The First Abode of God Skanda

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Groups of pilgrims gather at the banks of Menik River. The surrounding trees offer landmarks for individual groups

Vows fulfilled or vows to be made, great numbers throng Kataragama, a deeply spiritual region held in veneration by those of all walks of life and varied faiths. Steeped in religious belief it is the domain of God Skanda or the Kataragama Deviyo. Many who make the journey often venture further to Sella Kataragama…

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About five kilometres from Kataragama lies Sella Kataragama, a humble town comprising of a central bus depot, a public market and narrow by-lanes that could easily be missed if not pointed out to the unfamiliar visitor. At first glance Sella Kataragama seems a mere semblance of a township but size hasn’t deterred it from running abound with activity. Set adjacent to the Menik River, it serves as a second site of deity worship for pilgrims travelling from Kataragama.

An integral part of the festival conducted at Kataragama is the elaborate procession preceding the sacred casket of the God mounted on a richly adorned tusker. It is escorted from the main Devale to the Valli Amma Temple and returned to its abode. A custom carried out annually, it signifies the spiritual and religious culture and lore

of the Kataragama Deviyo that extends to Sella Kataragama as well. It is surmised that Sella Kataragama is the very place that God Kataragama upon arrival from South India, met his first consort Goddess Valli Amma and established their abode. It is believed that his brother Lord Ganesh (Ganapathi), enabled the union of his brother and his first consort by appearing in the form of an elephant.

Therefore, Sella Kataragama is also renowned for its Ganesh temple in the river, and the town itself has transformed to cater to worshippers with its shops laden with arrangements of offerings of fruit baskets and incense. Further inward are a fanciful mix of shops where purchases of anything from shoes and hats to chunky sweet meats like musket can be made. With the town's many narrow confines it can only be explored on foot to discover the endless array of stalls that seem tethered to one another.

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Although no sign of a temple could be discerned at the town itself pilgrims make their way, arms heavy with offerings, and demeanours altered in spiritual intent. From the town centre they seem to disappear into a breach between the roadside stalls – to the inconspicuous route that paved way to the Ganesh Temple and its restful precincts.

Here the trappings of the bustling town evaporate without a trace. Instead the Menik River bubbles pleasantly in the shades of gnarly trees imparting a salubrious atmosphere of cool serenity. The famous Ganesh Temple standing stolidly in the water is mobbed by pilgrims, so much so, from a distance it appears to overflow. Within crowds sifted in thick rows as they approached the sanctum where the poosari or the Temple priest accepts offerings for the God. Immediately outside, an iron framework stands overwhelmed with tethered coins wrapped in cloth – a symbolic gesture to the God in request of fulfilling a wish or expectation. While some served their God in calm and meditative prayer others preferred an uproar of rhythm, song and dance that reverberated throughout – together forming an unusual unison of spiritual veneration.

Outside, the embankment had transformed to immediate campsites, with pilgrims finding spots to rest and relax. Some bathed in the river and attended to daily ablutions. Here and there steam unfurled from earthen pots upon wood stoves,

brewing lentils or rice in preparation for the daily meals while families grouped around. Trees in the surroundings served as landmarks and accordingly number plates were pinned haphazardly along their lengths so that individuals could locate their group.

Just outside the Temple precincts a broad flight of steps leads up to another tier for spiritual observances. Named the Mahasen Raja Maha Viharaya, its open expanse accommodates both a Buddhist stupa – Mahasen Maha Seya and Hindu temples of deities; Ganapathi, Kataragama and Valli Amma. Here distinctions of religion have blurred and pilgrims visit and worship all religious abodes. Some traverse around the site imbibed in spiritual dance and music, their earnestness heightening at the threshold of each sanctum. The reasons and origins of this temple may be the belief that Kataragama was Buddha’s last place of visit to the Island where he was met by King Mahasen who reigned the region at the time.

With its deeply religious roots Sella Kataragama holds a pride of place in the hearts of many believers regardless of religion and origin. They flock the many temples and religious sites to make their fervent prayers and offerings. To some on arduous month long pilgrimages, it is the final stop where they rest and rejuvenate and make the last of their vows – the end of a long spiritual journey. In ancient religious lore, it is where it all began.

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