Echoes of History: A Legend Retold

Posted on

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Masked dancers join with gay abandon.

On the way down from Colombo to Galle is the village of Totagama where once dwelt the erudite poet monk, Totagamuve Sri Rahula. In this village was a very old pirivena (centre of learning) which is now in ruins. Also in this neighbourhood, in the

village of Seenigama is the Seenigama Devale (a Hindu shrine dedicated to the god Kataragama) which nestles on a promontory close io the popular tourist resort of Hikkaduwa.

Very often this devale and the neighbouring temples organize a perahera which is shorn of the pomp and pageantry of the annual Esala Perahera in Kandy. It is a ‘folksy’ affair. Villagers in animal garb prance around in groups and the procession is led by cyclists whose bikes are adorned with large clusters of paper flowers.

Humorous contemporary social changes are portrayed by rural participants d□□essed as tourists or sheiks from the Middle East. Women and children play a significant role in the singing and dancing and waving of flags, while stilt walkers, masked dancers and /ee ke/i players (a play on sticks) join in with gay abandon.

Totagamuve Sri Rahula’s name is a highly respected one in this area and in the literature of our country, and this legend about him is often told.

THE POET MONK AND THE DEMONS

On a walk around the royal gardens, the king of Kotte stopped to enquire of a little boy of royal birth, about his welfare. The child replied promptly in verse: “That ·you, 0 king, should beckon me
And ask in all sincerity
Just how I fare, my joys and woes,
The greatness of your stature shows.”

The king and his retinue stared in wonderment at the child for his horoscope, when cast at birth, had left his parents in great despair. The astrologer, having made abstract calculations from charts and scrolls yellowed with age, had presented a rustling ola leaf to his parents with the prediction: “This chart reveals four bianks and these blanks mean that your son will not gain earthly goods for gold and lands will never be his. Although he be of regal clan, such riches will he spurn.”

His parents were distraught. “Our son will be a ne’er do well,” they said. “We may as well let the temple have him.” Thus it was that to the ancient village of Totagama, which stood by the coast of the southern sea, the young boy with the four blanks in his horoscope was sent to learn his letters. He shaved his head and donned the saffron robe and was known to all as Totaga111uve Sri Rahula. Eventually he became renowned for his learning and his knowledge of healing. As a

poet, it was hard to find his equal.

Legend has it that Sri Rahula had the power to summon yakkas (demons) of the nether world to do his bidding. Their power lay in their brawn, for brains they had none. These beings of great strength could carry mountains and even suck rivers dry.

One day, Sri Rahula was busy in his library when a group of yakkas hovered at his window. The chief of them spoke up. “Sir, have you work for us today, for in idleness we lie?”

Not wishing to be disturbed while he was writing, the poet monk replied: “Go, you fellows. Clear the jungle lands around the village and don’t return until the work’s complete.” He added softly to himself. “That should keep them busy for a good long while.

Hardly had he settled down to work again when the group of yakkas returned and the chief of them spoke up. “Good sir, we’ve carried out your orders to the letter in quick time. We’ve hewed and chopped and cleared and burnt and once again in idleness we lie. Have you no other work for us today?”

Irked at being disturbed again, the monk thought for a while and replied, “Go, you fellows, back to the land you’ve cleared and if it’s work you want, dig pits in very close, one to the other. Dig each pit till it reaches far, far down to the very bowels of the earth and don’t return until ’tis done.”
Once again he added softly to himself, “That should keep them busy for a good long while.”

He had hardly settled down to his literary work again when the group of yakkas hovered at his window once more and the chief of them spoke up. “Noble sir,” he said, “we’ve carried out our tasks. We’ve dug and scooped and cleared and once again in idleness we lie. Have you no other work for us today?”

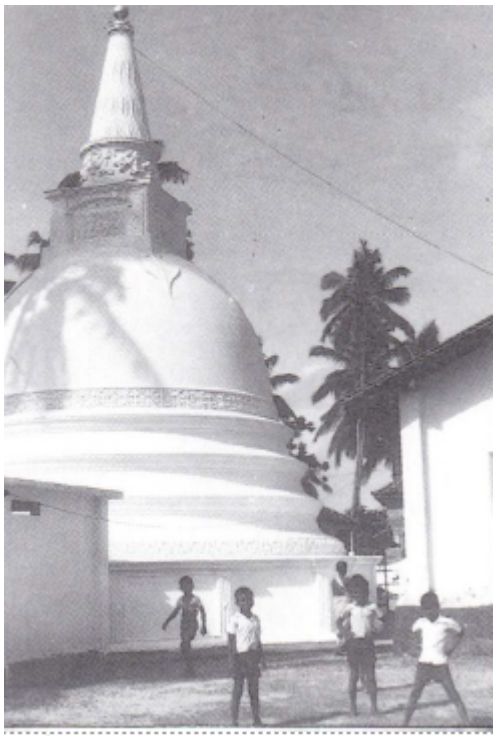
Greatly annoyed at this disturbance, the poet monk plucked out a tiny thread of wavy hair from his head and placing it on the out-stretched palm of the yakka chief, exclaimed: “Go, you fellows, and straighten out this thread of wavy hair and don’t come back until it’s done.”

The yakkas took the thread of wavy hair away. They pulled and tugged and tugged

and stretched but each time it coiled back like a tension-released spring. So they went back again to the library window of the monk and their chief spoke up.

“Good sir,” he said, “we’ve pulled and tugged and stretched but your tiny thread of wavy hair springs back into a coil. Please teach us how.”
Sri Rahula, with puckish humour, replied, “Fie! Shame on you! Why do you not place it on an anvil and strike it with a red hot iron, for then it will be straight.”

The foolish yakkas rushed thereupon to the nearest smithy and, placing the thread of hair on the anvil, dealt it a mighty blow with a red hot iron. The hair went up in smoke … the yakkas went back to the nether world in shame at their folly … and Sri Rahula continued with his writing in peace.•



The dagaba of the Totagama temple where the famous poet monk Sri Rahula lived.