A rich tapestry of Faith

Posted on
Coins tied as votive offerigns by devotees

Sri Lanka, possessing a complex culture, is a tangled weave of reverence. Most evident is the interaction of Buddhism with Hinduism, exemplified by the mixed statuary of the shrine known as the *devale.*

Words Richard Boyle

The gods and goddesses of Sri Lanka, called *deviyo*, are believed to have attained such status through merit in their past human lives. Apparently they prefer not to have direct interaction with their devotees, but use the power of the mind to assist them, just as they do to create physical objects.

Saman Deviyo

Saman Deviyo, one of Sri Lanka's four guardian deities, has powers limited to the south-western Sabaragamuwa region, in particular the holy mountain, Sri Pada. Saman, which means 'the rising of the morning sun', may have been a provincial ruler of Sabaragamuwa. In legend, however,he is linked to Lakshmana, the brother

of Rama, both characters in the oldest Sanskrit epic, *The Ramayana*. The brothers invaded Sri Lanka to rescue Rama's consort, Sita, who had been kidnapped by Ravana, the mythic king of the Island.

From Saman, Sri Pada – sacred to all four major religions, hence its Christian and Muslim name, 'Adam's Peak' – received its ancient appellation, Samanala Kanda, 'the mountain of Saman'. And the countless yellow butterflies that annually converge upon the mountain during their migration are called *samanalayo*. Sri Pada became a sacred mountain for Buddhists thanks to Saman too, who invited Lord Buddha to leave an impression of his footprint at the summit. Since then Saman's duty has been to protect the footprint and the pilgrims who toil their way to the summit to worship. There is a shrine to Saman Deviyo nearby.

On the outskirts of Ratnapura lies the Sri Sumana Saman Devalaya – a *devale* or *devalaya* being a shrine dedicated to either a god of the Hindu pantheon or a local deity, usually situated within a Buddhist vihara or temple. This, the main *devale* dedicated to Saman (there is another at Mahiyangana), was created by King Parakramabahu II in 1270.

Barbara Sansoni describes the nature of this *devale* in *Architecture of an Island* (1999): "It is very impressive – the grandest in size and setting of all the *devales* I have seen. Approached by long steps, flanked by dug out boats on either side (ready for the annual floods) one senses that one is entering a place of myths and legends and of fine style and historic importance."

Every August a two-week *perahera,* or grand procession, perhaps the oldest in Sri Lanka, is conducted. Constance Gordon-Cumming describes this in *Two Happy Years in Ceylon* (1892): "A venerated gilt bow and three arrows were solemnly brought forth, said to have been placed here by Rama after he had slain Ravana. These precious relics were sprinkled with holy water and placed in a mysterious ark. Then the Juggernaut car, with a crimson body on very large wheels, was dragged out. Amid blowing of horns the procession formed in the moonlight, elephants bearing headmen, and devil-dancers with astounding head-masks going before the ark."

Aiyanayaka Deviyo

Rural Sinhalese worship Aiyanayaka Deviyo as the village guardian. This deity is

associated with Ayyanar, a village god of South India, who is revered by Sri Lankan Tamils. Blessings are made to Aiyanayaka by villagers to protect their *wewa* (reservoir, known in South Asia as a 'tank'), especially its bund (embankment).

The essential ritual concerning the tank bund is *muttimangallaya*, performed during the rainy season, in which Aiyanayaka's assistance is sought to ensure the bund remains secure. After a night of customary dance by the *anumatirala*, the deity's 'spokesperson', the villagers proceed with two pots filled with saffron and incense to the abode of Aiyanayaka, always a tree on the bund, and hang the pots on branches and offer betel to chew.

At the conclusion, the *anumatirala* tells the villagers that Aiyanayaka has accepted their offerings, and on his return to the village he performs a final dance. The villagers eat their midday meal together in celebration, and then return home, united in the belief of the blessing bestowed by their Aiyanayaka *Deviyo*.

Should you visit Chilaw, witness the weave of reverence at the Tinapitiya Tampita Vihara, 'The Temple of Pillars', called so because the image house is built above ground level. In that remarkable image house a statue of Aiyanayaka Deviyo can be found to the left of the main statue of Lord Buddha.

Kadawara Deviyo

It is believed that Kataragama Deviyo – another of Sri Lanka's four guardian deities – resides spiritually in the scrub jungles near Kataragama in the south-east corner of the Island. However, this revered deity (worshipped by Hindus as God Skanda or Murugan), is thought on special occasions to visit the Kataragama Temple, a complex of *devales* dedicated to him. Thus a *deviyo* known as Kadawara became guardian of the temple and of the many pilgrims who travel there annually.

Research suggests that Kadawara is also regarded as the principal protector of the Kala Wewa basin, near Sigiriya, and the inhabitants of the nearby villages. Kadawara, as with all the deities, is said to have certain preferences – in his case to be adorned with white flowers and consume water-melon. To attract his attention a white sapphire is the best ploy in pressing circumstances. And a beseeching chant, such as:

Cast hither your eyes, your divine ears lend and take up our petition. Cool the

heated minds, lead us forward Urge the people to stand firm and fight O Lord Kadawara respond to this calamity, save us. What more needs to be said? Nothing.

Gambara Siddha Suniyam Deviyo

It is thought this powerful deity has two distinct sides to his personality. A benevolent aspect (*ardha deva*) becomes apparent during the lunar fortnight when the moon is brightest, either side of its waxing, which results in the protection of the righteous.

However, throughout the dark lunar fortnight the malevolent aspect (*ardha yaksa*) becomes evident, when the sinful are punished. During these periods, it is said, Gambara Siddha Suniyam Deviyo rides a white stallion between villages throughout the Island to dispense favours and justice.

Gambara is supported by *devatas*, guardians both male and female who have specific duties. Every village and town is said to have a Gambara Devata, who informs Gambara Deviyo about what has happened, and what rights and wrongs have resulted – by and to whom.

Rajjuru Bandara Deviyo

To the south of the Sinharaja Forest Reserve there is a village called Kotapola, dominated by a 450-metre peak. At the summit is the scenic Getabaru Raja Maha Vihara, a cave temple a mere 9 metres long largely occupied by a reclining Buddha statue. But it is the adjacent *devale* that is of significance for those in quest of indigenous deities, as it was built in homage to Rajjuru Bandara Deviyo.

Rajjuru Bandara is believed to inhabit places of worship but is also prepared to curse his devotees' adversaries. Unsurprisingly he commands great respect among the people. The title 'Bandara' was associated with those closest to the royal family, individuals who became chief administrator in remote areas. Over time dignitaries were deified.