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TODA TRIBAL SETTLEMENT

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NILGIRI BIOSPHERE RESERVE TRIBAL COMMUNITIES: SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOOD OPTIONS

THE NILGIRIS AND ITS INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

Ecologically, the Nilgiris is a very fragile ecosystem. Plantations of tea and coffee have replaced most of its pristine vegetation, and its marshes converted into vegetable fields. The patches of forests that still remain are, therefore, crucial to conservation of its extraordinary range of biodiversity and in sustaining the water bodies. Its tribal communities are known for living in harmony with nature and for conserving its fauna and flora in all their pristine splendour. Today, their population of a little more than 25,000 is totally swamped by the migrants from the plains, who number more than 7,00,000. While the *Todas*, *Kotas* and *Badagas* reside on the Nilgiri plateau, the *Kurumbas*, *Irulas*, *Kasavas*, *Betta Kurumbas*, *Kattunaikans*, *Mullu Kurumbas* and *Panyas* live in its lower reaches. As these tribes are no longer totally isolated from the national mainstream, the development activities impinge on their traditional lifestyles and cultural practices.

BADAGA: *Badaga* community is the most numerous and the largest tribe in the Nilgiris. From being traditionally

herdsman and tiller, *Badaga* has now integrated himself into the mainstream economy.

TODA: A well-researched tribe, *Todas* are pastoral nomads and revere the buffalo, practising animal husbandry for livelihood. Now only a few of them herd buffaloes, mainly due to the shrinking of grazing lands. They now “seek to participate vigorously in the dynamics of modern era.”

KOTA: The only hill tribe that practices industrial arts and, therefore, essential for the existence of the others, the *Kotas* work in gold & silver, and are also adept in carpentry smithy, leather tanning, rope-making, pottery, etc. At the same time they are also a cultivator. Now only a few of them still work as artisan. Most of them have acquired land and taken to agriculture.

ALU KURUMBA: One of the *Kurumba* tribes, *Alu Kurumbas* are hunter-gatherer, collecting myrobalans, barks and roots, both for their own use and for bartering for grain and salt. Like the *Irula*, they also cultivate millet, chillies

and vegetables like pumpkin, etc. They are now mostly settled in forest-fringe villages, eking out living partly by working on their own land and selling minor produce gathered from forests, and partly by working for wages on nearby tea or coffee estates.

BETTA KURUMBA: Another of the *Kurumba* tribes, *Betta Kurumbas* live in the northern part of the Nilgiris, extending into the Mysore district. Their settlements are large, consisting of 60-80 households. Most have no land and depend, for a large part of the year, on the sale of non-timber produce gathered from forests. With tea estates proliferating in Gudalur area, they are now reduced to the status of daily wage earners.

IRULA: Anthropologists do not consider the *Irulas* to be the original inhabitants of the Nilgiri hills. They have moved up to the hills either for wage labour or while doing slash-and-burn agriculture. Usually, they have little contact with the other indigenous communities of the area, except the *Kurumbas*. Their livelihood depends upon foraging for food by hunting and gathering fruits. As employment opportunities on nearby plantations increased, the role of local trade in their economy is lessening.

KATTUNAIKEN: Also called the *Jenu Kurumba*, the *Kattunaickens* are found in the northern part of the Nilgiris, extending into the Mysore plateau. They depend mostly on forest produce and their primary occupation is hunting and gathering, particularly gathering honey. They now live near or inside tea and coffee estates or are settled just outside the Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary. *Kattunaiken* settlements are very small in size, usually with an average of 5-8 households; sometimes only a couple of families can be found living together.

KASAVA: The *Kasavas* live in the northeastern part of the Nilgiris in large settlements, averaging 80 households. Living close to wildlife rich areas, they are adept in hunting and gathering minor forest produce, and depend on these activities for survival. Most of them have land. However, as the land is rocky and arid, they usually leave it fallow and seasonally plant it with millet and vegetables when water is available. The wild animals pose a constant threat to their crops.

PANYA: *Panyas* are not a forest-dependent community and are mostly found in the foothills. They are adept in agriculture. They appear to have brought to the Nilgiris from adjacent Kerala by some land-owning community to work as farm labour.

A CHANGED LIVELIHOOD STRATEGY

Most of the tribal move from place to place, a common feature of the hunting-gathering communities. With no or little land, they depend a lot on daily wage labour and collection of non-timber forest produce. Even those with an acre or less of land cannot subsist from the meagre earnings from their land. The monoculture crops (tea and coffee) promoted in these hills are highly input intensive, which is something they cannot afford. Being cash crops, these contribute very little to the family's food security, nutrition, etc.

A WAGE DRIVEN LIFE

As most of the tribal communities depend on daily wage earning, they usually work on a regular basis on the nearby tea or coffee estates. More women work regularly on daily wages than men. Usually, a tribal works for 4-5 days a week, earning around Rs. 200-250. The extent of remuneration and the season of the year determine the number of days a week they usually work and the type of work they usually take up.

LIVING ON THE EDGE

The phrase, "living on the edge" aptly, describes the state of the tribe's livelihood today. Usually, their meagre earnings are just enough to meet their daily needs. In times of illness, festivals and funerals, they have no option but to take loans at exorbitant rates of interest from the local moneylenders. They repay the loan by selling their produce or, as is more common, take another loan to repay it. Another common practice is to take loans for no special purpose.

A. William Jebhadas and William A. Noble had very well summed up the state of the tribal communities. They said, "As the plantations spread, the *Irulas* lost usufruct rights over considerable tracts and were forced to

contend with large, capitalistic, efficiently run enterprises close to their own hamlets. Their main benefit of easy employment on plantations brought with it the termination forever of any seasonal dependence upon gathering, trapping or hunting. *Irulas* did also benefit from the modernising amenities associated with plantations. When eventually most of them worked on plantations, they led a dual existence, one related to daily work rounds, largely controlled by foreigners, and another still tied to many of their own traditional ways.”

(Hockings; Blue Mountains - the Ethnography and Biogeography of a South Indian Region).

ISSUES FACING THE NILGIRIS

Environmental Issues

Some of the major environmental issues are: (a) commercial forestry practices that are damaging natural forests; (b) extensive use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides resulting in pollution of rivers and contamination of marshes and water catchments; (c) mono-cropping practices (tea/coffee plantations) and increasing human habitations disturbing faunal and floral balance and diversity; and (d) overgrazing, illicit felling and frequent forest fires resulting in degradation of forests.

Development issues

The important development issues include : (a) absence of proper land-use planning; (b) high rate of unemployment; (c) poor access to infrastructure and services; (d) low income generation opportunities and low standard of living; and (e) changes in the traditional lifestyle.

LIVELIHOOD OPTIONS

Keeping these factors in view, the Keystone Foundation began its work in 1994 on the livelihood options of tribal communities with a survey of tribal honey-hunters and beekeepers in Tamilnadu. Facing a complex issue in the Nilgiris, with its environment needing conservation and its tribal people at a crucial crossroads, the Foundation started its 'eco-development initiative' among the honey-hunters and beekeepers in the Kotagiri region of the Nilgiris. Bee was chosen as it has critical links to the state of the environment and the issues facing the tribal communities. Bee keeping (apiculture) was selected as the major thrust area and a program with multi-disciplinary approach was formulated. As the tribal societal structure revolves round the family as the basic unit, the Foundation works with the tribal family as a unit, giving equal importance to men and women. The tribal honey-hunters and beekeepers had other livelihood problems and that led to formulating programs in other areas. Gradually, the Foundation has diversified its activities to address the issues relating to land, water, forests and other basic needs of these communities. Besides training in bee-keeping and improved wild honey harvesting methods, the project activity also includes training in value-addition to products and marketing to secure fair price for them, and skill development in various crafts including working with alternative material and architecture for low-cost housing construction.

The Keystone Foundation is involved in grassroots action and research in mountain development, and it approaches development problems in an integrated manner keeping the interests of the tribes at the core. Some of its other activities are forest conservation, development of minor forest produce, hill watershed development and the revival of traditional agriculture to enhance food security at the household level in the tribal communities.

(Based on the paper presented by **MATHEW JOHN** of the Keystone Foundation, Kotagiri)
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