

Kataragama

There are a variety of Hindu temples in Sri Lanka that are popular pilgrimage sites. One of these major temples is known as Kataragama which is located in the southeast region of Sri Lanka. Kataragama is a holy site which is used to celebrate many festivals. Some of these festivals are to celebrate the love of the Hindu God, Lord Murugan, and a village girl/goddess Valli. “Valli first met the prince/ deity Kataragama” by the Manik Ganga River, this would start the beginning of their love story (Younger 27). Their marriage is important because Valli and the Hindu God, Lord Kataragama, are from different cultural backgrounds, which is not common in India. Pilgrimage is an important part for devotees who are going to Kataragama and is a large part of worshipping Lord Murugan before arriving at Kataragama. These festivals bring in many families, and religious groups, and aid in preserving the traditions of Hinduism. One major festival is the Kataragama festival, which celebrates Lord Kataragama/Lord Murugan.

Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage can be interpreted as when a person leaves a place they know to be safe and ventures into the unknown, as the Hindu God Murugan is reputed in myths to have done many years ago, while relying on faith and leaving all modern items behind (Holt & Higbee). The people of Sri Lanka leave on their pilgrimage walk (Pada Yatra) to Kataragama, which is roughly 300-400 kilometres of travel that begins almost 45 days before the Kataragama (Holt & Higbee). Devotees walk barefoot down the coast of Sri Lanka. They carry a *vel*, which is a spear covered with peacock feathers and fabric and is carried the entire way.

Devotees leave on the Pada Yatra to focus their minds on the Divine (Holt & Higbee). While on the Pada Yatra, pilgrims stop at villages on the way and eat with other believers. When at these villages, devotees perform *pujas* (prayers to Murugan) asking for many things, such as

healing, love, and for Murugan to be a part of their lives. Every time a Pada Yatra leaves a village it grows since members of the village join the pilgrimage (Holt & Higbee). When the pilgrims get to a point where they can see the peak of Kataragama Mountain, they stop to say another *puja* (Holt & Higbee). Once the pilgrimage makes it to Kataragama they stay there for the two week festival.

Kataragama Festival

The Kataragama festival is held at the holy site of Kataragama to worship Lord Kataragama/Murugan. The Kataragama festival is held annually, and “commences on the new moon (July-August)” (Navaratnam). “The festival takes place on the edge of the great Yala Forest” which is controlled by the Sri Lankan government (Younger 26). Thousands of people gather at Kataragama “...to fulfil their vows or to seek knowledge and guidance.” (Navaratnam).

When the pilgrims arrive at Kataragama they are greeted by the many that have already arrived for a meal. Once this meal is finished the devotees then a hike up the Kataragama Mountain to a sacred site where they perform a *puja* to Lord Murugan. They also perform a sacred ritual to a large *vel* of Lord Murugan. A selected individual dresses the *vel* in clothes and peacock feathers. Another *puja* is performed after the *vel* has been dressed. It is at this point the pilgrims place their *vels* which they have carried on the Pada Yatra by the large *vel* of Lord Murugan to show they are devoted to him (Holt & Higbee).

The *perahera* (procession) is a popular ritual of the Kataragama festival. This ritual consists of Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and Veddas parading “the casket of a god on the back of an elephant with chamera, damps, and flambeaux” between three temples (Navaratnam). The *perahera* always concludes at Lord Kataragama’s temple. “This central ritual is a dramatic

procession” which occurs every “evening as Lord Kataragama emerges from his temple and rides on the back of an elephant to the temple of the village girl/goddess Valli” (Younger 29-30).

This procession occurs “on the first fourteen nights for the festival. On the thirteenth and fourteenth nights, there is a second quiet visit at midnight. On the fifteenth night the midnight visit lasts until the wee morning and the romantic bond is consummated.” (Younger 30)

The *yantra* (which contains the power of gods) of Lord Kataragama is dipped in the sacred water of Manika Ganga on the last day; this is known as the Water-Cutting Ceremony, and takes place on the last morning of the full moon. Many devotees dump water on their bodies and drink it, since the water is said to heal one’s body from any diseases or illnesses. The Water-Cutting Ceremony is supervised by the LTTE to monitor the crowd and to protect the casket (Holt & Higbee). Once the Water-Cutting Ceremony is completed Murugan is taken to Valli’s temple so he can bid her farewell until the next year (Holt & Higbee). This concludes the *perahera* until the next year.

Another common ritual “is the exciting fire-walking ceremony” (Navaratnam). This is performed a couple days before the end of the Kataragama festival. The fire-walking ceremony occurs late in the evening and proceeds into the morning. The fire-walking occurs on a piece of land which spans about twenty feet. The participants perform the ritual “after finishing their religious ablutions in the waters of the sacred-river” (Navaratnam). After the participants have been blessed they make a last request for strength. Then the shouts of “Haro Hara” are made and the participants either run or walk barefoot over the cinders. This ritual is intended to show the power of faith and it is held that if one did not have faith they would be burned by the hot coals.

Work Cited

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Written by Kendra Darr (Spring 2009), who is solely responsible for its content.