Raw, Red Earth

Posted on



Ussangoda has an eerie, desolate beauty

Little solid facts are known about Ussangoda, a mysterious heath shrouded in myth and legend

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Nothing prepared us for the Ussangoda national park. We had scrambled up narrow paths of loose soil, clutching precariously at roots, with no idea of where we were going. So when the vast red heath sprang upon us it was a shock. It was a huge expanse of earth, red-ochre to be exact, spreading as far as the eye could see (and many, many times beyond, as we were to learn). A flimsy carpet of straggling grass grew in very sporadic patches.

Our rendezvous with this, perhaps the least known of our national parks, was the kind that nurtures the soul, like Wordsworth’s daffodils; only, Ussangoda, being more primordial, provided us much rawer excitement and inspiration than tame Lake District.

Why is Ussangoda a heath, where nothing except very weedy, mean grass can grow? Several explanations are put forward; some rational and others pulled out of the realm of fantastic Hindu myths. The most logical is that, the sea air being very strong, few plants can survive on the heath. This may be true. Though the plain itself is bald, the slopes, which are not so blatantly whipped by the sea winds, are full of growth: Pandanus with ribbon like leaves, huge cacti with monstrous yellow thorns, and other coastal flora. But most people prefer a more poetic (in fact epic) explanation. To them, Ussangoda was part of Ravana the demon king’s city, in fact where the Dandu monara, the peacock chariot he flew, was landed. When (as related in the epic Ramayan) Hanuman the monkey god set fire to Ravana’s city, Ussangoda was the part most sorely afflicted; it would never again be fertile after that fire.

When we walked into this wind-swept red land, we disturbed few living things. Only the Red Wattled Lapwing seemed to haunt these wastes with his “Did-you-do –it?” We had no reason to fear him that day because we had nothing on our consciences. Still scolding, the lapwings flew away. I suppose they were resentful of our invading their peaceful realm.

The people who live around here call Ussangoda the ‘*pittaniya*’, which means ground. Indeed, if I were to add another myth to the already rampant collection of Ussangoda myths, I would have said this would have been an ancient playground for giants.



A tongue of red earth thrust to the sea

From the cliffs of this heath you could enjoy a commanding view of the Indian Ocean. It was a bit sulky that day, but for all that very beautiful. Wave chased wave. One huge swelling wave would hoist itself up mid-ocean and roll majestically towards the beach. Progressing with slow pattering movements, it would finally lose heart and flounder on the beach, or on the crags that have heaved themselves out of the sea like petrified behemoths.

Everything in Ussangoda seemed extraordinary to me. The weedy grass itself was dotted with tiny flowers coloured a dainty purple-pink. Even the insects crawling on the ground I seemed hitherto never have seen. Maybe I was getting carried away. But certainly the place was alien, removed from normal experience. On that I was reminded that a meteoroid is said to have once blasted the land here: one more attempt to explain the peculiar geography.

The day we visited Ussangoda was misty. The sky was a bit heavy, but on the other hand, there was no sun to prickle us, which would have been an inevitable discomfort on a sunny day. The sea was a grey green. It looked like a rearing, gloomy, beast ready to swallow the earth.

For 20 acres this enigmatic red land stretches. Fantastic though the legends woven to it may sound, there is no denying that Ussangoda has medicinal plants found nowhere else locally, and that the colour and sterility of its soil is unique. If you are

heading to the deep south, this is a place to explore. I don’t mean just nature. You stand a good chance of discovering yourself in its solitary, wide spaces.






