

# NATURE CONSERVATION IS A THREAD WOVEN WELL THROUGH FOREST BEEKEEPING

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During particular months, honey is collected from nests of *Apis cerana* in the forests. Different methods are used to collect honey, that is either as a food, for ritual or for marketing. Traditional practices and indigenous knowledge include great care for the cavity-nesting honey bee species, *Apis cerana*.

The different indigenous communities have given the cavities used by *Apis cerana* various names. In the Nilgiris, the nesting cavity is called *sirf* by the Kurumba tribe, *pieru* by the Toda, *kaimane* by Irula people and *theivaai* by the Kattunaickan community. These cavities are regarded as an asset of the common man. Numbers of these cavities are managed by several generations of indigenous families.

Conservation is not about only guarding the ecosystem but also involves understanding the rich diversity, living mechanisms, seasonal cyclic changes and growth. A Toda beekeeper looks at their bees from all these angles – understanding the bees very well. The colonies are either nesting in a natural cavity in a tree trunk or in enlarged cavities made by Todas. When the monsoon ends at the beginning of November, a Toda makes a journey into the *shola* woodland to clean up cavities and seal the entrances with pieces of stone, leaving small holes for entrances for the bees. These are called cap stones. *Apis cerana* bees occupy the cavities by the end of November. The bees accept the housing provided by the Toda.

When plants show new buds and shoots, it is time for the second journey to observe the nest and collect one or two newly built combs for a ritual. The Toda greets the bees and inspects the honey store. Later, in February and March, when the honey is ripe, only the honey combs are collected and usually taken home for sharing with the family. Some of the honey is sold in the local market.

In Toda areas, sacred forest groves harbour many nests. These forests are thick and are not disturbed by gathering of fire wood and other requirements for domestic life. The trees are not cut or disturbed, even if a tree dies. Good melliferous plants are protected in the vicinity. The stories, songs, legends about bees and their nesting cavities help promote this tradition.



A Toda beekeeper removes the cap stone from a tree cavity before inspecting the colony of *Apis cerana* living in the cavity



Toda beekeeper harvesting honey

As the monsoon intensifies by mid June, the bees migrate to lower elevations and the Todas' honey season is over for the year. Today, Todas regret that their forests are being disturbed by outside people. Some of these unknown intruders raid their colonies and take away the honey and brood – thus disturbing the colony and making the bees defensive. In some cases, traditionally owned areas are now designated as protected and state control prohibits this practice of honey collection.

We have a lot to learn from these communities about the ecology of the bees and the forests. However our immediate concern is whether this tradition will survive.

## Further reading

Todas of the Nilgiri Hills. *BID Journal* 52

*Honey Trails in the Blue Mountains*, Keystone Foundation



Tree cavities provide nest sites for *Apis cerana*. The cavity entrance has been sealed with a capstone by the Toda beekeeper.