

The Mountain of the Sacred Footprint

Posted on

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Ceylon from whatever direction it is approached, unfolds a scene of loveliness and grandeur unsurpassed, if it be rivalled by any land in the Universe. The traveller from Bengal, leaving behind the melancholy delta of the Ganges and the torrid coast of the Coromandel, or the adventurer from Europe recently inured to the sands of Egypt and the scorched headlands of Arabia, is alike entranced by the vision of beauty which expands before him as the Island rises from the sea, its lofty mountains covered by luxuriant forests, and its shores, till they meet the ripple of the waters, bright with the foliage and eternal spring.



That was how Sir Emerson Tennant, a former lieutenant-Governor during the early days of British rule, described Sri Lanka. He is among so many others, travellers and writers, through many centuries and from many lands who have been entranced by the beauties of nature abundant in Sri Lanka.

Much of this beauty still lies in the invigorating Mountain Zone constantly watered by perennial streams, where the verdant greens of virgin tropical forests and nubby carpets of tea are interspersed with white waters of cascading waterfalls.

There is a mountain rising above these cloud-mantled slopes which from the known history has been the most sacred and most venerated mountain of all. Though not the highest mountain of Sri Lanka, Adam's Peak or Sri Pada is part of the myth and fable of East and West and the faith and legend of the four major religions of the world which have their birth in the East.



Depiction of the Buddha's footprint in stone at Sri Pada - Adam's Peak (8th to 10th Century) From X1 40. 1890. Royal Asiatic Society, Ceylon Branch

Of this mountain John Still writes in "The Jungle Tide": "In the middle of the hills of Ceylon, now sacred to tea, there towers a mountain so famous that the literature of two thousand years in several languages would have to be searched if all references to it were to be assembled in one book. Hindus and Buddhists, Mohammedans and Eastern Christians alike revere the mountain as a holy place and there is some evidence that the jungle people who came before all did likewise. It is certain that the Peak was holy fifteen centuries ago, when the oldest Sinhalese Literature that has survived was composed out of fragments and books already old and being forgotten ; and it is almost certain that it was holy a thousand years before that, when legends, of the Buddha attached to it, and when it became the refuge of the aboriginal inhabitants of Lanka who fled before the advance of the first Sinhalese invaders.

It is now the season of the year when Buddhists make the annual pilgrimage to the holy mountain. All through the night the narrow path to the peak echoes to the cries of "Karunawai, Karunawai" (may there be kindness) as those climbing and others descending help each other along the sacred trail. If to the old sacred chants are now added the sound of transistor radios and cassette players, most of these would also be playing devotional music.

Young and old make the three to four hour ascent to the peak beginning at about 10pm usually from Nallathanni at Dalhousey. They climb in faith to worship at the image of a footprint at the peak and ring the holy bell there, one for each time the pilgrimage has been done.

Mothers will carry infants huddled to their breasts and fathers will progress with toddlers on their shoulders, while old men and women with determination and faith writ on their faces would often be seen ascending unaided save for the support of a stout walking stave.

The pilgrims pause at traditional resting places along the route to bathe in cool spring waters, listen to Buddhist stories retold by the pilgrim leaders, and share in the special pilgrim baskets which traditionally include "aggala" - small cakes made of dried and ground rice sweetened with jaggery and laced with pepper and ginger

to warm the body.

The legends, lore, and beliefs about Adam's Peak are many, giving to it a rare ecumenism in a world where most sacred places are the strict reserve of a single faith. To the Buddhists of Sri Lanka and in many other Asian lands the depression somewhat in the shape of a footprint at the summit of the mountain is the footprint of the Buddha. It was placed there on one of the Buddha's three visits to Sri Lanka as a sign of his blessings of this land which would protect his teachings for five thousand years. The mountain is also called "Samantha Kuuta Pabbatha" or the mountain abode of Saman believed by both Buddhists and Hindus to be the tutelary deity of the Adam's Peak wilderness. The origin of the belief of Saman also goes back to the Hindu epic Ramayana and is believed to be an abbreviation of I.axamana, the brother of Rama.

Another name for the mountain in Sinhala is Samanala Kanda derived from the popular belief that each year butterflies in their millions go on a final pilgrimage to the sacred mountain. Indeed, whatever the facts, by November/December a person driving on any of the country roads will not fail to notice the thousands of butterflies that keep moving in the general direction of Adam's Peak. Hindus in Sri Lanka and India believe that the footprint on the summit is that of Siva, one of the Hindu trinity, and many are the Hindu devotees who make the annual pilgrimage to worship at "Sivan-olipadan" the sacred footprint of Siva. Hindus have also given it the name "Swargarhan" – the ascent to heaven which is an indication of its sacredness in Hindu belief.



The Makara Thorana at the beginning of the climb to Adam's Peak believed to protect the worshippers from all dangers on the journey.

The believers of Islam hold the footprint on the peak to be that of Adam, the first man, from which the western name for the mountain is derived. Many an Islamic traveller in the past from as far away as Arabia and Morocco have come to this Island to worship at this footprint. They believe that after Adam was banished from the garden of Eden it was on this peak that he atoned for all that was lost with Eden.

Ibn Batuta, the Moroccan traveller who came to Sri Lanka in the 1340's, describes his journey to Adam's Peak thus: "On the mountain are two paths leading to the Foot of Adam. The one is known by the name of 'The Father's Path' and the other of 'The Mother's Path'. By these terms are Adam and Eve designated. The Mother's route is an easy one, and by it, the pilgrims return; but anyone who took it for the ascent would be regarded as not having done the pilgrimage. The Father's Path is rough and difficult of ascent "The impression of the noble Foot, that of our Father Adam is observed in a black and lofty rock, in an open space. The foot is sunk in the stone in such wise that its sight is quite depressed: its length is eleven spans".

Yet another time-worn legend makes the Peak sacred to Eastern Christians. According to this, recorded by the Portuguese chronicler De Cuoto, the depression on the summit was that caused by St. Thomas, the disciple of Christ who came East. Those who hold this belief say the depression was caused as the saint wept kneeling on the summit for the many doubts he had about Christ's divinity. Whether singularly or in combination, all this religious belief attached to the Peak gives the area of the Peak's wilderness a rare, undisturbed tranquility. Although the conditions and rules for making the pilgrimage to the mountain are not as rigid a51 they were, very few indeed would cause to be uttered an ,improper word or inauspicious thought while on the journey. As in the days of old when pilgrimages were long treks with an uncertain return, those who go to Adam's Peak in piety would still not make a post pilgrimage appointment or even inform of a date and time of return. It is to "Deiyanne Rata", the land of God, they go to and until they return they are in the hands of God.

One of the most memorable rewards of a climb to Adam's Peak to the devotee and interested traveller alike is the unravelling of nature's own drama, the sunrise as seen from the Peak From early hours the dim rays of dawn begin to light up one peak after another of the vast wilderness range with a sky lit in a magnificence of colour. As the sun rises higher and the mist begins to break, the shadow of the Peak is cast over nearly a third of Sri Lanka slowly receding each minute - a beautiful experience in a truly beautiful abode of sanctity. Pilgrims to Adam's Peak start the season in December on Full Moon Poya Day and end in March. Special bus services and train services to Hatton will be available during this season.



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Pilgrims drop coins into the depression where the sacred footprint is



A devotee reverently touches the stone slab over the sacred footprint on the Peak.