

Kataragama: The symbol of religious harmony

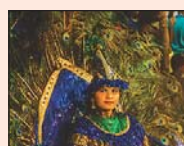


The Ruhunu Kataragama Maha Devalaya in the deep South of the country has been a revered place of pilgrimage among Buddhists and Hindus for centuries. Pilgrims seek the divine intervention of God Kataragama, depicted with six faces and twelve arms, to fulfil their worldly desires. The main shrine in Kataragama is believed to have been built in 160 BCE by King Dutugemunu in fulfilling a vow to defeat King Elara. Kataragama Devalaya and its surroundings are always a hive of activity. It is a common sight of pilgrims smashing coconuts wishing ill-will on their enemies and carrying baskets of fruits to offer God Kataragama during the three main *poojas* of the day. A Bhikkhu chants prayers interceding for the believers and their pleas in the shrine room.



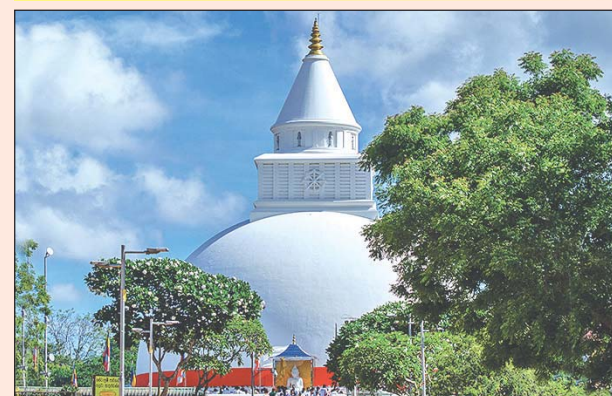
A group of *Pada Yatra* Hindu pilgrims from the North make a long trek from Jaffna through the East coast and the hard terrain of Kumana and Yala Wildlife Sanctuaries to attend the Esala festival at the Ruhunu Kataragama Maha Devalaya in Kataragama.

Kataragama Perahera



The Kataragama perahera or festival, an annual festival that is taking place now in Kataragama and ran for about two weeks is dedicated to the Hindu *God Skanda* known to Sri Lankans as *Kataragama Deviyo*. The Kataragama perahera is a procession of elephants like in any perahera in Sri Lanka commences from Kataragama. Some Hindus perform excruciating acts such as swinging on hooks pierced to their skin, some roll barely clad on hot sands near the temple and some devotees tread on red-hot embers. *Kavadi* (burden) dancing is the dance of the peacock, the vehicle of *God Skanda*. This is done to demonstrate the devotees' gratitude in return for vows made or favours sought. The climax of the Kataragama Esala perahera is the *Maha perahera*. The Relic or Yantra of God Kataragama is placed on a majestically caparisoned tusk. Drummers set the beat and various dances add vibrance to the procession.

Kirivehera Dagaba



Buddhists have a close kinship with Kataragama. Close to the *devale* lies a majestic *dagaba* named *Kirivehera*. It is one of 16 places identified as spots visited by the Buddha. Masonry marks found in the bricks and letters inscribed in *Kirivehera* indicate that the *dagaba* was built by King Mahasen in the 1st Century BC. It is 95 feet high with a circumference of 280 feet.