

CONSERVING DELHI'S *PAHARI*: RETHINKING THE RIDGE AS AN URBAN CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

JYOTI PANDEY SHARMA

Department of Architecture
Deenbandhu Chhotu Ram University of Science and Technology
Murthal, Haryana
E-mail: jyotip.sharma@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The geographical entity called the Delhi Region, home to the many capital cities of Delhi through the ages, is a triangular area marked by the river Yamuna and the Ridge, locally called *Pahari*, an extended spur of the Aravalli mountain ranges running in the south-eastern and north-western direction to complete the triangle formation. The Ridge, an important marker in the landscape of the cities of Delhi, besides serving as an urban forest, offered sites for dynastic capitals. Its utilitarianism as a built environment aerator notwithstanding, the ridge evolved as a cultural landscape with human interventions of varied socio-cultural dispensations, coexisting with the natural environment.

While the significance of the Delhi Ridge as a natural landscape is underscored by the state and citizenry in equal measure in contemporary times, its reading and appreciation as a cultural landscape has been ignored. This Paper aims to address this gap by focussing on the ridge as a cultural product where nature and human interventions came together to produce a multilayered heterogenous landscape with tangible, utilitarian functions overlaid with abstract and experiential dimensions. It asserts that Delhi's *Pahari* is a worthy candidate for conservation not simply as an urban forest but as a cultural asset in its entirety.

Key words: Ridge, City, Culture, Conservation.

Introduction

No other city in the Indian Subcontinent can lay claim to so many lives as Delhi. There are several layers that collectively constitute the identity of the city at the core of which lies a geographic region, the Delhi Triangle, defined by two natural entities, *Darya* (River) Yamuna on the east and the Ridge, locally called *Pahari* (hillock) on the west and south. The triangle has been home to the many capital cities of Delhi from pre-historic times to the present day.

Geographically speaking, the Ridge is a spur of the Aravalli Hills that run for 800 km from Gujarat through Rajasthan and Haryana. It enters Delhi from the south-west through Gurugram (formerly Gurgaon) and subsequently bifurcates into two branches that make their way through the city, one going eastwards to Tughlakabad-Jaunapur-Bhatti, while the other in a north-eastern direction to Mehrauli-Vasant Vihar-Chanakyapuri-Civil Lines-Wazirabad. The Ridge lies in the Kohi ecological subdivision of the Delhi Triangle, as delineated by the colonial state following the occupation of the city in the early 19th century, the other being Bangar, Dabar, and Khadar (GOI, 1988). The Kohi tract was described in the colonial official records as hilly with rocky landform and

concomitantly the Ridge flora was characterized as a deciduous, arid, scrub forest (Fig. 1). Typically, the Ridge was home to stunted, thorny and open canopied trees such as Dhak (*Butea monosperma*); Dhau (*Anogeissus pendula*); Khair (*Acacia catechu*); Kareel (*Capparis decidua*); Kumttha (*Acacia senegal*) and Phulai (*Acacia modesta*) (Krishen, 2006).



Fig. 1: The Ridge: A hilly landform with stunted and thorny flora
Courtesy: Archaeological Survey of India Photo Archives, Delhi Vol. 12, 1931-32, No. 5897.

Realising the worth of Delhi's *Pahari* as a cultural asset in its entirety.

Besides serving as an urban forest, the Ridge offered sites for dynastic capital building enterprises for various political dispensations that ruled Delhi from the pre-Muslim era onwards. Indeed, as is evident from coeval cartographic sources, the evolutionary trajectory of the various cities of Delhi built in the Delhi Triangle initiated from the Ridge and subsequently shifted to the Yamuna river front (Fig. 2). City building enterprises entailed making human interventions in the Ridge that besides

acting as an urban forest would now perform a multi-layered role as a cultural landscape.

This paper examines the Delhi Ridge, an important marker in the urban landscape of the cities of Delhi, that has traditionally been regarded as a significant element of the natural landscape as an urban forest. While the Ridge historically was and continues to be an urban forest, it has also served as a site for human interventions of varying scale through the ages. In the current scenario, on the one

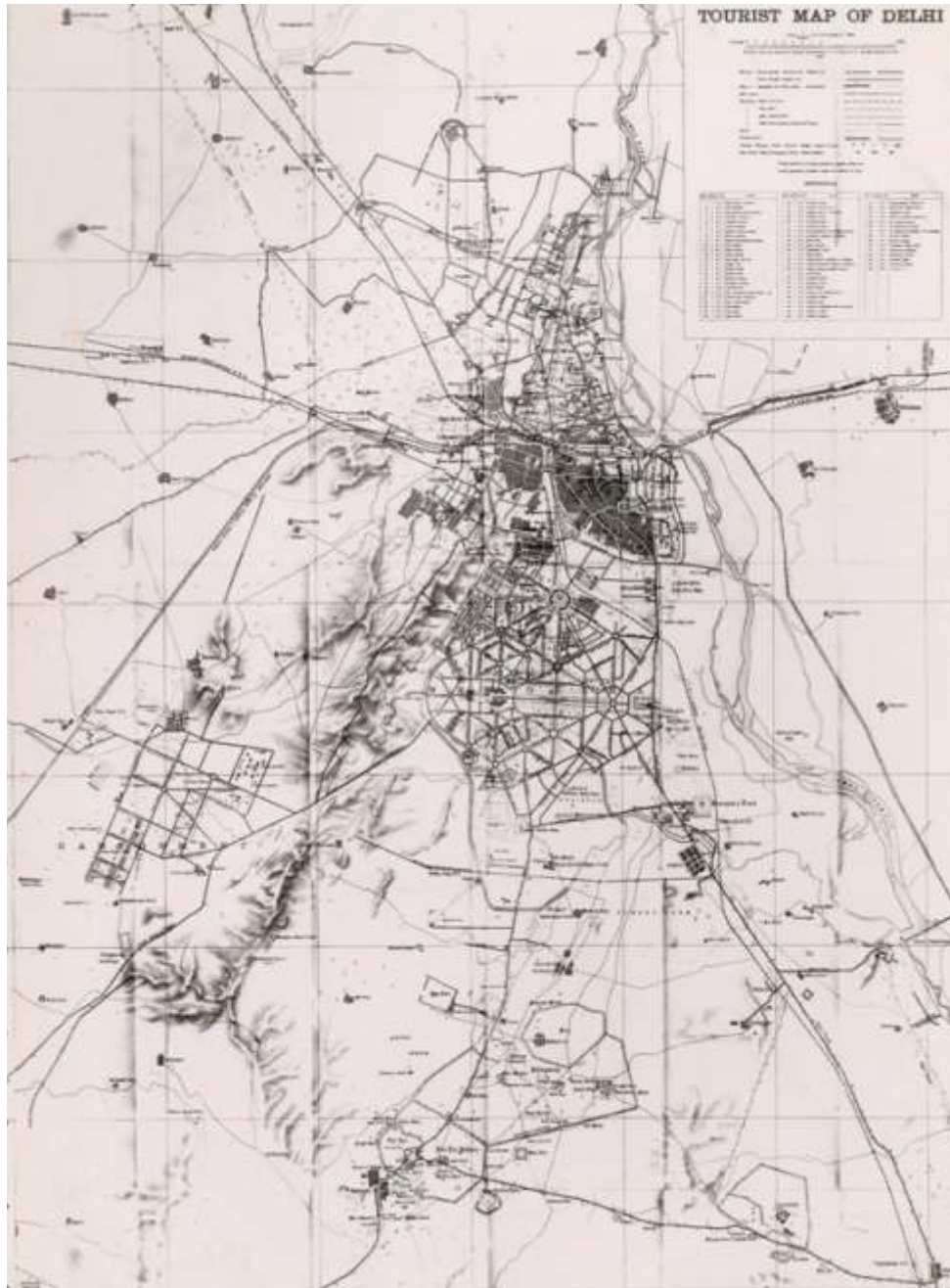


Fig. 2: Delhi region: Cities of Delhi within the Delhi triangle on the Ridge and along the Yamuna as indicated on the Map- '*Delhi: Copy of the Tourist Map of Delhi*'.

Courtesy: Archaeological Survey of India Photo Archives, Delhi Vol. 14, 1935-41, No. 6730.

hand, from a culturalist's perspective, the Ridge's worth as a cultural resource, with human interventions made by varied socio-cultural dispensations, that have coexisted with the natural environment, remains undermined. On the other, in popular worldview, the nature-human connect is non-existent with citizenry tending to perceive the Ridge only as a forest. This paper argues that the Delhi Ridge is a heterogeneous landscape composed in equal measure of natural and human made interventions, both qualifying as heritage today. Indeed, the global understanding of heritage has come a long way from the compartmentalized and object centric notion of the post war decades to a more nuanced understanding of heritage where the intersections between nature and humans are to be celebrated as what UNESCO, World Heritage Centre's Operational Guidelines describe as a Cultural Landscape (UNESCO, World Heritage Centre, 2008). In view of the above, it is argued that the Ridge is a cultural product where nature and human interventions came together to produce a multilayered, heterogeneous landscape, worthy of conservation.

Material and Methods

While the natural heritage of the Ridge has been a recipient of academic scholarship, it is the built heritage, ranging from capital cities to modest structures of plebeian patronage that has been neglected. The Paper aims to address this gap in scholarship by investigating the various human made interventions on the Ridge through history and asserts that a more holistic reading of Delhi's Ridge would be as a landscape shaped by nature and humans rather than the current reading of it as an urban forest. The built environment interventions of the Ridge have been investigated through on-site fieldwork to examine the built-form remains that still survive in various states of conservation from ruins to complete entities and the findings of the investigation form part of the paper. On-site fieldwork has been bolstered by archival research, using both textual and graphic including cartographic and photographic sources, to set the remains as they exist today in their respective historical contexts to further enhance the understanding of the interventions in time and space. The interventions have been classified in two broad categories, namely Pre-colonial interventions and colonial interventions, both types qualifying as heritage in the current scenario. The former include building enterprises under the patronage of the Delhi Sultans followed chronologically by those of the Mughals, while the latter are interventions made by the British following their occupation of Delhi in 1803, first as the British East India Company and after the events of 1857 as the British Raj. The events of 1857, described as the Mutiny in coeval

colonial literature and celebrated as the First War of Independence in independent India are significant not only politically with Delhi being one of the major centres of the indigenous uprising but also have an important bearing on the Ridge as will be discussed later. The following section will examine the built-form interventions made on the Ridge.

Pre-colonial interventions on the Ridge

The most significant human intervention on the Ridge was the founding of capital cities of various ruling dynasties including those of both pre-Muslim and Muslim origin through the 12th to the 15th century, within the Delhi Triangle (Sharma, 1990). These include Lal Kot; Qila Rai Pithora; Siri; Tughlakabad; Adilabad and Jahanpanah as revealed by cartographic sources (Fig. 2). The Ridge afforded an elevated site that given the prevailing political scenario met the need for defense rather effectively and the river Yamuna formed part of the hinterland. Subsequently, the topographical preference was reversed in part due to the relative waning of threat to the state of external invasions, with the river becoming the preferred city building site and the Ridge serving as the hinterland. Cities including Kilokiri; Ferozabad; Mubarakabad; Dinpanah; Shahjahanabad and New Delhi were all built on the Yamuna (Fig. 2). The locational shift by no means implied the loss of significance of the Ridge as the latter continued to be viewed as an extension of the city and remained in use. Typically, city building enterprise was an elaborate affair centered on the imperial spatial ensemble around which interventions of sub-imperial and plebeian origin gravitated. The Ridge besides offering sites for city building was also the source of construction material for buildings. In its role as the hinterland, its flora and fauna caused the Ridge to serve as a popular hunting ground. It became the site of the royal hunt, an elaborate affair notably under the Mughals, where the *Badshah* (Emperor) and the imperial entourage frequented the Ridge in search of game. This resulted in the building of hunting retreats, called *Shikar Gah* on the Ridge some of which continue to survive, notably Kushk Mahal; Malcha Mahal and Bhuli Bhatiyarika Mahal, all located on what is today identified as the Central Ridge (Archaeological Survey of India, 1997). Further, across the Ridge the Monsoon runoff was collected via building of *Bandh* (check dam) in mud and stone across seasonal streams to create *Talaos* (ponds) and *Jheels* (lakes) to meet the need for water. Several traces of embankment walls remain scattered across the Ridge today as part of a network of dams representing a traditional knowledge system for water gathering (Cherian, 2010). In Wazirabad, for example, a water channel was dammed to create a water body around

which the tomb complex of a local *Sufi* saint, Shah-e Alam, including a bridge, was built (Fig. 3). Gardens both pleasure gardens and orchards were also laid out under imperial and sub-imperial patronage on the Ridge such as Talkatora Bagh built during the reign of the 18th century Mughal ruler, Muhammad Shah Rangila.

Colonial interventions on the Ridge in the Pre-1857 years

Delhi was occupied by the British East India Company in the early 19th century as a ruling power with the incumbent Mughal ruler, no longer *Badshah* but designated as the King of Delhi becoming a dependent of the Company. The colonial regime subscribed to the by now well established colonial norms of tripartite spatial territorialisation. The British Cantonment and Civil Lines, both spread on the Ridge, north of the indigenous walled city, referred to as the Native city in colonial parlance (King, 1976). The colonial interventions introduced not just new settlement types but also novel built-forms inspired by the metropole, notably bungalows and large residential estates and leisure retreats, the last two built by acculturated Company officials popularly referred to as Delhi Nabobs (Anglicized version of the indigenous title given to the elite, *Nawab*). Thomas Metcalfe, Delhi's most famous Nabob built both a residential estate, Metcalfe House, and a leisure retreat, called Dilkhusa, the former occupying parts of an indigenous village settlement north of the walled city and the latter by appropriating a 17th century Mughal era tomb and converting it into a place of leisure (Sharma, 2008). All colonial interventions resulted in large scale felling of trees on the Ridge.

The events of the 1857 uprising against British rule in Delhi were not only politically significant but also impacted the city's future including that of the Ridge (Norman and Young, 1902). From May to September,

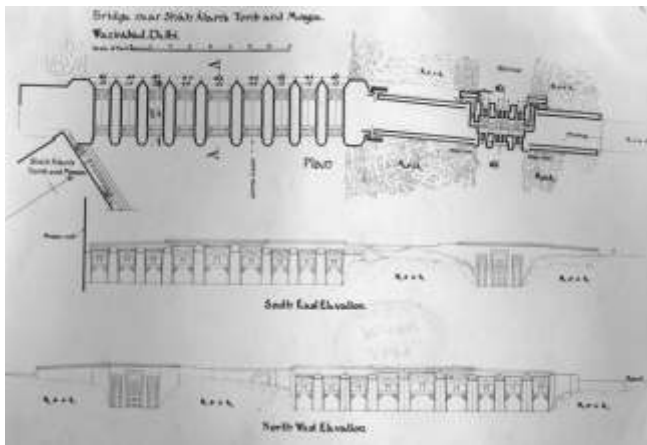


Fig. 3: Wazirabad: Damming a water channel and building a bridge near the tomb of a local Sufi Saint.

Courtesy: Archaeological Survey of India Photo Archives, Delhi Vol. 8, 1923-26, No. 4846.

1857, the indigenous rebels fought the British as the former took control of the walled city and the Mughal *Qila* (Palace Fort). The British forces, completely taken by surprise by the rebel attack, managed to station themselves on the Ridge north of the walled city where they set up their pickets and batteries at among other places at Metcalfe House estate, Ludlow Castle, Qudsiya Bagh, Chauburji Masjid and a Tughlak era observatory locally called 'Pir Ghaib', as indicated by coeval cartographic sources. They battled both insurgents and disease that took a heavy toll of their men and strategised to end the siege of Delhi. During the course of military operations against the rebels, trees on the Ridge were a casualty (Fig. 4). The final assault was made on September 14, 1857 and the British forces entered the city. The city was transformed into a site of war and the British were in complete command by September 20, 1857. The incumbent King of Delhi, Bahadur Shah was taken captive and British victory in Delhi was accomplished shattering the myth of Mughal invincibility.

Colonial interventions on the Ridge in Post-1857 years

Following the British victory, political power shifted from the British East India Company to the British Crown and Queen Victoria was declared as Empress of India. Delhi was penalized for serving as an important centre of the uprising through its annexation to Punjab. The city was controlled by the military and was municipalized (Sharma, 2015). The victorious colonial state, took recourse to a programme of urban restructuring to control city space assisted by a heightened military and police activism. 19th century sanitarians, including military and medical officers set out to concretize their vision of an ideal urbanism through the creation of a military and civic landscape. The colonial administration also fashioned a Mutiny pilgrimage circuit that was marked by sites associated with



Fig. 4: British picket established at a Tughlak era observatory locally called 'Pir Ghaib'.

Courtesy: Archaeological Survey of India Photo Archives, Delhi Vol. 12, 1931-32, No. 5896.

Mutiny action that were to be venerated as pilgrimage sites, while those associated with the rebels were remodelled in a show of authority. The Mutiny landscape was centered on the Ridge and included not only parts of the forest that witnessed action during the events of 1857 but also structures of pre-colonial origin like the Chauburji Masjid, Pir Ghaib and Qudisya Bagh that were all retained as part of Mutiny memorabilia (Sharma, 2008) (Fig. 5). New commemorative structures including the Mutiny and Nicholson Memorials were added to the circuit. The circuit found prominent mention in late 19th century literature especially travel books with visitors urged to undertake the Mutiny pilgrimage failing which they were in danger of being branded as unpatriotic (Keene, 1882). These sanitizing interventions in the walled city and its hinterland resulted in felling of trees on the Ridge. By the late 19th century the Ridge was described as generally bare with little or no vegetation except for some Kikar, Kareel or Ber (Mann and Sehrawat, 2008). Loss of tree cover prompted the colonial state to initiate afforestation endeavours on the Northern Ridge. These were largely directed towards seving the needs of the European residents of the cantonment and civil lines to impact the microclimate through mitigation of heat and were an outcome of individual effort rather than a concerted policy (Mann and Sehrawat, 2008). The southern Ridge became the subject of attention during the course of planning the new capital of British India, New Delhi. The Town Planning Committee recommended the afforestation of the Southern Ridge with a view to enhance the aesthetics of the setting of the new capital by planting trees with visually pleasing attributes (Mann and Sehrawat, 2008). Further, to safeguard the green background, the Southern



Fig. 5: Chauburji Masjid on the Ridge: Retained as a Mutiny Monument.

Courtesy: Archaeological Survey of India Photo Archives, Delhi Vol. 12, 1931-32, No. 5895.

Ridge was declared a reserved forest under Act VII (1878) in 1913. As a consequence, the formal landscape that fronted the Acropolis Capitol whose centre piece was the Government House had a verdant setting in the backdrop provided by the horticultural interventions on the Ridge.

The Delhi Ridge in the post independent era

The Ridge continued to survive as an urban forest in post independent India. Today it is administered via the Ridge Management Board, constituted in 1995 to look after all matters pertaining to the Ridge that has been divided into four Sub-divisions for administrative convenience. These include the northern/old Delhi Ridge that covers 87 ha centered on Kamala Nehru Park; the central/New Delhi Ridge comprising 864 ha centered on Buddha Jayanti Park and Mahavir Vanasthali; the south central/Mehrauli Ridge that has 633 ha centered on Sanjay Van and the southern/Tughlakabad Ridge with 6200 ha centered on Asola and Bhatti wildlife sanctuaries.

Urbanisation and its impact on the Ridge flora and built heritage

The Delhi Ridge's ecosystem plays a vital role in contributing to the city's quality of life. It acts as an aerator of the built environment as an urban forest; contributes in mitigating the impact of air pollution; lowers the ambient temperature thus impacting the microclimate; acts as a buffer against the dust laden winds blowing from the Thar desert and its rocky topography helps in acting as a ground water recharge area. The Ridge also has a rich corpus of historic built-forms raised on it through time comprising entire pre-colonial cities, imperial and sub-imperial structures, modest buildings and commemorative structures that have been integrated with the natural landscape over the ages. This corpus is representative of a multi layered cultural tradition from pre-historic times to recent history.

The Delhi Ridge that once occupied almost 15% of the city's land is affected by rapid urbanisation marked by uncontrolled growth and settlement sprawl following independence (Aggarwal, 2013). This has led to the loss of forest cover of the Ridge with encroachments causing shrinking of the boundaries of the Ridge Sub-divisions. The breaching of perimeter walls defining the physical limits of the forest is rampant, making the area a convenient place for dumping city garbage and abetting the mushrooming of various built-form interventions notably parking lots, religious structures, stores and service buildings and impromptu way side shrines besides campuses of educational institutions and camps of security forces. Further, horticultural interventions aimed at the aestheticisation of the Ridge have led to loss of indigenous

flora. Further more, the built-forms have also been affected by urbanisation and its concomitant forces as they become victims of neglect even as some are protected by the state as monuments. Some structures are misused with little or no regard for their historic worth by people frequenting the Ridge. Vandalism is rampant where the historic fabric is perceived as a source of building material and also as space to be illegally appropriated for use. The Ridge is perceived exclusively as a natural resource with the built-forms viewed as objects in the midst of the natural landscape and not regarded as an integral part of it. Indeed it is worth underscoring that the Delhi Ridge presents a case of coexistence of nature and human intervention as a natural/cultural ecosystem.

Conclusion

It has been established that the Ridge is not simply an urban forest but also a cultural landscape that has been shaped by humans over the ages. The management of the Ridge must therefore draw on the acknowledgement of the Ridge as a natural/cultural spatial ensemble. Such an approach entails involvement of all stakeholders including

the state, professionals and the community and their collective participation in making the Ridge a part of the citizenry's urban life. The state is expected to ensure maintenance of Ridge boundaries; clearly articulate land ownership around the Ridge; remove all types of encroachments; hire watch and ward; enforce statutes and develop appropriate infrastructure such as walking trails, jogging tracks, bird feeding and watching vantage points, etc. On the other hand, professionals must undertake the audit of all natural and built resources; inventorise flora, fauna and historic structures in the precinct; engage in activism including public outreach, and design heritage walks, among others. The community must participate by being aware of the significance of the Ridge and imbibing a sense of pride in the Ridge. It must harness the Ridge as a cultural and educational resource and form citizen forums to work for its conservation.

It is only when all the stakeholders come together that Delhi's *Pahari* worth as a candidate for conservation for posterity not simply as an urban forest but as a cultural asset in its entirety will be fully realised.

दिल्ली की पहाड़ी का संरक्षण : शहरी सांस्कृतिक भूदृश्य के रूप में पर्वत श्रेणी पर पुनरविचार

ज्योति पाण्डे शर्मा

सारांश

दिल्ली क्षेत्र, जो युगों से दिल्ली के कई राजधानी शहरों का घर है, का भौगोलिक अस्तित्व स्थानीय रूप से पहाड़ी कही जाने वाली पर्वत श्रेणी एवं यमुना नदी द्वारा चिह्नित एक त्रिकोणीय क्षेत्र है, जो त्रिकोणीय संरचना को पूर्ण करने हेतु दक्षिण-पूर्वी और उत्तर-पश्चिमी दिशा में फैली हुई अरावली पर्वत रेंजों की एक विस्तारित श्रेणी है। शहरी वन के रूप में कार्य करने के अलावा दिल्ली के शहरों के भूदृश्य में एक महत्वपूर्ण चिह्नक पर्वत-श्रेणी ने राजवंशीय राजधानियों के लिए स्थलों को उपलब्ध कराया। एक निर्मित पर्यावरण वातन के रूप में इसके उपभोगितावाद के होते हुए भी विविध सामाजिक सांस्कृतिक वितरणों, प्राकृतिक पर्यावरण के साथ सहअस्तित्व के मानवीय हस्तक्षेपों के साथ एक सांस्कृतिक भूदृश्यों के रूप में पर्वत-श्रेणी विकसित हुई है। जबकि एक प्राकृतिक भूदृश्य के तौर पर दिल्ली पर्वत-श्रेणी के महत्व को समकालीन समय में समान अनुपात में राज्य और नागरिक वर्ग द्वारा रेखांकित किया गया है। सांस्कृतिक भूदृश्य के रूप में इसके अध्ययन एवं मूल्यांकन की अनदेखी की गई है इस शोधपत्र का उद्देश्य एक ऐसी सांस्कृतिक रचना के रूप में पर्वत-श्रेणी पर केन्द्रित करके इस अन्तराल का समाधान करना है, जहाँ सामान्य एवं प्रायोगिक आयामों से आवृत्त वास्तविक एवं उपयोगी क्रियाओं के साथ एक बहुस्तरीय विषम भूदृश्य का सृजन करने के लिए प्रकृति और मानव हस्तक्षेप एक साथ आए। निश्चयपूर्वक कहा जा सकता है कि दिल्ली की पहाड़ी न केवल एक शहरी वन के रूप में संरक्षण के लिए अपितु अपनी सम्पूर्णता में एक सांस्कृतिक सम्पदा के रूप में भी उपयुक्त है।

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