STING IN THE TALE

BRAVING A SWARM OF ANGRY BEES, TO RESEARCH A SHORT STORY

BY **SHARANYA MANIVANNAN**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **ERIC TOURNERET**

A honey gatherer of the Irula tribe in the Nilgiri hangs precariously along the side of a cliff from a rope ladder he wove himself. The giant rock bees build their hives under protected overhanging sections, making the honey gatherer's task rather dangerous.

I was crouching at the entrance of a bear's cave at the foot of Kakulai Parai (cliff) in the Nilgiris, watching as one man swung precariously on a rope ladder, while another sang to the cliff he was descending. I had been working on a book of stories about love, ambiguity and consequence, and its underpinning motifs of sweetness, wildness, and greed had led me to only one logical conclusion: honey. For months, not knowing what the story I would eventually write would be, I had been conducting research into traditional honey gathering, learning along the way about modern beekeeping, the differences between bee species around the world and how bees keep ecosystems alive. Throughout, I was compelled by a single image: a suspended man jabbing a spear at a hive, rich and heavy. I knew I had to see it for myself, and I knew that the only place I would was among the tribal people of the Nilgiris.

That is how I landed up in the offices of Keystone Foundation in the beautiful little hill station of Kotagiri, an hour's downhill drive from Ooty. The organisation works in the fields of biodiversity and indigenous interests. After many emails, in May 2012 they told me that the annual honey gathering season had begun. It was there that I met Chinnasami, an intense-gazed, smiling man on the ladder, and Jadayan a bearded older man, who appeared a bit prickly, but was earnest and kind. I met them just as I was leaving the organisation after going through their archives, having been told that venturing into the forest was probably not possible. Jadayan and Chinnasami, both of the lean, wiry build typical of those who do a lot of physical work, and with faces made striking by defined cheekbones, were entering just then, carrying a bag of beeswax between them. They hadn't planned on going gathering, they said, but they would take me.

The next morning I accompanied five Irula tribesmen, honey gatherers of a 1,000-year-old tradition, to a forest near Queen's Shola, a short bus ride from Kotagiri. We walked through a village step-cut into the hill, then through a plantation vivid with tea leaves, and finally arrived at the border of the forest. The group also consisted of three very young men, C. Murugan, J. Murugan, and R. Krishnan, the last of whom I suspect was brought along mainly to look after me.

As with other honey gathering tribes such as the Todas and the Kurumbas, ritual is very important to the Irulas. As we entered the forest, Jadayan asked if I would wear the *pottu*. When I said yes, he broke off a leaf and dotted its sap between my eyebrows. This was for protection. "*Kaaduthan kadavul*", they believe, meaning the forest is god but it is also replete with spirits with differing motives.

To gather wild honey one requires permission from the forest. A little way into the jungle, we arrived at a clearing with a small brook. Every expedition to Kakula Parai begins with prayers here. A small rock shaped like an irregular triangle was anointed with ash. Incense sticks and bananas were placed before it. An *arati* was offered. Jadayan sang and chanted. And then we could begin.

Reconnaisance missions are conducted separately from honey gathering ones, and Chinnasami had already identified three hives on Kakula Parai some days earlier. Jadayan squatted near the brook and began to dig the earth with his hands. Clear water, cold and sweet, was revealed. The first order of the afternoon was nourishment. We drank a delicious tea brewed over a makeshift fire and ate our packed lunches. I learnt a little about their lives. In Irula, the honey is called "*beliajhen*", or "big honey". In Tamil, it is simply "*malaithen*", or "mountain honey". Off-season, the Irulas sell vegetables and take on contractual work as labourers. But honey has profound cultural meaning for them, and those who have been raised in the trade return to it annually.

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After finishing lunch, the tools for the task at hand were assembled from scratch: a ladder; a wooden spear to dislodge the hives from the cliff; a *panthai*, or bundle of burning leaves to smoke out the bees; and a contrivance known as a kukketappa, in which the hive is collected.

Rope is fashioned from a flexible vine known as the *biskoti*. Tightly twisted, the fibre is woven into the ladder from which Chinnasami would swing against the sheer face of the cliff. Smaller sections are used to tie branches into a Y formation to hold the kukketappa, into which the hive falls when wedged away from the rock.

A spear was made from a long branch, and finally, the smoker, the panthai, created from a variety of dry grass (called *Bombaypul* or *vazhaipul).* The *panthai* was then tied to another biskoti rope, to be sent down the cliff. From the base of a tree, Chinnasami retrieved a tin box, which had been hidden since the last harvest. This was the kukketappa into which the hive would drop. As the contraptions were being crafted, still unable to believe my luck, I asked Jadayan why I had been allowed to accompany them. He shrugged—it was never his decision at all; the forest allows and excludes as it chooses.

Preparations complete, we ventured deeper into the forest, hacking our way past scraggly shrubbery. The dangerous possibility of encountering a leopard or perhaps a bear added a tinge of adventure to the expedition. Kakula Parai finally came into view, with three dark hives clinging to the underside of a shallow overhang. Here, the two Murugans and Chinnasami began to hike to the cliff from the sides. "Don't be scared," Jadayan said. "Hold tight to this matchbox. You will need it." With these ominous words, he left, to position himself directly below where Chinnasami was to descend. Krishnan and I settled a little distance from the base of a cliff, close to the entrance of a cave where bears sometimes slept. We gathered a pile of leaves and dry grass and kept it ready. We would light it if the bees fled in our direction.

Three figures emerged at the top of the cliff. Traditionally, a honey gatherer's brother-in-law is the one responsible for holding his ladder, the belief being that he would do anything he could to prevent his sister from being widowed. The two Murugans were entrusted with this task, as well as with lowering the lit panthai to smoke out the bees. Chinnasami would collect the honey.

Many of the inhabitants of villages like Hasanur** (above) **in the Nilgiri region, tend to work in neighbouring tea plantations that border the forest.

Keystone Foundation has been working with the indigenous people of the region for 15 years, informing them of good practices and equipment.


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1 Some wild honey tastes bitter because of the taste of flowers like jamun, from which the bees collect nectar. 2 A honey gatherer and his wife finish weaving a rope ladder. 3 The rope is woven from the flexible biskoti vine that grows abundantly in the forest. 4 Irula culture is replete with rituals. The honey gatherers pray to this ceremonial stone at the entrance to the jungle, seeking the permission and protection of the forest spirits. 5 Long coils of rope and containers for the honey are carried into the forest. 6 As the honey gatherer descends, the panthai is lowered by his side, ready to be lit to smoke out the bees. 7 Honey gatherers empty the kukketappa, the metal box in which the honey is collected. 8 Chunks of the comb are squeezed by hand to gather the honey. 9 The honey is then filtered to remove dust and impurities. 10 Irula women do not participate in the honey gathering, but are involved in other aspects, including ceremonial singing, packing, and selling the honey.

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Cross-legged below the hives, Jadayan began shouting and singing prayers to the bees so they would return the following year to continue the cycle. He also prayed to the hive, to the cliff, to the god of the forest who is the forest itself. He had a pile of grass by his side, ready to be set ablaze. Chinnasami began to lower himself over the ledge of the cliff. When he had reached a comfortable position, the panthai was sent down, swinging close to the hives and releasing plumes of smoke.

Immediately, a great dark torrent appeared, buzzing furiously. "They're coming!" Krishnan shouted, and struck a match to the leaves we had collected. In a matter of seconds, they were all around us, a cloud of thousands of angry, intoxicated bees. Smoke debilitates their senses, but they are still capable of stinging—a final act of honour, for they die when they do. The adrenaline of the moment was unmistakable, the pure excitement that comes from risk sending a charge through me. Through this confusion of smoke and bees, I could see Chinnasami dangling on a ladder of vines, prodding at each hive with his spear. Graceful as a trapeze artist, he manoeuvred in mid-air, his feet and legs gripping the ladder as his arms stretched out to tease the hive away from the rock. He wore no helmet or protective gear. Nothing lay between him and a fatal fall but willpower, luck, and the grace of the mountain.

NOTHING LAY BETWEEN HIM AND A FATAL FALL BUT WILLPOWER, LUCK, AND THE GRACE OF THE MOUNTAIN

The first hive fell to the ground with a thud. The other two were also cautiously prodded away from the rock and securely manoeuvred into the tin box. The storm of bees continued to rage, as did the clouds of smoke we kept sending to abate it.

Chinnasami climbed back to the top of Kakula Parai. The exhausted men trekked back down and we made our way back to the clearing where the instruments had been crafted. The hunt had been successful; it was time to harvest.

The hives were shorn of inedible parts and cut into manageable pieces, then put into pieces of cloth and squeezed by hand. Fresh honey spilled into tins and bottles. Krishnan cut away a piece of fresh honeycomb, wrapped it in a leaf, and gave it to me. I was surprised to find the wild honey bitter. I learnt that this was typical of the region because of the taste of flowers like *jamun*, from which bees collect nectar. Some honey is always left for the forest itself. The squeezed-out combs were also left behind; drowsy bees would wake in a couple of days and carry on with the cycles of nature.

The following day, I visited Chinnasami's home in the six-household hamlet of Anil Kaadu to listen to his mother, R. Letchumi, sing traditional songs. I went to the Bee Museum in Ooty to learn more about the insect and its intuitive, intelligent nature. Much later, I even wrote the short story I'd come here to research.

That first bite of the honeycomb had been the most extraordinary taste I experienced during this adventure. It was a complicated, intense flavour to suit a complicated, intense experience. As the men continued to squeeze the combs, I sat in silence on the dry leaves of the forest floor and enjoyed a few moments of wonderment, eating mountain honey as sweet and as bitter as my heart.

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*Chennai-based **Sharanya Manivannan** is the author of* Witchcraft *(Bullfighter Books, 2008), a book of poems.*

At the top of the cliff, preparations for descent begin. One person stays near the base and sings to the bees to entreat them to return the following year.