Enchanting mountainscape

A field trip through the Western Ghats throws up some unexpected thrills

By Anuradha Arjunwadkar

Two tiny bulbous-ended, translucent white tubers were noticed growing in different directions, as if exploring their surroundings. We could barely see the pale little head to which they were attached. The apparatus belonged to a being that was encased in a pea-sized shell. Below the white outgrowths, we could see a mouth. "A snail! And it has horns!" someone exclaimed. "Not horns, those must be feelers," another said. We were a group of ecologists out on a field trip with our instructors. It had been raining all night. A cool and wet August morning found us on a route leading from Pune city towards the coastal Konkan plain to the west.

Majestic waterfall

As the winding road took us through the Western Ghats, we halted at the foot of a majestic waterfall leaping from the dark, towering basalt escarpment down steep, rocky walls.

Marked with pockets of greenery where plants and shrubs clung precariously, it crashed into a shallow pool at the bottom of the cliff, and a frothing torrent gushed out and roared down the slope. It divided under the culvert where we stood gazing, emerging on the other side, poised for another mighty leap into the valley below. A sharp, gusty wind blew, diverting some of the water onto the road. The snail, secure in its shell, had been floating in this splashing.

In fact, those were eyes on stalks, as one of our instructors explained. We observed keenly as he patiently pointed out the retraction and extension of these minute telephonic tentacles. A marvelous beginning to a day of discovery!

Further along the road, we stopped by a patch of forest which had traditionally been protected by the nearby village as a sacred abode of the local deity. We followed a narrow path threading through the forest, the thick foliage nearly blocking out our view of the sky. As the sounds of vehicular traffic were subdued, a pacifying silence pervaded the scene.

At the end of the path, a small shrine stood on a low stone platform, blessing the denizens of the forest.

Dense canopy

Trees and shrubs, some feasting on lankas, crowded on a hillock to one side and extended far in the opposite direction. The rain had let up, but the pitter-patter of rainwater that still dripped through the canopy sent little rivulets across pathways strewn with last year's leaves. Mesmerised, we wandered slowly under the dense canopy, skirting fallen twigs and branches, the carpet of dark, mouldering leaves deafening the sound of our footsteps.

Deeper within the forest we came upon a huge, dark boulder adorned with ferns and mosses. A small white globular structure near its base stood out in the gloom. No bigger than a marble, it seemed to be the skeleton of a miniature football. What might this be? It turned out to be a kind of fungal - a species of 'basket fungus' - which proves on decaying vegetable matter. It lay there like an exotic offering made to the megalith, which embodied the very spirit of the forest. How long might this boulder have sat there, unmoving, as if in deep meditation, and unmoved by the forces of nature - a few decades, perhaps a hundred years, or even longer?

"TUT-TUT-TUT-TUT" IT WENT LIKE A MACHINE-GUN, EMANATING FROM SOME TREES

"Tut-tut-tut!" Loud chattering sounds broke my reverie. "Tut-tut-tut-tut" it went like a machine-gun, emanating from somewhere in the higher branches. What was causing that racket? Uncertain. I tried to locate the source but it seemed to be changing directions; and the thick foliage allowed me not a glimpse of it. "A giant squirrel," someone whispered. What luck to have heard it call!

Taking a pathway leading to an exit to the road, we were brought up short by an imposing tree. It had a massive trunk with several buttress roots radiating from its base. The one closest to us was so thick that, standing beside it, I had to stretch my arm overhead to reach the level of its top. As we stepped around the wild fig tree, for that is what it was. Glaring our necks we observed its massive, spreading branches, far above us. How we wished we could go on to explore the entire forest, but we had to keep that for another day. Reluctantly, we stepped out of the twilight zone, vastly enriched by our experiences of the day.

(The writer is a member of Kalpavriksh, which is coordinating the series.)

Bangalore