



Panduru tied on the Thrishulaya (Trident)

**“Om mauwaran piyawaran demarawaran dedawaran balawaran guruwaran.....”**  
**chanted Wimalasena, requesting God Kataragama to bless us with his presence. We clasped our hands together in reverence deep in religious fervor...the whole jungle was quiet as if waiting...suddenly a sound of a bell was heard...**

***Words Udeshi Amarasinghe Photographs Mahesh Bandara***

Kebiliththa, is said to be the spiritual residence of God Kataragama as such it is believed that Kebiliththa is a site of great divine power. Kataragama Devalaya, is the more well known abode of Kataragama Deviyo where crowds throng in thousands everyday to pay their respects. However, it is believed that Kataragama Deviyo resides there only on festival days or poya days and on all other days He resides at His modest abode in Kebiliththa.

We had been wanting to make this trip for more than two years, but had been prevented from doing so due to various reasons. One does not go to Kebiliththa for fun, it is a religious journey where one needs to prepare and be true to one's faith and belief in God Kataragama. Abstinence is a must. You have to be a complete vegetarian for at least seven days prior to the journey. Furthermore, one needs to control one's temper, refrain from using harsh words, lead a life of simplicity and not talk about the pending travel. Many who plan to go, at times are not able to reach the Kebiliththa Devalaya on their first try. Prior to the journey we were told that the drive is difficult, that vehicles topple and at times winches are used to pull the vehicle as it struggles in the mud. Stories of overflowing rivers and unsuccessful travels were told. But, the success of the journey depends on the faith and good heartedness of the people who travel. A few days prior to our journey we made a vow at the Gangaramaya Temple, in faith that the journey would be a success.

Kebiliththa is situated in the heart of the jungle in Yala Block IV. We decided to take the route via Yala, which is said to be more difficult than the route via Kumana, Kotiyagala (through Siyambalanduwa) and Galge. As there are no facilities, camping equipment, water, food and most importantly torches and lamps need to be taken. Furthermore, all the required elements for the poojawa too need to be taken as well.

It was mid morning when we reached Yala National Park. We had to take a tracker with us as we were entering wild territory. Though there was a slight delay, as all the trackers had

gone into the national park with other visitors, soon Sirisena Ratnayake who has been with the Wild Life Department for more than 30 years was assigned to us as our tracker. Little did we know at that time, that he was a blessing in disguise.

We drove through the Yala National Park passing the many jeeps that had come to see the elusive animals that make it their home. Our attention was focused on reaching Kebiliththa therefore we were not interested in seeing any animals. Obeysiri was driving our jeep and Priyantha was driving the jeep carrying our friends. Having experienced and vigilant drivers is a must as you are travelling through the wilderness miles away from civilisation.

[We crossed the Menik Ganga, splashing the water and the engines roared with life, we had officially crossed into Yala Block II.](#)

We crossed the Menik Ganga, splashing the water and the engines roared with life, we had officially crossed into Yala Block II. We headed towards Meegaha Sevana to have our breakfast, Isuru who has experience in camping had a camp site there and we were fortunate to meet a young couple from the Netherlands who had thoroughly enjoyed their stay in the jungle. We filled ourselves with the scrumptious breakfast. Sandaruwan who was to be our cook joined us from this point. Prior to leaving the campsite Sandaruwan lit a lamp, incense sticks and left a branch of a tree at the base of a tree where a shrine had been made for God Kataragama in the form of a bequest, seeking a safe and successful journey. We all brought our palms together in worship and recommenced our journey. We had turned to one direction to get to Meegaha Sevana we had to now go in the opposite direction. At the entryway into the jungle both jeeps stopped and Sirisena informed us that we need to break a thornless branch and hang it on a tree, this is a tradition that has come down through generations and it is a form of worship that has been practiced by the Veddha community in Sri Lanka.

The landscape of Yala Block II is very different from Block I. There are vast open plains with interspersed semi arid shrubs, Sirisena told us that during the time of the kings this area had been acres of paddy fields and there had been a township with a very large population. As years passed, during the time of the colonial rulers this area was declared as a wildlife sanctuary. Maybe I was dreaming but staring out into the open plains I could almost see farmers harvesting their paddy on a sunny day. On and on we drove along the Weliyara and then we entered the more forest like area. The jeeps dipped and dived along the bumpy roads and Obeysiri and Sirisena kept yelling 'balagena athu wadei!' (be careful the branches will hit you), sometimes the warning was too late and we would have each received a good slap from an errant branch!

At times we had to get out of the jeep as the incline was too much, our luggage and supplies would topple onto the floor and we were thankful that we were not inside the jeep! There were times when we had to clear the road so that the jeeps could pass. Not for a moment were we scared of the animals in the jungle, though Sirisena cautioned us on numerous occasions.

We reached the Kumbukkan Oya and were quite surprised to see that on the other side of the river was the Paththini Amma Devalaya that we visit on our sojourns to Kumana. Our tracker advised us that we should visit the devalaya as such we crossed the river on foot and first worshipped Lord Buddha and then Paththini Amma for her blessings for a safe and successful journey.

We resumed the drive through the bumpy and winding roads and reached a 'somewhat' clearing, Sirisena cautioned us to keep our voices down and watch what we say. We had reached the realm of Kataragama Deviyo...

We had been travelling for about seven hours in total. We got down, the Kumbukkan Oya was calmly flowing by us, across the river was the abode of Kataragama Deviyo. We first cleared the campsite so that we could set up our tents. Pradeep Kumara who had organised the Kapu Mahattaya (a layperson who performs the religious ceremonies) went to look for him. Suresh and the rest of the group started organising the various items that we had to prepare for the poojawa.

Prior to crossing the river to go to the Devalaya, one needs to take a cleansing bath in the Kumbukkan river. And, that is what we exactly did. We had a bath and applied the juice from a heated lime and then we dressed in white. Just as we had finished our bath, the clouds broke open and drops of rain started pouring down on us. It had been sunny and there had been no hint of rain, even now while it rained the sky was bright and the clouds were slowly moving. We were told that this was the first time it had rained in eight to nine months! It is at this point we met our Kapu Mahattaya, Wimalasena from Kottiyagala. By looking at him, it was apparent that he was a great devotee of Kataragama Deviyo, his eyes twinkled with kindness. His family has for eight generations been in service as Kapu Mahattayas. He had learnt all that he knows from his father, whom he reminisced about with tears flowing down his face. For years he has served Kataragama Deviyo with great reverence.

Pradeep Kumara and the Kapu Mahattaya with another friend crossed the river to entreat Kataragama Deviyo for the rain to stop. And, within moments the rain did stop and we all proceeded to prepare for the poojawa.

Clad in white, we first built the makeshift structure, with four branches as the cornerstones and a white cloth on top to cover. Then, a stove was built using three stones. Lotus flowers were placed on the stones, then lamps and incense sticks were lit. We were preparing to make the Murthan Buth (an offering of rice preparation). The Kapu Mahattaya dug seven holes on the banks of the river, which represent seven wells. Around each 'well' branches with leaves were planted. Turmeric powder was put into each well so that the water is purified. It is this water that was used to make the Murthan Buth and also wash the fruits that were required for the pooja watti.

Palm sugar and dates were cut, coconut milk was made, mung beans and rice were washed... the ingredients were all put into the pot and the Murthan Buth was made. While these activities were ongoing a group of us prepared the 'mal watti' composing of pink nelum flowers. Then others prepared the palathuru watti, or fruit baskets which composed of red banana, oranges, lime, ripe jack fruit, guava, king coconut and many more; sweet items such as preserved winter melon, bundi and other such sweet meats were also placed. Suresh worked hard to ensure that everything was prepared appropriately while Pradeep too overlooked the preparations. Three types of beverages - water, delum and lime with rose water in each - were prepared as Madhura Paana (sweet drink). One special wattiya was made with a coconut instead of a king coconut and all the baskets were covered with a red cloth, which is the colour of Kataragama Deviyo.

[We lit the lamps along the path to the Bodhi tree and the Devalaya. By this time it was quite dark and sounds of the forest were calm and quiet...](#)

While the watti were being prepared some of us crossed the river back again towards the campsite to light the lamps near the Bodhi tree on that side and offered flowers to the Bodhi tree. We crossed the river again and lit the lamps along the path to the Bodhi tree and the Devalaya. By this time it was quite dark and sounds of the forest were calm and muted except for the noise of the insects. It has to be felt to be believed but this place where civilisation is far away and only man, the land and the divine reside, you feel the spiritualness and strength that something more profound and strong, the epitome of faith is amongst us.

We returned to the site where the pooja watti were being prepared, everything was ready. As is the tradition prior to the Devala pooja we first must perform the Buddha pooja, Bodhi pooja and Nava Graha pooja. With mal watti, incense, madhura pana, savandara roots, a ball of white thread and saffron robe we all walked back towards the Bodhi tree, chanting 'Sadhu Sadhu, Sadhu'. The offering for the Bodhi pooja was carried under a white cloth to prevent anything falling on to the offering to Lord Buddha. Here our Kapu Mahattaya

conducted the Buddha pooja, Bodhi pooja and we offered our prayers and flowers. We carried containers with water and bathed the Bodhi tree while finally draping the saffron robe around it. Though we came to know of Kebiliththa more recently the presence of the overarching, massive Bodhi tree is proof that this revered place has been here hidden from civilisation from time immemorial.

Wimalasena, our Kapu Mahattaya, Pradeep Kumara and Suresh wound the thread around the Bodhi tree and we all sat down for the chanting of pirith. The jungle was quiet and Wimalasena's voice reverberated through the night. Suddenly there was a cracking of twigs, Sirisena was alert, we all knew who it was but animals recognise those who mean no harm to them and it seemed that this herd of elephants which was what it was also respected the sanctity of this holy ground and left us to proceed with our prayers. Once we had completed the poojawa we headed back to the banks of the river. What I failed to mention before was that there is a slight climb from the river bank to the flat ground and the path is riddled with roots, therefore in the dark there is only the light from lamps and a torch is a must.

The Murthan Buth was ready, the Palathuru Watti was ready, as Sandaruwan and Pradeep Kumar had come to realise a vow that they had made earlier they also had a miniature spear and a granite statue of God Kataragama to be offered. We all stood in a line and covered our mouths and noses with white cloth to ensure that our breath would not contaminate the divine offering. We retraced our steps back to the Devalaya carrying the pooja chanting Sadhu, Sadhu, Sadhu.

Now, this spiritual site, though primarily the abode of God Kataragama, it is also said that Kalu Bandara, Kadawara Kalu Bandara, Kaluvedhi Bandara and Goddess Badra Kali also visit this location. Therefore along with the Murthan Buth pooja, Palathuru pooja and Devala pooja, Kadawara pooja is also held. God Kataragama seeks to attain enlightenment. According to belief, Deviwaru (deities) require the merit from human beings and as such special vows for those who are worthy and are of pure heart are fulfilled.

The Devalaya and the Bodhi Tree do not have any concrete buildings, the jungle makes the walls and the sky is the roof. It is simple but a special force is felt. The statues of Kataragama Deviyo and Kadawara Deviyo are before us. The Siyambala tree is somewhat small and at first you may wonder if it is just a plant. This tree has been here for many years but has remained the same. It is said that there was a massive Siyambala tree at the very same location and it is in this tree that Kataragama Deviyo resided. However, over the years with people placing oil lamps at the base of the tree the oil had seeped into the roots and the tree had perished. What remains today is a sapling of the same tree. However, the sapling had stopped growing after a few years.

Wimalasena asks us to keep the palathuru pooja on the altar. He lays his towel on the sandy ground and lies face down and brings his hands together. With great reverence he performs the motions of worship. He gets up and asks all of us to sit down.

### **The Poojawa Begins....**

'Om mauwaran piyawaran demarawaran dedawaran balawaran guruwaran divampath sandaranaka divakkarakarakata balayakata yaethi aybowewa aybowewa Ong' sadhu sadhu wandenwita wanden ba wanden uduathin wanden uruathin wanden wakkala athin wanden dikkala athin wanden kanda nama wanden banda nama wanden doth nama doth wandakillen sadhu ping athi budun dakina budu wena hamuduruwane eskawalen esakwalata mesakwalen mesakwalata....'

At times it seems that Wimalasena is affectionate towards the Deviyo he so reveres, from the pitch of his voice you hear respect and loyalty and faith...while listening to the chants that sound foreign yet so familiar, you too start to feel the same emotions as Wimalasena. The prayers were said in Shudda (pure) Sinhala. Your thoughts do not wander, if so it is only to speak to the Kataragama Deviyo through your mind. The minutes passed into hours, at times some of us fell asleep soon to be woken up by the changing tones of Wimalasena. (We were later told by Wimalasena that everything that happened including the rain, some of us falling asleep and other such incidents took place because that was the will of Kataragama Deviyo).

*The poojawa continued deep into the night... my mind was clear and I felt purified. The air was perfumed with fragrances... I felt as if I had reached a moment of peace*

As the night proceeded Wimalasena brought out some peacock feathers and blessed each of us by placing the feathers on our head while chanting the prayers. The poojawa went deep into the night...my mind was clear and I felt purified. The air was perfumed with fragrances... I felt as if I had reached a moment of peace and it is then that I heard a bell ring... faint but it was there... I knew that I was in the presence of great divine power. I looked up...

*The air was perfumed with fragrances... i felt as if i had reached a moment of peace and it is then that i heard a bell ring.*

Wimalasena concluded the poojawa and while all of us stood on in front of the altar, he called each one of us to individually bring our palathuru watti to a small shrine behind the

main altar and while he chanted the prayer we were able to converse our dreams and hopes through our minds to Kataragama Deviyo. After which, we tied panduru (a coin wrapped in a cloth) around the iron Thrishulayas (Tridents) around the Siyambala tree with great reverence.

Now, if I revert back to the story about the Siyambala Tree... after the first tree was destroyed it is said that Kataragama Deviyo chose another Siyambala Tree, which is a short distance away from the Devalaya. It is to this location that we next proceeded. We walked along a path further into the jungle and there... in a small clearing was this massive Siyambala Tree. There was a small shrine, we worshipped and prayed and then we walked around the tree. At the back of the tree, the surface of the bark was formed in such a way that it depicted God Kataragama. We placed our foreheads on the trunk of the tree and worshipped.

We proceeded back to the Devalaya and once we had eaten some of the blessed fruits, Wimalasena individually blessed each of us while tying the sacred Devala noola (signifies protection). We walked back to the campsite, each of us deep in thought. As we crossed the Kumbukkan Oya the water had receded further, usually the water level is said to be very high making it very difficult to cross. It is as if all the happenings of the day had culminated into a perfect journey and I was humbled by the faith and divinity of this sacred site...

We were quite exhausted when we reached the campsite, but in a good way. We were hungry, so Sandaruwan quickly whipped a lovely meal of rice and pol sambol (well he didn't have any choice, there were five very hungry people standing in front of him willing him to cook faster!!!). While we were eating we noticed Sirisena, Priyantha and Obeyesiri blocking one of the paths with a large log, which was slightly lit. The camp fire too was full ablaze. We all knew but we did not ask, this was done to ward away any elephants coming our way. We had some of the left over fruits, which are known to be favourites of our elephantine friends.

With our minds clear and tummies full we went to sleep in our tents.

Early next day, we had a bath in the river and went once more to the Devalaya. Wimalasena, Pradeep and Suresh were already there. We worshipped at the Bodhi Tree and the Devalaya and proceeded to the sacred Siyambala Tree. With deep reverence we once again offered the sweet fragrance of the incense sticks and sprayed the air with perfumed scent. We walked around the tree again in deep meditation our thoughts only between us and the divine. In some ways we did not want to leave, but we had to... back at the Devalaya we brought our hands together in worship took a couple of steps back bowed our heads and

turned back to return to the campsite. We journeyed back to Yala, where we were staying overnight with no mishap and in the same way returned to Colombo enlived by the entire experience.

A few days later, we went to realise the vow we had made at the Gangaramaya Temple to show our appreciation to all divine powers for ensuring that our pilgrimage to Kebiliththa had been a success.

Usually, people say 'you have to see it to believe it', well.... we saw, we felt it...and we truly believe.....

[nggallery id=110]