Northward Bound: Elephant Pass

Posted on



Arriving at Elephant Pass

Words Chiranthi Rajapakse Photographs Prabath Chathuranga

It was the Dutch who gave it this curious name. Elephant Pass is the name given to the causeway spanning the shallow lagoon that separates the Jaffna peninsula from the rest of the island. During the time when Sri Lanka was under Dutch occupation, elephants were exported from Karaitivu, one of the islands lying off the Jaffna peninsula and an annual sale of elephants was also held in Jaffna. Elephants caught in other parts of the country were driven into the Jaffna peninsula, across this

lagoon, which was later bridged and given the name Elephant Pass. Elephants no longer traverse this stretch but the fanciful name still remains.

Elephant Pass lagoon is fed by a number of rivers from the south, including the Kanakarayan river and the Netheli river. It's home to a wide variety of water birds and was declared a bird sanctuary in 1938. The Dutch also built a fort here in the 18th century which was later partially used as a rest house, but this no longer exists, though the name board still remains. A newly constructed memorial monument stands near this site.

Due to its location, Elephant Pass controls access to Jaffna. It connects the peninsula to the Sri Lankan mainland and thus forms a vital part of the road to Jaffna. Until recently, it was the only route to Jaffna.

This is a journey not just of distance, but also of landscape. As the lagoon is crossed, the land becomes increasingly flat and the vegetation changes. Large trees disappear. There are no spreading trees here offering shade as in other parts of the country. The only thing to be seen on the flat landscape are the palmyrah trees, their silhouettes standing tall and clear against the dying light. They are beautiful but offer no protection, no shade for the traveller.

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Perhaps because of its unique location, Elephant Pass has always interested writers. For travellers in the past, crossing Elephant Pass was not an easy journey. Travelling in 1905, the journey from Colombo to Jaffna took the writer Leonard Woolf three days. Woolf, then a member of the Ceylon Civil Service, was posted to Jaffna and his first journey there was eventful. In his autobiography "Growing; an autobiography of the years 1904 to 1911", published in 1961, he describes the journey; "The only way to travel the hundred odd miles from Anuradhapura to Elephant Pass was to use what was called the mail coach. The mail coach was the pseudonym of an ordinary bullock cart in which the mail bags lay on the floor and the passengers lay on the mail bags." Fortunately, the present day traveller has much faster and more comfortable modes of travel.

For most Sri Lankans, Elephant Pass still remains a slightly distant and mysterious place. To drive north from Anuradhapura is to enter less travelled country. From

Anuradhapura you follow the A9 as it winds its way northwards. Vavuniya, Puliyankulam, Mankulam, Panikkankulam, Murikandy, Kilinochchi… You look out as the list of unfamiliar towns roll past. At last you come to Elephant Pass; that final gateway you must cross to enter Jaffna. The journey is long. But to look around you is to understand why travellers who make the pilgrimage do not forget it. Even a traveller as battered and bruised as Woolf was by his journey, noted the strange beauty of the place. Everywhere, he writes "…was the calling and the crying and screaming of the birds of the sea and the lagoons." More than one hundred years later we make the same journey. So much has happened, so much has changed. But the birds and the sea and lagoon remain.

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