

VALPARAI

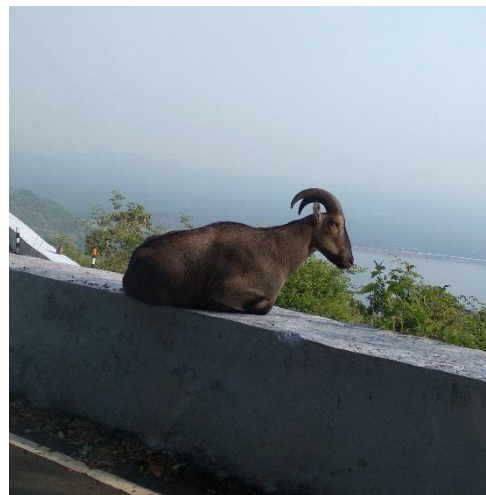
In recent days, most of my unproductive time is spent by looking at computer screen. On one such occasion, I came across a video titled “Do not visit Valparai!”. I was curious on it, as I just finished my holidays there. The video was elaborating on the topic, like the inherent risk of travelling there because of wild animals like elephant, leopard, bear etc. Among other good reasons like no amusement zones for kids, we are discouraged to venture there so that we do not spoil the natural habitat.

When I planned my summer trip just a week in advance, I had no idea about the place, and no feedback or inputs from other travellers for obvious reasons. Most of the tourist itineraries in this part of India include Ooty and Kodaikanal. People visit these places as they offer abundant for family and kids with lakes, gardens and photographic points. People visit these regions of Western Ghats like pilgrimage in every summer for a brief escape from searing summer.

Our trip started from Coimbatore through recently laid road for about 40 kms. to reach Pollachi. Up on a further drive of 24 kms. we reached Aliyar dam, the water reservoir built across Aliyar river in 1962 with maximum depth of 120 ft. The water body surrounded by Anamalai hills is a visual treat for the eyes. It serves as a main source of irrigation for Pollachi and surrounding villages.

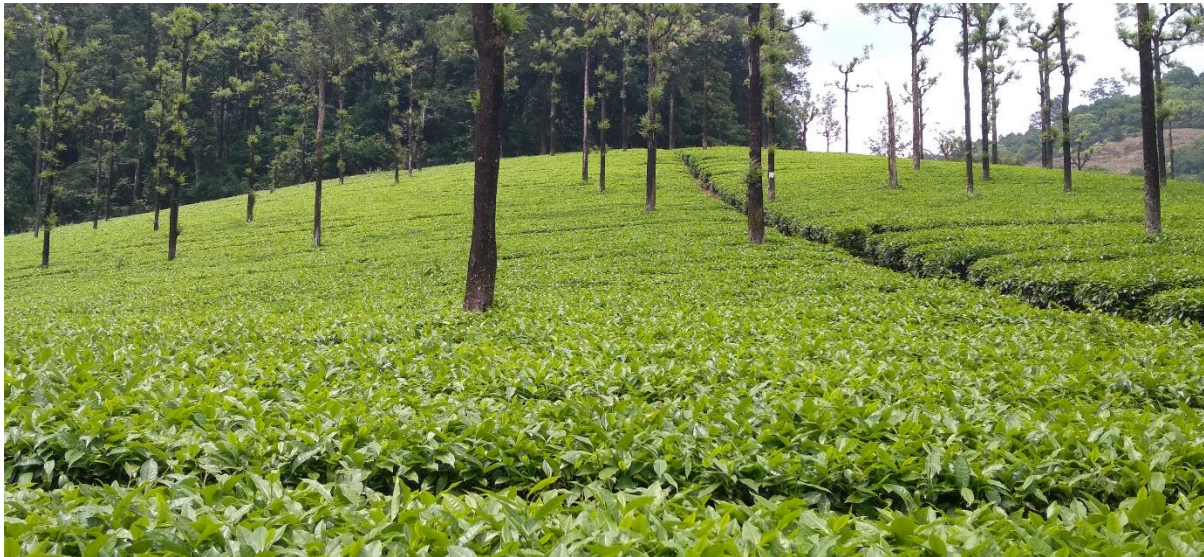
From there on, our hill drive began for about 2 hours to reach Valparai. The hill route and the bends looked like a long man-made rope tying the mountains. On the way, the hill view of Aliyar dam was very imposing and so got some clicks in the camera. On our way, some of our beloved friends (Bonnet Macaques) were crisscrossing the road, to get their attention for food from travellers. They are located in plains and lower range of mountains in southern part of India. They are very social animals, capable of communicating through different gestures and facial expressions.

After conversing with them, our road trip proceeded further and then stopped for brief time. We were just waiting for the Nilgiri Tahr to cross the roadside. There were few tourists stepped down and played with them, though they were not looking comfortable. We could see some lunatic youngsters speeding their bikes without any conscience of entering into the wild life zones. These grass eaters are found only in southern part of Western Ghats, and also named as state animal of Tamilnadu. They live in herds and their numbers were reduced to danger due to hunting and poaching. They are considered as endangered species by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).



A part of our hill route was filled with sounds which were strange to us, but not for Mr. Mahesh who was our cab driver and guide. He knew that it was the sound of Malabar Gliding Frog, which belong to the Western Ghats. Upon crossing the forest range in the hill drive, we moved up further to begin our drive through the man-made tea mountains.

We had a stop at Carver Marsh view point, from which we differentiate tea mountains on one side, and natural habitats on the other. From here on the tea-mountains of Valparai begins. The tea plantations in Valparai are due to the large scale deforestation in 1890 assisted by experienced planter Mr. Carver Marsh who was paid Rs. 200 as salary. I was told that his method of tea plantation is being largely followed all over the country. From there on, we were breathing the air flavoured with tea leaves, and drank a tasty black tea in the back drop of tea-mountains. We also had few photo shoots at the tea plantations as if we were the owners of the property.



After four hours of travel from Coimbatore, we reached Valparai, originally known as Poonachimalai, located at a height of 1059 m on the Anaimalai Hills range of Western Ghats. Valparai receives good rain fall throughout the year, with temperature ranging from 25 °C to 15 °C in summer and 15 °C to 10 °C in winter. After our late lunch and a bit of rest in our hotel, we also tried our luck to spot any leopard in the nearby coffee plantation, but all were in vain.

*

On next day, after visiting a temple and church, we drove towards Nirar dam. On our way, we stopped at Kulangal River, where chill and clear water flows over the pebbles in the midst of tea-mountains. Like other kids, we were collecting pebbles and played with water. On our way, we passed a place known as Cinkona, where a hospital built by British was still serving for the tea garden workers. After reaching a point to have a top view of the dam, we plugged some mangoes from nearby garden, then drove down to the dam. This small dam is located at the bottom of few surrounded mountains where water from Chinna Kallar Water Falls are stored here for hydroelectric power project and then distributed to the local plains of Tamilnadu and Kerala for irrigation. Human spirit is visible as engineers leave no stones unturned to tap water even in small regions for the betterment of human life.

Though we were tired after lunch, Mahesh was particular in not letting us in our comfort. He drove us immediately towards a place called Nallamudi View point, which needs to be reached before 4 pm. He woke us all after reaching there, where we walked up through tea plantations for 30 minutes for a good view of chain of mountains, including Anaimudi, the highest peak of Western Ghats at the height of 2695 m. We were lagging behind our schedule

of that day, and possibility of reaching our next place namely, Sholayar dam was looking very bleak. But Mahesh had better plan to make it possible. Because of want of time, he decided to take us to Kurangumudi, a village located at the Sholayar dam. Though the village is nearer, still he has to rush for any glimpse of the dam.

Once we entered a dense forest on our way, he slowed down the car. With his guidance we spotted Malabar Giant Squirrel, brown in colour having thick tail, on a tree top. There were also Lion-tailed Macaques looking at us without having any intention to attack us, unlike the Bonnet Macaques. Western Ghats are the habitats of these endangered species, brown in colour having hairs around the face, like lion. In few places, there were sky walks made up of rope and wood to connect trees on either side of the road to avoid any road-kill.



Mahesh was watchful on the wild and listening attentively the music of this rain forest. There were variety of sounds, but one must have the skill of distinguishing them. He suddenly cautioned us that we may be fortunate to spot Great Indian Hornbill, one of the most beautiful birds, whose habitats are Western Ghats and other Southeast Asian countries. Though there are more than 8 varieties of this rare species, one such is having long curved beaks with top one in ripe mango yellow with red tip and the bottom with ivory colour. It has peculiar yellow cap over the head and a yellow coloured neck. The body and wings are coloured back and white. The male one is slightly larger in size, taking the responsibility of feeding the partner and chicks inside a tree nest for months until the chicks grow with wings. Male collect berries and store it in mouth, and during nesting, it brings out berries one at a time, to feed the family. For nesting, they choose large tall and old trees so that they can withstand strong winds and heavy rainstorms. They are categorised as vulnerable species by IUCN. In fact, we could see a Hornbill on the flight which is usually a rare sight. In the following week, Mahesh also shared a video of male feeding the family, captured by a surveillance camera fixed on another tall tree opposite to the location of Hornbill. The video was captured on the way to Vazhachal by a wildlife photographer for whom he was the guide.

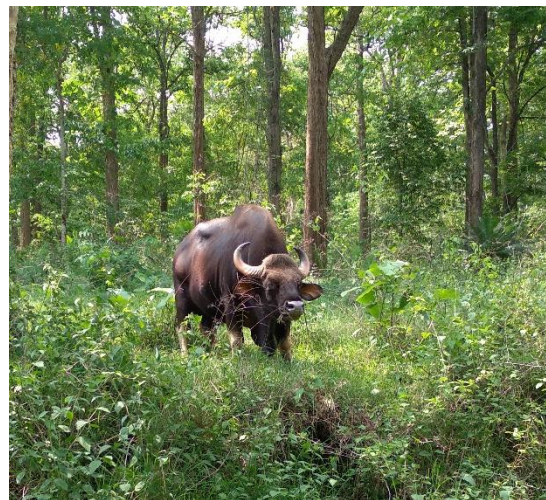
As we drove inside the forest slowly, we were safe inside the car and enjoyed some music in low volume. Since I do whistle on my choice of music, my daughter applauded my sweet whistle. “It is not me!”, as I was silently dissolved in music from inside and outside. It took no time for Mahesh to alert that, “Malabar Whistling Thrush is somewhere around!” We

stopped our car and spotted one. These beautiful crow like creatures with patches of dark blue coloured body, wings and head-top could be a sight to watch in bright sunlight. For us, it was evening inside the dense forest. These omnivorous birds are found in India and Southeast Asia. Their whistling sounds are very similar to that of human beings.

We spent some good time with Kurangumudi village people and the dam, with cup of tea in nearby shop. They were all waiting for the bus from Valparai, to receive their friends and relatives who had gone for shopping. The bus is the only mode of safe transportation, as they pass through the forest on daily basis. The shop keeper said, we are sure to spot Leopard as it moves around the village after 7pm. On hearing this, we decided to leave the village without any further delay.

*

On the final day, we left Valparai as early as 6 am. Tea-mountains were glittering with first light of the day. On the other side, sun light was diffused with the misty morning. As water drops cleaned up the road, it looked like perfect black strip decorating the vast green carpet of tea on either side. Chill breeze did the magic of soothing nerves like never before, and so brought us closer to the nature. On our way, we spotted many Gaurs or Indian Bisons in the nearby tea-plantations. We also stopped when a Wild Boar with their big family crossing our road. The little ones in the family were looking different from their mother,



with white spots on their brown coloured body, like Deer's. On our further drive, we slowed down to see a group of Jungle Myna, small and brown coloured body and yellow beak with little cap on the head. There were many Nilgiri Langurs which look white except their black face. As the name suggests, they live in southern part of Western Ghats, and classified as vulnerable by IUCN. Some were jumping between the branches, few were sitting and playing with little ones. After witnessing all the fun, we came down after two hours of hill drive to stop near Aliyar dam for our breakfast.

After getting enough calories, we drove on the foot hill, passing through many villages decorated with coconut trees all over. These villages are the immediate beneficiaries of Aliyar dam, and so flourishing well. Villagers were busy doing hand works with tree leaves, and thus engaged for generations. We drove for another two hours and climbed over adjacent mountains. It was a dense rain forest with old dry bamboo trees on our way. We spotted Peacocks, Nilgiri Langurs and Spotted Deers. We passed through a place called Topslip, near to which there is an Elephant camp where wild elephants are trained by tribes called Malasar. Finally, we reached our destination – Tiger reserve of Parambikulam, the last leg of our trip. We had few clicks near the hoarding “Welcome to Kerala”. From there we were taken by the Kerala Government bus for a wild life safari. We started our 3 hour long safari at 11 am, though the perfect time for wild life safari is early morning.

Dense forest of Parambikulam is a vast habitat for many wild animals including Tigers. I learnt that the wealth of this forest had been sucked out by the British rulers in 19th century. In particular, natural teak, ebony, rose wood and bamboo were taken away in unmeasurable numbers. In 1905, the British empire developed an ingenious tram way to transport timbers across the forest for 80 kms from Parambikulam to Chalakudi. From Chalakudi to Cochin and then through the sea, the woods of Parambikulam travelled a long distance to reach England for ship building. The bygone grandeur of Parambikulam is now seen through the Kannimara tree which is approximately 465 years, the oldest living Teak tree in the world. In our forest safari, we were thrilled looking at this 6.57 m wide and 48.5 m tall tree. This giant tree is bestowed with First Mahavriksha Puraskar by the Government of India in 1994.



In the midst of forest is the Parambikulam water reservoir which was built in 1961 and inaugurated by the then Prime Minister Jawarharlal Nehru. In addition to providing water to Tamilnadu for hydroelectric project, the dam symbolizes inter-state cooperation. The catchment area of the dam covers around 21 sq. km. of forest. With no surprise, tiger reserve in this region coexist with Parambikulam, Thoonakadavu and Peruvaripallam dams – all built around the same time. The tiger reserve spans around 640 sq. km. of which 390 sq. km is being considered as the core tiger habitat. Such man-made water bodies are perfecting the rhythm of live between human and wild. The landscape is dotted with many herbivorous species like Elephant, Gaur, Spotted Deer, Sambar Der, Barking Deer, many resident and migratory birds. A survey also shows that Prambikulam is decorated with 260 species of butterflies. The diverse vegetation here includes 1400 tree species and 1300 flowering plants as well.

Thus ended our three days visit to Valparai and Parambikulam, where the wilderness of rain forest is being preserved by the wild-life.

R. Sankaranarayanan, June 1, 2022.

* * * * *