

# Hill Wetlands in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve : A People's Conservation Initiative

## A note based on a social assessment of participant communities

This project proposes to facilitate people's conservation initiatives around three wetlands in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve. One of them is in the Badaga village of Nedugula in Kotagiri taluka and the other in the Toda village of Tarnad Mand in Udthagamandalam taluka. The third is in the middle of a reserved forest in the Upper Bhavani region, relatively isolated from human habitation.

The challenges to conservation vary across the three wetlands. They range from the spread of invasive species to breakdown of traditional systems of community governance and in as much characterize the socio-ecological changes that are occurring in the Reserve. This note discusses the social circumstances of the Nedugula and Tarnad Mand wetlands.

### NEDUGULA

This Badaga village is a continuation of the Bergani valley - extensive and large and known to be an intensive agriculture zone. Wetlands are situated in the fields and also on one end of the agricultural operation. It is as though the wetland surrounds the agriculture enclave. Sources of the stream are in the upper reaches – bringing with them significant amount of chemicals draining from agriculture operations.

The Badagas are the largest indigenous group in the Nilgiris. Politically, they are under the Backward Class Category. There has been an ongoing demand by the community to be included in the list of Scheduled Tribes, citing their compact geographical location, animistic customs and traditions of ancestral worship. As such, the community is well-organized with significant political participation at various levels of local government.

The traditional systems of governance within the Badaga community are considered to be fairly robust. The systems involves a federated structure of villages that comprise a *seemai* or a region, within which a traditional leader of *parpathy* oversees issues in a group of villages. In each village, the institution of the *maniagarar* is a hereditary position of village leadership and local adjudication. While these systems still hold good on matters of community rituals etc., they have little or no influence in matters of common property such as the village swamp.

Swamps or *hanni* (in Badaga), hold significance for the community as important indicators of subsurface flows; in the older pasturages, they provided much needed water holes for domestic cattle. It was believed