Kataragama: The Place of Penance

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Deep in the jungle fastness of Ruhuna in southeastern Sri Lanka is a shrine which the traditions of more than two thousand years have made into one of the holiest places in the island.

Kataragama, the shrine of the Hindu deity Skanda or Muruga, the son of Shiva, god of war, also called Subramanya, more popularly known by Indian Hindus as Kartikeya, is a perennial pilgrim centre and a place of penance. Thousands of Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and even some Christians make their trek each week to this sylvan shrine with its origins lost in history, myth and legend. They come to

worship a deity whose name inspires awe in most Sri Lankans, and whose realm, by tradition, extends over the whole southern region. “Deiyanne Rata” it is called, God’s own country. Kataragama dates back to the time when myths were born and deities trod this earth, intervening directly in the mundane affairs of man. Tradition makes the site of the shrine here one of the oldest venerated places in all South Asia. Pilgrims have come to Kataragama from India in the pre-Buddhist era, and still continue to come from across the Palk Strait for the annual festival in July/August.

Many Hindus consider it one of the holiest places on earth, chosen as the abode of Skanda and his lovely escort, Valliamma. Buddhist chronicles of Sri Lanka refer to the Buddha having visited the place in 569 B.C. The first Sri Lankan convert to Buddhism, King Devenampiya Tissa, had planted a sapling of the sacred bodhi tree here in 307 B.C., acknowledging its importance at the time.

There is little to doubt that the present rituals of Kataragama come down from the time of the Veddahs, the aboriginal inhabitants of Sri Lanka who lived in the jungles of the south.

Unlike comparatively recent times Kataragama was a small shrine almost lost the jungles of Ruhuna, which extended to embrace the Ruhuna National Park at Yala. It came to life once a year at the time of the annual festival. Most of the pilgrims came undergoing much hardship, some walking more than 200 miles. Some crossed the dense jungle, where the elephant and leopard roam on foot. Some devoted Hindus walked all the way down from Jaffna in the North. Although still protected by the deep jungle all round it, Kataragama is a transformed place today. It is a zone declared sacred by statue and has well-tended pathways and streets, potable water, many pilgrims’ rests which are clean with Spartan comfort and plenty of landscaped scenery around. It is a place where vegetarianism rules, a combination of the Buddhist and Hindu abhorrence of meat eating.

The Menik Ganga where the devotees take a ritual bath before paying homage to the deities.

A devotee walks under the elephant’s trunk carrying a child.

Another has his skin punctured with hooks.

Yet another with skewers in his body prepares himself for a walk on nailed sandals.

The Kataragama festival is one of several summer festivals of Sri Lanka held in the period of Esala, between the full moon days in July and August. It is the time when thousands converge on the shrine to participate in the many rituals associated with the worship of Skanda.

All who come would first take the ritual bath in the Menik Ganga (the river of gems) which flows down from Adam’s Peak passing through the gem bearing hills of Ratnapura. They will wear white clothes and cross over to the sacred area and approach the shrine carrying colorful baskets of flowers and fruits to be offered to the deity. You will soon get used to the crack, pop and splash of coconuts being broken in a trough as an offering, with adults and children both enjoying a bite of the white kernel, now made sacred.

The poojas or daily ritual offerings begin at 4 am with several poojas each day. Many a pilgrim would stand hours in a long and winding line for that fleeting moment when his basket of offerings is taken by the officiating kapurala (temple custodian) to be placed at the altar of Skanda. A prayer is intoned thanking for

favours received or seeking help for any among the multiplicity of human woes.

Kataragama is the place of vows and redeemed pledges. See a man with a skewer in the shape of a trident, the symbol and weapon of Skanda, piercing both cheeks, walking about begging for alms. Meet a man whose body is pierced with spikes in many places who will greet you with raised palm and anoint your forehead with holy ash. See whole family of five or six rolling in the sand in the hot midday sun, as they make their slow progress to the shrine, fulfilling a vow. See another pilgrim make the same slow progress on his knees. The acts of penance at Kataragama are many. There are those who puncture the skin of their back with several hooks, and turn themselves into human bullocks and draw a small cart. Others have their backs pierced with hooks and are then suspended from a beam, raising the sacred cry of “Haro, hara, Vel Muruga” in honour of Skanda and in expiation of the sins of life.

But the big event of Kataragama is the Perehera held each night during the seven-day festival. It is full of the rich tradition of Sri Lankan ritual processions. The elephants always with colourful caparisons. Southern dancers stepping to the vigourous beat of drums. The more eye-catching of the dancing here is the Kavadi, a dance of fervour, performed more by the pilgrims, men and women, and not professional dancers. It is faith that moves the Kavadi dancer, deftly balancing the three-foot long shoulder pole decked with peacock feathers, the peacock being the vehicle of Skanda. As the tempo increases, the dancers move in a frenzy, possessed of unshakeable faith. Faces decked with ash and magenta dye bright in the light of flares. Sweating bodies gyrate. Men, women, children – whole families absorbed in the dance, arms flailing, feet pounding the dry earth.

They lead the festive chariot where the Vel, the weapon of Skanda, is carried. They prostrate themselves before the chariot. All move in for the great event: the fire walk It is the measure of their faith in Skanda. The pit is usually more than 20 feet long and about half that wide. The embers glowing, crowds straining to watch the spectacle keeping back because of the heat of the pit. Those who have taken the great pledge come forward as the tempo of the drums increase. There is no trial, no testing. The feet are bare. With great shouts of “Haro hara” they step on the embers. Most of them will walk steadily, some dance their way across, others do it at a quick trot, a few would run. Some fathers or mothers would walk the pit carrying a child. Fathers, mothers and children all join the burning trudge. The protection of the god is assured. No feet are scathed. The penance is performed, and the glory of Kataragama made manifest again. There are many other shrines to other lesser deities within the sacred area of Kataragama. It is a place of retreat

where many who have abandoned the world have settled down to lead a life of meditation.

British peers, German professors, American students and many others have found their private solace at Kataragama. There are also the tombs of two Islamic saints which draw the Muslim pilgrims. Beyond the main shrine is a magnificent Buddhist dagoba, the Kiri Vehera, dating back to the 1st century B.C.

Most Buddhists who visit Kataragama to worship at the shrine of Skanda would also visit Kiri Vehera to offer flowers to the Buddha. While the ceremonies at Kataragama are the best known of the festivals in honour of Skanda, there are others too which take place during the same period. The Vel Festival in Colombo is a colourful three-day fair, preceded by a procession through the city streets, when the juggernaut, or temple chariot, is taken from a shrine in the busy Pettah to one of two shrines in Bambalapitiya or Wellawatte in Colombo South. There is a famous festival at Nallur, in northern Jaffna, where too the juggernaut is taken in procession, and a festival complete with fire-walking at Udappuwa, near Chilaw, 96 km north of Colombo. Kataragama is 185 miles (296 km) south of Colombo and could be reached by either driving along Galle Road, along the coast, or through Ratnapura.

Young and old carry the ‘Kavadi’ on their shoulders and wade through the Menik Ganga.

A believer has his skin pierced with metal hooks-fulfilling a vow. (Fred R Malvenne)