Adam’s Peak: The Sacred Mountain

Posted on

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Whatever the culture, mountains have always been part of the myth and magic, legend and lore, faith, fancy and religion of diverse peoples. While the mythical Mahamera in the Himalayas and the summit of Mount Olympus in Greece were considered abodes of the Hindu and Greek pantheons, Mount Sinai is at the core of traditions embracing Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Mount Fuji in Japan is closely linked to Shintoism, and Mount Kilimanjaro to the rich Swahili culture of Africa. In a way, each religion and cultural tradition has its own mountain, its own point of communication with the stronger power and force of divinity and the unknown. Each sacred mountain is the impregnable fortress of a separate faith, or for those with common religious rocks, as Mount Sinai for Judea-Christianity and Islam, and the mythical Mahamera for Hindus, Jains and Buddhists. Not so Adam’s Peak in Sri Lanka. It is a mountain where different faiths have met for centuries. In fact, there is possibly no other place on earth which is held sacred in common by all four of the world’s major religions, which makes it by any definition the most sacred mountain in the world. Sri Pada, the Mountain of the Sacred Footprint, has been an object of worship and pilgrimage, for king and commoner, devotee and mendicant, from the

very dawn of history, and even beyond. Stories about the mountain are inextricably woven into the history and traditions of Sri Lanka extending beyond 2500 years. There is no lack of evidence that the island’s pre-historic inhabitants, the ancestors of the present day Veddahs, also held the mountain sacred.

Many a visitor to the ancient kingdoms in Sri Lanka have recorded the manner in which the mountain was venerated by the people, and by foreigners who came to the island with the express purpose of making the ritual ascent to its sacred peak. Many are the beliefs and legends about this mountain which stands 7,362 ft. in the Adam’s Peak range in the heart of Sri Lanka, the watershed of which is the source of the four principal rivers of the island, blessing the country with waters for an abundant harvest. In a country which is predominantly Buddhist, it is the Buddhist tradition which is strongest, giving the name by which it is best known throughout the country -Sri Pada. Buddhists say the human footshaped hollow on the boulder on the peak marks the place where the Buddha placed the impression of his foot on a visit to Sri Lanka. The Buddhist kings of Sri Lanka considered it their special duty to protect and pay homage to this footprint on the summit. Some had gems embedded in the rock, others used the power of the royal edict to make the path to the summit safer and easier for the pilgrims, and one king had the impression covered with a boulder on which the traditional symbols of the Buddha were carved. This is what the visitor who makes the journey to the summit sees today.

The Sinhalese of Sri Lanka have another name for the mountain – Samanala Kanda, which literally means Butterfly Mountain. It comes from the tradition of the mountain being the abode of God Saman, at whose invitation the Buddha placed his footprint on the summit. Coincidentally, the Sinhalese say that the millions of butterflies that take wing from November to February fly towards Samanala Kanda in their own final pilgrimage to the abode of Saman. Ergo, the name Butterfly Mountain. It is not difficult for those with the necessary faith to see in the annual flight of the butterflies their progress in the direction of the holy mountain.

To the Hindu devotee, who joins his Buddhist cousin-in-faith in the annual pilgrimage to the peak, it is Sivan Adi Padham – the Footprint of Siva, whose Dance of Creation is commemorated here. It is not unusual to hear the chants of Hindu stanzas mingle with those of the Buddhists as they make their slow progress to the peak, each to worship in their own rite, in a unique example of religious amity and tolerance.

Adam’s Peak, the name by which the mountain is known in the Western world,

comes from the Islamic tradition, itself the source of a touching legend. The early Saracens, and later Moorish traders, who came to Sri Lanka to trade in gems, elephants, peacocks and spices, considered this island, which they named Serendib, to be the closest they could reach to the lost Eden or Paradise of the Judeo-Islamic tradition. From this arose the belief that it was on the sacred mountain, already the object of veneration by Buddhists and Hindus, that the first man, Adam, spent his years in banishment from Eden, lamenting his fall from grace with his creator. To chose of the Islamic faith, the depression on the peaK • the footprint of Adam, pressed into the rock as he stood in penance for seven years, weeping at the loss of Eden and all its beauty yet thankful to god for placing him in this other Eden.

A related tradition comes from the Moorish traders who eagerly sought the gems of Sri Lanka. It says that the gems hidden in the mountain terrain around Adam’s Peak in the surrounding country reaching up to the gem city of Ratnapura and even further south, were in fact the crystallized tears of Adam and Eve shed on the peak and carried down by the rivers that flow from there.

Although Christianity came much later to Sri Lanka, with the arrival of the Portuguese in the early 16th century, there is also an old Christian tradition about Adam’s Peak and the depression on che summit. Some Eastern Christians say the depression is not a footprint but a hollow carved by the knees of Christ’s disciple Thomas, who bent there in prayer in repentance for his doubts about the divinity of Christ. Thomas was the disciple of Christ who came East and preached in India, where the early Eastern Church was established. The annual pilgrimage to Sri Pada begins in January and concludes in March/ April, with the “Medin” Full Moon in March being the height of the pilgrim season. During this period thousands converge on the mountain to make the trek to the peak, through tea covered lower slopes and the densely forested higher reaches. There are three traditional routes they take: via Ratnapura involving about 10 miles on foot; from Kuruwita (on the way to Ratnapura) which joins the former route for the final three miles, covering 12 miles on foot and considered the most attractive of the routes; and the most popular path today from Hatton (via Maskeliya) where the climb is reduced to 4 miles on foot, most of it now made easier with steps. The route is lit up at night when the climb starts, and in keeping with Buddhist tradition, many a benefactor makes large donations to help ease the toil of the pilgrims as the ancient kings did.

The climb from Nallathanni near Hatton usually begins around 10 p.m. which gives sufficient time to be at the summit to worship at the footprint and also view the spectacle of the sunrise, which the “Handbook for the Ceylon Traveller” describes

thus: “The sunrise produces the famous spectacle of the Shadow of the Peak. The north-east winds that blow in the pilgrim season have laid, some thousands of feet below it, a layer of misty cloud. Over this the sun casts the vast dark triangular shadow of the huge summit pyramid. Its point lies, at first, upon the infinitely distant horizon, then, as the sun waxes. races backward, foreshortening the shadow, until it is swallowed altogether in the rock of the peak itself.

A less advertised phenomenon (because it usually occurs outside the pilgrim season) is also occasionally to be seen; the even more fantastic spectacle of the so-called Spectre of the Broken. When the cloud layer happens to be vertically rather than horizontally piled the intruder on the summit terrace occasionally sees before him an enormously magnified image of all upon it – including himself – often encircled by a halo of rainbow hues.