

Meet the man in Ooty who has grown a mini Shola forest

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In a discreet corner of Udhagamandalam town, over 60 native Shola trees, numerous grasses, orchids and balsams thrive in the home of one of the town's well-known dentists and experts on Toda culture.

On his 23-cent property, Tarun Chhabra, points to an orchid (*Calanthe triplicata*), and speaks of its relevance to the indigenous Toda Adivasi community.

"The Todas call this the *taihn-esh-toorr*, or the honey-leaf plant. The flowering of this species is an indicator of the early stage of the Southwest monsoon and the leaves are perennial. The



Tarun Chhabra

■ M. SATHYAMOORTHY

reason it is called the honey-leaf plant is because when the Todas are collecting honey from the hives of the *Apis cerana* bee in the tree cavities, they can fashion the leaves into a vessel to collect it," said Mr. Chhabra.

After moving into the property in 2012, Mr. Chhabra has planted a wide range of Shola tree species, including *Syzigium densiflorum*, *Rhododendron arboreum*, *Symplocos cochinchinesi*, *Syzigium tamilnadensis* and many others.

Mr. Chhabra also has, in his collection, very rare plant species native to the Western Ghats, including five species of impatiens (balsams) as well as cobra lilies and native grasses, most of which are unique to the Ghats.

"For instance, the *Impatiens leschenaultii*, found commonly in the Nilgiris and maybe in the Palani Hills as well, is unique, as you can

find it flowering right through the year," said Mr. Chhabra.

The more than 60 trees in Mr. Chhabra's residence and the other species of flora have quickly grown over the last seven years to dominate the area where he lives.

"The growth of these trees is a testament to the fact that Shola species grow very quickly provided they are planted in the right conditions," said Mr. Chhabra.

He said there was a belief among the public that Shola tree species grow extremely slowly, which discourages people from actively trying to grow them in their homes.

"The Todas rely on native flora for each and every cere-

mony, from their birth till death, and these ceremonies all played a key role in ensuring the protection of these species," said Mr. Chhabra, highlighting the gradual disappearance of key species of grasses like *Eriochrysis ran-gacharii* -- known to the Todas as *Avful* -- from the landscape.

"The Todas use this grass to re-thatch the roofs of their temples. However, due to changes in the landscape, such as the destruction of grasslands where this particular grass was found, the Todas have to trek more than 90 km to find this particular species of grass, which is becoming increasingly hard to find," said Mr. Chhabra.