STRENGTHENING LIVELIHOODS

Exploring the Role of Beekeeping in Development

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Bees *for* Development

PRATIM ROY, INDIA

WORKING WITH INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES IN THE NILGIRIS OF SOUTHERN INDIA

The Keystone Foundation is an NGO working in natural resource management and development projects in the Nilgiri Hills of southern India in the State of Tamil Nadu.[1] This mountain area lies within the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve – a unique, biodiversity-rich zone and home to several indigenous mountain tribal communities: *Badagas*, *Irulas*, *Kasavas*, *Katunaickens*, *Kotas*, *Kurumbas*, *Panniyas* and *Todas*. The area borders the States of Karnataka and Kerala and is located in the Western Ghats.

Part of the work carried out by The Keystone Foundation is with honey hunters and beekeepers from tribal communities. After conducting studies in the area, The Foundation decided to start with projects on beekeeping and honey hunting as an entry point into mountain development processes. This Chapter provides a brief description of honey hunters and honey hunting in the Nilgiris and then explains the development approach of The Keystone Foundation when working with these people.

Honey hunting and beekeeping in the Nilgiris[2]

Honey hunters and beekeepers are from tribal communities known as the *Kurumbas*, who live in bamboo and clay homes distributed through forest valleys of the Nilgiris. A part of *Kurumbas'* livelihoods depends on the seasonal hunting of honey and beeswax from honeybees. In addition, they collect many forest products, both for their own use in housing, tools and for food, and for sale where they are paid only collection charges and not part of the value of the final product. The *Kurumbas* grow millet and vegetable crops, although increasingly they buy their staple food. They also work as labourers in tea and coffee estates in the Nilgiris, or find waged labour further afield in towns on the plains.

Honey hunting is a declining skill and it is estimated that it has dropped by 40% in recent years, even though it contributes 70% of the honey produced in India. The following account describes how honey hunters collect honey from *Apis dorsata*, the giant rock bee. The Keystone Foundation has been working with men like these to improve techniques of honey extraction and to assist them to get a better price for their products.

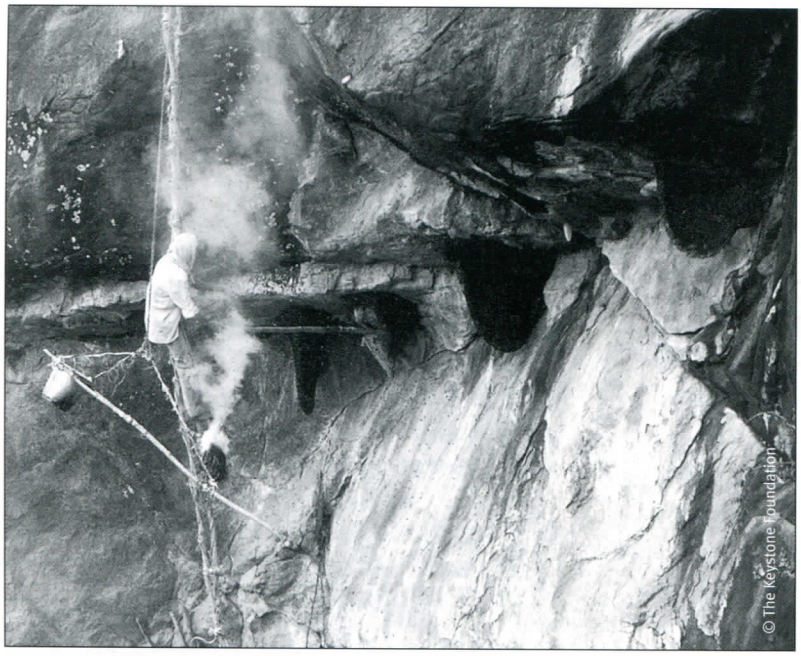
One man's story: the honey hunting season

Visu is a man who left his village in the Nilgiri Hills for a wage-earning job on the plains. He left several years ago but each April, as the yearly honey hunting season approaches, he returns to honey hunt on the Nilgiri cliffs. He honey hunts with men from his family, so his return to the village helps to reaffirm the household bond. Visu's honey hunting group, like other groups, consists of 4-8 family members. His family know that they can trust one another in the dangerous task of collecting the honey.

The honey hunters specialise in collecting the honey of *Apis dorsata*, that live in colonies that build their combs from overhanging cliff outcrops in the Nilgiri Hills. In May, the peak blooming time for *Acacia* species, the honey is ripe for harvesting. At the start of the monsoon in June, *Apis dorsata* migrate to the lower regions. *Apis dorsata* and other species of bees living in the Nilgiri Hills are crucial pollinators within the mountain ecology.

The cliffs where *Apis dorsata* form colonies can be as much as 90 m high, with the combs built from over-hanging rocks halfway down. Therefore to get the honey, honey hunters have to climb down a rope suspended over the cliff; an extremely dangerous task, especially once the honey hunter has disturbed the bees. Different cliffs and honeybee colonies are the territory of different *Kurumba* clans who only honey hunt from the cliffs from which it is their right.

1. I am grateful to Nicola Bradbear and Helen Jackson – the two-woman army of B*f*D for making a bold beginning into the question of sustainable livelihoods and beekeeping development. B*f*D is a partner organisation of The Keystone Foundation and it has enabled us to contribute to this volume.
2. This information can be found on video and CD Rom: *Honey hunters of the Blue Mountains*, a film by Riverbank Studios, New Delhi & The Keystone Foundation. (For details: keystone.ktg@vsnl.com UK Supplier: info@beesfordevelopment.org).



Honey hunters harvest honeycombs from cliffs in the Nilgiris

Some cliffs are worshipped as honey rocks and the bee colonies remain undisturbed.

When Visu arrives in the village for the honey hunting season, the first task is to go into the forest to collect a particular species of vine, which is flexible and can be woven into rope ladders. After they have collected the vine, the honey hunters walk along several miles of steep tracks to the cliffs. Upon reaching the cliffs, a priest performs a ritual and the men bow to spirits that protect the bees and beseech the rock bees to give up their combs. They also pray to the forest gods, asking them to keep the *Kurumba* honey hunters safe. The men themselves will be mystically protected and although the task of collecting the honey is very dangerous it is said that "you only fall when your time has come" so they are not afraid.

After rituals have been performed, Visu will climb down the rope ladder from the top of the cliff. The person manning the rope is traditionally the rope-climber's brother-in-law because it is said that he will take extra care so his sister is not made a widow. Visu's other relatives make a fire at the bottom of the cliff so the smoke will rise up to the bee colony. The climb leaves Visu hanging in open space with his hands and feet bare; he remains unperturbed as clouds of bees fly around him.

Once Visu has reached the honeycomb, a smouldering bundle of vegetation is lowered to him so he can use it to calm the bees. He then reaches out with a long cutting stick to cut away the brood-comb leaving comb with ripe honey. Visu collects the honey as it pours from the comb by using a vine container tied to a long stick. In the past, honey hunters would line the containers with leaves but now they use a sheet of plastic. The yield can be 7-9 litres of honey. Not all the honey on the cliffs is harvested because some of the colonies are left intact. When Visu and his relatives return to the village with the harvested honeycomb there will be celebrations with songs and music to celebrate the successful harvest.

From this account, we can see that honey hunting is a highly skilled livelihood activity, which is combined with other activities. It is a very localised way of obtaining honey that is declining, although as we have seen in the case of Visu, honey hunting has an important draw for some men, who see it as part of their identity and manage to combine it with waged labour in other parts of the region. We can also see how honey hunting is not simply an economic activity but is part of *Kurumba* cultural practices with important ritual dimensions; it is a very clear example of how a livelihood is not simply about material things.

In the past, honey hunters would barter and sell the honey in dirty bottles at the roadside for a pittance. Pollen would be mixed into this honey. They would also disregard the brood comb and comb from which honey had been extracted. Today, The Keystone Foundation is working with honey hunters like Visu and beekeepers to improve the quality of their produce and to enable them to sell it for a better price. The next section describes how The Keystone Foundation started to work with beekeepers and honey hunters, and the way it has identified problems and is generating solutions together with the people themselves.

Problems facing honey hunters and beekeepers

The Keystone Foundation undertook a survey in 1994 to understand tribal development issues in the Tamil Nadu hill areas. It contacted honey hunters and beekeepers living in the 15 hill ranges (11 distinct tribal communities) of the State. Discussion took place on methods of beekeeping, honey hunting, marketing of hive products, and the cultural practices and rituals attached to this activity were explored for the first time.

The survey found that some of the issues people face are:

- Non-recognition by the State of honey hunters as a community, for example, as compared to the identities of artisans such as weavers, fisher folk and potters. They are still part of an unrecognised group contributing to at least 70% of the total honey production in India.
- Poor pricing of honey compared with the extensive amount harvested during the seasons through a well-developed appropriate technology and complex social-cultural gathering.
- High incidence of exploitation due to the informal and invisible nature of the activity.
- No development in the technology of honey extraction and processing of honey and beeswax.
- Individual honey hunter groups spread across a large region with little networking and exchange.

The Keystone Foundation approach

The process of finding a niche for interventions and carrying out rural development work in India is diverse. Each approach has a definite destination. At Keystone, we have tried to mix and match the big and the small picture. For forest-people and marginal hill communities, principal areas for intervention include income-generation, better markets and technology. Introducing flexibility into the design and implementation of the study has been a key approach to working with these communities.

The Keystone Foundation started work in 1994 with a four-person team. Today there is a staff team of 18 consisting of local people and professionals in the fields of rural management, economics, social studies, rural development studies, ecology and extension. The survey conducted in 1994 led us to zoom in on Kotagiri – part of Nilgiri District in Tamil Nadu – and set up a field station. This has included building basic infrastructure, attracting project personnel, training and capacity building, communications and networking, generating field research studies, liaising with Government and other local institutions, and getting to know the villagers and their habitats.

We decided to start with projects on beekeeping and honey hunting as an entry point into mountain development processes. This led to action-research on appropriate technology, documentation of honey hunting, and exploring market possibilities for produce, and to the establishment of a marketing enterprise for honey and beeswax, with gradual diversification into tribal homestead produce.

In addition to this marketing enterprise, a package of interventions was designed for selected mountain communities within hill watersheds. This included consideration of how each project activity is connected to the other, problem identification and understanding the complexity of natural resource management issues in mountain systems.

From these steps we can see that bees, honey and forest gatherers open up a new area for intervention processes, which included non-timber forest products (NTFP), traditional agriculture revival, enterprise (through a commercial bank loan), and basic needs (drinking water and shelter).

Indicators of success

- We now have a vibrant enterprise in place with the opening of green shops in two towns (Coonoor and Kotagiri) within the District: selling products and providing information about indigenous mountain people, the issues they face, and the importance of linking activities for an appropriate livelihoods strategy.

- Successful repayment of a loan taken from a development bank paid out of profits made in the enterprise. Surplus profits have been ploughed back into repurchasing finished goods from tribal farmers and put aside for small initiatives, for example repair of a workshop, hive tools, tiling houses, a small revolving fund for agriculture and provision of an improved coffee huller.
- A network of honey hunters and beekeepers within the District (800 families): regular exchange of information, prices and technologies.
- A set of grassroots projects implemented in ten tribal villages as a model for other similar areas.

Limitations encountered

- Institutional arrangement is still a limitation, including capacity to scale up activities and to deal with a group within a village rather than individuals.
- Capacity for training on production systems (beeswax products, coffee, pepper, organic tea) and quality control is an issue.
- Relationships with other traders and businesses in the same field have not been formalised: they could in the future perceive The Keystone Foundation as a threat if our business grows.

Thoughts about a sustainable livelihoods approach

The Keystone Foundation does not implement a sustainable livelihoods approach, but reflecting on our experiences we would suggest that the concept of sustainable livelihoods needs to be well implemented on the ground for the target group to perceive the host of options and interactions possible. Excluding any one way, or a critical link, could jeopardise the entire programme. Attention to the human, social, natural, physical and financial capital in the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (see Chapter 2, Bradbear; Chapter 13, Seeley) needs to be dynamic and part of an overlapping and linked process: it has to be a high recall agent amongst the communities with whom we engage. In the example of Keystone, bees and beekeeping have led us into NTFP, land development and water issues, with each activity linking forward and backward in the project.

The dimension of time is an important consideration. Any tool or methodology to unravel the process quickly yields limited results. For sustained long-term action and to develop a project on livelihoods, it is important to understand the basics of existing livelihood strategies. From our experience of projects on natural resource management with rural, marginal and remote communities, it is evident that apparently small activities such as beekeeping are a binding agent for a gamut of development processes. This calls for a renewed look at development at the grassroots level: where the small lens leads to the big picture.

Conclusion

Bees and beekeeping ought to move away from a focus on technology and specialisation into the mainstream of development initiatives. As we have learned at Keystone, the potential is immense. Bees, honey hunting and beekeeping have enabled us to get into a diverse range of activities in an interesting and relevant manner. Keeping the people-centred approach with apiculture as the hub has resulted in diversification of Keystone's activities. Awareness, training and documentation of each facet of the Project have helped us to design better and engage at a local yet widespread manner in the development sector. In summary in the case of Keystone, the small picture of beekeeping development has linked to the larger issues of mountain natural resources and development of indigenous communities.