

## Where many worlds meet: Nilgiris Field Learning Centre

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*By: Pratim Roy, Sarasmeetha Pathy, Anita Varghese*

### Background

The Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve (NBR) has for more than 25 years been the field learning centre for the Keystone Foundation, a voluntary agency based out of Kotagiri, Tamil Nadu. The reserve is spread over a 5500 sq km area and spans three states—Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala. More than 75% of the reserve is ‘protected area’ as a tiger reserve and national park. An estimated 30 distinct Adivasi groups, including seven communities who fall under the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) of the Government of India, are ancient residents of these forests and mountains. The diverse social, cultural, political and ecological mosaic poses opportunities and challenges that require trans-disciplinary approaches cutting across scale and sectors to understand and manage issues. So, while the Keystone Foundation had set out to work on eco-development issues, the NBR kept throwing at us situations that required us to be adaptive, flexible and innovative. It is this lived experience that we wanted to offer as a field learning course and by doing it in collaboration with an academic giant like the Cornell University, we could reflect, build new programmes, and critically evaluate what the NBR has taught us thus far.



The process to build the Nilgiri Field Learning Centre (NFLC) started in 2011 when Pratim Roy, Founder Director, Keystone Foundation spent a year in Cornell University and talked about his dream of instituting a field learning experience that would produce 'conscious leaders' from amongst young people who would take the world ahead on the road to sustainable living. A core team of four faculty members from the departments of Anthropology, Global Health, Natural Resource Management of the Cornell University, led by Prof Neema Kudva from City and Regional Planning, took active interest to champion the idea. The team came on a short visit to the Keystone Foundation offices in 2012 and met with the program and community leaders. The time spent in discussions and field visits gave both parties an overview of the themes to work on and soon after, a curriculum was drafted.

Alongside, work was initiated at the institutional level to establish the nature of this collaboration. We agreed to begin with a semester-long program that would be divided into classroom-based learning and field research studies. Months later, a team from the foundation spent two weeks at Cornell University, meeting and discussing modalities. It was at the same time, three years after the idea was presented, that we signed an MoA, in 2013, for five years that would allow us to conduct the semester program and along with it, build collaborative action research projects. Our first course was launched in 2015, with six students from Cornell and five students from the Nilgiris.

### **NFLC program**

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The NFLC curriculum brings together theory and practice, scientific and traditional knowledge, quantitative and qualitative methods in a 15-week program. Hosted by the Cornell University study abroad program, it is approved by all seven undergraduate

colleges of the university. As of May 2019, four courses have been held and a total of 27 undergraduates from Cornell and 29 Adivasi students from the Nilgiris have completed the course. The Cornell students get 15 credits for successfully completing the program and both sets of students are awarded a certificate at the completion of the course.

Themes in the course comprise community-based conservation, social-ecological systems, forest-based livelihoods, community wellness, indigenous worldviews, governance, urbanisation and trade and markets. After seven weeks of theory, which includes lectures, field-work, assignments and readings, the students are ready to undertake field-based research. An important part of the curriculum is, research methods, which weave in and out of every theme in these first seven weeks. Research topics are pre-determined, based on the needs and interests of the program lead of the foundation and a faculty member from Cornell, both of who work together to guide the research. The students are assigned research projects based on their core courses and interests. Five weeks of research involves living in villages to collect information through interviews, PRA maps and focus group discussions etc. Two weeks are devoted to analysing the data and presenting the results to two sets of audiences. The presentation in English is made to colleagues at the Keystone Foundation, other NGOs, government officials and local leaders. The community members who are part of the research and have played a significant role in it are invited to make the presentations in Tamil. This is a time of sharing results, discussing, asking questions and making corrections.

### **Many worlds of NFLC**

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The students of the NFLC come from all seven undergraduate colleges of the university and are, mostly, American citizens, from diverse backgrounds. For each Cornell student, a local student (from the Adivasi communities of the Nilgiris district) is also selected and together they form the NFLC cohort. Students at Cornell register a semester in advance and take preparatory classes. At the Keystone Foundation, students are selected based on a written test, personal interview and academic qualifications. They also attend a week-long orientation and undergo spoken English classes in preparation.

Both sets of students, during the 15-week course duration, stay in hostels on campus; living and learning together and from each other. There are some aspects of the curriculum that play an extremely important role in bringing their two worlds together. Every morning starts with a 'Crossing Boundary' exercise that builds language (Tamil, English and local words) and cultural context. Every evening, for an hour, students debrief with faculty members, either as two separate Cornell and Keystone groups or as a combined group. At these debriefs, everything is discussed – what was taught, what was felt, what happened or what did not happen. These sessions help ease-off layers of conditioning and play an important role in making this program meaningful.

Every week, one or two themes are hosted and are jointly taught by Cornell faculty (sometimes, remotely but most often, in person) and Keystone subject-matter experts. At Cornell, four faculty members give their time to this while at Keystone, teaching is carried out by eight program leaders, with their respective teams pitching in for field trips and

class exercises. National experts on the subject are also invited to give lectures. Lectures are bilingual, which is quite challenging as a one-hour class needs to be divided for translations, reflections and discussions. Many-a-times, translation time is slotted in when boredom creeps in, especially for students who are used to a much faster-paced learning. Though with time, students begin to reflect and begin to pick up vocabulary from the other language. It is also a time to be patient and learn the worldview of another culture.

### **Partners in research**

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The classroom dynamics change considerably when the research phase starts. In the field-work, local knowledge, language and familiarity with the region become as important as the theory. The local students who have been reticent until then, start to take the lead. In the past five years, research topics have been on water and waste in the Nilgiris, infant feeding and dietary diversity, Gaur movement in the urban landscape, indigenous healers and their life histories, and the implementation of the Forest Rights Act or Conservation Agreements. Each research team consist of one Cornell and one Keystone student who are each assigned a translator.

Collaboration in research is an idea that needs constant reminders. An incident from a few years ago comes to mind. A Keystone-Cornell research team were working on processing their field-work notes. A visitor came in and took one look at the team and turned to the Keystone student and asked, 'Are they interviewing you?' We have noticed and heard from students that in the interviews in the village too respondents sometimes talk only to the Cornell student assuming that they are doing the research and all the others in the group are field assistants.

For the Keystone students, sometimes, the research is about their own cultures and spaces. What is there to learn, they think till it is emphasised through the theoretical lenses that they now have that they must make the 'familiar, unfamiliar'. Students learn when they must switch off their community lenses and when to switch them back on, to process the conversations and find common themes that will tell the story of their community.

### **Exploring methods in learning**

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Making journal notes, recording field diaries, and note-taking, are an integral part of the NFLC classes. Phones and laptops are left behind in the rooms and not brought to the class. Students are encouraged to write blogs and share their experiences. This year the Keystone students have chosen to 'speak' their stories and therefore, audio files are uploaded on the website. A learning experience that relies only on reading, writing and speaking is limiting in itself and we, who are running the program, have been thinking about this for some time. We introduced film-making in the course one year to see if this was another tool that could be explored. It had positive results, but we realise we are already being pulled in several directions, and; managing data in video bytes was going to be another level of work. So, currently, that project is on hold.



The Keystone and Cornell students are developing friendships that transcend borders of language and culture. Cornell students who have been through the program have felt that it has changed something at their core. Many of them have chosen to work in the conservation and development sector and take to interdisciplinary approaches more easily. As many as 50% of the Keystone students have been recruited for work in the development sector. As for those who had dropped out of school, they have gone back to complete their degrees. Social media has been a way for both sets of students to keep in touch and there have been instances when news from the Nilgiris has travelled first to Ithaca and then received by people in Kotagiri.

When such different worlds are brought together the issues that crop up are also diverse. One of the Keystone students shared how when they saw a bowl of fruit in the canteen, they assumed it was only for the international students. When it was explained that this is not so, it was hard for them to believe. The Cornell students want to 'give back' and help the local students. At the same time, they want their Keystone classmates to know that everybody can lead and has something to give back. Only when such challenges have been overcome can a team of Cornell and Keystone students go onto writing a research paper jointly. In one such case, the Cornell student and Keystone student used email, Skype and translation assistance and got their research paper published (for more details of the paper, see Craig et al 2018)<sup>3</sup>.

### **Elements of a 'near equal' collaboration**

There were many concerns, initially, regarding the demands of an academic residential program on human resources and infrastructure of a field-based organisation like Keystone. With time, trustees and advisors gave full support as we grew to

accommodate, on an average, ten undergraduate students every year between January and May. Now NFLC functions seamlessly and is a part of the ecosystem at Kotagiri.

For the Cornell faculty leads, this is an additional workload that they chose to take on for several reasons that they remain committed to, like their research interests, India, indigenous communities, Nilgiris etc. We started with four faculty members and their core disciplines. We are aware that Cornell has more to offer and there is scope for expansion. How do we go forward to bring on board new faculty members and disciplines? How can we be good gatekeepers?

For now, at the core of the relationship between the Cornell faculty and the Keystone team is the trust, communication and respect essential to any good relationship. There are moments of frustration mostly when the difference between practice and theory come to the fore. In a field-based situation sometimes the only constant is change – what is written in plans need not be what is implemented on the ground. An academic syllabus is more constant, it can be adaptive but not necessarily at the rate of the change one sees in a project implementation.

Keystone, today, has a health program which looks at nutrition, mental health and wellbeing and this was unimaginable for us 20 years ago. Around the same time that we launched the MoA with Cornell University in 2015, we started to notice a number of mental health-related issues among the indigenous communities we worked with. At that time, we didn't have the expertise, and it was the strength of our collaborators at Cornell that helped us to critically analyse and find resources to build a meaningful health program that addresses core issues of wellbeing.

### **Unwavering local support**

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Every year, as the students prepare to graduate from the NFLC, local community members come to the Keystone campus to listen to the students talk about their research. The Tribal Advisory Council is a loosely held together collective of tribal elders who advise the Keystone Foundation on the implementation and planning of new and ongoing programs. The council is called together on a need basis and has more than 40 member-representatives from each geography and community that Keystone works with, in the NBR.

The NFLC too started with a meeting of the council through which we sought the community leaders and elder's thoughts on the idea and their commitment to host young students to undertake studies in their villages. We were pleasantly surprised by their enthusiasm. One of the important aspects for the elders was that their young people would be trained, and they would learn new things. The elders continue to be a pillar of strength for us as we go forward, and they renew their commitment when each year, at least a hundred people gather to hear the final presentations of the students.

Today, the differences between students from continents apart seem far less than before—information, technology, access have helped bridge several divides. It seems they understand better among themselves their fears, anxieties, hopes and aspirations. Our

NFLC classroom makes students uneasy at first because social, economic, academic backgrounds seem very far apart. Over weeks of interactions, some defences are dropped, and some are reinforced; some bridges are built, and some are broken down. Everybody who has been through the program has been touched by it, some less, some more so. The global and the local are finding ways to have a shared understanding and above all, to respect diversity. How many conscious leaders we have moulded we are not sure but every so often, when students speak of the lessons for life that they have learnt at the NFLC, we feel encouraged to go forward.

For more information on the program, visit: <https://blogs.cornell.edu/nflc/>

## AUTHORS

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**Pratim Roy, Sarasmeetha Pathy and Anita Varghese** are members of the Keystone Foundation and involved closely with the NFLC.

**Photo credits: Neema Kudva**

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