

## Kataragama—the Holy of Holies of Sri Lanka.

By swami Asangananda.

**G**IRDLED on all sides by the belt of the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal, enriched by the fertile soil of the plains and the hills, watered by several rivers, endowed with numerous fauna and flora, natural scenic beauty-spots and enviable health-resorts, studded with very many seats of importance—cultural, historical as well as religious—and fully equipped with the variety of climates visible in its various places, Sri Lanka or Sīṃhala or Ceylon is undoubtedly the “Pearl Island of the Indian Ocean”, which has evoked eulogy and admiration from innumerable great leaders of the world who happen to pass through the international key-port of her capital. Moreover, several currents and cross-currents of thoughts—cultural, religious and political—had flowed throughout the length and breadth of the land in season and out of season and threatened her very existence; yet she kept her head high in the thick of the tremendous inundations of conflicts and contacts by clinging fast to the basic principle of life. The fountain of her spirituality is perennially issuing forth and has been supplying the waters of life from time immemorial. The temple of Kataragama, surrounded by dense forests and situated on the bank of the ‘Manik Ganga’, is, indeed, the veritable Gangotri of spirituality eternally gushing out torrents of water with a sonorous music of ‘Harohara’.

While the holy *Kṣetra* of Kataragama is a household word in Ceylon and

is so famous and well-known in South India, especially in the Tamil Nadu, very few people in North India, it is a pity, have come across or even heard of the name of the most sacred place of pilgrimage of the Hindus in Lanka. In the opinion of the writer of this article, who has visited almost all the important places of sanctity and holiness in the North as well as the South, from the Himalayas to the Cape Comorin, Kataragama may be placed on the same footing as Benares of the North, Kanchipuram of the South, Pandharpur of the West and Jagannath of the East; nay it is the ‘Kailas’ of the Hindus of the island. Most marvellous is the situation of this *Pīṭhasthāna* and equally congenial is it for *Sādhana* and spiritual unfoldment. Kataragama lies in the very heart of the virgin forest, south of Ceylon, and has a river of sweet water flowing perennially touching its holy feet. It is 59 miles away from Hambantota, 87 miles from Badulla and 10½ miles from the nearest post town Tissamaharama. Although there is so much of facilities of conveyances and communications in other parts of Ceylon, especially in these days of speed and quick transport, yet the road to Kataragama from Tissamaharama exists to-day as it was several centuries ago. And consequently the pilgrims, to whatever status they may happen to belong, have to cover up this short but exacting, withal enchanting, distance on foot, and only a few souls who are incapacitated

to move due to old age, disease or weak health have to take recourse to the relics of the ancient Eastern vehicle, *i. e.*, the bullock bandy, the constant jolting and the frequent violent impact of which with stones make even the most reluctant tongue utter now and then the sacred name of "Harohara". The concourse of pilgrims during the festival who mend their way to the Temple of Kataragama through the sylvan tracts reminds one of the "Swargārohaṇa" of the Pāṇḍavas of the Epic *Mahābhārata*, on their way to the Heaven through the Himalayan forests.

Like all the traditional places of pilgrimage associated with historical events or legendary stories, Kataragama has got its own tale to tell. How far the story is real and authentic is the matter to be discussed, examined and verified by the erudite historians; but, so far as the main plank upon which the sacred place of pilgrimage is based is concerned, Kataragama has, no doubt, eclipsed all the other holy places in Ceylon. The story owes its origin and importance to the *Skanda-purāṇa* of the Hindus and it runs as follows.

Once upon a time there was a great war between the Suras and the Asuras, which ended in a glorious victory to the Asuras. The King of the Asuras or Demons, Padmāsura by name or better known in South India and Ceylon as Sura Padma, captured all the dominions of the gods and held Lord Indra, Varuṇa, Agni, Vāyu and other royal dignitaries in the captivity, who had to carry out the ignominious orders of the demons and their Chief. Thus smarting under the heavy load of slavery and infamy,

the gods found their lives unbearable and therefore put their heads together day and night to devise a means of putting an end to the rule of the Demon King. King Sura Padma was not an ordinary monarch. He ruled over a vast empire of eight and a thousand worlds, having Ceylon or Lanka as his capital. And consequently finding it extremely difficult, nay impossible, to extricate themselves out of the clutches of Sura Padma, the gods in a body went on a deputation first to Lord Brahmā and next to Lord Viṣṇu and sought their help and counsel. But, as ill-luck would have it, both of them pleaded inability to help them and counselled the gods to approach Lord Śiva for the fulfilment of their desire and prayer. So they all went to Lord Śiva when He was not in *Yoga* and sought redress from Him with supplicating hands. Lord Śiva acceded to their prayer, but, since it was *infra dignitatem* for Him to stoop low to fight with a demon and since it was physically impossible for other gods to wage war with such a mighty Asura, Lord Śiva promised to depute one who would be as powerful as Himself. The deputy was none else than His son, Kārtikeya, around the birth of whom innumerable legendary stories have been spun and woven. Indeed, in his infancy, Kārtikeya showed feats of extraordinary power and in recognition of his superior strength was afterwards installed as the Commander-in-chief of the army of the Suras or gods. The weapon he had as a present from his mother, Goddess Pārvatī, who pulled it out from some part of Her Divine body, was a lance, the far-famed Vel. Fully armed with the war-materials, Kārtikeya was sent by his father, Lord Śiva, to the

South to fight with Sura Padma. The Commander-in-chief of the gods came down to Thiruchendur, a port of sanctity in South India, and sent his messenger Veeraragu to the Chief of the Asuras of Lanka with an ultimatum—"Release of the captives including King Indra or war at the battle-field." Relentless was Sura Padma and therefore war was inevitable. Lord Kārtikeya led his army on the battle-field and at the first counter shot the Asura King with his invincible Lance, the 'Vel'. Being tormented by the piercing of the Lance, Sura Padma begged the boon of his life which was granted and consequently the latter was transformed into a cock and later into a pea-cock.

The Puranic gods had all the failings of ordinary human beings, but with divine interpretations and devout justification. Soon after the famous victory over the Asuras Lord Kārtikeya was shot by the arrow of the Cupid God, Madana, and was in mad pursuit of a highland princess, Valli by name, a Vedda girl (the aborigines of Ceylon are called Veddas). And it is here at Kataragama that Kārtikeya met and married her. And tradition has it that since then Lord Subrahmanyam or Kārtikeya is still living there. Kataragama is an *Aṣabhrāṃśa* or corrupted form of *Kārtikeya-grāma*, i. e., the village of Lord Kārtikeya.

To the Hindus of South India and Ceylon, to question the historicity and antiquity of Kataragama is nothing short of a sacrilege and blasphemy. Whatever may be the attitude of the devotees towards its historicity, it is stated that King Dutugemunu, the

famous ancient King of Ceylon, visited the Kataragama Temple and performed strenuous *Sādhana* for regaining the lost ancestral kingdom.

Sir Pounampalam Arunachalam wrote a very interesting brochure on "The worship of Muruka or Skanda, the Kataragama God", wherein he mentioned the worship of Lord Kārtikeya by King Dutugemunu two thousand years ago. He says, "King Dutugemunu in the first century B. C., according to ancient tradition, rebuilt and richly endowed the Temple at Kataragama as a thank-offering for the favour of the God, which enabled him to march from this district against the Tamil King Elala and, after killing him in battle, recover the ancestral throne of Anuradhapura. Dutugemunu's great grandfather Mahanaga, younger brother of Devanampriya Tissa, had taken refuge in Mahagama in the southern Province and founded a dynasty there, and Anuradhapura was for 78 years (with a short break) ruled by Tamil Kings, of whom Elala (205-161 B.C.) was the greatest. Dutugemunu conceived the idea of liberating the country from Elala. While his thoughts were intent on this design day and night, he was warned in a dream not to embark on an enterprise against his father's positive injunctions unless he first secured the aid of the Kataragama God. He therefore made a pilgrimage thither and underwent severe penances on the banks of the river, imploring divine intervention. While thus engaged in prayer and meditation, an ascetic suddenly appeared before him and inspired such awe that the prince fainted. On receiving consciousness he saw before him the Great God of War,

who presented him with weapons and assured him of victory. The prince made a vow that he would rebuild and endow the Temple on his return and started on his expedition, which ended in the defeat and death of Elala and the recovery of the throne.

"The incidents associating the Kataragama God with Dutugemunu's victory naturally find no place in the Buddhist chronicle, 'the Mahāvamsā', which glorifies him as a zealous champion of Buddhism. The tradition is confirmed by a Singhalese poem called '*Karūda Upata*' (Birth of Kauda), for a MS. copy of which I am indebted to Mudaliar A. Mendis Gunasekhara; Stanzas 41 and 46 show that King Dutugemunu invoked the aid of the god and received his help and built and endowed the temple at Kataragama in fulfilment of his vow. The royal endowment was continued and enlarged by his successors and by the offerings of generations of the people and princes of Ceylon."

Thousands of pious pilgrims have been wending their way towards this sacred place from a very ancient time, but Kataragama came into greater prominence and limelight soon after the realization of the great North Indian monk Swami Kalyangiri, known in Ceylon as Muthulinga Swami. What Lord Chaitanya had done for the rediscovery of Vr̄ndāvana, Sage Kalyangiri Swami did for Kataragama. Swami Kalyangiri was, indeed, the discoverer of Kataragama. It is he who revitalized Kataragama by delving into the abysmal depths of *Samādhi* and brought the sweet fragrance of the Deity to the door of every Hindu devotee. It will

not be out of place if a brief history of the incident of his life is narrated here for public enlightenment.

Several centuries ago, a saint of North India, Swami Kalyangiri by name, was overwhelmed with sorrow at the prolonged stay of Lord Kārtikeya in Lanka, and determined to bring Him back to the mainland. With this end in view, the revered Swamiji visited Kataragama, but failed to get an audience with the Lord in spite of his strenuous efforts; and, therefore, he plunged himself into the depths of austere penances and spiritual practices for a long period of twelve years, in the course of which a Vedda boy and a girl used to attend on him with all love and care. At the end of the twelfth year, one day, while he was sorrowfully mourning over his failure to get a vision of the Lord after such a long time, he fell fast asleep. Just then the Vedda boy came and awoke him. Being thus disturbed in his sleep the sage cried aloud in anger, "How dare you disturb my rest when you know that this is the first time I have slept for years?" The boy uttered and muttered a few words of excuse and began to run away followed by the Swamiji till he came to an islet in the river and the long cherished desire of the saint was fulfilled. Lo ! the boy then transformed himself as Lord Subramaniya ! At once, a new light flashed before the saint's mind and, to his great joy, he came to realize that the Vedda boy and girl were none other than Lord Kārtikeya and Goddess Valli. With all devotion he fell prostrate at the holy feet of Lord Skanda, begged pardon of his act and requested the Deity to return to India. Then came a tug of war—on one side stood Goddess Valli

who made her appeal not to leave her and Kataragama, and on the other the Swamiji with folded hands pressed for the Lord's return to Bhāratavarṣa. But, in the end, the former request prevailed over the latter and both Lord Skanda and Swami Kalyangiri settled down at Kataragama. Here, it is said, that the venerable Swamiji again threw himself heart and soul into austere spiritual practices and, before he left his mortal coil, he left the legacy of his *Tapasyā* engraved on a golden plate, a *Yantra* (Mystic Diagram), and enshrined it in the *Sanctum Sanctorum* of the Temple constructed or restored with the help of the then King of Ceylon. The tradition has it that when he gave up his body, he was buried and was at last changed into a pearl image, whence came the name, Muthulinga Swami, and he is still being worshipped in an adjoining temple. Indeed, it was this Swamiji who recovered, as it were, from the debris of age-long antiquity the temple of Lord Kārtikeya and restored it its pristine purity, nay, revitalized and surcharged the whole atmosphere with electric spirituality and thus transformed the sacred place of Kataragama into a gigantic power-house of spirituality and sanctity.

It might be definitely stated that the Sage Kalyangiri lived at Kataragama between the latter part of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth century from the fact that the King of Ceylon, who helped him in the renovation of the Temple, ruled over the island nearly fifty years during the seventeenth century. And the visit of Governor Brownrigy to Kataragama and His Excellency's reception by the

disciple of the Muthulinga Swami, named Jaisingh Giri, described by Dr. Davy, corroborates the fact that such a great and mighty spiritual personality did live at the sacred place of Kataragama. Dr. Davy specially mentioned in his diary that the particular object of reverence was the seat of "Kalana Natha (*i. e.*, Kalyananath *alias* Kalyangiri), the high priest of the temple."

There was another great soul of wide celebrity living at Kataragama, named Swami Kesavapuri or Kesopuri, better known in Ceylon as 'Palkudi Bawa' on account of his living on *pal* or milk. He hailed from a high class Brahman family of North India and embraced the life of renunciation at Allahabad at an early age. Spurred by the fire of renunciation, he betook himself to roaming about throughout the length and breadth of India and came to Ceylon during the early part of the last century and merged into the ocean of arduous *Sādhana* in the forest of Kataragama, finding the place specially congenial for spiritual practice. Nobody knew the exact duration of his *Sādhana*. But another North Indian Swamiji, Surajpuri Swami by name, who happened to visit the sacred temple of Rameswaram received a divine call to make a pilgrimage to Sripada (Adam's Peak), holy to the Hindus as well as the Buddhists. And here at Sripad he was ordered again to proceed to Kataragama forest and serve the Swami, who had been doing intense *Tapasyā*. Swami Kesopuri was discovered and served by Surajpuri to the best of his ability; but soon Kesopuri Swami gave up all solid food and lived solely on milk and henceforward he came to be known as the

'Palkudi Bawa'. He breathed his last at Colombo in July 1898 at a ripe old age; but his remains were taken to Kataragama and a Samadhi Temple was erected, where the body was interred. The revered Palkudi Bawa is second in succession to the *Gādi* created by a very pious lady, whose life also was bristling with thrilling incidents. She was the first child of a North Indian Raja who took a vow before the Kataragama God to the effect that if any children were born to him, the first one would be dedicated to the Lord's service at Kataragama. The child, Balasundari by name, was born to him in course of time; but he totally forgot all about his vow. Being rebuked by the god and threatened with a disastrous consequence, the Raja brought his girl and left her at Kataragama with a suitable retinue to attend to her necessities of life. She lost all ideas of the worldly life and entirely devoted herself to the life of spiritual discipline and practice. She was a very pious lady and a paragon of beauty. Her fame reached the ears of the then King of Kandy, who sought her hand in marriage, which was sternly refused. It is said that being furious at her refusal, the King of Kandy sent an army to fetch her to his palace. She prayed to the God of Kataragama and her prayer was answered and so her life of celibacy and *Sādhana* was saved. In the meanwhile the British troops were attacking the citadels of Kandy and ultimately the King was taken prisoner and deported to Vellore in South India; this was in 1814. The lady afterwards lived a grand old age and passed away after installing Swami Mangalpuri who was succeeded after his demise by Palkudi Bawa in 1873.

In Kataragama there is no image or idol of God in the Temple; the Lord Subrahmanya is worshipped here as "the all-pervading Spirit of the universe, the Essence from which all things are evolved, by which they are sustained and into which they are involved—who in gracious pity for humanity takes form sometimes as the youthful God of Wisdom, God also of War when wicked Titans (Asuras) have to be destroyed, sometimes as the holy child Muruka, a paragon of perennial tender beauty, always and everywhere at the service of His devotees." In the *sanctum sanctorum* are hung a number of curtains one behind the other and nobody except the Kapuralas (the priests are so designated here) is allowed inside these curtains, which are never raised and thus separate the worshippers from the Holy of Holies. According to some high authorities it is presumed that there is a casket inside containing a *Yantra*, (Mystic diagram) engraved on a golden tablet, in which the divine power and grace are believed to reside. A mystery enshrouds the whole affair and whoever happens to come within the precincts of the Temple compound is, as it were, thrown forcibly into and carried away by the inconceivable currents of mysterious divine force. Such, indeed, is the potency of the Impersonal divinity residing in the Temple. Here all your philosophical formulas and set doctrines, atheism and scepticism are pulverized by the sledge-hammer blows of the Divine presence and you are a thoroughly transformed soul before the Divinity. Nay, some of the worshippers are, in the twinkling of an eye, inspired and entirely lose their body-conscious-

ness, so much so that they walk on fire without getting their feet burnt or blistered or sometimes get their tongues, cheek and other parts of their bodies stuck with silver Vels and jump in and around the Temple with joy, completely oblivious of their bodies and the pain due to tortures. And now when the Vels are slowly removed by the Kapuralas, the devotees are given *Vibhūti* (holy ash) to besmear their bodies with, and instantaneously all their physical pains disappear on its application as darkness does before the rise of the Sun in the early hours of the morning.

The Lord has unequivocally declared in the 'Bhagavadgītā' that whatever devotees sincerely pray for unto Him, is fulfilled by Him forthwith. If any sceptic wants to verify the validity of this bold declaration and statement of the Almighty, he is requested to pay a visit brief to this temple during the July festival. Very many mysterious things take place here which the philosophers and even matter-of-fact scientists have helplessly and ludicrously failed to explain with their much-vaunted doctrines and theories. Miracles they may call them, but miracles cease to be miracles if they can find strict coincidence with facts and bring in their train a thorough change in the life of the people. It is not baseless exaggeration of facts that the Lord does appear in various human forms to sincere devotees in their unguarded moments and give them His messages which heal the wounds of either their minds or bodies or both; and just when they are, as it were, brought to the normal consciousness and search after the Divine Messenger, lo! He has already vanished and is not to be

seen again. The history of Kataragama, the Holy of Holies in Ceylon, is bristling with innumerable thrilling instances, and, as the years are rolling on and on, such instances are finding more space in its pages. The writer has already come across a good number of such occurrences and, since the space will not permit him to write down all the happenings he has heard of, he will content himself by citing an incident occurred in the life of an ex-Civil servant and a J. P., who is still alive and who is a great friend of him. When he was in service, the distinguished gentleman was passing through pangs of suffering, both mental and physical,—mental, because in his official career he had been superseded by his lower officers many a time, and physical, since he had been a victim to a serious disease which he was unable to get rid of in spite of various kinds of treatment. So, it is said, he took a vow that he would visit the Holy Kṣetra of Kataragama and await the message of Lord Murugan and the healing balm for the curing of his diseased body and mind. He did make a pilgrimage to Kataragama while he was appointed an officer at Badulla Kacheri, the Headquarters of the Uma Province and was well looked after by the great sage 'Palkudi Bawa'. Just on the last day of the July festival, after the 'water-cutting' ceremony, while he was talking with some of his fellow-pilgrims inside the compound of the Temple, a madman approached him and said, "Well, off to the north! off to the north! and you will be all right." Thus uttering a few words, the madman disappeared, and a few minutes later, when the gentleman looked for him to get

illuminated on the *Ādeśa*, lo! the Mad-man was not to be seen. He felt so morose and disheartened. Lord Subrahmanya appeared to him as a Mad-man; but as ill-luck would have it, he failed to recognize Him. The officer returned to Badulla soon after the festival and to his great joy and bewilderment he received an order from the colonial Secretary to proceed to the Northern Province as a higher officer. Thus his mental wound was healed, but the body was still undergoing the suffering. There was a famous Āyurvedic physician who treated him and he was cured within a few weeks. And, when this incident of his life was being narrated by the gentleman, tears were trickling down his cheeks. This is not a mere story but a hard fact in life, and therefore it cannot be summarily dismissed as a fantastic creation of an agitated brain.

The sylvan retreat of Kataragama remains a veritable forest with its denizens, the elephants, snakes, cheetas etc., except on two occasions, *i. e.*, during the July festival, which lasts for a fortnight, and the November Kartikai ceremony lasting only for a day. During the former occasion the whole village of Kataragama is transformed into a beautiful town with all the modern commodities and necessities of life. Streams of pilgrims will be passing through the forest day and night having always the holy name of 'Harohara' on their lips. There is a procession every night when the sacred Box containing the *Yantra* is taken round on the back of an elephant, followed by an army of devout pilgrims having earthen pots of burning camphor on their heads and chanting the name of 'Harohara'. Just

a day before the termination of the festival there is the fire-walking ceremony during the early hours of the morning, when 25 to 30 devotees, being inspired by the Lord, walk on the forty feet of glowing embers of fire without getting their feet burnt. And on the last day there is the 'water-cutting' ceremony and the Lord Murugan is taken to a place on the bank of the river Manik Ganga and the *Pūjā* is celebrated inside a closed tent surrounded by nearly 20 to 25 thousand pilgrims. And no sooner the ceremony is over than the pilgrims take a dip in the river, the significance being that the Lord Kārtikeya takes the devotees across the 'River of Samsāra'. After the ceremony the deity is taken to the Temple of Valli and returns to the *Sanctum Sanctorum* after a few hours' stay there and thus the Great Festival of Kataragama terminates.

Besides the main Temple at Kataragama there are two other very sacred places associated with Lord Subrahmanya within a radius of four miles from this place, *viz.*, *Sella Kataragama* or Little or miniature Kataragama with all the important temples and shrines and the *Kataramalai, i. e.*, The Hill of Katara or Kārtikeya, where His arm, the Vel, is worshipped on the top of a hill; it is believed that immediately after His conquest over the Asuras Lord Subrahmanya ascended the hill and planted His lance as a mark of His glorious victory and the freedom of the gods from their unbearable and ignominious captivity. These places, too, are not devoid of happy incidents as stated above. Another remarkable feature of this place, which should not escape the gaze of the devotees, is the representation of



two other faiths, Islam and Buddhism, in the mosque situated near the Temple of Goddess Valli and the Buddhist Dagoba located 2 or 3 furlongs from the main shrine. The festivals of the mosque and the Dagoba synchronize with the Festival of Lord Kārtikeya when reciprocal visits to the different shrines are made by the votaries of three main denominations of the island. Although there is no church or chapel, yet there is a considerable number of Christian devotees who make a pilgrimage to this holy *Kṣetra*.

Though several centuries have flowed down the stream of time without our cognizance, the Holy Tīrtha of Kataragama is as fresh as before. It is, in fact, a seat of divine knowledge and love, and a haven of peace and bliss. A brief visit to this sacred place will convince even the casual observers and die-hard critics that a mysterious Power works here in a very subtle way that passeth human understanding—as if the Heaven or the *Kailāsa* of Lord Śiva is brought down to the forest of Kataragama and the devotees are, so to say,

transformed into living embodiments of gods and goddesses, thoroughly forgetting all ideas of desires and passions, hatred and jealousy, complexes of superiority and inferiority;—so calm, so elevating and so sublime becomes the whole atmosphere! Oh Lord! when is this world of ours, the veritable abode of selfishness and individualism, lust and anger, rivalry and competition, self-aggrandizement and hypocrisy, individual as well as national, going to be metamorphosed into the Greater Kataragama of love and devotion, purity and chastity, harmony and concord, sacrifice and service?

“When the whole world is the Form Universal of the Eternal *Ātmā*, the *Īśvara*, what is there to wonder at the special influences attaching to particular places? There are places where He manifests Himself specially, either spontaneously or through the earnest longing of pure souls, and the ordinary man, if he visits those places with eagerness, attains his end quite easily.”

—*Swami Vivekananda*.

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One who is resolute, though tender-hearted, and has brought his senses under control, and who does not associate with outrageous persons and himself abstains from inflicting pain on others, conquers the heavens through his control of senses and charity.

—*Lord Manu*.

Giving up lust, anger, greed, infatuation, and so on, investigate your real nature and find out what you are. Fools lacking in knowledge of self have to fall into hell.

—*Sri Śankarāchārya*.

