

Sacred Hills of the Toda People of South India: A Plea for World Heritage Status

Tarun Chhabra

Abstract—The Todas worship scores of hilltops where they believe their principal deities or clan-specific local gods reside. It is thus considered sacrilege even to point towards such a deity peak with one's finger. It is also no coincidence at all that the area in and around the Toda sacred-landscape, where their major hill deities are believed to reside, has come to constitute in recent times, the core of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve. This is the very first biosphere reserve in all of India (1986). There is now an urgent need to have this region inscribed as a World Heritage site.

The Toda Dreamtime

The Todas (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2) have occupied the Nilgiri Hills since time immemorial. Toda society is divided into two endogamous divisions: Tawrrta(r)sh with ten extant exogamous patrilineal clans and Taihhfill(zh)y, with five. During their Dreamtime, it is said, gods and Todas lived alongside. Natural landmarks still exist that are associated with divine exploits, testimonies to their life stories



Figure 1—Dairyman-priest purifies newly rebuilt temple with sacred tehhdh bark, a species (*Meliosma simplicifolia*) that no Toda layman may handle.

Tarun Chhabra, Dentist and Founder of Edhkwhehlynawd Botanical Refuge (EBR) and Toda Nalavaazhvu Sangam (Toda Welfare Society), Hospital Road, Ootacamund-643001, Nilgiris, South India. E-mail: kwattein@bsnl.in

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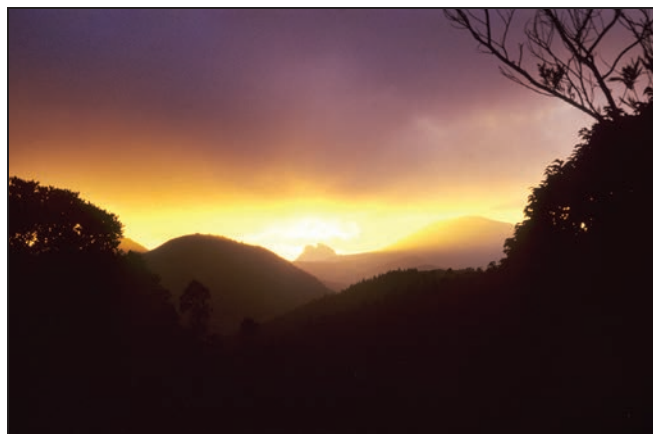


Figure 2—The winter sun sets over the twin peak of Kaa(r)sh-gol.

that Todas still remember. These gods and goddesses, after their time in human form, went on to occupy various hill summits where they are believed to reside even now. These are called *taihh-teh* or “deity-hills”. Their presence is so real and sacred that a Toda elder would not commit the sacrilege of using his finger to point out the location of a deity peak. He will rather point to the neighbouring hill and say: “The peak next to that”. Todas passing in the vicinity of a deity peak reverentially salute the summit by adopting the *koyemukht* posture, raising the right forearm with palm outstretched and having the left hand touch the right elbow, as they softly chant the *kwa(r)shm* or sacred name of the deity. Before taking up residence in nearby hills, deities like Goddess Taihhki(r)shy, created Toda buffaloes that were distinct for the dairy-temples attached to each patrilineal, and those that were allotted for domestic purposes. She then created a particular category of sacred buffalo herd for each of the temple grades. She gave the *kwa(r)shm* or sacred words to all the sanctified areas, sites and buffaloes as well as to numerous species of flora and fauna. Finally, God Aihhn decided to establish the afterworld where Toda spirits, provided they had performed all their rites of passage, would journey and reside.

A typical Toda prayer consists of sacred chant words addressed to such mountain gods, along with other natural landmarks, like nearby peaks, slopes, valleys, ridges, shola thickets, specific sacred trees, rocks, swamps, meadows, pools and streams. There are *kwa(r)shm* also for the dairy-temple, buffalo pen, pen-posts, pen-post bars and other dairy-temple items. If we analyse Toda prayers, we find a corpus of sacred names for several hundred natural features; and if we attempt to map all the named features that have survived the ravages of the recent march of civilization, then we have one

important aspect of Toda sacred geography in place. Of the natural landmarks, hills are the most sacred entities and represent either a major, or a local deity. Consequently, any attempt to reconstruct traditional Toda cosmography must begin with deities who dwell in sacred peaks, who created the sacred buffaloes whose milk is processed in the dairy-temples, and the Toda ethos.

Toda Deity Hills

Todas recognise thirty-four sacred places as *taihh-tehtt*, “deity-hills” (although a few are associated natural landmark features such as, rocks, cliff-faces, etc.). In addition there are hills not included among the thirty-four *taihh-tehtt*, but which specific clans or hamlets regard as being just as sacred. Since all these are considered to be the abodes of the gods, they are treated with extreme reverence and are mentioned in prayers. Although deity and other sacred hills are central to Toda culture, there is no ceremonial activity associated with the preservation of their sanctity (apart from the chanting of their sacred names in prayers).

These natural features that are gods are sacred to all Toda clans. In many instances, a particular god is also the ruling deity of one or more specific clan. Thus for example, Kaa(r)sh-gol is a god for all Todas (Fig. 2), but is also the ruling deity of Kaa(r)sh clan. Some clans have a special relationship to more than one of the thirty-four *taihh-tehtt* listed above. For instance, Maihhdr clansmen look to Kawnttaihh (his hill near Avalanche, better known as Devar-Betta) as their ruling deity, but also revere Kwatteihhn, a former clansman who became a god, as a special clan deity. Kwatteihhn’s hill is located in the Attapadi Valley in neighbouring Kerala and commonly known as Malleswaran Mala (Lord Shiva’s mountain; 1664 m). Six other hills in Attapadi Valley are also associated with Kwatteihhn, and therefore sacred to Todas. Next to Kwatteihhn’s hill is that of his divine consort, Goddess Teihhkosh (1554m), adjacent to which is that of his inseparable friend, Errtn (1447m). Four other hills in the general neighbourhood are those of his other friends, Kalgyawdr, Pehnpehhroty, Eezheihhm and Koll(zh)taan. Besides Kawnttaihh and the seven hills associated with Kwatteihhn, Maihhdr clan is closely linked with four other major deity hills and sites, viz. Aihhzaihh, Mōzaihh, Nee(r)shngo(r)shy and Tehhkaiahny, all of which are situated in the Upper Bhavani-Bison Swamp area.

Because Kwatteihhn was the last among Todas who became hill deities, his life story is remembered well and I shall outline how he came to reside in his special hill. Towards the end of his life, Kwatteihhn and friend, Errtn, were returning home with salt from Peihhtt (in Mannarkad area). When they crossed river Pōlpahh, just below the Kurumba tribal village of Pawny (Tudiki), Kwatteihhn saw a hair entwined around his foot. On lifting it up, he was astonished to see that it had an unusual golden hue and was very long. He asked Errtn to wait while he went upstream in search of the person to whom this exquisite hair belonged. Errtn, who had a foreboding of what might happen, tried to dissuade Kwatteihhn, but he would not listen. The story then tells how Kwatteihhn soon came upon a group of divine females playing naked in a beautiful pool of water, with their capes placed on a nearby rock. When they spotted Kwatteihhn the females quickly gathered up their clothing and ran away. But one was left behind. Realising that the remaining figure was Goddess Teihhkosh, Kwatteihhn sat atop her clothing until she agreed to marry him. Finally, she acquiesced, although Kwatteihhn would soon have to pay the price for his audacity.

Later, as Kwatteihhn and Errtn continued their return journey to the Nilgiris, a *kaarrpill(zh)c* bird (*Saxicola caprata*) irritated Kwatteihhn by fluttering across his path. Errtn understood that this bird, harbinger of future events, was telling Kwatteihhn that his time in this world was up. Sure enough, next morning, Kwatteihhn was missing. All that remained to be seen was the deerskin on which he had slept, his silver ring and some froth. Legend has it that Kwatteihhn later took residence inside an outstandingly-peaked hill in Attapadi to the southwest of Nilgiris.

R.W. Burton (1940) describes the peak where Kwatteihhn resides as possessing a “remarkable pinnacle having a 400 ft. perpendicular scarp, which dominates the whole valley and can be seen stabbing the sky from [as far away as] Met-tupalayam. It is said that no man has ever set foot on the top of the pinnacle ...” Burton’s observation that no man had set foot on the summit notwithstanding, this peak has long been the site of a Kurumba shrine dedicated to Lord Shiva and the destination of an annual pilgrimage. On the night of Mahashivaratri, Kurumbas select around twenty amongst themselves to pilgrimage to this peak. In recognition of the fact that this peak is also the abode of a Toda deity, they sometimes take Todas along and only the chosen few are permitted to ascend to the holy summit (Fig. 3).

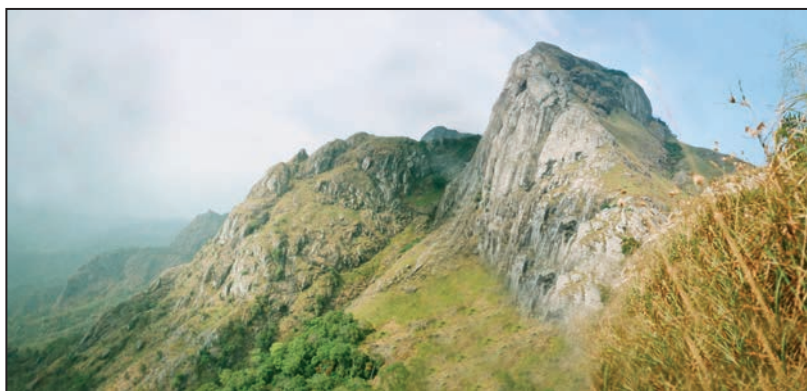


Figure 3—Kwatteihhn Peak: a panoramic view just before the final ascent.

Kaa(r)sh-gol, the Origin of the Monsoon and Other Pilgrimages

Kaa(r)sh-gol (Nilgiri Peak) is one of the most important of the Todas' deity hills and the abode of a god of the same name. He is the ruling deity of Kaa(r)sh patriclan, which shares his name. This peak, a sheer massif, 2476 m, is in Toda thinking, intimately related to the onset of the Southwest Monsoon. Todas say that the first mists of this monsoon swirl around this hill—like people perambulating a temple building—before moving to the deity hill Kawnttaihh (Devar-Betta), where the mist similarly encircles the summit. Todas believe that, following this phenomenon, the monsoon rains will begin and that the mist will not leave these two peaks until the Southwest Monsoon peters out.

At Kawnttaihh hill, three conical projections may be seen on its rocky face. The Todas have a *kwa(r)shm* for each one, viz. *Keezhkymehn*, *Kwaw(r)shy-vōh* and *Tee(r)shymudry*. They say that these three conical projections store the mist, wind and rain respectively. They believe that, while he was eating some *kaihh(r)sh* fruit (*Syzygium densiflorum*), Kawnttaihh spat out the chewed on seeds that became the mist. As he spat out the seeds, the air expelled from his mouth became the fierce monsoon wind that ever since, has bombarded the Nilgiris. Finally, his spittle became the monsoon rain.

Because Kaa(r)sh-gol peak is considered by Todas as not ascendable, and the other peak associated with the onset of the Southwest Monsoon, viz. Kawnttaihh happens to be the ruling deity for hamlets situated in the Kundah Range, Todas undertake an annual pilgrimage to this hilltop.

Once, when this writer was visiting the seasonal hamlet Kwehh(r)shy, he was able to participate in this pilgrimage. The priest had brought some milk in a bamboo vessel and, at the summit, poured this milk onto a flat rock, while all prayed and prostrated themselves. The pilgrims danced and chanted the *konn. ezht* song composition in the traditional manner. They prostrated themselves towards the distant hill where God Kwatteihhn resides. The pilgrims also executed the *koymukht* salutation and prayed in the direction of all major water, hill and other sacred sites located in this area and prayed for success of the impending monsoon. Along with the salt-giving rites, the pilgrimage to Kawnttaihh hill (Fig. 4) represents a Toda attempt to maintain the sanctity and health of their environment.

Another hill to which Todas pilgrimage during onset of the summer showers in April is Mount Paw(r)sh where they conduct an annual ceremony and pray to this hill's deity and that of the Pykara River that flows below, for blessings, ecological and general well-being.

Clan Deities and Their Hills

The ruling deity of Nawsh patriclan resides in Pwoo(r)shy hill located near the clan's chief hamlet. This is the abode of the pre-eminent Toda goddess, Taihhki(r)shy. Her husband P-heedhy resides in a prominent peak located in Mukurti area, named after him (Fig. 5). This is the second important hill for this clan; another is Kehrr-taihh, whose resident hillock is located in the vicinity of Nawsh hamlet, as is Mokhwehder-tehnp, a grass-covered mound deity site.



Figure 4—The pilgrimage to Mt Kawnttaihh is an indirect method of ecosystem management.

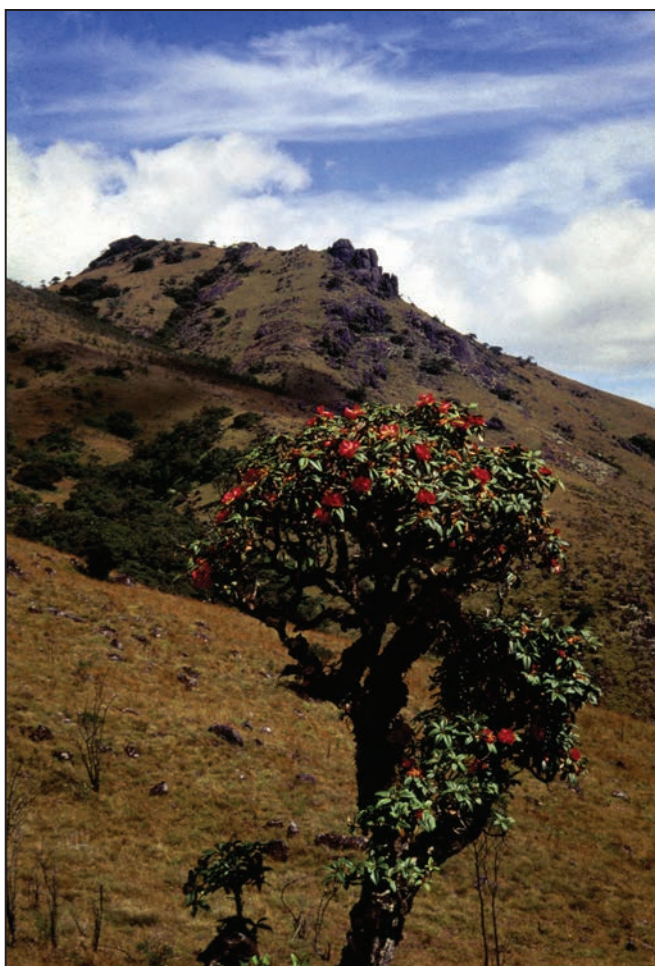


Figure 5—Deity hill P-heedhy dominates the Mukurti landscape.

Nehdry clan has Kawdr-daihh as its ruling deity, whose peak is located in Hullikal area of south-eastern Nilgiris. In order to resolve the predicament caused by Kwattaihh's intransigent behaviour, the gods once summoned a council at Mount Tehhkolmudry. Kwattaihh attended, but refused to heed the gods' censure, who then decided that one of them, Kawdr-daihh, would take Kwattaihh to a cliff and push him into the abyss below. Kawdr-daihh accomplished this feat, but Kwattaihh had a soft landing on a thicket and used a bamboo pole to vault back and hit his aggressor on the head, splitting it into three pieces. This is why, the legend tells us, even today Kawdr-daihh's peak has three projections. The female Goddess Nawtt.ee(r)shy is the ruling deity for Melgaa(r)sh clan; this imposing hill, named Mt Snowdon by the British, is located near Ooty Town. Another deity of Melgaa(r)sh clan is Kwattaihh, a clansman who later became a god (see above).

Korattaihh, is the ruling deity of two patrilineal divisions, Kaihhr-rawdr of Tawrrta(r)sh division, and Kaihhr of Taihhfill(zh)y division. This god's hill is located near the principal hamlets of both these clans. Korattaihh, another son of Goddess Taihhki(r)shy, is said to have emerged miraculously from her afterbirth that floated down Pykara River. Legend goes that the baby roamed around the temple complex of Awdr, located at the lower end of Pykara River. He began to play with the sacred calves and to touch various sacred dairy objects. God Kondhill(zh)y-daihh, residing in a peak in Mukurti area was alarmed at the child's behaviour. At this time, the nearby Kawtt.y deity hill, was higher than Kondhill(zh)y-daihh, and thus the latter could not always see the boy interfering with the sacred dairy operations in the distance. So it is said, Kondhill(zh)y-daihh took a buffalo pen-post and struck Kawtt.y peak, breaking it into three smaller summits. This reduced Kawtt.y's height, permitting Kondhill(zh)y-daihh to keep constant watch over this boy from a distance. Once, God Teihhfakh, who happened to be this boy's maternal uncle, was passing by. Seeing the boy, he set him on his lap and immediately recognised him as his sister's son. When the gods next met in council, they decided that Teihhfakh's nephew should henceforth occupy the peak that was to be named Korattaihh after him.

Pehrgawdr clan has the nearby female deity hill, Etyott.y-daihh (commonly known as Rangaswamy Betta, 1786m), as its presiding deity. This goddess is said to be the consort of Kawnttaihh, mentioned earlier. This patrilineal division has a second major deity, Kwehdrehnn-ddaihh, whose hill (1490m) is located beyond the Nilgiri range, in what is now called Dimbum Ghat. This deity was a son of Goddess Taihhki(r)shy and a story relates how he once had an altercation with his mother, who, in an attempt to subdue him crushed some shoots of the *kwaagehl* plant (*Cyanotis* sp.) on a still visible rock and, preparing an infusion, poured it over the boy. This however only caused his neck to bend. For this reason, Todas say, the distant hill (visible from the Pehrgawdr area) has a curious bend close to its summit (Fig. 6).

The Tawrrawdr clan has Po(d)zeveh(r)shn and Peh(r)sheveh(r)shn as its ruling deities. These gods are two more of Goddess Taihhki(r)shy's sons, who reside in adjacent hills. Two other deities important to this patrilineal division—mentioned in its prayers—also occupy adjacent hills Tehhvony and Kaadhmoof nearby.

The deity hills associated with Kehhwehdr clan are Kawtt.y, located in Mukurti area, and Taihhkhaa(r)sh (Wapshare Peak, 2275m), located near Kaa(r)sh-gol (Nilgiri Peak).

Locally-Sacred Hills

Besides the hills that are residences of ruling deities for various clans, there are others that are hamlet-specific. Whenever one hamlet is located away from the main patrilineal settlement area, it will usually have a deity hill nearby as its sacred site. For example, Melgaa(r)sh clan's seasonal hamlet of Nhyoollnn, is located in the Kundahs, the heartland of Maihhr clan. Consequently, Nhyoollnn hamlet's presiding deity is Kawnttaihh (see above). Mheen hamlet belongs to Kehhwehdr clan, but regards the nearby Nawtt.ee(r)shy hill and its resident god as its presiding deity rather than Kawtt.y and Taihhkhaa(r)sh that are the ruling deities of the entire clan.

It was on the slopes of deity hills Kawtt.y and Kawnttaihh that the dairyman-priest at the most-sacred tee institutions would ritually fire (with firesticks) the grasslands to herald the onset of the winter season. This also served an important purpose of direct management of the ecosystem, but has been proscribed by the Forest Department.

Besides these deity peaks, there are other hills that are exceptionally important to one patrilineal division. Some of them are regarded on a par with the deity peaks themselves and represent the ruling deities of particular clans. For example, Taihhkavfy at the northern edge of the Upper Nilgiris is particularly sacred to Teihhfakh clan, while Tehhkolmudry on the north-eastern edge (where gods are believed to have held council in ancient times) is especially sacred to Kerrir clan. In both cases, the sacred hill is close to the clan's chief settlement.

Some Toda clans have no major ruling deity, but worship the local god of a nearby hill. There are also numerous minor hills that are sacred to one or more hamlet(s) located nearby (see Table 1 for an example) and are mentioned in the prayer of the associated hamlet(s).



Figure 6—Kwehdrehnn-ddaihh's summit has a "bent neck" appearance.

Table 1—Sacred Hills and their kwa(r)shm according to patriclan and hamlet associations (example of one hamlet given here).

Patriclan	Hamlet	Sacred Name of Hill	Associated Couplet (kwa(r)shm)
Kaa(r)sh	Kaa(r)sh	1)Peihhdhawll(z)	1)Kawllvehll(zh)/Peihhdhawll(zh)f//
		2) Oodhill(zh)nn	2)Oodhill(zh)nn/Ehchoodhill(zh)nn//
		3) Agaa(r)sh	3)Ta(r)shagaa(r)sh/ Ta(r)shaarrkwehhdr// Ta(r)shaarranboll(zh)y///

Finally, in discussing hills sacred to the Todas, we must not forget those located in Amunawdr, the Toda afterworld that is physically located in the far south-western Nilgiris. The most important of these are Taihh-mush-kullnn, the abode of Aihhn (Fig. 7), who rules this afterworld, and the hill into which both human and buffalo spirits are said to disappear into the afterworld.

Todas believe an entire sacred peak is the manifestation of its associated deity. Consequently, they do not build shrines on the summits of sacred hills, as is the custom of some other Nilgiri peoples. There are instances, however, where a single peak is sacred not only to the Todas, but also to some other people. It is for this reason that many of these hills are popularly known as Devar-Betta, literally “God’s hill”, in the Badaga language. We saw above how the hill that Todas know as Kwatteihhn is regarded by Kurumbas as being the abode of Lord Shiva and they have built a hilltop shrine there. Similarly, Kawnttaihh is a hill sacred both to Todas and Badagas and the latter have built a shrine at the summit. Finally, the hill that Todas call Etyott.y daihh, is sacred to three communities: Todas, Irulas and Badagas, and is better known as Rangaswamy Betta, since there is a temple dedicated to Lord Ranga, an aspect of the all-India deity Vishnu on its peak.

**Figure 7**—Taihh-mush-kullnn Peak, from where God Aihhn rules over the Toda afterworld.

Deity Hills and their Sanctity

Emphasising the belief that gods reside inside the hills, Todas relate stories of how they have heard sounds of resident gods entering his or her hill and closing the entrance behind them. At Kawllvoy, close to Pazhtaarr hamlet, one can actually see a door-like entrance on the cliff-face of this hill. Similarly, at Awllvoy, situated behind Krurmund Waterfall, a door-like feature can be seen in the rocks.

There are several stories concerning the power of a specific hill god. One well known recent story relates to the construction of the hydroelectric dam at Upper Bhavani. During the building process, workers started digging earth from the nearby deity hills, Aihhzaiah and Mōzaihh. This earth was to be used for the construction work. Some Toda elders, committed to their sacred hills, protested at this sacrilege, but their words were not heeded. After a while news came that, during the excavation, earth had caved in and killed some of the labourers. Subsequently, these hills were left untouched.

In the traditional Toda mind, any alteration in the ecosystem around a deity hill indicates a profound sickness of the environment. This may be due to the planting of exotics, or to actual destruction.

An Appeal for World Heritage Status

The information provided in the first section of this paper establishes the cultural criteria for the area under the Toda sacred hills and related ecosystems to be designated as a World Heritage (WH) site. As the biodiversity value of this area also overwhelmingly fulfils the natural criteria, it is proposed to be recognised as a “mixed” WH property.

Since a nearby portion of the Western Ghats (Anamalai Cluster) has recently been inscribed as a biodiversity WH site, the area in and around the complex of Toda sacred hills also has the similar “Outstanding Universal Value”, a key requirement for inscription of a property on the WH List.

Secondly, the ecosystems of the Toda sacred hills form the heartland of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve (NBR), the first such to be recognised by UNESCO under their Man and Biosphere Programme in India (1986). This was in recognition of the outstanding bio-cultural diversity of this area, for example, there are over 130 flowering plants endemic to a small area.

In addition, all the endangered mammals of this area like the Asian Elephant (with perhaps the most numbers in the world), Lion-Tailed Macaque, Nilgiri Tahr, Bengal Tiger, Wild Dog (Dhole) and Dusky-Striped Squirrel are found in the NBR. There are also several Important Bird Areas (IBAs) in and around the Toda sacred hills and they contain healthy populations of most of the sixteen endangered bird species of the Western Ghats (the Western Ghats have the second highest number of IBAs in the world, 29). One resident bird species, *Garrulax cachinnans* (Nilgiri Laughing-thrush), is restricted to a home range of less than 1000 sq. km. Although the Western Ghats as a whole is listed as an Endemic Bird Area (EBA; another important criterion for being listed as a WH site), it needs to be emphasised that there are species endemic to a very small area, located precisely where the sacred hills of the indigenous Toda people lie.

Besides, even among amphibians, there are a number of species endemic to the region where the Toda deities reside in their peaks. Many frog species are being discovered regularly, for example, *Raorchestes ravii*, in 2011 (yet to be assessed by IUCN). Among insects too, there are a number of endemics with a very restricted range, like the Nilgiri Clouded Yellow (*Colias nilagiriensis*) butterfly.

The sacred landscape of the Todas constitutes the heart of the Western Ghats Global Biodiversity hotspot. The NBR is also a part of the Global 200 priority eco-regions and an International Centre of Plant Diversity (CPD). Moreover, it is classified as a Key Biodiversity Area (KBA) as well as a global Alliance for Zero Extinction (AZE) site. All these are taken into consideration while determining potential natural WH status.

At the ecosystem level, the highland shola-grassland climax ecosystem of the Western Ghats (especially in and around the Mukurti National Park where most of the Toda sacred hills are located) is recognised as globally unique. The stunted evergreen, montane shola forests that lie in the moist hollows between extensive grass-covered hills,

are referred to as “living fossils”, as they are thought to be relics of ancient and far more extensive forests dating back to the time of the undivided mega continent, Gondwanaland.

From the points mentioned in this paper, it is apparent that the region in and around Toda sacred hills meets both cultural as well as the two primary biodiversity criteria: (ix) as they are clothed with globally unique ecosystems that exhibit high endemism at species and higher taxonomic levels and (x) as they host scores of locally endemic species and their habitats, thus meeting the requirements for it to be inscribed as a mixed WH site.

A study by the IUCN World Heritage Programme in 2013, lists the Western Ghats as the most irreplaceable WH site for threatened amphibian, bird and mammal species in the world. This study also categorically recommends that the existing WH site in the Western Ghats may merit extension, by accommodating contiguous or close by areas, through serial approaches, to better reflect the exceptional species values in the larger areas surrounding them.

Concluding Remark

The above-mentioned serial approach can be used to add the area in and around Toda sacred hills to the existing Western Ghats WH site as a mixed (cultural and biodiversity criteria) property and protecting it accordingly.

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