

Maureen Seneviratne does some tree-spotting.

Majestic Trees of Sri Lanka



One of the most beautiful trees is the venerable tree of patriarchal proportions, especially charming at blossom-time when a wealth of small, red-veined, yellow flowers spread over its branches. It is found in all our villages and grows prolifically in our jungles.

An old folk superstition has it that of all trees, the shade of the tamarind is the coolest. In Sri Lanka there is no trace of the old belief prevalent in India, that the tamarind's shade is unhealthy. But Captain R Percival, a British officer quartering his troops of local mercenaries here in the first decade of the 19th century was curious to discover that his men would not allow their horses to be picketed in the shade of a tamarind tree.

The Rev J P Lewis, an eminent antiquarian who carried out research in many such old superstitions has written of the tamarind: Both Sinhalese and Tamils are agreed that the shade of the tamarind is cooler than that of any other tree. So pleasant is it that there is a saying in Jaffna that the son of a widow should not sleep under one, apparently because it will make him lazy and this will therefore result in his failing to work for his mother. A characteristic of the tree is that when there is a shower of rain, it penetrates slowly through its small but densely crowded leaves to the ground below and it is a long time before the leaves begin to drip.

Perhaps one of the oldest tamarind trees in Sri Lanka is the gnarled, majestic, ponderous one of the species, growing by the placid waters of the Yoda Ela in Elahera near the Wasgomuwa Nature Reserve in the centre of the island. This is a tree of royal romance and for centuries the folk of the nearby village have regarded it with pride and pleasure, perhaps because people everywhere love a lover. When that lover was also a great king, who came in the ink-blue dusk to keep a tryst with a beautiful maiden, the story has all the elements of undying romance.

It is said that in the vicinity of Elahera, King Mahasen, the famous tank-builder had a charming paramour. He would steal away to meet her rowing himself across the waters of his magnificent canal, tethering his boat to the self-same tamarind tree which stands still nobly on its bank, and then slip quietly into the maiden's home for a few stolen hours. Sceptics claim the tree is only a descendent of the original.

The girth of this tree is of such colossal size that it needs half a dozen men holding hands to embrace it. The twist branches are misshapen with age yet stoutly offer their refreshing shade to all, and in Elahera the villagers have not heard that it is unwholesome to sit beneath their spreading tamarind.

Another famous tamarind tree stood for countless centuries before being destroyed in the

964 cyclone. It was known as Knox's tree because under it on the shores of Cattoyar Bay close to Trincomalee, Robert Knox senior captain of the frigate Anne and father of that gentlest of historians and meekest of captives, Robert Knox, was taken prisoner by the Kandyans. He was waiting hopefully for the arrival of his son and their retinue who had set out in an advance party to meet the envoys of King Rajasinghe II.

According to the story told by Robert Knox, in his celebrated book, A Historian Relation of the Island Zeylon, The Captain mistrusting nothing, came up with his boat into a small river and being come ashore sat down under a Tamarind Tree, waiting for the Dissawe and us. In which time the native soldiers privately surrounded him and his men having no arms with them, he was seized on and seven men with him, yet without any violence or plundering them of anything and then they brought them up unto us, carrying the Captain in a hammock upon their shoulders.

At Point Palymra, the northernmost point of the Island, stands yet another magnificent, historical tamarind tree which lent its soothing shade to a distinguished cleric some 300 years ago. Philip Baldaeus, the dedicated Dutch Minister of the Word of God, as he styled himself, accompanied his fellow countrymen to Ceylon shortly after the Dutch conquest of the Jaffna Peninsula. At Point Palmyra along the shores of Kankesanthurai he stood under a fine tamarind tree to preach a stirring sermon to the first Protestant-Christian converts in Ceylon. About two centuries later the British administrator, Emerson Tennent, visited the tall tamarind tree and found it still standing. He has recorded that Baldaeus tree was 42 feet in circumference at the base of the trunk.

The most sacred tree in our land is the Bo tree. The oldest and most hallowed of all is the Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi in Anuradhapura's Magamega Garden. Another renowned specimen, hoary with legend is to be found in the Welimada Plains in the Uva province. It is known as the Deewrungaha or Tree of the Oath because the captive Princess Sita (of Ramayana fame) took a vow there in defence of her chastity. The original tree is believed to have been a Banyan sacred to Hindus.

Among the strangest and most mysterious trees found in Sri Lanka are the grotesque baobabs in Mannar. Their origin is unknown for they are not native to our island. There are many theories as to how the baobab came to be cultivated in Mannar. It is believed they were first planted over 2,000 years ago by Arab traders as fodder for their camels. Others attribute their presence to the Portuguese as having introduced the baobabs from the coast of Africa, which is their natural habitat. However, the prodigious age of the trees belies this theory.

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The baobab is a tree of monstrous size: its huge and shapeless mass of wood resembling a gigantic bulb rather than a trunk. Adding further to its uncanny appearance is its singular scarcity of leaves at all times of the year. One of the largest of these trees measure upwards nine metres in circumference, although it is little more in height. It is strange that baobabs grow nowhere else in Sri Lanka and you'll have to journey to Mannar Island in the northwest to see the best.

