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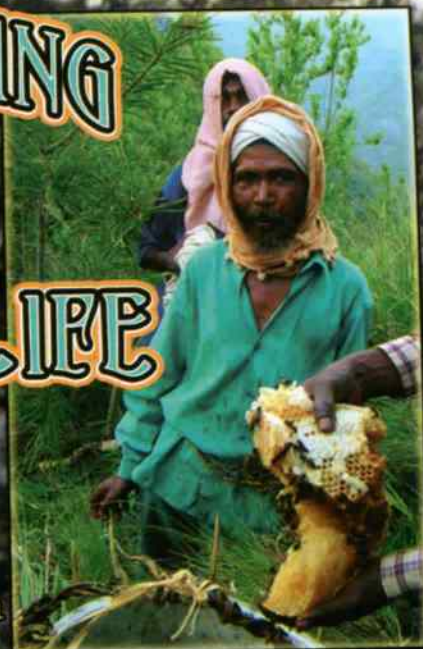


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# HONEY HUNTING IN INDIA AS A WAY OF LIFE

by KATIE KLETT

Photos courtesy of  
The Keystone Foundation



Arriving in Kotagiri, in the southern Indian Peninsula state of Tamil Nadu, is a feast for the eyes. The only way to arrive coming from the East is to come up over a big mountain pass along a winding mountain road that leads in from Ootacamund, the nearest city. As you look out over the panorama, the Western Ghats mountains fill your eyes with lush green forest sholas (high-altitude stunted evergreen forests found in this region), and tea factories spread out on the lower hills. The multi-colored houses and huts around provide a beautiful contrast to the Nilgiri Hills or Blue Mountains as they are known in English. Aside from the tea factories and townspeople in this area, there are four main groups of tribal people living in and depending on the forest for their livelihoods. These four main tribes are known as the Kurumbas, Irulas, Todas, and Kotas. A steady trend of deforestation and an influx of tea estates has rendered much of these peoples' old style of life impossible in today's wage-labor society. Much of the traditional culture and self-reliance of these once independent, private people was beginning to dwindle. That is until an organization called Keystone [www.keystone-foundation.net](http://www.keystone-foundation.net) got involved in an effort to preserve the tribal communities of the region and help these groups of people maintain a sustain-

able life, independent from the laborious low-wage jobs at the tea factories. So what is one of the largest sustainable income generators in the region? Well, honey actually!

Honey hunting is an art that has been practiced by these tribes since their earliest beginnings. The legends of the honey hunters are almost as numerous as the number of Rock Bee colonies (*Apis dorsata*) you can find hanging from cliffs and enormous trees in the remaining old growth forests of these hills. As a child of U.S. bee-keeping, I had my questions and concerns about honey hunting. First of all, what actually happens on a honey hunt? Is this a sustainable way to deal with bees? Why not just get some *Apis mellifera* colonies and keep your bees that way? As it turns out, I had much to learn about the realities of both honey hunting and life in the Nilgiri Hills of India.

So what actually occurs during a honey hunt? That would depend on which tribe you are from actually. Let's take for the purpose of this article the Kurumbas, much respected in the area for their bravery in rock cliff honey hunting. To understand how the hunting of honey works, you first have to understand a bit about the bees they hunt, *malai then* or *Apis dorsata* in English. These bees are some of the largest, most productive, and most aggressive honey bees. The nests of the rock bees

are massive, up to two meters across and one and half meters in height. The nests are wide open, with thousands of bees just hanging from the comb. Sometimes one single nest can produce over 40 lbs. of honey. With this much honey in their comb, the bees need a strong substratum, such a large tree limb, or underneath a rock cliff or building. Some trees or rock escarpments can contain hundreds of nests. The bees are migratory, leaving the hills each year in sync with the coming monsoon, and returning (often to the same nest site) annually. Some of these annual cliff sites are left undisturbed by Kurumba honey hunters, as they are considered sacred cliffs. This policy through the generations has resulted in the protection of many colonies, which in turn has ensured the continuation of cross-pollination and diversity in the forests.

The honey hunting commences when the bees return to the woods for the year, approximately April 15 until June 14. A party of men goes into the woods to find suitable colonies. The judgment about a suitable, mature colony comes from the shape of the comb. A wider, shorter comb often signifies more honey, while a longer, narrower comb usually means less honey and more brood. The hunters don't want these combs until they are plump with honey. They often watch the withering of



**Honey hunters assembled. Each person has an important job vital to the hunt's success.**



**Cliff with numerous *Apis dorsata* combs and bees**

the flowers as well, to be sure the requirement of pollen and nectar has been collected and hopefully capped off.

Once a site has been selected, they will simply leave a sign for other tribes in the area to mark their claim on a particular nest site. Some groups even hide herbs around the site to irritate the bees, and prevent other hunters from being able to hunt there until the herbs are removed.

After finding, marking, and waiting for the combs to be ready, the men perform initial ceremonies and form a hunting group. The sounds of hunting songs being sung by the village women echo behind them as they enter the woods. Before the actual gathering of honey can occur, the men prepare smokers and rope ladders from forest vines. They also make a honey collection basket that they weave from leftover vine material they used to make the ladders. The differ-



**Gathering vines to make the rope ladder**

ent jobs on the hunt of the Kurumbas are taken very seriously, as one slip up on someone's part could result in the death of the hunter. Division of labor includes:

- Those who make the utensils used on the hunt (ladder, etc.)
- Those who start the initial smoker

beneath the nest of the *Dorsata*

- Those who run below with the basket to catch the falling wax and honey
- The ladder holder
- The hunter who actually collects the honey, dangling freely in the air

Once the materials for the hunt have been prepared (the ladders usually take between 2 and 3 days to make), the fresh ladders are moved to the sides of the cliffs. The brave Kurumba hunter climbs over the side with nothing but a spear and smoker. Upon signal, people at the base of the cliff light big smoky fires. The bees go up in a roar, and up near the comb, the hunter begins

to use his smoker as well. The honey basket is lowered by rope to the hunter. His bamboo spear is what cuts the comb; this requires a great deal of skill, as the hunter is still dangling freely in the air. There are thousands of giant bees flying everywhere. With the skill of a professional, the hunter



**Preparing the rope ladder**



**The ladder is made from locally gathered vines and carefully assembled**



**Preparing the basket that will hold honey combs.**



**Extended rope ladder and the perilous trip down the cliff**

cuts just above the brood portion, and the brood falls to the valley floor where his partners are waiting to collect it.

What remains is the honeycomb, now flowing with thick, golden honey. Chunks of falling comb and free honey are collected by the hunter in his basket. This collection process carries on to various nests in the area and can last from a couple of hours to a couple of days. After a donation of a few chunks of comb to the gods for a safe return, the men taste some of their spoils and begin the trip back to their village.

That all sounded fine and dandy to me, but I still wondered, why do things this way? Why not just keep bees like a beekeeper and remain firmly on the ground? The helpful staff members of Keystone explained to me that keeping bees, particularly *mellifera*, which is an exotic species here, is not always as suitable for tribal peoples as one might think. First of all, beekeeping with hives is more resource intensive, ruling out a large number of poor people, or those less knowledgeable



**Preparing smoking material**

about the maintenance of a bee colony. The problem with *mellifera* bees is their monoculture pollination pattern and the concerns over new diseases that come with introducing any exotic species.

A trip to a local village helped me further see why hive beekeeping for these people

might not be preferable over honey hunting. The villagers are still living a subsistence lifestyle, providing for their own needs with the different products and foods they can make, grow, hunt or gather. They were growing coffee as a cash crop, which is very labor intensive. With all this energy expenditure going out for raising food, caring for livestock, picking coffee beans, and producing all their living requirements, while still not turning much of a profit from these activities, it was apparent to me what it would mean for them to take up beekeeping as a large-scale operation. Honey hunting seemed more and more appealing all the time.

So if honey hunting was right for them, what were the problems associated with this activity? Who are the Keystone people and why do they even need to intervene in these practices? I was soon to find out that while the history of Kurumba honey hunting may have gone back hundreds of years, the problem was bringing this socio-economically and culturally important activity to mesh harmoniously with the modern situation in the Nilgiri Hills. One of the problems was a simple lack of new and young Kurumbas to take up the tradition. With the growing number of tea factories and the deforestation of the entire area to suit their growth, many young men have been leav-



**Smoking the colony.**



**Preparing to smoke the bees off the comb**



**Closeup of smoking brush, catch basket and large comb of *Apis dorsata* with many flying bees**



**Not the safest looking position to be in, but it's the life of a honey hunter.**



**Another angle showing the honey hunter at work**

ing the forest to take wage-labor jobs at the tea factories. A loss in cultural significance of honey hunting activity as well meant less tribal community and as a result, fewer and fewer young members taking part.

The Honey Hunters also faced problems in the knowledge of how to properly process and market their honey. They had been skilled for generations in how to harvest the honey, but crude marketing along roadsides where quality was not a factor had severely limited their ability to properly turn a profit from their harvests. A lack of technology was stunting the correct handling of the honey. Middlemen would often come in and exploit the tribes, giving them low returns and keeping huge profit margins.

These factors, combined with an overall lack of proper information regarding what sustainable harvesting means, were keeping the honey hunters from improving their situations. The Keystone Foundation has completed 10 years in the Nilgiris, working with indigenous communities on eco-development initiatives. The measures they have taken to improve the honey hunting that takes place in the area have made astounding improvements to the lives of the local people.

They have intervened in several ways. One intervention involves quality control. They began to show the hunters how to properly process their honey, providing them training and information. Basic information about honey such as the importance of separating brood comb from honey comb, and the temperature of the honey during processing had never been explained before. They showed the people how to check moisture content, and how to use the wax comb they had harvested, which up until then had been thrown out. A standard filtering method was employed and proper storage containers provided so that the honey was every bit as marketable as that of modern beekeepers.

The long-term goal was to make honey hunting a sustainable livelihood. Ensuring that honey hunting is done sustainably is a

large concern, since the Dorsata bees are of the utmost importance to the diversity of the forest sholas. Conservation was stressed as a main theme and local awareness of the forest ecology was raised. Keystone also helped to create a market for the honey of the tribal people, opening fair trade Green Shops and widely distributing information



**Fresh honeycomb, some of which will be consumed and the rest sold.**

about honey. They also provided training about modern beekeeping with another native honey bee species, *Apis cerana*, where possible. Relying on Cerana beekeeping as a secondary source of honey would take some of the pressure off of the wild bees in the forest.

The difference they have made in the lives of these people through honey and bees is clear for any visitor to see. When Keystone first got involved in the area, there were 30 honey hunters. There are now around 250 and many more youngsters are showing interest. The improvement has

been not just in the lives of these unique peoples, but also in the care and awareness that has been developed to ensure this activity will not hurt the forest, one of the top 10 biodiversity hotspots in the world.

When thinking about bees and beekeeping, it is often easy to just think of your own operation and sometimes it feels like there is only one way to work with bees. I have always been skeptical of honey hunting or any beekeeping that deviated from what I believed to be the "right way". This trip brought to my attention the importance of bees to many more lives than just my own and in how many different manners and mediums bees have the power to improve our world.

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