STING IN THE TALE

BRAVING A SWARM OF ANGRY BEES, TO RESEARCH A SHORT STORY

BY SHARANYA MANIVANNAN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERIC TOURNERET
I was crouching at the entrance of a bear’s cave at the foot of Kakulai Parai (cliff) in the Nilgiris, watching as one man swung precariously on a rope ladder, while another sang to the cliff he was descending. I had been working on a book of stories about love, ambiguity and consequence, and its underpinning motifs of sweetness, wildness, and greed had led me to only one logical conclusion: honey. For months, not knowing what the story I would eventually write would be, I had been conducting research into traditional honey gathering, learning along the way about modern beekeeping, the differences between bee species around the world and how bees keep ecosystems alive. Throughout, I had been conducting research into a 1,000-year-old tradition, to a forest near Queen’s Shola, a beautiful little hill station of Kotagiri, an hour’s downhill drive from Ooty. The organisation works in the fields of biodiversity and indigenous interests. After many emails, in May 2012 they told me that the annual honey gathering season had begun. It was then that I met Chinnasami, an intense-gazed, smiling man on the ladder, and Jadayan, a bearded older man, who appeared a bit prickly, but was earnest and kind. I met them just as I was leaving the organisation after going through their archives, having been told that venturing into the forest was probably not possible. Jadayan and Chinnasami, both of the Irulas, are very typical of those who do a lot of physical work, and with faces made striking by defined cheekbones, were entering just then, carrying a bag of beecloths between them. They hadn’t planned on going gathering, they said, but they would take me.

The next morning I accompanied five Irula tribesmen, honey gatherers of a 1,000-year-old tradition, to a forest near Queen’s Shola. A short bus ride from Kotagiri. We walked through a village step-cut into the hill, then through a plantation vivid with tea leaves, and finally arrived at the border of the forest. The group also consisted of three very young men, C. Murugan, J. Murugan, and R. Krishnan, the last of whom I suspect was brought along mainly to look after me. Jadayan and Chinnasami would collect the honey. In Irula, the honey is called “belaijhen,” or “big honey.” In Tamil, it is simply “muthulithen,” or “mountain honey.” Off-season, the Irulas sell vegetables and take on contractual labor as laborers. But honey has profound cultural meaning for them, and those who have been raised in the trade return to it annually.

Every expedition to Kakulai Parai begins with prayers here. A small rock-shaped like an irregular triangle was anointed with ash. Incense sticks and bananas were placed before it. An erott was offered. Jadayan sang and chanted. And then we could begin.

Reconnaissance missions are conducted separately from honey gathering ones, and Chinnasami had already identified three hives on Kakulai Parai some days earlier. Jadayan squatted near the brook and began to dig the earth with his hands. Clear water, cold and sweet, was revived.

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After finishing lunch, the tools for the task at hand were assembled from scratch: a ladder; a wooden spear to dislodge the hives from the cliff; a contrivance known as a kukketappa, in which the hive is collected. As the contraptions were made, I learnt a little about their lives. In Irula, the honey is called “belaijhen,” or “big honey.” In Tamil, it is simply “muthulithen,” or “mountain honey.” Off-season, the Irulas sell vegetables and take on contractual labor as laborers. But honey has profound cultural meaning for them, and those who have been raised in the trade return to it annually.

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Some wild honey tastes bitter because of the taste of flowers like jamun, from which the bees collect nectar. A honey gatherer and his wife finish weaving a rope ladder. The rope is woven from the flexible biskoti vine that grows abundantly in the forest. Irula culture is replete with rituals. The honey gatherers pray to this ceremonial stone at the entrance to the jungle, seeking the permission and protection of the forest spirits. Long coils of rope and containers for the honey are carried into the forest. As the honey gatherer descends, the panthai is lowered by his side, ready to be lit to smoke out the bees. Honey gatherers empty the kukketappa, the metal box in which the honey is collected. Chunks of the comb are squeezed by hand to gather the honey. The honey is then filtered to remove dust and impurities. Irula women do not participate in the honey gathering, but are involved in other aspects, including ceremonial singing, packing, and selling the honey.
Cross-legged below the hives, Jadayan began shouting and singing prayers to the bees so they would return the following year to continue the cycle. He also prayed to the hive, to the cliff, to the god of the forest who is the forest itself. He had a pile of grass by his side, ready to be set ablaze. Chinnasami began to lower himself over the ledge of the cliff. When he had reached a comfortable position, the panthai was sent down, swinging close to the hives and releasing plumes of smoke.

Immediately, a great dark torrent appeared, buzzing furiously. "They're coming!" Krishnan shouted, and struck a match to the leaves we had collected. In a matter of seconds, they were all around us, a cloud of thousands of angry, intoxicated bees. Smoke debilitates their senses, but they are still capable of stinging—a final act of honour, for they die when they do. The adrenaline of the moment was unmistakable, the pure excitement that comes from risk sending a charge through me. Through this confusion of smoke and bees, I could see Chinnasami dangling on a ladder of vines, prodding at each hive with his spear. Graceful as a trapeze artist, he manoeuvred in mid-air, his feet and legs gripping the ladder as his arms stretched out to tease the hive away from the rock. He wore no helmet or protective gear. Nothing lay between him and a fatal fall but willpower, luck, and the grace of the mountain.

The first hive fell to the ground with a thud. The other two were also cautiously prodded away from the rock and securely manoeuvred into the tin box. The storm of bees continued to rage, as did the clouds of smoke we kept sending to abate it.

Chinnasami climbed back to the top of Kakula Parai. The exhausted men trekked back down and we made our way back to the clearing where the instruments had been crafted. The hunt had been successful; it was time to harvest.

The hives were shorn of inedible parts and cut into manageable pieces, then put into pieces of cloth and squeezed by hand. Fresh honey spilled into tins and bottles. Krishnan cut away a piece of fresh honeycomb, wrapped it in a leaf, and gave it to me. I was surprised to find the wild honey bitter. I learnt that this was typical of the region because of the taste of flowers like jamun, from which bees collect nectar. Some honey is always left for the forest itself. The squeezed-out comb was also left behind; drowsy bees would wake in a couple of days and carry on with the cycles of nature.

The following day, I visited Chinnasami’s home in the six-household hamlet of Anil Kaudu to listen to his mother, R. Letchumi, sing traditional songs. I went to the Bee Museum in Ooty to learn more about the insect and its intuitive, intelligent nature. Much later, I even wrote the short story I’d come here to research.

That first bite of the honeycomb had been the most extraordinary taste I experienced during this adventure. It was a complicated, intense flavour to suit a complicated, intense experience. As the men continued to squeeze the combs, I sat in silence on the dry leaves of the forest floor and enjoyed a few moments of wonderment, eating mountain honey as sweet and as bitter as my heart.