

Padayathra: Pilgrim Route through the Forest

Posted on



Pilgrims walking across Yala Block II

“You need a personal call from the god to embark on this journey: as per the devotees. When the call comes everything should fall into place enabling you to traverse through the jungle to reach the shrine of Kataragama.”

Words Thejaka Perera **Photographs** Thejaka Perera, Yasantha Jayasinghe, Sanath Siriwardhena and Timal Tennakoon

For us it was a trip in the planning for five years. We were not Hindu devotees, but a group of guys employed in Colombo caught in the routine. Amongst us we had a taste for adventure and exploration in common.

The moment we heard about the centuries old traditional foot pilgrimage route taken annually by the devotees of God Kataragama through jungle terrain and the vast saltern flats, our interest was aroused. The path goes through Kumana and Yala, the largest sanctuary in Sri Lanka. Usually Yala block two is closed to visitors who are not allowed to step off the vehicles even inside block one (open to visitors) except at two designated places. Walking through the sanctuary is only possible when it is open to pilgrims for a period of two weeks a year. We thought our physical strength was adequate to tackle this trek, however our plans did not get underway due to busy schedules and other unforeseen circumstances.

Some Hindu elders offered insight as to the preparation needed for this annual pilgrimage. You need to refrain from consumption of alcohol and adhere to strict vegetarianism before the pilgrimage. You also need to respect nature and the environment.

The trail, as we learned from those who treaded the same path before us was supposed to be very dry, barren and full of wild animals including the big three; the elephant, bear and the leopard. However, the most dangerous was thought to be the wild buffalo. Carrying supplies for four days we left for Arugam Bay on August 3, the day of the official opening of the passage. Arugam Bay is full of fun, sun, surf and the night life. We refrained from indulging in fun and frolic in preparation for the 85 km hike the next day. The usually dry Arugam Bay had a drizzle. And one thing we were not prepared for was the rain. We rushed to the nearest shop to buy light weight raincoats for the journey.

Early next morning we travelled to the Okanda-Kumana entrance by car. We said a prayer at the Okanda Shrine and entered through the Kumana gate. For the first time we felt the burden of the heavy haversacks. The sun rose giving us a taste of the task ahead. We decided to take regular breaks to hydrate and stretch our muscles.

We walked alone for the first nine kilometres and reached the first resting point, Bangure...

Although the aim was to walk with the pilgrim groups, they had made an early start.

We walked alone for the first nine kilometres and reached the first resting point, Bangure at 11.30 am and the companionable pilgrims offered us an early lunch. Realising that all the pilgrims were spending the night at the flat lands of Bangure, we decided to tackle the next 12 km leg of the journey by ourselves. The mid-day heat was unforgiving. We had our footwear, backpacks, bandanas soaked in water and wore sunglasses to reduce the glare of the white sand. It should be noted that some pilgrims had only a yellow Vetti and a shawl and had taken only the bare minimum essentials to survive the journey.

By mid-afternoon we came across a buffalo that was intimidating. We stood still. After a brief show of aggression the animal vanished into the bushes. We passed the Kumana villuwa full of pelicans and flamingos and reached Madamethota – Kuda Kebellitta Temple at around six in the evening, having walked 21 km on the first day. The place was filled with pilgrims who had arrived earlier. The Army and wildlife rangers stationed there guided us to a spot to pitch a tent for our first night in the jungle.

The devotees started singing bhajans (devotional songs) and dancing to honour Murugan, the deity of Kataragama. It was a show of pure spiritual devotion and cultural exposition performed in the middle of the jungle. A bonfire was lit, but it soon gave away into the darkness of the forest. Various rustling sounds were emanating from the jungle. Our flashlights caught two jackals running about. It was the insecurity that kept us awake. When we realised that the Army and the wildlife rangers were keeping a constant vigil of the jungle surrounding the pilgrims' sleeping grounds we fell into a restful sleep.

We made an early start so that we would not fall back from the large group of pilgrims. Although we had gotten accustomed to the heat and the climate by this time the going was tough. Water tanks and service points were situated at three to four kilometre intervals along the journey. If not for these the pilgrim route would have been extremely difficult due to the scarcity of drinking water in that area. We undoubtedly felt extremely grateful to the Military personnel for providing this service.

We walked 14 km and reached the 'The three wells' camping ground by noon. Here we found a small camp, a tuck-shop and canteen. Although we were keen to proceed with the next leg of the journey, we were strongly warned against it by the pilgrims. We respected their wisdom and experience and decided to camp there for the night.

They described the experience as a truly spiritual rendezvous with God Murugan

The leopard and the bear had taken a stroll across the camp site on the previous day. The evening at the campsite included a patrol with the Army into the jungle and a 'knowledge sharing session' with the pilgrims. We realised that lot of the pilgrims dressed in crimson and yellow were actually professionals and businessmen. They described the experience as a truly spiritual rendezvous with God Murugan. They were confident that somewhere along the stretch from Kumana to Kataragama they will meet God in the form of an avatar. We were offered a tasty lunch and dinner by the pilgrims.

On day three we started early in order to take advantage of the shady hours of the day. We followed the pilgrims who took 'short-cuts' across dried lagoons and thorny bush lands of "Katulpilara", and reached "Kosgasmankada" by 12.30 pm. We bought a round of soft drinks and tea from the tuck-shop located, and offered to the group of pilgrims who fed us. Naturally another lunch invitation was offered to us.

Lunch was vegetarian biryani served on the sands of Menik Ganga. Although tired and drowsy, a siesta was impossible due to the heat. The pilgrims decided to camp there for the night. We decided to leave in the afternoon and reach the Warahana bridge by tackling the next eight kilometres. The path that ran along the banks of the Menik Ganga was shaded by trees and we reached Warahana by five in the evening. Having travelled 24 km during the day, we slept under the stars till the next day as the bridge would be open only from six in the morning to three in the afternoon.

The morning breakfast was Kadala (Chickpeas) and Belimal (Golden apple herbal tea) offered by a dansala. We had an early start along the jeep track of Yala Block. We reached Katagamuwa and took a short cut across the Katagamuwa tank and reached the tarmac. At Kochchipatana we met a Thambili (King Coconut) seller and reduced his stock as we treated the pilgrims passing by to a refreshing drink.

There was a large dansala serving a delicious meal to the pilgrims. Well fed, we reached the Kataragama sacred city at two in the afternoon on August 7th and we crossed the bridge into the temple grounds to symbolise the end of our trail.

There was a sense of serene calmness as well as a sense of achievement and above all a feeling of heartfelt gratitude

Refreshed and in clean attire we attended the evening Pooja at the temple. It was the first date of the annual festivities. The temple grounds were lit up with multi coloured lamps. There were tuskars waiting in line being prepared for the Perahera (pageant). At the temple grounds we met a few of the pilgrims who had taken the same path with us. We had walked nearly 85 kilometres, but some pilgrims had begun the walk as far as from Jaffna. As we sat down to see the Perahera, there was a sense of serene calmness as well as a sense of achievement and above all a feeling of heartfelt gratitude towards the deity and all those who helped us along the way.

