

Enchanting mountainscape

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

By Anuradha Arjunwadkar

Two tiny, bulbous-ended, translucent white protuberances moved gently and independently 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 ensconced 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 ecology students, 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 dived 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 wild water onto the road. The snail, secure in its shell, had been floating in this spillage.

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 telescopic tentacles. A marvelous beginning to a day of discovery!

Further along the road, we stopped by a patch of forest which has traditionally been protected by the nearby village as the 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 festooned with lianas, 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



A giant squirrel. PHOTO: ASHISH KOTHARI.



The Mulshi forests. PHOTO: SHRINI WAS GRAMOPADHYE.

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

twigs and branches, the carpet of dark, mouldering leaves deadening 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 fungus – a specimen of ‘basket fungus’ – which grows 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’

Loud chattering sounds broke my reverie. ‘Tut-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 impos-

ing 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! Awestruck, we slowly walked around the wild fig tree, for that is what it was. Craning 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.)