

HINDU AND MUSLIM CONNECTIONS TO SRI PADA

Premakumara de Silva

The sacredness of Sri Pâda is not only claimed by Buddhists but also by other religious groups such as Hindus, Muslims and Catholics. In this paper I want to explore these non-Buddhist mytho-historical connections, specifically those of Hindus and Muslims. Let me first begin with the Tamil Hindu story.

Sri Pâda is regarded by Hindus as having been made a sacred ground by Lord Siva, one of the supreme gods of the Hindu pantheon. The origin myth of Sri Pâda as a footprint of Siva, popularly known as *Sivan-oli-padam*, *Shivanadipadam Mallei* (mountain of Shiva's footprint) or *Swangarrhanan* (ascent to Heaven), is widely believed among Tamil Hindus in the country. The basis for Tamil Hindu belief in the Sivan-oli-padam, according to the Chief Priest (76) of the Kotahena (north of Colombo) Ponnambalam Vanisvaram Siva temple is this: Siva appeared in his dancing manifestation, on this mountain for the performance of certain devotional austerities, at the end of which, in celebration of his abode there, he left the impression of his foot upon the mountaintop. Another Hindu priest at the Sri Kadiresan temple in the south of Colombo told the following somewhat different story:

When Siva was living in Mount Kailash, a mountain in the Himalayas, he made a journey from the Himalayas to Rameshvaram in South India where he saw that people were poorer than in Sri Lanka. Siva then left Rameshvaram for Sivan-oli-padam, in one of his most popular forms, that of Nataraja (the dancing form), and made his cosmic dance there. As a result, a war broke out, but that war could solve all the malicious things in Sri Lanka because his dance created the sacred footprint for people to venerate that is Sivan-oli-padam.¹

Interestingly, I found another myth of Sivan-oli-padam in the appendix of William Skeen's book *Adam's Peak* (1870). The story seems to be translated from Tamil to English by P.K.T. Kanageratina, MODR, but the writer of the story is unknown. However, it was forwarded to Skeen by H.S.O. Russell, then the Government Agent of the Central Province:

In Ceylon there are places dedicated to Siva such as Trincomalee or Thadchanakaylaysam..., Thirukkachcharam... There is a Puranam... in Sanskrit (which is the mother language of Tamil) relating to Thadchanakaylasam or Trincomalee, called Thadchana-kaylaya-manmeium... The following was recorded in the 6th and 7th chapters of that book. In the middle of the mountain called Sivanolipatham, three rivers or kankai rise out of Sivan's foot... From my (Sivan's) foot, three rivers issue out, and the names are Mavillie-kankai... Manikka-kankai... and Karary-kankai... Mavillie-kankai flows towards the North, reaches Sivan's place at Trincomalee, and falls into the sea south of it. Manikka-kankai flows towards the East and passes by Katherkamum... a place dedicated to Supermania-swamy, son of Siva, and then falls into the eastern sea. Kavary-kankai flows towards the West, and passes into the place of Siva, called Therukkachcharum (situated at Mantotte in Mannar). These three kankais are 'highly meritorious streams'. The names of these three rivers, the directions they take in their course, their connection with the above-named three famous places dedicated to Sivan's worship, the name 'Sivanolipatham' by which this peak is usually known, and the fact of these four places and the three rivers being recognized by Sivaites as places peculiarly adopted for the worship of Siva, at the present as well as in the ancient times, show beyond doubt that the mountain in the Central Province of the Island of Ceylon which is called Sivanolipatham in Tamil — Adam's Peak in English — is the very mountain spoken of in the Sanskrit work Thedchana-kaylaya-manmeium written several centuries ago. (1870: 295-96)

This fascinating story describes the sacred footprint as having been made into a sacred ground of Lord Siva, and it also describes the elaborate Tamil Hindus sacred geography in Sri Lanka. Though the story is said to be taken from one of the ancient Puranas, a prominent Tamil literary scholar in Sri Lanka told me that no such myth appears in any of the eighteen Puranas. Similarly, another distinguished Tamil historian has recently edited a book titled *Temples of Siva in Sri Lanka* with no reference to Siva's connection with the

Sivan-oli-padam (Pathmanathan 1999). Confirmed by the prominent archaeologist and historian S. Paranavitana in his book *The God of Adam's Peak*: "to my knowledge, there is no work of any antiquity which refers to the Footprint on Adam's Peak as that of God Siva" (1957: 21).

This does not mean that there has been no historical claim, or Hindu engagement with, Sri Pâda. For example, the Mahavamsa states that a group of Hindu Saivite priests began to control Sri Pâda under the patronage of the Sinhala king Râjasinha I (1581-95) of the Kotte kingdom (Mv. Ch.93 v 4-17). They controlled Sri Pâda for nearly 160 years before it was handed over to a Buddhist monk by Kîrtisri Râjasinghe (1747-80), himself a Hindu Tamil king, who later became a pious Buddhist king of the Kandyan royal court (Mv. Ch. 100, v.221). Even before that, Ibn Battuta, a Muslim naval trader or traveller stated that, "Arya Chakravarti, the Hindu king of Jaffan, brought with him four *yogis* who were in the habit of visiting the foot-mark every year; and with these they were also accompanied by four Brahmanas and ten of the king's companions" (cf. Paranavitana 1957: 21). This account confirms that Hindus made the pilgrimage to Sri Pâda by the 14th century, and even before.² But the point I want make here is that, unlike the Mahavamsa, any Tamil claim on Sri Pâda, or more precisely Sivan-oli-padam, has not been prominent in their terrain of mytho-historical knowledge production. This confirms Daniel's suggestion that the Tamil Hindu conception of history puts more emphasis on heritage than on concrete history, which is emphasized by Sinhala Buddhist (1989: 22).

Although the authoritative tradition of Tamil Hindus in Sri Lanka, and even south India, has simply forgotten or dropped the mythology of Siva's connection with the Sivan-oli-padam, it is still popular among Hindu priests and the wider Tamil Hindu community in Sri Lanka. For example, popular myths among estate Tamils, who mostly live in the central hill-country, interchangeably claim the sacred footprint as that of the god Siva and of the god Vishnu. Their annual ritual journey to Sri Pâda is more explicitly rooted in their belief in the footprint as that of Vishnu. I found that the myth of Vishnu³ is predominantly popular among plantation Tamil Hindus, while the myth of Siva is popular among non-plantation Tamil Hindus.

The Muslims of Sri Lanka believe that the sacred footprint is that of Adam; more precisely they call it 'Baba-adam-mallei' (footprint of Adam). Their engagement with the sacred mountain can be traced

back to early Arabic writings of travellers and traders.⁴ However, the general belief about the mythical origin of the sacred footprint is that, after Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit and were expelled from the Garden of Eden, Adam was further punished by being forced to stand on one foot on the mountaintop.⁵ This long ordeal left the print of Adam's foot on the mountain. Adam's fall from Paradise is mentioned several times in the Koran. G. Sale says in his translation of the Koran: The Mohammedans say that when they were cast down from paradise, Adam fell on the isle of Ceylon or Serendib, and Eve near Joddah (the port of Mecca) in Arabia; and that after a separation of 200 years, Adam was, on his repentance, conducted by the angel Gabriel to a mountain near Mecca, where he found and knew his wife, the mountain being thence named Arafat, and that he afterwards retired with her to Ceylon, where they continued to propagate their species. (D'herbelot, Bib.Orient: 55) (Sale, London 1734: 6 n6)⁶

A similar story was narrated somewhat differently by a Muslim priest (Lebbe: 65) of a village mosque from Kahattagasdigiliya in the North Central Province, together with two fellow priests, at the Sri Pâda temple. He narrated the story in Sinhala: The God Allah told Adam and Eve, 'You do what ever you want to do, but don't eat the fruit (*gedi*) of the Forbidden Tree.' But they did not pay attention to the word of Allah and they ate the fruit. Then Allah said, 'You did the wrong thing so I expel you from heaven to earth (*bimata*)'. When they were expelled from heaven to earth, Adam put his first footstep on this [Adam's] peak, and his other footstep on the Kuragala.⁷ Eve put her footstep on to Mecca [*makkama*]. At the time they came here, no one lived on the earth. They were crying for seven days. Their tears ran down to the sea and some turned into precious gems (*menik una*). They accepted their wrong-doing, and then God Allah brought them together. At that point they felt hungry. Then God Allah sent a messenger (*deva dutaya*) to the earth to explain to them the basic cultivation techniques. After the course of time they had two children; one was a boy and the other a girl. Then they got married and had children; so the human world was created. That is why we believe this footprint is that of Adam, the footprint of the first man on the earth.

Such a claim can be further explored through the knowledge produced by voyagers, missionaries, traders and travellers,

who had historically interacted with Sri Pâda. The narratives those figures produced I collectively refer to as “diasporic narratives.” The diasporic narratives show us how the Muslim association with Sri Pâda was historically established and then flourished.

The history of the Muslims of Sri Lanka is part of the history of Arab civilization in the East.⁸ From the middle of the 6th century CE, the expansion of Arab commercial activities in the Indian Ocean gradually caused the expansion of Muslim settlement in south India and Sri Lanka (see Kamil Asad 1993; Devaraja 1994; McGilvray 1999). However, the earliest Muslim engagement at Sri Pâda, according to Paranavitana, was reported in the 851 CE travel account of the Arab merchant Soleyman. In this account it states, “It is thought Adam ascended, and there left the print of his foot, in a rock which is seventy cubits in length; and they [Muslims] say that Adam at the same time stood with his other foot in the sea. About this mountain are mines of rubies, opals and amethysts” (cf. Skeen 1871: 46). However, Soleyman refers to the mountain by the name of ‘Al-Rohoun,’ as mentioned by 9th century North Indian poet and dramatist Râjasekhara in his work *Balaramayana*. Paranavitana claimed that the early Arab travellers adopted this name, from which followed the use of ‘Al-Rohoun’ by the people of north India (1958: 17-20). Ruhuna is the ancient province (*ruhunu rata*) to which Sri Pâda belonged. Van Sanden also writes of Abu Zayd, an Arab traveller in 910 CE, who described the country and its people, making references to the port of Galle as an entrepot, where goods from China and the Far East were traded for goods from the West and the Middle East (Aboosally 2002: 47).

Marco Polo, a Mediterranean merchant, in his voyage to the East, particularly to Sri Lanka and south India at the end of the 13th century, gave a brief description of his visit to island. According to his account, he did not visit Sri Pâda but repeated what he heard about Buddhist and Muslim pilgrimage to the sacred mountain. He wrote that the pilgrims went there to see a grave but did not mention whether it was that of Adam or Buddha. Moreover, he did not refer to Christian engagement with that grave, though he was well aware of the other Christian pilgrimage sites in the region, particularly the tomb of Saint Thomas in south India, to which Christians and Muslims travelled. He further confirmed in his account that, unlike Buddhists and Muslims, Christians were not engaging in Sri Pâda pilgrimages at this time because, “according to the Holy Scripture of our Church, the sepulchre of Adam is not in that part of the world” (cf. Yule 1875: 298-313). He must be right since the Christian,

more precisely Catholic, engagement with Sri Pâda began around the early 16th century with the advent of Western powers to the Indian subcontinent.

Like Marco Polo, a number of other travellers visited the island, but their accounts seemingly did not provide any reference to their visit to Sri Pâda. It seems what was reported about Sri Pâda was largely based on the stories given by other pilgrims, most likely Muslim. These accounts are very brief and straightforward. For example, the travel account of Odoric (Beatus or semi-saint of the Roman Church who travelled from 1316-30) as translated and edited by Colonel Henry Yule, explained:

In this country also there is an exceeding great mountain, of which the folk relate that it was upon it that Adam mourned for his son for one hundred years. In the midst of this mountain is a certain beautiful level place, in which there is a lake of no great size, but having a great depth of water. This they say was derived from the tears shed by Adam and Eve; but I do not believe that to be the truth, seeing that the water naturally springs from the soil. The bottom of this pool is full of precious stones and the water greatly abounded in leeches. (Yule 1913: 171)

There are other travel accounts, however, which reported their own experience of journeying to the sacred mountain. For instance, Giovanni de Marignolli, a monk in the Franciscan priory of Santa Croce in Florence, was journeying with some other monks to the tomb of St Thomas in Madras, but was caught in a storm and came to Sri Lanka in late 1340s. He gives an extensive account of the geographical and ecological surroundings of the sacred mountain, and describes how Adam made the sacred footprint there, his account also informing us of the growing popularity of the myth of Adam among Muslims at the time of his visit to the island (see Yule 1913).

For Muslim engagement at Sri Pâda, the account given by Ibn Battuta is worth excavating here. Battuta was born into a family of Muslim legal scholars in Tangier, Morocco, in 1304. He studied law as a young man, and in 1325 left his native town to make the pilgrimage, or hajj, to the sacred city of Mecca in Arabia. He travelled to many parts of the world in 1330 (1332) and ventured to India to seek employment in the government of the Sultanate of Delhi. In August 1344, Ibn Battuta and the ship crew arrived at the western port city of Puttalam in Sri Lanka, where he met the Tamil regional king of Chakkrawartti of the kingdom of Jaffna. Under the

patronage of this king Battuta went on pilgrimage to Sri Pâda and later wrote the account of his journey. Battuta, quite fascinatingly, described the rituals practised by Muslim pilgrims at the sacred site; morning and evening visits to the sacred footprint for three days seems to have been an established practice then among Muslims pilgrims. The offering of gems, jewellery and gold at the pilgrimage site also seems to be an established custom by this particular period. Moreover, Battuta explained that Imam Abu Abdallah (died in 953) was the first Muslim pilgrim who found the path to the sacred footprint at Adam's Peak (see Gibb: 1929/39: 254-60; Dunn 1986: 241-44). If Battuta was right, it is quite reasonable to accept that the first Muslim pilgrimage took place around the 10th century.

These accounts give us some idea of the mythological construction of 'Muslim Adam's Peak.' They also explain how the 'sacredness' of Muslim Adam's Peak was well accepted and popularly venerated by pilgrims from the Middle Eastern world even beyond that. In other words, the 'diasporic narratives' clearly confirm that Sri Pâda was not only a pilgrimage site attracting local communities, but also a sacred site which attracted various 'diasporic communities,' unlike other popular sacred sites on the island. These pilgrims not only came from the Middle East, but from the Far East too; for example, in Chinese mythology, the first created man who impressed the sacred footprint bore the name of Pawkoo and sometimes the name of Fo (i.e. Buddha). Skeen says: "The Chinese books repeat the popular belief, that the hollow of the sacred footstep contains water, 'which does not dry up all the year round', and that invalids recover health by drinking from the well at the foot of the mountain, into which 'the sea-water enters free from salt'" (1870: 24). Today we don't see such a well at Sri Pâda, but one monk told me there is a place called "*China peela*" a few yards down from the temple where water is collected. Such a place name clearly showed a Chinese presence at Sri Pâda.

Historically speaking, Sri Pâda is a remarkable place of worship for people belonging to all major religions where they share one particular object of worship, the sacred footprint, but with specific interpretations from their own religious traditions. But today such a remarkable site of multiple worship has been constructed or ordered as a predominantly Buddhist site. In other words, like Kataragama, the strong Buddhist element at today's Sri Pâda continues to grow.

**Dr. Premakumara de Silva teaches at the
Department of Sociology, University of Colombo**

References

- Aboosaly, M.L.M. 2002, *Dafther Jailany: Historical Account of the Rock Cave Mosque*, Colombo: Sharm Aboosally.
- Aksland, Markus 1990, *The Sacred Footprint*, Oslo: YETI Consult.
- Asad, M.K. 1993. *The Muslims of Sri Lanka under British Rule*, New Delhi: Navrang.
- Chaudhuri, K.N. 1985, *Trade & Civilization in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750*, Cambridge University Press.
- Daniel, E.V. 1989, "Three Dispositions towards the Past: One Sinhala Two Tamil," *Social Analysis*, Vol. 25: 22-41.
- De Silva, Premakumara 2002, "Past in the Present: Problematic of interpreting 'History' in a plural society," *Pravada* 10: 6.
- Devaraja, Lorna 1994, *The Muslims of Sri Lanka*. Colombo: Lanka Islamic Foundation.
- Geiger Wilhelm 1908a, "Introduction," *Mahavamsa*, London: Pali Text Society.
- 1908b, *The Dipavamsa & Mahavamsa & their Historical Development in Ceylon*. (transl. E.M. Coomaraswamy) Colombo: H.C. Cottle.
- Gibbs, H.A.R. 1939, *Ibn Battuta: travels in Asia & Africa 1325-54*, London: Routledge.
- McGilvray, B. Dennis 1999, "Arabs, Moors & Muslims: Sri Lankan Muslim ethnicity in regional perspective," in Veena Das et al, eds, *Tradition, Pluralism & Identity*, New Delhi/London: Sage.
- Paranavitana, Senarat, 1958, *The God of Adam's Peak*, Switzerland: Artibus Asiae.
- Pathmanathan, S. 1999 (ed.) *Temples of Siva in Sri Lanka*. Colombo: Chinmaya Mission.
- Sivathamby, K. 1995, *Sri Lanka Tamil Society & Politics*. Madras: New Century Bookhouse.
- Skeen, W. 1870, *Adam's Peak, Legendary, Traditional & Historic Notices of Samanala & Sri-Pada*. Colombo: W.H.L. Skeen & Co.
- Yule, H. 1875, *The book of Ser Marco Polo*, 2nd ed., revised, London: John Murray.
- 1913, *Cathay & the Way Thither*, revised, London: Hakluyt Society.

Notes

- 1 Both brief interviews were carried out on 12 and 19 of June 2002.
- 2 William Skeen has produced the "positivist" historiographical account on "Adam's Peak" and concluded that "the oldest probable period" from which to date the legend (of Sivan-oli-padam) is that immediately following the invasion of the Solians (south Indian Tamil invaders) in 1023 CE. He says, "There is no doubt about the fact that the Sivan-oli-padam was resorted to by Hindu pilgrims in the early part of the fourteenth century and as the pilgrimage was then an established custom (1870: 36-37).
- 3 The story is related to Rama as a personification of Vishnu. The well-known account of Rama's epic battle with Ravana, the demon king of Lanka, exists in oral and textual traditions throughout Asia, but especially in south India and Sri Lanka.
- 4 There is an Arabic inscription found on a side of a cave inscription (*bagava lena*) of Nissanka Malla (1187-96) at Sri Pâda: "Muhammad, may God bless him (the father of) man" (Senaveratna 1950: 17).
- 5 But there are several myths about what happened after Adam and Eve had eaten the forbidden fruit.
- 6 Quoted from Aksland (1990: 110).
- 7 The rock of Kura: recently this place has become the most popular Muslim pilgrimage site in the island.
- 8 An economic history of Islamic civilization in the Indian Ocean has been well documented by K.N. Chaudhuri (1985).