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# Honey, it's up there

TAKE OFF

AMRITA TALWAR spends a day with the Kurumbas, an ancient honey-hunting tribe of Tamil Nadu. And gathers sweet memories



Kurumbas never touch this hive, it's sacred



*When you go in search of honey, you must expect to be stung by bees and you will fall only if your time has come. So goes a Kurumba belief.*

*They (Kurumbas) are quite secluded from the rest of mankind, dwelling in holes and caverns in the sides of mountains, deriving a precarious and wretched subsistence from some ill-cultivated spots near their dens, from the animals which they may catch and destroy, and from presents received from the Todas and Bogadas for assisting in their ceremonies. And the practice of sorcery and witchcraft. The unexpected sight of a Kurumba is enough to strike dread among women and children. Upon the appearance of a Kurumba, they scurry into their houses!*

—Nilgiri Gazetteer, 1830

**T**he little observations made by the Nilgiri Gazetteer in 1830 were sensational but inadequate to define the honey-hunting tribe that has remained an enigma to this day. Kurumbas were the first Nilgiri community to become known to scholars, yet the last to be studied at close quarters. It was quite by chance that I got curious about them. A friend from Coonoor got me this honey for a sweet-toothed diabetic we both knew. The results were remarkable enough for me to wonder if the ancient people knew to work miracles with their hands. Were they as sweet and gentle?

Research didn't help much.

Some accounts said the word Kurumba means "a doer of mischief," supposedly a reflection of their practice of sorcery and witchcraft. A travesty of sorts for a tribe which has been climbing difficult cliffs for centuries, testing guts and wits with *Apris Dorsata*, the dangerous rock bees, for the purest honey.

And so it was on a sunny February morning (honey hunting begins this season) that we set out to hunt the truth through a mist of legends. "Welcome to the land of blue mountains," read the big signboard as the car completed its corkscrew ascent from the hot and crowded Coimbatore into the delicious eucalyptus-scented coolness and quietness of what Alfred



Tennyson fondly described as "the sweet half, English Neilgherry air."

After an arduous 10-hour journey, we reached Semanarai, a small hamlet of seven Kurumba families. Our motley crew consisted of my interpreter Sushila, a modern Kurumba girl, her sister Saraswati and Belluma, who had come all the way up here to master the skills of bee-keeping. We were greeted by "Mummy," a village godmother of sorts. Nobody, even her children Rangaswamy and Mani, knew her real name. So she had become the universal mother.

We were to stay at Keystone's resource centre, an NGO helping the ancient community market their honey and devise alternative means of livelihood. But I chose to stay with mummy. An overprotective



Sushila was surprised by my gesture and nudged me to think twice but later surrendered to my whim. Education had changed her perspective about an urbanite's need for comfort. However, I was willing to experiment.

The Kurumbas live mostly on the glens, at 600 to 1,200 ft. Their settlements are led by a *maniagara*, a village headman, *bandari*, his assistant, *talevaru*, a deputy head

and *kurudale*, his assistant. Tribal hierarchy and rules are sacrosanct, nobody dare cross the line. Kurumbas are quite content with their insular order, a keystone of their purity. But they are not closed. They are adaptive, absorbing as much of modernity as is required for survival.

Their reclusive behaviour is not much different from a British forest officer's account in 1876. A couple, he wrote, lived in the centre of a dense forest, cultivating a small patch of millet, cut off from neighbouring tribals. That isolation has reduced the Kurumba population to around 5,000.

A European traveller, Father Jacamo Finicio, discovered them first. Sample his journal entry: "There are three sets of people

namely the Todas, Kotas and Kurumbas. The Todas are the pastoralists, the Kotas musicians, artisans and cultivators. The Kurumbas, on the jungle edge of the plateau, are gatherers and hunters. The Bagadas, the agriculturists, came much later."

The British discovered the plateau in the 1820s. In summer, the Chennai presidency would shift to the Nilgiris. An important military base came up as did an extensive plantation. The Kurumbas, in their remote hutments, were little affected by it. Near, yet so far...

Pristine myths were completely shattered when I heard a Kurumba boy shout "Mallika Sherawat" as a local radio station played *Bheeg Hont Tere* from the film *Murder*. Lucky. The chief wasn't around to see one of his herd drift away. Or else, the boy's cries got drowned in the beehive of activity nearby. Everybody was preparing for the big night of the honey hunt.

Raju, who has been part of this ritual for the last 20 years, was weaving a ladder out of *biscuty* rope. Nephews Mani and Rangaswamy counted the number of steps.

Raju's hands were bleeding, but he swiftly knotted up the ladder for what would be a swinging ropetrick. The men make the ladder, locally called *biscuty*, out of sturdy jungle vines. Sushila said the pain and bruises of the hunters were nothing compared to the virtues of the vine, which doesn't catch fire or wear away easily despite the constant friction against the rocks during the climb to the hive. A *bis-*

*cuty* lasts three seasons.

Understanding this traditional logic made me hungry for more of the ancient wisdom. But as the men kept themselves busy, we decided to respect another Kurumba tradition, eating before the men did. There aren't any gender issues involved, it's better time management; the women can do something fruitful when the men have their meals and rest. We had rice and jackfruit curry, all sizzling fresh on a green banana leaf. The Kurumbas combine rice (*saphar*) with curries of tubers: cabbage and jackfruit are the occasional delicacies.

We entered a hut made of thatch and corrugated iron sheets. The latter the tribals have picked up from the "civilised" world. And just as we were about to excuse the Mallika Sherawat fan as an aberration, we were surprised by an array of WWF posters jostling for wall space alongside calendar pictures of deities. A prayer for strength no doubt to gods of all kinds — hulk, hunk and epic heroes. Just then Sushila laid out colourful mats in an L-shape and asked us to sit down. "It makes good Vaastu sense," she explained, having read my thoughts. And settled the tradition versus modernity debate with, "Kurumbas are not primitive the way you mean it. They are open to widow remarriage, love matches and even extramarital affairs. No stigma is good for a healthy community."

We were woken up by drummers and flute players in the middle of the night. It was time. Honey-hunt-



A helper balances himself on

(L to R) Workers make a *biscuty*, filter the honey and make candles





ing happens in the wee hours of the morning when the bees are less active. Kurumba men set out at night as it is quite a long walk to the jungles. We walked about six kilometres on a path lit up by the stars, passing enormous tea estates that are gradually pushing the fringes of the forest.

We stopped at the edge of the forest where one of the hunters, Mani, squeezed himself into the skirting bushes. We burrowed in after him and began our walk to the cliffs. It had rained the night before making the ground very slippery. The darkness did not help either. The Kurumbas were, however, sure-footed, the route having been imprinted in their genetic memory. As for us urban slob, we kept on slipping without the comfort of a torch. Or crutch. The five-minute walk seemed like eternity. And then the 300 ft cliff zoomed out of the darkness, like a giant breathing down on intruders. The new sun had yet to soften its outer contours.

The men split up. Raju and Rangaswamy would climb the cliff and break the honey combs while Mani and other men would stay as helpers below.

The Kurumba men make sure that no two members of a family make it to the raiders' group. Legend prevents them from making exceptions. Sushila told us the story of the six brothers who deceived their eldest for money. And honey. The elder brother went up a huge cliff laden with honeycombs. He pierced each, the honey dripped down. So sweet

was it that the young men who were collecting it forgot all about bringing their brother down. A greedy, eager lot, they cut his rope and left him stranded in the cliffs. For eternity.

With their numbers dwindling rapidly, it is difficult for the Kurumbas to separate brothers before each expedition. In fact, Rangaswamy and Mani in our team were brothers. "But Mani is only a helper," explained Raju, their uncle. Mani has never climbed cliffs, it gives him the goose bumps. Neither is he allowed to hold onto the *biscuity* while Ranga is up there. Mani is just an expert bee keeper.

Women, howsoever expert, are not allowed up either. The ban follows another legend of how men had cut a woman climber loose out of sheer jealousy. Suddenly, the Kurumbas did not seem too gender-sensitive. "It's just the food-gatherer-protector thing," reasoned Sushila.

Before the climb, the hunters perform an elaborate puja to the Mother Goddess, thanking her for nature's bounty. In the Nilgiris, she is known as Ghummad Devi. Raju began with an offering of fruits, rice and vegetables to her, saluted water, the life-giver and invoked the blessings of Kurupade-Tayi, the protector of Kurumbas. The tribe also believes in the guardian spirit, Munispura, whom they propitiate with a yearly goat sacrifice.

There are around 600 colonies of bees here, each cliff having no less than 50 combs. The Kurumbas harvest haphazardly, leaving some colonies untouched. It keeps their





## THE WITCHHUNT

Part of the legend of the Kurumbas being sorcerers may have something to do with the healing properties of their honey. Or the fact that they are creatures of the night, laying their trap before dawn breaks. All the other tribals in the area get their ailments cured by the Kurumbas.

Their fiercest enemies are the Bagadas, the agriculturists who usurped much of Kurumba land, pushing the honey hunters deeper into the forests. Bagada ballads have one Kurumba villain whose acts bring about a most tragic and inevitable result, the death of a Bagada hero or heroine. A particular favourite of the Bagadas is the ballad *Ko Litippe*, the tragedy of Ali Ma Di, who was walking through the woods alone one night. Ka Ni Kurumba of Hadamoto came out looking for honey and noticed her. He turned himself into a black dog and started following her. When Ali Ma Di saw the beast, she fainted. Then Ka Ni took out her kidney and put grass in its place. The woman died in five days. Bagadas believe

that a person could die in a couple of days if a Kurumba witch implants cactus or stones or last out eight days if stuffed with flowers or grass.

Despite their rivalry, Bagadas have always gotten themselves treated by Kurumbas. And when the treatment has failed, they haven't spared the medicine men. In 1836, no less than 58 Kurumbas were murdered. That toll dwindled between 1875 and 1882. In 1891, Bagadas burnt down an entire Kurumba family because a witch doctor had failed to cure a sick Bagada child. In 1900, the Bagadas massacred a settlement, blaming Kurumbas for an uncontrollable epidemic in their village. Being extrovert, the Bagadas managed to win sympathy of the outside world at the expense of the insular Kurumbas.

Later, the British rule gave the commanding officer of Ootacamund police powers to rule over the hills and protect the lives and property of all inhabitants.

and cover their ears and head with a piece of cloth. You cannot hunt with metal, it's considered a sin.

I could hear Raju and his troops singing in Tamil while ascending the cliff. Sushila translated: "We have waited and searched for a year/Mother Bee do give us your blessings/Your sons and sons-in-law have returned to collect their wives." Wives, in this case, are the bees. The insect is not a lowly cre-



Kurumba village

ation in Kurumba myth, it is a "blooming flower" or a "fine friend." Such pleadings and placatory references are understandable given the fact that a rock bee sting can knock an adult down in seconds. But Kurumbas have never had a mishap. The bees do not harm those who do not harm them.

This faith is what makes the Kurumbas brave a perpendicular 300 ft cliff, climbing steep and dangerous rocks. The Kurumbas win by letting nature be. They apply this restraint to their own lives as well, no hunter trespasses a fellow-hunter's territory.

Rangaswamy and Raju reached the top of the cliff. Rangaswamy prepared for his descent while Raju lowered the *biscuity* and held on to it.

Rangaswamy set fire to some dry leaves, the smoke would drive the bees away. Within seconds, we

greed under control and Kurupade Tayi happy.

Raju and Rangaswamy discarded their traditional *mundu* and slipped into trousers before the climb, another example of modern living that had become handy. The Kurumbas do not have any hunting gear apart from a stick and bucket covered by plastic sheet to collect honey. To avoid stinging bees, they smear their faces with sticky honey

An abandoned beehive



**WHERE TO STAY** The nearest town is Kotagiri in Tamil Nadu. You could stay at state government guest houses or get in touch with Keystone Foundation who are open to receiving guests.

**HOW TO REACH**

**AIR** Coimbatore is the nearest, over 100 km away. **ROAD AND RAIL** Kotagiri is linked by road to other important places in Tamil Nadu. There are regular buses to Ooty, Mettupalayam and Coonoor.

**PLACES TO VISIT AROUND KOTAGIRI**

Coonoor is the second largest hill station in the Nilgiris, surrounded by tea plantations, at an altitude of 1,839 metres. Its climate is milder than Ooty. It is a very popular weekend getaway from Coimbatore. Coonoor is essentially a small tea garden town where the weather remains pleasantly cool throughout the year. It is on the toy-train line between Mettupalayam (28 km) and Ooty. A popular pastime is birdwatching. The main attraction is the Sim's Park, a small well maintained botanical garden that has several varieties of plants. It is about 19 km to the south of Ooty and is accessible by both train and road.

**OOTY** The queen of hill stations is a land of picturesque picnic spots. Used to be a popular summer and weekend getaway for the Britishers during the colonial days. It is situated at an altitude of 2,240 metres above sea level. An added attraction for the tourists to Udagamandalam is the mountain train journey on a ratchet and pinion track which commences from Kallar near Mettupalayam and wends its way through many hair-raising curves and tunnels. It chugs along deep ravines full of vegetation, gurgling streams and tea gardens.

heard an ominous roar as thousands of bees swarmed down the rockface, bunching up into an angry, brown jet. They were so loud and close that I instinctively ducked, hands pressed to my ears, and held my breath. Instead, the rock bees dispersed just as suddenly, clustering around dying embers. I huddled closed to Sushila as Rangaswamy began extracting honey from the hives. With a wooden spatula, he folded a three-foot long segment of wax and held it over his bucket. The golden liquid overflowed with weight and sweetness.

Clasping his legs precariously around the rope, Rangaswamy lowered the honey and the comb fragments to the men waiting below, inch by inch, minute by minute.

After a three-hour haul, he, Raju and the helpers descended from the cliff. Everybody decided to take a hard-earned coffee and jaggery

break. But not before Raju had scooped out a handful of honey and let it blob in three corners of the campsite. "Lucky charm," he told me.

I asked Raju if he had ever been scared. He rattled off an old Kurumba faith: "You fall only when your time has come." Earlier, the Kurumbas would barter the honey away but now with Keystone's intervention, they are making money. It is divided equally among all hunters irrespective of their role in each trip.

Educated Kurumbas like Sushila are clearly making a difference to their traditional means of livelihood, selling their product at superstores. Five years ago, Rangaswamy had given up honey hunting for the more lucrative job of a coolie. But Kurupade Tayi wouldn't have forgiven him. So he's back. Never to stray again.