

Mongabay Series: Eco Hope

Aadhimalai, winner of UN Equator Prize from Nilgiris, offers a lesson in indigenous economics

by Arathi Menon on 20 December 2021

<https://india.mongabay.com/2021/12/aadhimalai-winners-of-un-equator-prize-from-nilgiris-offer-a-lesson-in-indigenous-economics/>

- *The Aadhimalai Pazhangudiyinar Producer Company Ltd is run by the tribal people of the Nilgiris, with 1609 indigenous shareholders. Almost 90 percent of employees are tribal women.*
- *The company collects farm*

and forest produce from tribal people directly using digital scales and buys them at 20-30 percent more than the market price.

- *The farmer producer company that started as a small tribal collective has bagged this year's UN Equator Prize.*

Traditional healer Janakiamma (60) belongs to the Kurumba community. An indigenous community in south India, Kurumba is listed by the government of India as one of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups or PVTGs in India. The Kurumbas are primarily honey collectors, apart from doing small-scale farming for a living, marked by low-level literacy and economic backwardness among other indicators.

Janakiamma has not had formal education, but she is now the director of a farmer producer company in the Nilgiris district in Tamil Nadu. Started by the tribal people, for the tribal people, Aadhimalai Pazhangudiyinar Producer Company Ltd (APPCL), located in Kotagiri in Nilgiris, has seven directors from the indigenous communities at the helm of affairs.

The story of an uneducated tribal woman from an economically poor background who went on to head a company with over 1600 shareholders runs parallel to the story of Aadhimalai itself, the farmer producer company that started as a small tribal collective but has bagged this year's Equator Prize

Conversation

(<https://www.equatorinitiative.org/2021/07/11/aadhimalai-pazhangudiyinar-producer-company-limited/>) by the United Nations Development Programme.

The APPCL, initiated by a non-profit Keystone Foundation in the Nilgiris (<https://india.mongabay.com/2020/11/climate-change-may-have-pushed-the-toda-community-up-the-nilgiris-3500-years-ago/>), won the prize under the categories of green economy, nature-based solutions (through sustainable harvest) and women empowerment.

"I was a honey supplier at the non-profit foundation earlier but now I am one of the directors at Aadhimalai. My main job is to collect produce from the villagers, most of whom are shareholders of the company, hold meetings with them and give them bonuses when it's time. Associating with Aadhimalai is so beneficial to us that even non-shareholders want to be shareholders now," Janakiamma says. As the discourse around the lifeways of indigenous communities, being appropriated and peddled as nature-based solutions (NbS) in various developed countries, gets louder, the APPCL stands as testimony to the fact that indigenous economics is one of the keys to climate action. Living in symbiosis with nature is the fundamental principle that guides indigenous lives worldwide. Indigenous economics, which has nature as the nucleus and does not treat conservation separately and as detached from other aspects of growth, serves as an antidote to the

Western economics that pursues economic goals or "development" at the cost of nature.



APPCL office in Kotagiri. The farmer producer company won this year's UN Equator Prize. Photo by Abhishek N. Chinnappa.

Green economy: Tribals as sellers and buyers

"We were recognised under green economy because the tribal communities involved get the produce from the forest which is value-added at the villages itself. Then that goes out to market, and profit returns to the communities. We are not polluting nature or depleting resources, or creating carbon footprints in the process. We are generating economy through green methods," says Jestin Pauls, the CEO of the APPCL and the only non-tribal staff there.

Started informally as a farmers' collective in the early 2000s, the APPCL was registered as a farmer producer company in 2013. Tracing its

beginning, founder Snehlata Nath, the founder-director of its parent company Keystone Foundation, says that it was the plight of the honey hunters of the Nilgiris and the minimal prices they fetched for the produce that planted the idea of a farmers' collective in her.

"We (the founders of the parent company) were in these tribal villages at that time, and we saw them selling honey at throwaway prices like Rs. 15 or Rs. 17 for a bottle. We were shocked and knew this was wrong, especially after knowing the trouble they go through to procure it. We wanted to intervene in getting the tribal people better market prices for forest produce. We started with honey but included other farm and forest produces later. Things sold in raw forms don't fetch good prices, so value-adding seemed to be a good idea. Then, that was also started," she explains.

The value-added products sold at the APPCL include beeswax lip balms and soaps, pickles, amla candies, etc.

On this thought, a few production centres were opened in the villages and the products were sold through Green Shop, a shop started under another project on organic market development. These production centres were started in tribal villages and were more like self-help groups initially. These centres, set up to collect produce from the tribal

community that lives in and around those centres, have been managed by tribal women.

In 2013, all the four production centres were brought under an umbrella called the APPCL or Aadhimalai. From its name to the model and the price of the products, everything was decided by the tribal elders, who were also the company's shareholders. They elected the directors, too. The board of directors meets every quarter when resolutions are passed on how to take the business forward and to decide the prices of the products. These decisions are made based on the meetings they've had with community members.

Sustainable harvest: With nature as a shareholder

Apart from the green economy, APPCL's intervention in ensuring sustainable harvesting methods is another reason they won the UN Equator Prize. Jestin Pauls says they are meticulous about not harming nature during harvesting, be it honey or other forest produce. Some of the products the APPCL sells include gooseberries, shikakai (*Senegalia rugata*), haritaki (*Terminalia chebula*), poochakkai or soap nut (*Sapindus mukorossi*) apart from honey.

While the traditional ways of harvesting among tribal people have been sustainable by default, market demand has made them veer away from the tradition and adopt unsustainable practices. The APPCL

intervened here and encouraged farmers to go back to traditional ways and convinced them that it was possible to market their products better and earn enough without compromising their traditional methods.

For example, since shikakai is a thorny climbing shrub, the quickest way to collect the fruit is by cutting the tree on which it climbs. But the shareholders and producers of the APPCL decided they wouldn't do it and instead would tie a net under the tree and shake it. This would also ensure only the ripe fruits are collected and the plant is not destroyed in harvesting the produce. A similar practice is encouraged in the case of produce like gooseberries. Pauls says this has also ensured better quality of the produce. "In the case of coffee, the farmers pluck only ripe ones now, which was not the practice earlier. This has increased the yield and quality of the coffee. From collecting 450-500kg coffee earlier, Aadhimalai gets about 22 tons of coffee now," he says. Their regular buyers include brands like CavinKare, Black Baza, Last Forest, to name a few.

Since honey hunting is a highly skilled job and wild honey is a much-valued produce, the APPCL ensures that the harvesting is fully sustainable. When supplying their honey to the company, the honey hunters have to provide details on how many honeycombs they

spotted, which cliffs they were on, what flowers and trees were there, and how many honeycombs they harvested.



*One of the directors of the APPCL, Janakiamma.
Photo by Arathi Menon.*

“Suppose they spotted 12 honeycombs, Aadhimalai’s harvesting protocols suggest that they can harvest only eight, and the rest have to be left untouched. They need to provide Aadhimalai details like how much honey they harvested from the honeycomb and how much has been left behind. All such details are collected and recorded here,” says Pauls.

The honey hunters are more aware of sustainable harvesting now and have taken the initiative to teach it to the younger generation.

The APPCL touches the lives of tribal communities in more ways than one. It gives 20-30 percent more than the market price for the products they

collect door-to-door from farmers. They use digital scales and not bushels to weigh the products for accuracy and maintain accounts which are shown at the annual meeting of shareholders and directors, thus maintaining transparency. The APPCL liaises between forest officials and the tribal people to ease friction. "Since this is a company, we can negotiate with forest officials better through Village Forest Councils," reveals Pauls. Kaliappan, a shareholder for seven years, says that there are many benefits of being a shareholder. Apart from getting more than the market price from Aadhimalai, the non-profit foundation provides financial and other support to shareholders. "They help us clean our farmland, supply seeds, saplings and bio inputs when we need them and conduct various training to improve farming and production. Shareholders also get annual bonuses for the sale of their produce through Aadhimalai," he says. The APPCL also has an insurance scheme for honey hunters. "Last year, we had 136 farmers who were certified organic through us," shares Pauls. One of the biggest production centres of Aadhimalai in Hasanur in Erode district has become a society, and it is most likely to become an independently functioning farmer producer organisation soon, says Snehlata Nath. "They are doing very well. Last financial year, they could make a profit of Rs. 1.26 lakh

(Rs.126,000) out of Rs. 28 lakh (Rs. 2.8 million) turnover. We handheld them in the beginning, trained them and helped them by buying products from them, and now they have grown to become independent," adds Jestin Pauls.

Women empowerment: How tribal women found their voice

The UN Equator Prize also recognises the APPCL's contribution in women's empowerment. Pauls says that out of 60 staff of the APPCL, 52 are women. Considering the tribal women are one of the most marginalised in society, Nath admits that it wasn't easy to achieve this. "We reserved the seats for women and only women," she says. "The biggest issue initially was that they were not educated. Every step of this enterprise needed them to be involved in calculations like measurements, maintaining records and understanding profit and loss. Initially, we did a lot of capacity building through repeated training. Some competent women like Sumitra and Janakamma played a crucial role in mobilising women. Then the younger girls who were educated showed up," says founder Nath. Being a part of the APPCL worked in favour of them because they understood the value of their work and the produce they sold, but it also reduced their physical labour from the

daily wage labour in farms, industries, and other fields where they were earlier involved in.

Sumitra, who heads the production unit at Pudukadu in Coonoor says that at least ten village women have been employed at the unit.

"Our unit is a place for women in the village to sell forest produce like shikakai, amla and silk cotton found fallen on the ground. Men go for work, but the money hardly reaches the woman in most households. Now she can earn by selling these, and these products don't go waste in the forest (<https://india.mongabay.com/2021/07/environmental-activism-in-the-nilgiris-too-early-to-rejoice/>) as well," she says. Sumitra feels that in Aadhimalai, tribal women have found their voice. We've got anganwadis and schools in our villages, and that's mainly because of us. When the authorities come to inspect villages, we are always here at the production unit to meet them and tell them what the village needs," she says with pride.

The biggest challenge the APPCL faces is that of funding. Recollecting a significant loss the APPCL suffered two years ago due to a lack of proper storage facility for pepper, Justin Pauls says they need better infrastructure but do not have funds.

"We take a loan every year from Nabkisan (financing company), but that's only enough to procure products and not to invest in anything. We are a company that's growing. Once we grow more, we will be able to invest in the future," he says.

Banner image: Sumitra, who heads a production centre, shows the value-added beeswax products that the farmer producer company makes. Photo by Arathi Menon.

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