

Indigenous Peoples' Plan Keystone Foundation

The cultural diversity in the NBR – with its number of adivasis and other communities, is one of the reasons to declare the area a Biosphere Reserve. There is a well known symbiotic relationship between the indigenous communities here.

These include the *Aalu Kurumbas, Paalu Kurumbas, Jenu Kurumbas, Kattunaickans, Sholegas, Betta Kurumba, Urali Kurumba, Kaadu Kurumbas, Kadars, Cholanaicken, Pathinaickens, Mudugas, Adiyans, Arnadans, Paniyans, Kurichiyans, Mullukurumbans, Malaivedans, Panjari/Badava Yeravas, Tani Yeravas, Karimpalans, Pathiyans, Malapulayans, Mala Kudiyas, Muduvas, Todas, Kotas, Irulas/Kasabas, Mala Malasar, Malapanikkars, Malamuthans, Thaccanaadans*. The *Badagas, Wynaadan Chetti* and *Manthadan Chettis*, though not classified as *adivasis* (tribes) are integral part of the complex cultural mosaic. In a rare synergy, most of the hunter gatherers built close links with agriculturists, where the supplying of ritualistic material and forest produce was exchanged with grain. The Kota artisans and the pastoralists played an important role in binding these communities together. The Badagas, though not classified as adivasis, were common links between communities as they practiced both agriculture and pastoralism. The whole NBR is traditionally been divided into socio-cultural territories (the details of which are too lengthy to be elaborated here), which enable a cross-community social fabric.

However, the estimated population of adivasis in the NBR is approximately 2,00,000. This is small compared to the larger migrant population of the area, which is roughly 10,00,000. This is reason enough for political and governance processes to marginalize these communities further. Today, it is even more difficult for the adivasis to follow their social systems as they are administratively divided into different states, their traditional boundaries and landmarks are eroded and migrant populations exert enormous pressure on the natural resources of the area.

Perhaps, to revive the concept of the Biosphere Reserve, not only for forests and wildlife corridors, but also for building back community based cultures and conservation with these people, will be useful. Special efforts can also be made to link up the area with common



themes & practices and to follow common regulations across the region. This can be an effort towards maintaining socio-cultural identities of the adivasis, who can then be prevented from being subsumed in the 'mainstream.'

Changes are taking place in the tribal mindset in the NBR. Erstwhile gathering activities and linkage to forest ecosystems are gradually diminishing. There is a need to understand the present context and the socio-economic situation of tribal communities in these hills. Lack of relevant opportunities for the tribal families and failures linked to efforts of "mainstreaming" are making them isolated and creating a situation of a fragile social system in a skewed natural resource base. With time this community is becoming more and more distant and peripheral to development issues and decision-making concerning ecology, conservation of indigenous communities and also to their own culture. This is inevitable, given the shrinking cultural space and the onslaught of larger development programmes that invoke faster changes than these communities can adapt to.

There are 8 Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs) as classified by the government within the NBR. These pre-agriculture communities have a different way of life and relationship to the earth. Administratively, these communities are given special categories in all government schemes and reservations for some posts. All are classified as ST (Scheduled Tribe) and some are PTGs.

The Constitution of India also specially protects the rights of these marginalized communities. The main rules, laws and Acts that have a direct impact on the indigenous people relate to Forest Conservation and the Rights of People to land and use/access to forests. A landmark Act in India was introduced in 2006 (Forest Rights Act 2006) which discusses both these aspects and gives rights to indigenous communities. It also governs aspects of conservation, displacement and critical wildlife habitat. This Act is now being implemented across the country- as also in the NBR and now forms the backbone to both conservation and tribal rights.

Keystone's Indigenous People policies and functioning

Keystone Foundation is a NGO, working in the NBR with these communities since 1994. It has since then addressed issues concerning the indigenous people and the conservation of nature, keeping eco-development approaches as its focus. Its journey began with 'honey' and has diversified to many other natural resource and market access based activities. Of the 36 indigenous communities known to reside in NBR, about 14 have been assessed to have been traditionally involved in the collection of honey - although this is of varying significance in the livelihoods of these different communities.

Stories of bees and honey have formed the basis of growth in the organization- which systematically took up traditional agriculture and land use issues, more NTFPs and forest assessment work, documentation of indigenous knowledge with medicinal plants, wild foods

and sacred groves, helped provide value to their produce and a market facility. More details of the programmes and projects of Keystone can be found at www.keystone-foundation.org

Currently, Keystone is a group of 50 staff, out of which 20 are indigenous people staff. We have since the very beginning believed in positive discrimination toward them for employment and have a policy to build capacities amongst them. Towards this Keystone has a:

1. Education Fund
2. Capacity Building Fund

It also involves people in all its activities including planning and participatory monitoring and evaluation of its different projects. Keystone has since 2004, a special 'People and Culture' programme that addresses issues of indigenous communities including rights, governance and culture.

As an institutional mechanism we also have the Tribal Advisory Committee with representation from all the areas of the NBR, which advises Keystone in its future direction and work. This committee meets two times a year, which gives an opportunity to all communities to express their ideas and plans. Previous meetings minutes are available for perusal.

Over the years, these processes have involved the people in all the work of the organization. Keystone, principally is not involved in programmes that negatively impact indigenous communities.

The following mechanisms will be followed for the CEPF programme to ensure free and fair discussion with communities and their participation.

1. Holding the Tribal advisory Committee meeting once during the course of the project in the local language (s)
2. There will be one planning meetings held in each tribal community directly affected by the project prior to project activities beginning, the proposed activities will be explained to them in their own language, and they will have the opportunity to choose whether to be involved in the project or not; and
3. A poster will be prepared, in appropriate local language(s) and displayed in prominent locations within participating communities; this poster should briefly explain the project and give contact numbers for Keystone and the CEPF-RIT at ATREE, so that any person who has grievances about the project for any reason can raise them quickly.

With specific regard to the project on Mainstreaming Conservation in District Policy:

The area/sample chosen to conduct the upstream/downstream study i.e. Coonoor River has very few indigenous people settlements in the upstream area. However, Toda settlements are

found in the vicinity and since their pastoral areas are large effort needs to be taken to ensure that these are not impacted in any way. Similarly Kurumba settlements are found downstream in the Barliar area and along some of the tributaries of the Coonoor Area. Their basic livelihood – both agriculture and drinking water, are greatly impacted by this river and its management. Discussions were held with Kurumba people and in the recent TAC meeting issues related to encroachment along the Barliar stretch of the Coonoor River was brought up. The TAC also requested for a forum, where their views/opinions and grievances can be aired to the District Authorities. This will be one of the agendas of the environmental governance engagements with the district.

It will be ensured that indigenous people are benefitted through this conservation project, they are involved in the planning, implementation and evaluation, there are regular and necessary forum created for expression of their views and ideas. No negative impact on them is envisaged through this project. This project which will closely work with indigenous community will be on a basis of free, prior and informed consultation for all the process, stages of the project.