

For 26 Years, This Woman Has Been Helping Nilgiris Tribals Stand For Their Rights

Thanks to their consistent efforts, tribal communities today have formed independent groups for producing several natural goods- especially honey and beeswax.

by **Ananya Barua** January 15, 2019, 6:13 pm

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After dedicating 26 years to creating a harmonious balance between nature, humans and technology, social worker Snehlata Nath, still feels that it is just the beginning.

Recipient of the prestigious Jamnalal Bajaj Award for Application of Science and Technology for Rural Development in 2013, she has been extensively working in the field of eco-development, livelihood, and sustainability in rural tribal areas of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve.

The heart of her efforts lies in marrying their indigenous knowledge, culture, and practices with modern technology – achieving sustainable development.



Photo Source: Snehlata Nath/Facebook; Keystone Foundation

Snehlata shares that her motivation to work in the sector was not a sudden realization, but a steady goal which matured over the years as she pursued higher education in Lucknow and Delhi.

“There isn’t a specific incident, but a series of them, which influenced me to work in the development sector. So instead of conventional professions, I chose to join an NGO in Delhi,” she said, speaking to The Better India.

However, after working for several years in the capital, she, along with a group of experts, decided to do more work at the grassroots level.

“We didn’t want to stay in Delhi and operate remotely. So we formed Keystone Foundation in 1993, which would venture in grounded eco-development and rural management.

The Nilgiris was chosen as the focus area due to the abject poverty and remoteness that these tribes face, from the rest of the world,” added the 53-year-old Snehlata.



Source: Facebook/[Keystone Foundation](#)

Their organisation focuses on the core aspects of ecology and economy, which includes developing appropriate technology for the mountains, preserving and enhancing the biodiversity and indigenous communities, forests, their livelihoods, and culture.

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And by doing so, they created the possibility of green enterprises and environmental governance in these remote regions.

Many need-based technologies – that blend the traditional and modern – have been able to ease the problems of the villagers by helping them to produce good quality and value-added agricultural and forests produce, and have also ushered a sense of independent entrepreneurship among them.

“Their knowledge about their natural surroundings, the forests, the land, water is vast and precious which needed a proper direction.

These communities were completely cut-off from the rest of the world, and we wanted to bridge that gap without intruding or harming their lifestyle.

So, in addition to introducing better technology to aid the production of indigenous agricultural and forest produce, we also wanted to promote employment locally and increase opportunity for labour, to stop migration to urban areas,” said Snehlata.

Thanks to their consistent efforts, tribal communities today have formed independent groups for producing several natural goods- especially honey and beeswax.



Source: Facebook/[Keystone Foundation](#)

“At a time when development and growth in India are being projected worldwide, I want to appeal to all to keep the needs of the rural communities in mind. These are communities for whom forests and water is of primary importance, not only for their livelihood but also for their culture, and so it is important to use sensitive development procedures for truly empowering them,” she added.



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National Award for Constructive Work

For contribution in any of or all the development areas of Mahatma Gandhi's Constructive Programmes, to create a self-reliant community in rural India.

The Man - Jinnalal Bajaj was among the stalwarts who gave of himself completely - mind, body and soul - to India's freedom movement. Jinnalalji overreached himself in making words into deeds and in implementing the Constructive Programme of Gandhiji, be it Khadi, Dalit - welfare, women emancipation, ethics in business, or preservation of cattle-wealth through Goseva. So much so that Mahatma Gandhi adopted him as his 'fifth son'.

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For more details contact: Secretary, Jinnalal Bajaj Foundation,
2nd flr., Bajaj Bhawan, Jinnalal Bajaj Marg, 226 Nariman Point, Mumbai-400021 India
Tel: 91-22-22023626 Ext: 241/243/244 Telefax: 91-22-22816604
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