mountain Hive has indeed been slow. Both in the homesteads of the tribals and in the apiary the basket hives seemed to take the back seat with the Newton Hive being more obvious.

Besides the efforts to diffuse the basket hive, many small experiments have been made in the artifacts related to bee keeping. Examples abound. The partition board, frame holder, feeding trough, hive stand, bee carrying box, top bars and so forth. The extent to which all these have diffused among the new group of beekeeping tribals was difficult to assess. The impression is that there have been no major breakthroughs worthy of reporting as a "successful" innovation.

More than the technology aspect of the AT project the real gains have been with regard to the social and cultural dynamics which this project has engendered between the tribal communities and Keystone. That the Keystone team recognise this fact is itself one of the most noteworthy aspects of the beekeeping project which cannot be quantified with traditional indicators.

The Annual Report of 1996 states:

"With time, there has also been a change in the level of sharing of tribals with members of Keystone. Now, more people speak out on different issues which are affecting them – illness, planting new crops, need for a nursery, applications to the government, savings, rights etc."

The project has also fostered capacity building at the village level in that the team were able to identify tribal youth who can play a major role in the future of the community. This building of human capital is the wisest form of investment which can be made and Keystone has perceived this opportunity and seized it with enthusiasm.

7. COMMERCIAL ACTIVITIES

Funding agencies and the general public always raises questions about the rationale of commercial activities by social action organisations. Funding agencies in the First World are more comfortable with Third World social action organisations that spend money for productive and social development programmes or skill and awareness creation programmes amongst a marginalised group in the society. Examples abound: bee-keeping, housing, literacy programmes, functional skill development, social awareness campaigns and so on fit the bill very well. However, when social action organisations take the step of involvement in the buying and selling of commodities, their motives may become the subject of scrutiny by funding agencies, the community within which they work and the general public. It is therefore no surprise that this is a matter, which has been raised in the context of the commercial activities of Keystone too.

Keystone has variously captioned its commercial activities as: "enterprise development" or "micro-enterprise development." The document "The Tree Fall Gap" refers to micro-enterprise development as the effort to "harmonise development aspirations and

economic growth". Keystone's rationale for undertaking these activities is spelt out in their 1996 Annual Report in this manner:

"As part of the aim towards self-sufficiency projects, Keystone has looked at resources available at the village and how value-addition can provide an economic incentive for the villagers to understand and conserve their environment better. Since the main effort has revolved around honey hunting and bee-keeping communities, the focus had been on honey and bees wax, However, slowly other items are being made and today there is a range of things that are available for sale" (Page 17)

Examining the audit reports one notices a very substantial increase in the sale of these products between 1996/97 and 1998/99. Sales increased from Rs.173, 000 to Rs.407, 000. During this same period the funds received from the Swallows, Sweden increased from Rs. 693,000 to Rs. 1,020,000 and the total income as per returns filed to the Income Tax Department was Rs. 944,000 and Rs. 2,434,000 respectively for 1996/97 and 1998/99. These figures place the scope and the growth of the activity in perspective particularly when one notes that the sales grew by 135 percent whereas the Swallows contribution increased only by 47 percent in the same period. Sales as a ratio of the Swallows contribution increased from 25 percent to 40 percent in this period though as a share of the total income it stagnated.

The question arises as to whether these operations, as indicated in the 1996 Annual Report, do give rise to "an economic incentive for the village to understand and conserve their environment better." Examining the audit reports further show that on average, over the three years, about 50 percent of the sales value went back to the tribals in the form of income – i.e. the amount shown as purchase cost of tribal products. In 1997/98 this worked out to about Rs. 735 per transaction which the tribals made with Keystone. This increased to Rs. 1215 per transaction in 1998/99. Compared to the prevailing levels of income of the tribals, this is a reasonable gross money income for them. The larger issue is how these incomes are utilised by them. Does it all go towards copious consumption? Or is it utilised for meaningful social development of the concerned family or community? The evidence at the moment seem to tilt in favour of the former, though the exceptions where tribals have made exemplary investments in housing and children's education from this income were pointed out by the Keystone team.

From the net retains (sales minus processing costs and overheads) a small but significant portion was paid out for medical treatment incurred by the tribals through an innovative arrangement worked out between Keystone and the Kotagiri Medical Foundation Hospital situated near the Keystone office in Kotagiri. This is noteworthy.

The public image of Keystone is also conditioned by this commercial activity. In the popular and common mind, the Keystone centre is known as a honey procurement centre ("Thean Appice") and not so much as a social service organisation. For many tribals too Keystone is probably seen (at least initially) as a place where they get a better monetary deal (ready cash, no cuts and commissions etc) for their products. Undoubtedly this "commercial" interaction is leading to new practices in the process of the village-level handling of the honey. One noticed at the HIVE the high level of cleanliness of the containers used by the tribals to bring in their honey. So also their awareness of the right methods to be used for its extraction from the comb. The perceived opportunity for

hitherto unknown sources of income – e.g. bees wax – was also evident. In fact bees wax may overtake honey sales in 2000.

On balance it can be said that the enterprise development activity undertaken by Keystone – which are basically the processing and marketing of forest products gathered and grown by tribals in the forest eco-system – provide a good beginning for achieving the objective of (1) self-sustaining of projects and (2) providing an eco-incentive for conservation. The loan made available by the Small Industries Development Bank of India (SIDBI) is a good indicator of the perceived viability of these operations by government financial institutions.

There are however a few knotty issues which are likely to arise in the future. Take the case of *apis dorsata* honey gathered by the tribals. This is a minor forest produce, which by law is meant only for consumption by tribals. All commercial transactions are therefore *prima facie* illegal. At the present scale of operations, neither Keystone nor the tribals encounter any resistance from the traditional honey traders. The Forest Department also has raised no objections. At present only about 60 of the estimated 566 honey hunters of Nilgiris supply honey to Keystone. (*Since Keystone does take honey from some traders they may in fact be finally marketing the honey from a larger number of honey hunters*). These numbers will most likely increase with the many proactive measures being taken to form a honey hunter's network in the Nilgiris and also the steps to start procurement centres at places other than Kotagiri. At a certain point, a threshold will be crossed when the interest of the traders and the village level forest officials are affected by the enterprise development of Keystone. This can give rise to hostility – commercial and otherwise – from the trader-middleman. It can also lead to questioning the legality of the operations by the forest department when the village and forest range officers who extract “honey rent” from the tribals perceive a treat to their flow of unaccounted incomes. Interestingly, when these situations do arise it will also be an indicator of the success of Keystone's enterprise development!

There is also another angle to this, which we must mention. How will the honeyhunters themselves react to the success? Given the nature of the relationships they maintain with Keystone, will they not be justified in raising the issue of profit sharing in a more structured way? Surely, commercial success apart, this will also be an indicator of the success in raising the level of consciousness of the tribals about their rights to fair trade.

In summary it would suffice to say that the very success of the enterprise development would bring with it a new portfolio of issues which can turn out to become “problems” or “challenges”. Either way they will have to be faced.

8. THE NEW KEYSTONE CENTRE

The new Keystone Centre is already a reality. The 1.17 acres of land acquired for this purpose has been fenced, road rough cut, the well dug, the tree saplings planted and the process of land terracing and bunding have all commenced in right earnest. With this, Keystone has dug its feet into Kotagiri and the Nilgiris. It has given the organisation a new personality. It has become a more permanent stakeholder in the future of the Blue Mountains, its eco-system, and people.

The physical features and plans of the manner in which the land will be utilised are more or less finalised. (See Appendix C) There will be ^{four} five activity centres and the names reveal well their function:

1. Training, Information and Network Unit (TINU)
2. Marketing and Processing Unit (MPU)
3. Eco-Development Unit (EDU)
4. Mountain Apiculture Centre (MAC) *and Apiary*

~~5. Apiary~~

The layout of the buildings and the landscaping will make this into an attractive and synergic meeting point of matter and minds. It brings hope for a new future for tribal communities and the unique Nilgiri mountain eco-system.

The Centre will grow to develop a personality of its own. It can evolve into a committed centre of excellence that becomes the harbinger for a fresh approach to understanding the dynamic interface between people and resources in a mountain ecosystem. This can be seen as the techno-ecological and socio-economic side of the personality. Together with this, it can also become the "support backbone" (invisible but strongly present) of a larger empowering process among tribal communities in the Nilgiris. This in essence will be the deeply cultural and political dimension of this personality, in that it can become the focus of the search for autonomy and reestablishment of a new identity. Understandably, it will be naïve to suggest that these two faces can be tightly separated for the simple reason that they are the two facets of the seal of just, participative and sustainable development.

Without implying any hastily value judgement on the merits of either of the options, it goes without saying that there is a definite choice to be made here. This process of attaining an organisational personality will be conditioned by several factors both "internal" and "external". Internal refers to the structure of the organisation, the nature of the personnel, their competence and concerns. The external refers to the larger social forces operating in society. It will also be conditioned by the extent to which Keystone develops as an "entity" and the measure to which Keystone fosters a "network" of relationships which relate to this entity. It is the nature of this interaction between the internal and external which will condition your choice.

In this context it may be appropriate to reflect on the broad framework within which this new centre should attempt to create and foster its activities both from the perspective of Keystone as an "entity" and Keystone as a supporter of a tribal "network" in the Nilgiris. We would like to call this the ART of the Keystone Centre.

1. Action for just, participatory and sustainable development
2. Research and documentation for technology development, awareness and information
3. Training for capacity building and network empowerment

The activities presently envisaged for the new centre can be accounted into this new classificatory framework. The important feature of this framework is that action, research and training need to be seen as both integrative and overlapping.

In the present scheme of Keystone's plans, the emphasis on training for network empowerment is inadequate. Some organised thought needs to be given to this dimension of the work in future. A meeting of concerned persons (representatives from Trustees, advisors, staff, local supporters and the tribal communities) should be organised to discuss this. Another requirement as part of the research and documentation is for a small facility for a documentation centre and library with a good collection of volumes on your realms of activity and on the Nilgiris.

9. ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE AND FUNCTIONING

The present organisational structure is topped by the Board of Trustees initially composed of all the three team members (Mathew John (*Managing Trustee*), Pratim Roy and Snehlata Nath). In July 1997, following directions from the Central Government that husband and wife cannot be members of a Trust receiving foreign contributions, Snehlata resigned. Two other persons well-know to the team were then inducted as Trustees. The three active team members can be considered the professionals and senior organisers of Keystone. Reporting to them are two senior field staff (only one during the time of visit) of whom one has been with them from the start. At the junior field staff level there are four persons and five village-level workers. The administrative staff are just two persons.

It may be useful to consider the organisation as consisting of three distinct functional groups: professionals (including part-time consultants); activity managers; and field workers. In each of these groups it is possible to further divide the personnel into "senior" and "junior".

9.1 Professionals and Foreign Consultants

Professionals form the "open top" of the organisation. Keeping it "open" allows for a greater flow of people who are competent and qualified and can widen the horizon of Keystone. Some may dedicate themselves to the larger cause. Most will leave after a stint to widen their own horizons. When you recruit professionals put them through the tough rigours which you have yourself been through. There should be no let up or exception to this rule. A professional drawn into an organisation after it has taken root can "ride off the back" of history without having any role in making it. A mere academic internalisation of the difficulties and challenges of "setting up" (which can be achieved by reading the stories of the your history of involvement from annual reports and project proposals etc), however thorough, is grossly insufficient. They need to be thrust into the field to unlearn, to be declassified, to acquire empathy and not least to have a first hand understanding of the "live reality". Keep the realm of the professional open. The greatest turnover is at this level. When you find someone, who in your judgement is good for this level, pay her/him well, (not necessarily full market rate) but take the person on a contract period of 2-4 years initially. This will help to keep out the issues of intra-organisational pay comparisons. Provide scope for initiative. Expect committed work. No excuses. Assess carefully in the first year. If s/he suits your needs, then talk about a future with Keystone and the terms on which it can be visualised. For every ten who come, one may remain to make a long term commitment to your evolving visions for the future.

avoid
numbers
this may
be taken
literally

S/he should be one with the ability to work hard, in a spirit of voluntarism – the willingness to do more than what one is paid for because the work is more of a cause one believes in. Three kinds of professionals you would want to look for at this stage are an anthropologist, a social demographer and a forest science person. For the last category, if you can identify an honest, young-at-heart, retired person from the forest department it would be ideal.

Professionals can also be foreign consultants. With them you need to take a different tack. The big difference between foreign and Indian professionals is that while both may be academically competent, the former, nearly always have a far better “hands-on” feel for their realm of competence. There is also a big disadvantage of having foreign professionals working with you. Given the sensitivity of the Government of India about work with tribals by voluntary groups, the presence of foreigners as a core part of your work can become a liability. It is therefore important that foreign professionals always have the right kind of visas. It would also be against the interests of your work to encourage the flow of too many “volunteers” who wish to have an exposure of tribal life. The preference should always be for persons whom you have come to know well and those who are aware of the “sensitivities” of pioneering voluntary action.

9.2 Activity Managers

The activity managers are the pillars of Keystone. They can have a permanent interest and loyalty to the organisation. They are likely to be from the local milieu, (Tamilnadu) without the benefit of urban education and great command of the English language. Their skills of writing in English may be poor. Their ability to relate to professionals and academicians may be limited. These weaknesses can be rectified with empathy and proper support from professionals. What is required is to identify and foster their innate and explicit strengths e.g.: skills of dealing with common people; their feel for sub-surface issues; their technical hands-on skills, to name a few. With work experience and proper, concerned guidance, some from this group of activity managers can be given co-responsibility for main programmes as junior professionals.

The middle managers form the hard core of the organisation. It is through their sustained initiative that the work at the base takes root. They provide the crucial link between the professionals, the field workers and the people. It is important to properly assess the personal and professional growth of people at this level. Provide the right mix of security of tenure and rewards for quality efforts. Those at the middle will have their own realms of activity. However, it is crucial that they meet together regularly between themselves and with the professionals for a sharing of their individual concerns and problems. Organisational synergy is best enhanced in this manner. Fortnightly meetings, bi-annual collective reviews, annual “get-away” picnics etc. need to be factored into the regular functioning of the organisation.

9.3 Field Workers

The field workers are the mouth, the eyes and ears of the organisation. They have to be trained to apply their minds in this fashion. It is likely that many of them will be from the communities or the locale in which you work. Their competencies can span a wide range. Their inadequacies will also be many but particularly evident with regard to formal education. This generally places a limitation on the levels to which they can rise in an

organisation. When the number of field workers increase it is important to build both horizontal (between themselves) and vertical (across levels) groupings among them. For example, the diffusion of bee keeping may create a group among the field workers who specialise in this. Interaction between them should be encouraged (e.g. now between Justin and Subramaniam). This is a learning exercise. However, they could also be part of a sort of "spearhead team" which is composed of field workers, activity managers and professionals/consultants who also discuss together, go to the field together, share tiffin-box lunch together, evaluate together. Such arrangements can be envisaged in the marketing and processing activity and so forth. Such teamwork fosters learning and unlearning for all involved. It promotes commitment to the organisation and the cause.

9.4 Interactions with Board of Trustee and Advisors

The practice of getting the Board of Trustees and the Advisory Board members whenever time and resources permit is a good practice which Keystone has been following. This should be continued. Before the commencement of operations from the new centre, it will be useful to vet your plans before them in a detailed manner. At a meeting like this, it would be meaningful to associate representatives of your major funding partners and other persons in the Nilgiris with whom you have developed strong links.

10. FINANCING THE FUTURE

Funds from foreign aid agencies, funds from government, funds from doing consultancy-assignments, funds from friends, funds from commercial activities, funds without strings, funds with freedom of wise use.

All social action agencies are constantly bugged with choices regarding the source and use of funds. Keystone is therefore no exception. From the audit reports one sees the rapid rate of absorption of funds between 1994/95 and 1998/99. The income assessed for filing tax returns grew from Rs 965,000 to Rs 2,434,000. The main source of this income was in the form of corpus funds provided by Swallows, Sweden. These contributions have increased in absolute terms from Rs 677,000 to Rs 1,020,000 during the same period but declined in share from 70 to 42 percent. During this period there has been a diversification of the sources of the funds to include ~~other foreign NGO aid agencies,~~ foreign governmental assistance and income from undertaking consultancy assignments. Loans and grants from Indian financial agencies and the yield from the commercial activities also merit mention.

There is always the tension between wanting to become self-sufficient and becoming too dependent on more easily available foreign funds. Sometimes the discussions centre round the issue of foreign versus Indian funds. What should be the approach of Keystone for the future?

The long term vision for a group like Keystone should be to taper off foreign funds to a minimum level and build your own corpus funds for support over the next decade. The commercial activity should be envisaged as providing "retains" based on viable, bankable schemes. A share of these retains (which must be decided later) can be utilised to "top up" special corpus funds which you wish to create. Consultancies should be viewed seriously, though taken up selectively without too much compromise of work priorities,

personnel and time. They "pay off" well if you can use them to (1) involve professionals who might later join you (2) give possibility for exposure of your activity managers to wider arenas and (3) if the realms of work undertaken are useful for empowering your own involvement in the Nilgiris. These may be useful criteria for judging whether or not to take up such consultancy assignments.

One major area of concern, particularly after setting up the Keystone Centre, will be the question of meeting establishment costs. The audit reports reveal that the expenses under the head "administrative expenses" increased from Rs, 67,000 in 1994/95 to Rs 443,000 in 1998/99 accounting for between 15 and 20 percent of the income applicable. By NGO standards this is fair. However, the amount is large and will increase rapidly in the future. While there are innovative book keeping methods to lower these figures, there will be no way to reduce the actual expenses on keeping the establishment and administration going. At the minimum, becoming self-sufficient on these two heads can be the first target to achieve

11. EXPECTATIONS ABOUT AID PARTNERS

Keystone's main aid partner has been the Swallows, Sweden. This has been a long and time tested partnership. No ceasing of contract or divorce is envisaged! As with good partnership, both partners have changed in the course of the relationship as a result of greater understanding of each other's strengths, weaknesses, hopes, fears, aspirations. Keeping up this quality of relationship is the most important dimension of the relationship. The quantum and flow of funds (its increase or decrease) is secondary but certainly related.

Again, as with good partnerships, it is not just the happiness of the partners alone that matter. The larger network of contacts with people which the two partners bring together in their relationship is paramount. This is for the simple reason that partnerships cannot thrive for long in a social vacuum. This is all the more true in a development partnership. How will Swallows and Keystone link the aspirations and the yearnings of the people of Sweden with the aspirations and yearnings of the tribal communities in the Nilgiris? Money is only one medium. Two-way effective communications, personal contacts, group sharing and caring are also ways to achieving this. In the end, it is the building up of solidarity for the causes that we struggle, which is more important to achieve.

In the chemistry of good partnership there is no role for catalysts that do not change. A dynamic relationship is also a changing relationship. The best is also yet to be achieved.

12. ON REACHING OUT

It is our considered opinion that for a secure future, Keystone should have a more balanced, planned and integrated policy for "reaching out" to the various constituents in society. In the first five years of involvement this was certainly not possible and probably not needed. This can no more be the case hitherto. We propose here a three-pronged approach to reach out to three important constituents in society. This consists of (1) the

academia and policy makers (2) the state and civil society institutions and (3) the people. This approach will ensure a balanced advance into the future.

12.1 To Academia and Policy Makers

The project reports undertaken by Keystone (See Appendix D) reveal the passion and the depth of knowledge and understanding, which the team have of the subjects concerned. Many of these are pre-action studies. They provide an analysis of the macro context while showing a keen appreciation for the micro reality. This is a rare combination in the world of social action organisations. These studies also reveal the seriousness of purpose, the willingness to explore the unknown before acting upon it. They also demonstrate the honesty and humility of realising that their action initiatives can only touch the fringe of the larger canvass of issues raised in these reports. Readers of these reports become well informed of the subject matter under discussion. The writing style, the use of photographs and drawings, detailed tables and tabular formats, all contribute to the wealth of information presented.

Take the case of the Report "Putting the Last First" which is about the beekeeping and honey gathering in Karnataka submitted to the FAO. When making the clearance for the final payment the FAO writes:

"The Keystone report provides most useful recommendations for follow-up action, which should be considered in FAO's programs for household food security, poverty alleviation, group/cooperative enterprise development, extension in natural resource management, forest management, small scale processing industry, women in development, support to tribal societies depending upon sustainable natural resources management and related policy advice and technical assistance..... For a very limited amount of money Keystone has integrated the lessons learned and it presents various components for a follow up strategy for beekeeping which can be a basis for future FAO action in this field."

The downside of this note of appreciation is the fact that this accumulated knowledge is at the moment in "cold storage" on the shelves of the Keystone office, and almost definitely in the FAO office, waiting for the action proposals to be funded. This is indeed a great pity. The same can also be said about the report on non-timber forest produce and the one on Kota pottery.

As a strategy of informing and influencing the academia and policy makers, the essence of every report should reach the public domain. Every report should produce at least one popular article and one academic paper. The former can be published in popular environment and development magazines and the latter in professional or sector-specific journals. This approach will establish the credibility of Keystone and the team members in the relevant policy and academic circles. This is a face of the work that needs to be pursued in the future as part of the strategy of reaching out. The scope of getting mileage from the reports of the last five years is indeed still immense. The time and effort required for this must be seen as an investment. It will yield dividends in expected (e.g. recognition in the academic circles) and unexpected ways (e.g. contacts and friendships from like-minded persons).

There are also some additional comments on some dimensions of the documentation, which need to be borne in mind for the future.

Firstly, it is very important to situate the subject of documentation in the overall context of the larger economy. For example, what is the contribution of the Nilgiris in the overall honey production in Tamilnadu/India? What share of the *apis dorsata* honey comes from Nilgiris? What is the rough average contribution of each of the 560+ honey hunters?

Placing such information in the public domain helps to highlight the contribution of the tribal community to the economy. The government always talks about what it allots for the tribals but ignores the contributions, which the tribal communities make to society at large. For example, in Tamilnadu, what is the ratio of the first sale (or wholesale) value of non-timber forest produce to the total special funds for Schedule Tribes development earmarked in the central and state budgets in any given year?

Secondly, collect and analyse more data on the demographic, educational and occupational profile of the population today and project these into alternative scenarios for the future: 2010 and 2020. As a start, take the villages where Keystone works and enumerate on a family to family basis. Use the services of persons from the community to do this. Collect the details of sex, age, children ever born, record of sex-wise infant mortality, literacy levels, whether children are school going or dropouts; major and minor employment with the time spent on each in the last season/year etc. Such data, properly analysed by competent researchers, will provide the basis for understanding the crucial demographic and socio-economic dynamics of the community. It can also be a starting point for discussions with the community about their own emerging future and how they can plan strategies to relate to it and intervene to change its course if necessary.

12.2 To the State and Civil Society

The Tamilnadu Forest Department is the main agency of the government with which Keystone interacts. They have over the years been able to maintain a cordial relationship with the top officers of the department at the state level and the district levels. In fact this contact has been a major factor in creating the level of credibility which is enjoyed by the Keystone team in the eyes of the senior bureaucracy and a certain "respect" in the eyes of the officials at the taluk and village levels.

As regards this relationship, there is a need to reach out from the realm of individual relationships to a more institutional level on a step by step basis. This must be done without compromising Keystone's identity as a social action organisation involved in the support of tribal communities and forest eco-system development. Keystone should play the role for facilitating more interaction between the Forest Department and the tribal communities or tribal occupational groups. One useful way for making a beginning for this would be to plan for a major conference keeping the Nilgiri eco-system and the tribal communities as the focus. Something like "Forest Foraging and Tribal Futures" or "Nilgiri Mountain Eco-System: Planning a Sustainable Future for Resources and Communities" could be the basis for such an event. The unique feature of such a meet may be the involved and properly structured participation of the tribal occupational groupings cutting across narrow village/political affiliation. The participation of forestry

scientists and other academicians involved in research on forest people should be envisaged. The role of the mountain industry associations (e.g. UPASI) must be considered. The foundation of such a meet can be four papers on the selected theme; one by Keystone; one by the Forest Department; one from an academic or research institution; and one by the tribal communities. This last paper should be prepared with the creative involvement of Keystone. It could be a case study of one of the village communities where you work. Based on discussions with the people, this paper can first highlight the present context and the problems. It can then provide some thoughts on how they think the future will emerge, given the demographic, educational and likely occupational profiles.

It will be useful to plan to hold such an event in late 2000 before the senior persons in the forest department with which Keystone has close contact retire from service. Cementing this institutional relationship, while retaining a separate identity is an essential strategy for the future.

One must hasten to add that it will be naïve to imagine that such events will transform state organisations into people-oriented structures. Far from it. The over hundred-year history of the forest department provides no solace on this count. The level of corruption and intrigue that has set into this structure is monumental. The aim of this exercise is therefore not really to bring change at the top of the apex of this hierarchical organisation. The challenge is to initiate steps to create the socio-political dynamics which will create pressure at its base – the level at which forest people, forest resources and forest officials interact directly. There is much written about this in the subaltern history of this country. Some of it has led to violent conflict and some to constructive rebuilding. Moreover, there have also been many examples of concerned, lower-level functionaries of the forest department who have set stirring examples of building new relationships with forest resources and forest people.

Keystone is becoming successful in fashioning “creative irritants” at the village level who will on the one hand “live and let live” and at the same time “compare and question” the nature of the traditional exploitative relationships between community, market and state at the village level. These tendencies are bound to increase in the future. Channelising them towards meaningful change will be a process, which Keystone will not be able to shy away from.

Given the context of the civil society in which Keystone is placed it needs also to play the role of “negotiator-supporter” for redefining tribal identity. In Nilgiri District the role of the tribal community is writ large in the consciousness of civil society. The numerous religious, educational, social service, and the industry associations and organisations have their perceptions about what is good for the present and the future of the tribals. Most often these are one-sided perceptions of “we-know-what-is-good-for-them”. The need for creative dialogue is of utmost importance at this juncture. Providing the appropriate social space for making it happen is a venture which should be on the agenda of Keystone for the near future. The interactions already established with educational institutions, clubs, social service organisation (church groups) and so on should be consciously enlarged and consolidated. It is also of strategic value to relate to networks dealing with labour rights, human rights and indigenous people’s rights in Tamilnadu.

12.3 To the People

Having made three trips from Kotagiri to the villages, one is convinced about the tremendous payoff that has resulted from this kind of personal contact which has been established between Keystone and the tribal communities. However, it is also fairly evident that, in the future, moving to and fro using Kotagiri as a central point cannot effectively achieve the process of "reaching out" to other tribal hamlets. This applies also when viewed from the perspective of the tribal population who (will) relate to Keystone (in the future).

The costs incurred on this account are huge both by the organisation and the tribals. Keystone knows the capital and recurring costs incurred for this. For the tribals too it is substantial. Just a casual enquiry with the tribals who came to deliver honey at the Hive indicates that this cost can be as high as 15 percent of the earning.

Two ways to facilitate reaching out with lower (long-term) costs and greater efficiency are through the setting up of Keystone sub-centres and the provision of cell phones. The former is a "traditional" and acceptable approach and does not require elaboration here. Keystone has also given adequate thought to this and has also made concrete plans for such de-centralised processing and marketing centres. The latter may seem too classy and MNC-like. Given the rapid changes in communication technology, using of cell phones in the context of difficult terrain is both cost and time effective. Reference to the experience of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh on this matter will be instructive. There are software options to restrict the numbers to which outgoing calls can be made from the phones which are located outside the HQ. The regional centres, field workers or village animators can have phones through which they can contact Keystone or one or two other neighbouring sub-centres. This does not restrict the incoming calls. These cell phones can however be accessed freely from any place. They can also be separately monitored and billed. These cell phones can however be accessed freely from any place.

Reaching out is not mere ability to communicate effectively, particularly when one is considering the links with the people with whom and for whom we work. Through the quality of your association and interaction with people you have opened new opportunities, shown new styles of relationship, a perspective of "right" dealings. You value the person and his/her relationships while at the same time emphasising the role of the collectivity. Having initiated this process, and taken it across the difficult first five years, there will be expectations from the people as regards the realms of their lives into which they will want you to reach out and touch. Creating false expectations in this regard will prove futile for the core part of your work. It is therefore very essential that as a team you decide about this matter. Into which realms of the people's lives will you NOT enter? There is need for clear and mutual understanding about this. Achieving this clarity will not be easy. It is not a black and white area. But it will be a matter, which will constantly come up in your future work. It will border on the social, political and cultural realms more than on the economic.

13. ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

There are many issues which Keystone should give serious thought to in the coming years in order to make their work more meaningful and relevant. We feature here some of the more crucial ones which have not been dealt with in the discussions above.

13.1 The "Disappearing" Tribal

"In 50 years there will be no more tribals left," said a senior government officer.

The scenario of the "disappearing" tribal is a matter which has engaged the mind of Keystone. There are only about 25,000 of them (taking all communities) in Nilgiris District today. Some of the tribes, like the Kotas and Todas are more endangered than some of the forest resources. If the tribal vanishes, so will their knowledge, their culture and the resources and artifacts which they labour to produce. Also, what is the future of Keystone without the tribals?

Reflecting on this, one sees two ways by which the tribals will "disappear".

The first envisages a scenario where the tribal youth of today and the next generation take full advantage of all the positive discrimination extended to the scheduled tribes. They get educated, get out of the mountain eco-system milieu and merge into the larger society by various economic, social and cultural means and thereby loose their separateness. This is the bright alternative.

The second scenario envisages a context where the situation of the tribal communities takes a turn for the worse. Despite the huge funds and facilities, the quality of education and other services is low. The transition to other occupations is restricted and the possibility to pursue the traditional ones ruled out for want of skills and traditional knowledge. Most of the present youth and the new generation get marginalised, alienated and loose their socio-cultural moorings. A few lucky ones escape. The vast majority merge into the ocean of anonymity of a reserve army of the proletariat. This is the depressing alternative.

The moot point however is that in both alternatives the result is that the tribals disappear. If they take the first route we can at least be consoled that there is no resulting human tragedy in this choice. But in the latter, we are confronted with misery, alienation, squalor and exploitation.

The history and politics of tribal development schemes in this country leads one to believe that if this state sponsored process of "civilising" the tribal is left to itself, we may be confronted with a scenario of the second type.

Creative social interventions are therefore paramount in this juncture in history. The work and involvement of Keystone must therefore be seen in this light. And yet we need to ask if Keystone's role is only to espouse the realisation of the first alternative against the second?

This brings to the fore the whole discussion of how one can retain the tribal IDENTITY and yet rid it of its depressing socio-physical manifestations of today. Can we think of an educated tribal coming back seasonally to his village to involve in a "modernised" honey hunting both as adventure and as source of collective income? What are the ways by

One issue to be looked into is that of the "missing women" mentioned above. Is the adverse sex ratio in the communities something to be concerned about? To what extent will it determine the future population growth rate and the population dynamics of the tribal communities? Related to this is the structured manner in which it will be possible to create active groupings among the tribal mothers in the villages where Keystone works. Having observed the nature of the interactions between Keystone and the women, this is unlikely to be a difficult proposition. The efforts being undertaken to provide productive employment should be matched with initiatives to foster some conscious discussion groups on issue of vital concern to the future of the community.

The other issue is the education of children, in particular the girl child. What one implies here is not just the formal education. One aspect is certainly the need to improve the quality of that. This will require first an examination of the quality of the educational services being provided for tribals by the state. Why is it that tribal children do not wish to stay at these residential schools? Are the formal facilities and the associative conditions necessary to make schooling a meaningful and fun-filled activity present in these schools? A comparison within the government sector and between the government sector and the facilities provided by religious organisations need to be compared. There is also the issue of the larger awareness of the tribal children concerning both the world outside and their own community and its values. Keystone, as a matter of top priority, must examine innovative ways by which they can provide to tribal children, within the context of their villages, the possibilities to enhance the quality of their knowledge.

KS
- education project?
what is the priority
and how can it be implemented.

13.5 Documenting Traditional Knowledge

Keystone's entry into the tribal communities of the Nilgiris was through the respect and understanding they gave to their knowledge system. One of the important steps to be taken is to continue the good work that has been commenced of documenting this in a variety of ways. The efforts at producing the film on honey hunters and the project on Kota pottery are worthy of mention in this context. What we wish to highlight here is that such sporadic efforts must be replaced by a more systematic, sustained and participative process of investigation of traditional knowledge. This must not only be restricted to the realms of productive activity. Frontiers like the practices adopted for child raising; administering to the sick; means of negotiating with outsiders; resolving of conflicts and other such "soft" behavioural adaptations must be examined.

which we can transfer into the "modern" world the human-nature relationships which "traditional" tribals espouse?

13.2 Community Rights and Collective Action

The prevailing values in the society at large, favour private rights and individual action for attaining personal goals. One of the greatest harms which we have done to the tribal communities in our haste to "develop" them has been the introduction of these values which put individual over community.

In this context it was encouraging to witness and hear about the numerous instances of tribals asserting their community rights and undertaking collective action to achieve a variety of personal and group goals. The examples of regaining lost land, the decisions to jointly clear land to undertake organic farming, setting up a village apiary, reviving the village water supply system and so forth come to mind. What this points to is the fact that the ethic of "community rights" and the advantages of "collective action" are still very central to their way of life. It is very important to keep this intact, and in fact, to consciously protect and build upon this.

13.3 The Missing Women.

The phenomenon of the missing women in the tribal communities is a matter which needs to be looked into. Reading history one finds that W. Francis who wrote the Madras District Gazetteer for Nilgiris in 1908 notes that the reasons for lower number of women in the district as a whole is due to migrant workers coming without their women. However, with regard to the tribal population he notes that there are only 78 women for 100 men among the Todas. Among the Irulas and Kurumbas it was 98 and 90 respectively. For the Badagas and Kotas it is 110 and 120 respectively.

A casual observation at all villages visited revealed that the number of males in both the Irula and Kurumba settlements outnumbered the females. Oral investigations revealed that there is no obvious male preference; no female infanticide; no blatant intra-family food or health care preferences; no dowry; no major water and sanitation issues affecting women's health; no evidence of high maternal mortality. Given this, the fact of lesser females in the community warrants some explanation. This can only be achieved with close observation of both household and collective behaviour to ascertain the dynamics of operation of the prevailing "unnatural" situation..

If the demographic profile has not changed significantly during the last century inspite of all the social, education, economic and health transitions, this is a matter which merits close investigation. The Keystone team is in an ideal position to carry out this work, if necessary with the assistance of experts.

13.4 The Future of Women and Children

The future of the tribal communities in the Nilgiris are in the hands of their women and children. One of the major shortcomings of the work of Keystone has been the male-bias in their activities. Partly to rectify this, but more importantly in recognition of the inevitability of it, a central role needs to be conceived for the women and children in the future work of Keystone.

Keystone has looked at tribals, as they perceive themselves. A closer look at all hunter gatherer communities, will reveal the significance of the 'family' as a unit. I think it is best to address this identity, rather than put pre-conceived notions of 'male' & 'female'. Women are used in projects → Silk cotton (which you did not see), Bees, seedling, land development work - all have women involved. →

14. CONCLUSIONS

Perspectives about the future of tribal communities in India have been unduly biased by the way tribes have been conceptualised in anthropology and the references in terms of which they have been studied. They have not been seen in their *own right* but always in reference to general Indian society characteristics of caste, peasant status and social differentiation.

It would seem that Jawaharlal Nehru's vision was intuitively more along the lines of wishing to treat the indigenous people of this country in their own right and against the processes at work in their own societies. Given that they have their own language, culture, customs, food habits, territory etc they can be considered as whole societies.

Interestingly, it is the work of many voluntary social action groups around the country that have brought the issue of both the present conditions of tribals and the question of their future identity to the core consciousness of main stream society. In this regard, the short span of five years of Keystone's work in Nilgiris points to both new strategies and new dilemmas of voluntary social action among tribal communities.

APPENDIX A

DETAILED ITINERARY OF THE SIX DAY VISIT TO KEYSTONE KOTAGIRI

Saturday 5 June 1999 (World Environment Day)

Arrived in Kotagiri from Trivandrum at 1.30 pm

1. Met the three team members – Pratim Roy, Snehlata Nath and Mathew John—and explained to them the participative approach to be taken for the assessment of their present work and their future plans.
2. As a first step got details of their personal history and motivation for joining together to commence the eco-development work called KEYSTONE
3. Joined the team, other staff and their family members to plant trees in the new land purchased for the KEYSTONE centre. This was their way of celebrating World Environment Day.
4. Met with the filmmakers who had come to finalise the film on the Honeyhunters of the Blue Mountains
5. Continued with personal histories

Sunday 6 June 1999

1. Continued with personal histories (till noon)

(Break for the day)

Monday 7 June 1999

1. Observe the Team having their weekly assessment and planning meet
2. Visit the Hive (Tribal Products Processing Centre). Observe the tribals bringing their products to the office.
3. Hold informal chats with the tribals about honey availability, market prices, reasons for bringing honey to the Hive. The advantages/disadvantages of the same.
4. Discussions with Robert Leo. Personal history and discussions about the nature of present work and thoughts about the future
5. Revisit to Keelcoupe Village after a gap of two years. Accompanied by Pratim, Sneh and Leo
6. Visit the newly set up apiary. Discussions with the village volunteer Chandran. Observe the process of bee wax candle making by women from the village. Discussions with the women.

Tuesday 8 June 1999

1. Visit to Semmanarai, the big village, with Pratim and Leo
2. Met with Ramaswamy, Village Headman and hold discussions about bee keeping and his proposal for planting his land with new crops.
3. Visit to the NAWA Balwadi and community centre
4. Visit beekeeper Raman's new house for which he had asked for financial assistance. Observe the process of Leo assessing with him the real amount of money he needs.
5. Discussions with Devi, a Kuramba women regarding their new cropping patterns and the reasons for not sending children to school.
6. Walk through the forest to reach the new patch of 34 acres of land cleared by 10 Irulas with assistance from Keystone for planting traditional varieties of crops for self-consumption. Discussions with them about motivations, the nature of assistance received and their assessment of Keystone and its activities and how they differ from services rendered by other NGOs and government.
7. Picnic lunch in the forest
8. Visit Irufa Burial Site in the forest

Kulumba

9. Return to Keystone, Kotagiri. Go through Audit Reports 1993-94 to 1998-99 and Minutes Book of the Board of Trustees. Examine the Trust Deed.
10. Read project reports produced by Keystone Team and other assessments of projects undertaken by external persons on various aspects of the work.

Wednesday 9 June 1999

1. Visit Banglapadi village where Keystone gets involved following repeated requests from the tribals to assist in land development and traditional crop planting. Accompanied by Mathew, Sneh, and Leo.
2. Discussions with the informal village leader Nanjan and the 20 persons about how and why they decided to contact Keystone for assistance. Talked about children's education and other aspects about their present life and future expectations.
3. Walked through the 80 acres of land that they have acquired following legal action.
4. Observe the crops planted and have animated discussions with members on crop choices, use of pesticides, chemical fertilisers.
5. Witness the questioning of the "fairness" of leader Nanjan by one of the tribals
6. Return to Keystone, Kotagiri. Discussions with Team members about their plans for the future with particular reference to the new Keystone Centre.

Thursday 10 June 1999

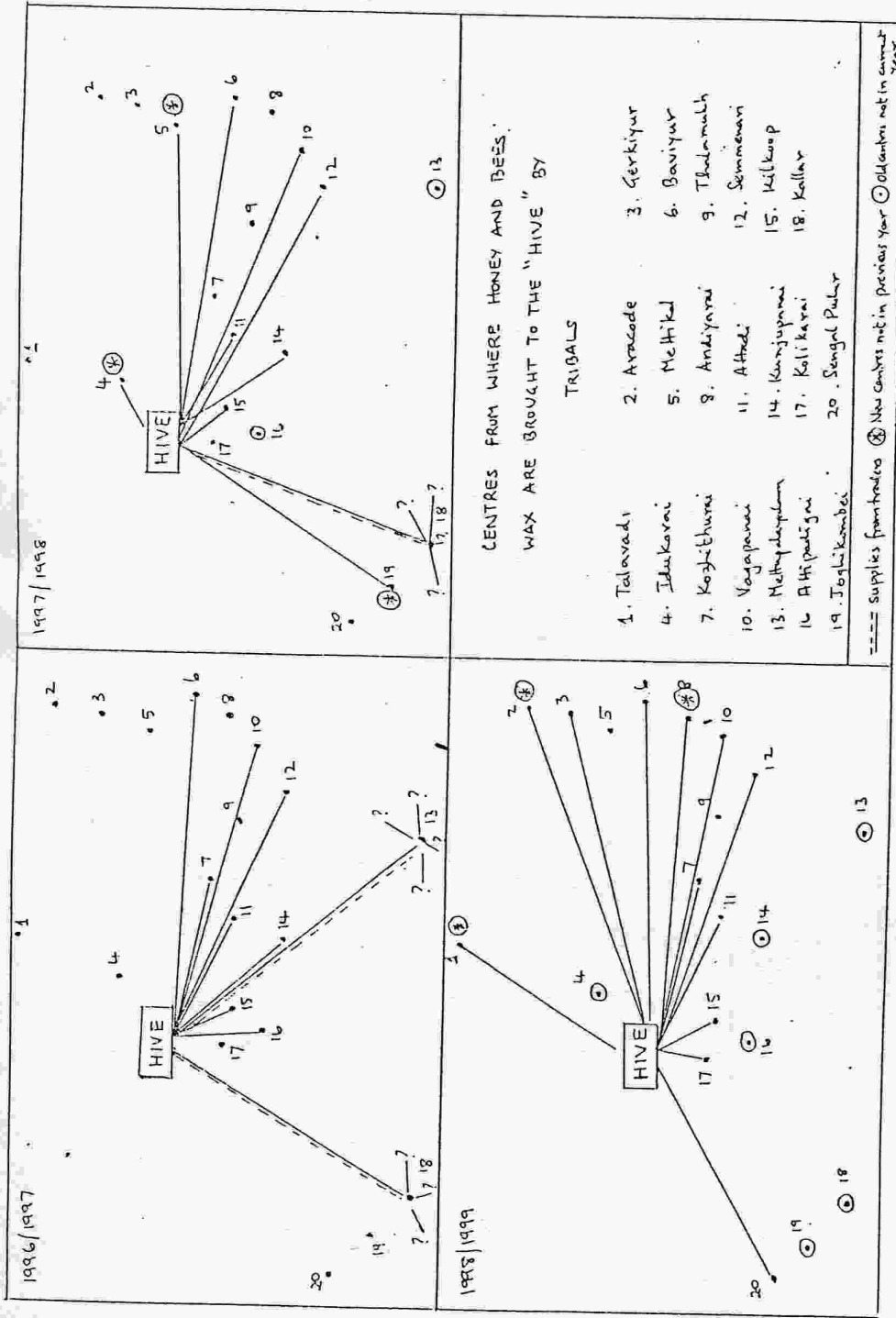
1. Discussions with Justin, beekeeper from Kanyakumari district, newly recruited as field staff who is to help with the bee-keeping project.
2. Visit to Kunjapanai to meet Ramesh Yesuthasan, long time friend and ^{extended team member} ~~informal advisor~~ of Keystone for discussions about his views about the future plans of Keystone.
3. Return to Keystone Centre and visit the land of the proposed new centre for better visual understanding of the building plans.
4. Discussions with Leo on how he sees the future of Keystone Centre.
5. Discussion with Ashok Millar, Marketing Project Assistant who is a local from Kotagiri regarding his job, the opinion that the locals have about Keystone and his views on the future.
6. Discussions with Rev. Mulley, Keystone Advisor, regarding my assessment, his responses to this and his own views about the future.

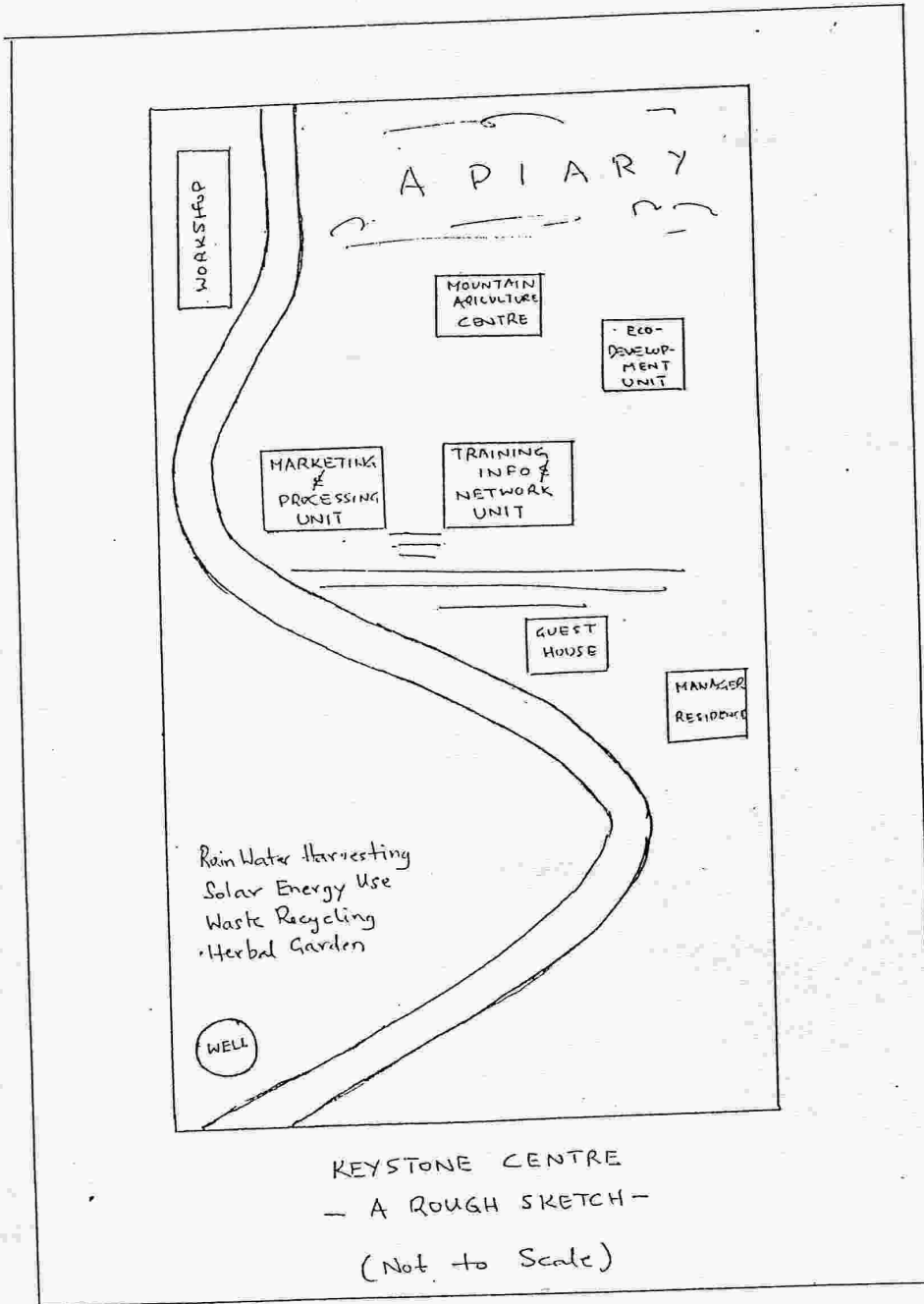
Friday 11 June 1999

1. Feedback to the Keystone Team regarding impressions about the visit and the areas where efforts need to be made for the future.
2. Discussions about the modalities regarding the assessment report.

Leave Kotagiri for Trivandrum at 1.30 pm.

APPENDIX B





APPENDIX D

LIST OF DOCUMENTS AND REPORTS PREPARED BY KEYSTONE

1. The tree fall gap
2. Honey hunters and beekeepers of Tamilnadu
3. Biodiversity conservation through income generation – a gathering strategy
4. Putting the last first: beekeeping and honey gathering industry in Karnataka
5. The local and national significance of income from honey hunting
6. Entering the new millennium: 5 year perspective plan
7. Beekeeping extension methods and mechanisms
8. Land use changes in the Nilgiris
9. Keystone marketing report

LIST OF REPORTS PREPARED BY OTHERS

1. Enterprise development: future strategies for Keystone
2. Feasibility of setting up micro-enterprises based on five non-timber forest products
3. Kota pottery