

Keystone foundation  
a organisation  
located at kotagiri  
history essay



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Keystone Foundation, a Non-Governmental Organisation located at Kotagiri, Tamil Nadu. Keystone started their operations with the indigenous communities of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve (NBR) in the year 1996. The idea for a livelihood intervention in the Nilgiris came up with a survey of the apiculture which the founders of Keystone took in the year 1994. This survey brought them in touch with the local communities living in the area and provided them an insight into the conditions of the tribal communities living in the NBR. The various issues faced by the local communities were as follows:

Exploitation of tribal people by the middlemen/traders

A lot of unfair practices with respect to weights and measures were being used by the middlemen

The tribes had a poor bargaining power with the traders and had to sell their produce within days/weeks

Most of the NTFP that the communities dealt with were directly linked to the problem of conservation of forests.

The visit also provided them with more information about socio-cultural aspects of the communities. The larger issues of changes in land use, reduction in forest cover, overuse of fertilizers and pesticides came to the fore

The Keystone foundation thus started its work in 1996 with the mission “ to enhance the Quality of life and the Environment with indigenous communities using eco-developmental approaches” and sought to intervene

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in the NTFP space. Today, it has completed more than a decade in the Nilgiris and works with the communities on a whole lot of issues like apiculture, NTFP, water and land management, development of micro-enterprises and a whole lot of other issues that concern the people of this region.

## **The communities impacted**

The NBR is home to a many indigenous communities. Hunting and food gathering are the prime occupation to many of these communities. The reserve contains various communities like Paniyas, Irulas, Kurumbas, Kuruchiyans, and Mullukurumbas etc. Each of these communities differs from the rest in some particular characteristic. Keystone works with the Kurumba and the Irula communities. Both the communities are pre-agricultural communities. Shifting agriculture was practised among the Irulas until some time ago. Today, most of these communities have settled down in a permanent place in the Nilgiris and have demarcated their land for agriculture. A mixed cropping system comprising of millets, maize, vegetable and fruits etc. is followed by the communities. Both Kurumbas and Irulas are primarily into honey hunting. While the former specialises in rock honey hunting the later community is involved in tree honey hunting. Both the communities are known for their methods of collection of plants (for food and medicine) from the surrounding forests.

## **The need for Intervention**

The intervention by Keystone Foundation was initiated to solve some of the following issues faced by the communities:

The womenfolk of both the communities suffered from low blood count and anaemia. They often fell ill. Lack of nutritious food was one of the prime reasons for the low immunity which increased the susceptibility to diseases.

Traditional practices which these tribes followed were on the decline. There was also a shift in the agriculture from food to plantation crops.

Exploitation by middlemen and traders in the process of getting their produce to the market

Degradation of forests at a rapid pace

## **The Intervention**

Keystone planned its intervention in the following manner:

Conduct a survey of flora and fauna available in the regions and document them. In addition to this, the various methods to harvest NTFP were also documented.

Design a plan to obtain NTFPs from local sources at regular intervals

Add value to the NTFP product through various means

Set up a system of fair weights and measures together with a payments system that is transparent

Generate employment opportunities for the tribal community in the process of value addition

Help in setting up micro enterprises which will add value to the community through skill development

### **Common Property Resources:**

The adivasi communities were dependent on common property resources like pasturelands for the purpose of agriculture. The manner in which these commons were use played an important part in the development of the community. The success of any institution built on these commons depended on the tenure rights the community had on the commons. There has been large scale encroachment on the commons and keystone had to work in clearing these hurdles before it could proceed further. The interests of other villagers in claiming forests as common property reduce if forests are encroached by a private owner. Old animosity also surface in collective actions in villages which can lead to a breakdown of the institution.

Normally, lands are registered with a common title for the whole community in the case of adivasis. The very fact that the boundaries of these lands are not very clearly marked makes it difficult for the adivasi communities to claim them and easier for the private owners to encroach upon them.

To help the villagers take up farming, Keystone first set out to help them demarcate their land. Staff from Keystone used GPS systems to identify the boundaries and marked them with plant species like Agave, Sapindus which were planted on these boundaries by the communities themselves. The identification of boundaries required many rounds of negotiations with the estate owners in area and also the help of forest guards. This helped many villages in recovering land for their common use. Around 27 acres that were

taken away under a social forestry scheme was recovered by the villagers of Nedugalcombei. Vellericombei and Pudurcombei recovered 90 and 65 acres respectively. These plots were again demarcated by planting trees at the boundaries. In fact, Keystone with the support of villagers succeeded in recovering 80 acres of village land from Sajbhas Estate by getting into litigation for the same. This land has now been put to good use by cultivating millets, vegetables, coffee and spices on it.

The lands belonging to the adivasis in the Kotagiri and Coonoor regions have low biomass content. Most of these lands lie in the rain shadow region and are prone to landslips and erosions.

Keystone supported the communities further by helping with the preparation of the lands that have been marked. This involved the process of building bunds and gully plugs of stone, helping to grow vegetative bunds on steep slopes and making contour trenches. The steps to improve the conditions of soil like mulching and increasing biomass were also undertaken. In addition to the above steps, Keystone also played the facilitator's role in creating a nursery, a seed bank, improving the methods of irrigation used and helping then to use tanks made out of polyline from storing water. The villagers went through training courses in organic farming techniques which helped them to shift to the organic method. Additional capacity building measures in the form credit facilities and revolving fund was created for every group of farmers formed. These groups were formed in order to contribute labour to the land preparation activities. Each of the revolving funds was handled by the members of the community.

Prior to the tasks of land preparation, Keystone engaged in a dialogue with the community to revive the traditional farming practices used by the community. An interaction between the elders and the youngster of the community help in bringing out many traditional practices and food recipes to the notice of the younger generation.

### **Setting up of NTFP based micro enterprises**

Keystone Foundation set up micro enterprises to work on the processing of the non timber forest produce gathered by the villagers. These enterprises were set up with the following objectives in mind:

To increase the income and employment in the village

To help in improving infrastructure and knowledge skills of the tribals

To help them understand the importance of adding value to the NTFPs so that they can obtain better returns for the same.

The infrastructure for the enterprises was established by Keystone with the help of the donor funds it received for the purpose. The member of the community who were interested in getting involved with the functioning of the micro enterprises was grouped together. These groups governed the functioning of the community centres. The staff members from Keystone were involved in the day to day functioning of these centres and in the process the community members were also trained to do the same. These production centres were started with the aim of converting them into community managed institutions which were managed by the local

community. The production centres were set up with the following factors in mind:

**Location:** Each centre was located at a place that was easily accessible to the member of the various communities

**Processing:** There was a restriction placed on the kind of NTFPs a centre could produce. Only the forest products that were available in plenty in the region were processed by that centre.

**Infrastructure:** The provision for infrastructure was taken care by the foundation

**Management:** The members of the community managed the functioning of the production centres.

## **Protecting the commons**

One of the most used raw materials by the communities under the intervention of Keystone was the NTFPs. The usage of these had to be monitored regularly to prevent misuse and extinction of the resource.

Keystone has come up with a good monitoring system in order to ensure that the stock of NTFPs is not used completely.

The system works on the basis of trust within the community. As the tribal communities have a strong bond with each other, any action by any of the member will be known to the other members of the community. Keystone built a system of monitoring by the villagers that worked on this trust. The main features of the system were:



Monitoring the farms of the group members by a villager. The people of the community took turns to perform the monitoring

Frequent visits by Keystone staff to inspect the local farms. These visits also helped the staff to provide any suggestion to the member on how to improve on their farming methods

This method of ecological monitoring that is followed by Keystone helps in maintains the livelihood of the members. A couple of examples of monitoring of the resource extraction are cited below:

For NTFPs:

The various characteristics of a new batch of honey that is brought in by the tribal are documented by Keystone. The documentation contains following data:

Name of the honey hunters who extracted it

The composition of the honey in terms of its water content

The location of the hives i. e. the area where it is found and the height of the combs

Details of the colonies of bees harvested etc

Maps depicting the honey zones in the locality have been plotted. In order to maintain the gene pools, Keystone has labelled some of the locations as ‘ god cliffs’. Any honey brought in by a new person is checked for its

properties through various means before it can be accepted by the foundation.

For cultivated produce:

Keystone captures the various data of the farmers and verified any produce that is brought in using these records. This helps in keeping a check on over use of mismanagement of the resources.

### **Leadership:**

At different stages in the intervention, Keystone foundation sought the help of leaders of the tribal communities for the mobilisation. As most of the tribal communities have closely knit society, the presence of the local leaders has played a very important role in the intervention by the foundation. With the setting up of seed banks and production centre, many of the locals were encouraged to take up leadership roles in the community. This ensured the continuous development of leaders with the villagers.

### **Collective Entrepreneurship:**

Each of the production centres that processed the NTFPs gathered by the community members were managed by 4-6 members of the community. These centres were operated by these members on a rotational basis. The participants were all skilled in processing of NTFP that were gathered from the forests. These products produced were marketed at the ' Green Shop' that were established by the foundation at selected locations.

## **Conclusion**

The intervention by Keystone foundation in the Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve is an example of collective action on behalf of the tribal communities that inhabit this region. The initial phase of the intervention started off by getting the community members together to believe in collective action. Slowly over a period of time, with the support of the communities, Keystone was able to identify the commons and come up with a system of monitoring operated by the community members themselves. The controlled usage of the common resources led to an improvement in the status of the member of the communities. Keystone also succeeded in bringing about collective entrepreneurship among the tribes in order to market the products made by their people.