

Cauvery Trek

by Neena Sekharan

It is now, almost a year since I went trekking along the banks of the controversial Cauvery river in south India. The memories and images though, are as fresh and vivid in my mind as though it was only yesterday that I walked about 30 kms to see the river cut through the rocks to make way for itself; or the sunrise I saw sitting on the top of a children's slide outside the two room village school. Perhaps, it is the uniqueness of this experience in my life that inspires me to write about it even after a year.

We were a gang of twenty people, all set for a unique weekend experience. Some were experienced and regular trekkers, some were first timers and some, like me, were rusted minds and legs.

On Friday night, we went by bus to a village called *Sangam*, about two hours away from Bangalore city. It was midnight when we reached the place and as per plans, we decided to sleep for a few hours in what seemed to be the courtyard of a local restaurant. None of us knew for sure where we were sleeping, and the flashlights didn't help us much either. Secretly, we preferred not knowing where we slept, to the other alternative of seeing a not-so-pleasant place to rest in. As the night went by soon with an occasional stray dog jumping over our sleeping bags, some of us wondered why we weren't cozily tucked in our beds watching a nice home movie on a Friday night...

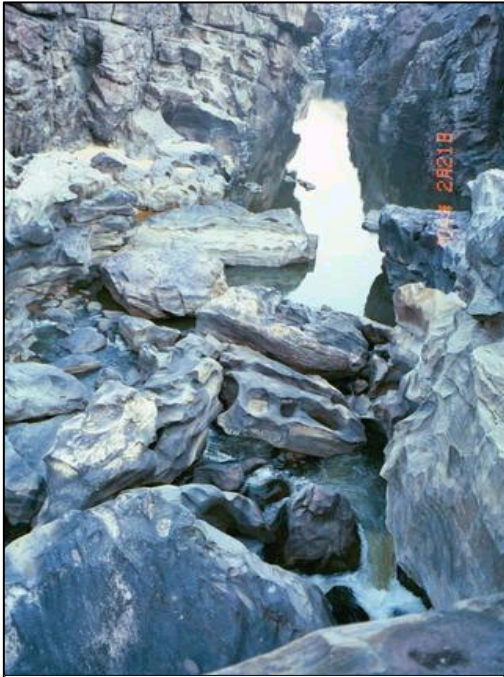
Just as planned, we woke up before sunrise. So we still did not know where we slept, but that did not matter since we were all wondering how the day would unfold. Our plan was to trek about 7 kilometers to a hillock named 'Mekkadathu' and see the sunrise there and we were mighty excited about that. The pre sunrise darkness made it easy for us to spend some time "behind the bushes". Well...what does one do?! ...we wanted to be one with nature and live the life our ancestors led ages ago!

Anyways... we got all packed and ready to go, though a little behind schedule. We crossed a rivulet which was all dried up owing to the time of the year. That was a little disappointing because we didn't get a chance to wade through water. But that was alright, the sunrise was awaiting us anyway.

We trekked on a terrain that was not very steep. Contrary to plan, sunrise happened before we could reach Mekkadathu. And it was a good thing to happen! As the sun rose, we realized that were around an accessible rocky area, where the Cauvery river cut through rock boulders. This place is quite far from *Talacauvery* which is the origin of the river, but even so, near Mekkadathu, Cauvery was still in her infancy.

The sight was simply breathtaking! When I think of that moment now, I realize how we were all turned speechless. There was absolutely nothing we could say. All we wanted to do was to be in presence of this side of nature. As we absorbed this beautiful sight into our being, our amazement changed to a smile and then to laughter of pure happiness that was fuelled by the innocence of feeling our place along with nature and not above it.

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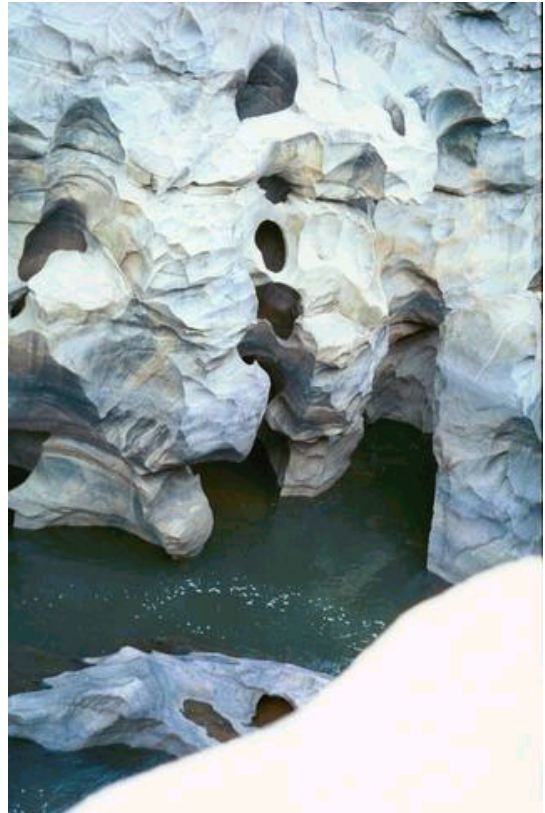


Rock Formations at Mekkadhathu

As Cauvery went forward on its undecided course, it left wonderful rock formations. In February, the water level is low, and though the current is not as strong as it is during the monsoon season, it is strong enough. We cautiously walked over the rocks with childlike enthusiasm till we reached the point where we could see the water about a hundred feet below. There were some places between the huge rocks where the water seemed stagnant. But that was a rather deceptive sight. The sound of water falling made us search for a waterfall in the vicinity of the stagnant water. And sure enough, we found a small but forceful waterfall! The cameras came out, and we tried to capture the moment.

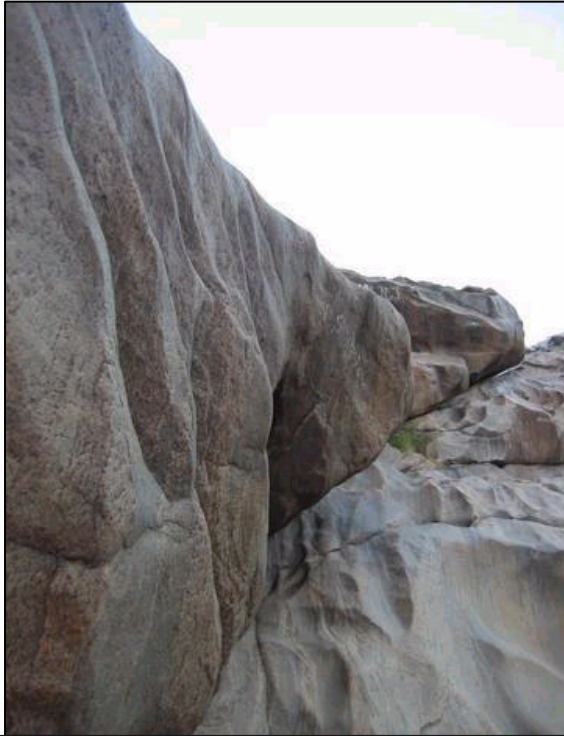


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At Mekkadhathu

We finally reached Mekkadhathu. The area was not as rocky and owing to the frequent visitors, steps were constructed there, which led to the water a few hundred feet below. We all landed there and spent some time having fun and just being happy. Reluctantly, we left Mekkadhathu saying goodbye to the resident monkeys there. On our way back, we stopped to have some breakfast.

Back in the village, we finally saw where we had slept through the night and we thanked God for the darkness in the night! We rested there for sometime, filled our water bottles from the village water tank. On the water tank, was a poster declaring a reward of Rs 50 million (approx. 1.1 million USD) for the one who captured *Veerappan*, the infamous sandalwood smuggler.

Interestingly, we were going to trek through Veerappans unofficial territory. Young and dreamy as we were, we started planning how we would spend the 50 million rupees just in case we ran into Veerappan on this trek and managed to *capture* him. [Incidentally, Veerappan was killed in a police encounter later that year.]



“Veerappan Most Wanted” poster

Just before we started our trek, we saw a village woman sell locally made *buttermilk*. We chose to have it over the other popular international aerated drinks (Yep! International brands of aerated drinks are available in Indian villages.) We were now ready to move on!

The long journey started. We walked along the banks of Cauvery. The sun was right above us now, and there wasn't much greenery around. But we managed to trudge along. At times, chatting with those in the group who were still strangers and at times walking alone in the group, just plain contemplating the wonders of life. Apart from the trek, the group was great and that made the trek much more wonderful.

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One time, when we had walked along the fairly parched river, and seen the dry and ochre landscape long enough, we emerged from the dry shrubs only to see a huge patch of water and a lot of greenery. The sight itself was refreshing and we all found ourselves re-energised.

The refreshing sight

Midway to our destination, we were stopped by the forest officials who informed us that a combing operation to capture Veerappan was going on in the area. We were very disappointed and we tried to explain to the officials that our route was a safe one and we would reach our destination village before sunset. Having got the go ahead signal, we quickly had our lunch and moved on with an express speed. From this time on, the group leader would entertain no requests for rest of more than 5 minutes.



The gang on it's way



An aerial view of the village

Just before sunset, we reached our destination 'Muthukadu' – a village by the Cauvery River. A few meters away from us we could hear Cauvery, our partner through this trek.

The village folk warned us of wild elephants in the region and asked us to spend the night on the veranda of the village school. The village school was a two-room building with classes conducted till the fourth grade.

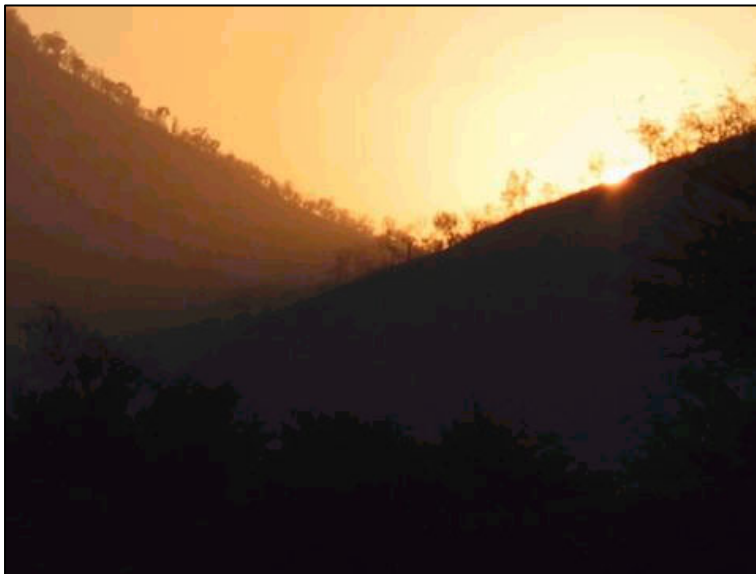
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Before night set in, we decided to explore the village. We went to the main street and chose to have some snacks at one of the stores. There was a lady making south Indian delicacies like *idli*, *sambar* and *bhajjis*. It was dark by then and the the single bulb in the shop and the stove on which the *bhajji* was being fried provided the light. We sat on a wooden bench and enjoyed our spicy snack.

I had never seen this kind of a world ever before and as expected, I was completely fascinated by it. I wanted to know more and more about this world. My teacher was the daughter of the store owner. She was a young , witty, sharp tongued teenager who was also one of the prettiest girls that I had ever seen. There was a brightness in her and I only wished that she puts her brilliance to good use. Since she understood only *Kannada*, I asked a *Kannada* speaking girl in our group to help me communicate with her. She had studied till grade 4 in the village school and did not continue beyond that. There was one bus that went through the village once in the forenoon and then once in the evening on its return trip. Had she decide to study further, she would have to go to another village by that one bus that came once every day. She was well aware of computers and though she read the newspaper daily, she expressed no desire to study further. Oh well.... I was in a very different world! I had only read about such places in newspaper articles!

As expected, the village slept early, and the group was back together again. As I crashed into my sleeping bag, I guess a few of the folks made *khichdi* for dinner on the camp fire. I believe the majority was too tired to be hungry. I didn't realize when the night went by. There were no stray dogs to disturb us and I was too tired to remember the warning about wild elephants. I woke up before sunrise and found a few of my fellow team members up as well. With the help of a flashlight, I found my way to brush my teeth and sit on top of a children's slide and wait for sunrise.



Finally, it happened. The sun rose from behind the distant hills. It was just like the crayon sketches we made as toddlers. This thought brought a smile on my lips as I tried to capture this moment on my camera. Sure enough, I heard a lot of other cameras click as well.

Sunrise

Once the sun was on our side of the planet, we found out more about the village. The main village are was a street about 150 feet long, at the end of which was a *Lord Ganesha* temple and stores on either side of the street. It seemed to me that this temple

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drove the village economy. The devotees who came would come to offer their prayers, would purchase items required to perform the rituals – *the coconuts, plantain leaf, kumkum, sandalwood, flowers etc* from the shops on the street. There were shops selling religious mementoes like rings and lockets, audiocassettes of religious songs and florists selling flowers for *puja*. Apart from these, there was the village grocer, the green grocer, a store that sold ladies jewellery items like bangles, *bindi* and earrings. Outside the boundary of this street were the houses where the villagers stayed.



The main village street

We had our breakfast in another store –cum-restaurant. This time we sat on plastic chairs and ate *dosas* and drank bottled water purchased from the store itself.

Some of the stronger ones decided to trek further on while most of us decided to go to the nearest bus depot by the only bus that went through the village.

The bus depot was about an hour away. We spent the hour constructively, singing the Hindi film songs and entertaining our amused co-passengers. In the bus depot, it was back to noise and the busy, boring man-made world.

It sure was a great get away.

Explanation of some terms:

Bhaji: A fried snack

Bindi: The colored dot worn by Indian women on their forehead.

<http://www.kamat.com/kalranga/women/bindi.htm>

Buttermilk: <http://www.indiatastes.com/categories/227.shtml>

Dosa: A pancake made of fermented rice paste

Idli: A steamed preparation made of fermented rice (<http://www.indiatastes.com/categories/26.shtml>)

Kannada: A Dravidian language spoken in southern India in the state of Karnataka.

Khichdi: A dish made of rice, dal and vegetables (<http://www.rangat.com/foodcorner/recipe1.asp?catid=1>)

Lord Ganesha: He is the Hindu God of knowledge and the remover of obstacles. He is also the older son of Lord Shiva. (http://members.tripod.com/~jennifer_polan/hinduism/ganeshstory.html)

Kumkum: The red colored powder applied on the forehead.

<http://www.saranam.com/heritage/kustom5.asp>

Puja: The sanskrit term for worship.

Sambar: A spicy and tangy soup eaten as an accompaniment with idli, dosa and steamed rice. (Recipe at:

<http://www.indiatastes.com/categories/6shtml>).

Talacauvery: <http://www.karnatakaturism.org/html/atract/pilgrim/talacauvery.htm>

Veerappan: <http://www.rediff.com/news/veerapan.htm>

Suggested website to know more about Hinduism: <http://www.saranam.com>