A glimmer of hope

Posted on



Fire twirlers mesmerise spectators
A thammattam drummer

The annual Navam Perahera pageant has been brightening the streets of Colombo since the late seventies, keeping hope and ancient culture alive by bringing together millions of people for an awesome display of faith and performance.

Words Keshini de Silva

The cracking of a whip sets it all off. Thousands of dancers, one hundred elephants adorned with glimmering regalia – the grandest of them carrying the venerated relic casket – legions of spectators waving colourful Buddhist flags. The Navam Maha Perahera is back for another year, this year to be graced by the presence of Maithripala Sirisena, President of Sri Lanka and Ranil Wickremesinghe, Prime Minister of Sri Lanka.

In the first weeks of February the Gangaramaya Temple is in a flurry of preparation for the procession, which was revived by Galaboda Gnanissara Thero, the Chief Incumbent of the Temple, to bear testament to the benevolence of the teachings of

the Buddha. Each year the pageant offers a fresh perspective, while staying true to ancient cultural and religious truths. The Navam Maha Perahera has only been taking place since 1979, but it feels like it’s always been a part of Colombo.

It’s a tradition that stood strong during trying times for Sri Lanka. While other large-scale pageants did not take place while terrorism was at its height, this one was a symbol of resilience, a unifying force bringing together people of diverse backgrounds and different walks of life.

It also rekindled Sri Lankan arts and culture by providing a platform for traditional artistes to showcase their skills at a time of general decline in the arts.

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The davula is an important traditional percussion instrument

Initially, inmates of Colombo prisons were recruited as torchbearers for the pageant, but then students from across the city were called upon to take part instead. When the terror threat was at its greatest, and parents were unwilling for their children to be in the midst of crowds at the event, trainees from the Temple’s Vocational Training Centre did the honours.

Galaboda Gnanissara Thero, fondly called Podi Hamuduruwo, recalls the tough task of recruiting participants in the early days of the pageant. These days it’s no trouble at all, with 5,000 musicians, dancers and monks taking part alongside one hundred elephants. A troupe of musicians play traditional percussion instruments including the *daula*, the *thammattama* and the *udakki*, while dancers from the up-country, low country and Sabaragamuwa traditions swirl to the beat, a symbol of the harmony the procession seeks to foster. Hundreds of monks follow the dancers, forming a sea of saffron so resplendent that pickpockets are stopped in their tracks, says the Thero.

Once the procession began attracting attention internationally, it was instrumental in resuscitating the tourism industry following several difficult decades in Sri Lanka. Where previously the tourist season finished in January each year, it now extends into February. A similar event, inspired by the Navam Maha Perahera, now takes

place annually in Kataragama too, breathing new life into this pilgrimage town in the south of the Island after years of fading fortunes.

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A champion of inclusivity, Gangaramaya has over the years attracted the patronage of people of different belief systems who ensure the future sustainability of the procession. So while the Navam Perahera was born of Buddhist customs today it is cherished by the whole of Colombo.

But it’s not just a cultural event; it was also a means of livelihood for many with its magnanimity during the conflict helping affected Sri Lankans. Each year the organisers provide vital employment for the procession’s many participants, motivating men and women with traditional skills to continue to hone their talents, safeguarding the future of the Navam Perahera as they do so.

Elephants in elaborate regalia are the main attraction

While the sacred relic casket is the most hallowed element of the procession, a serene Buddha statue was also carried to inspire onlookers with the Three Jewels of Buddhism – the Buddha, the Dharma (the teachings of the Buddha) and the Sangha (the Buddhist community). Today, the number of statues paraded on the streets has grown to 10.

The sight of the journey of the 10 statues at last year’s event stayed with the Thero, prompting him to commission a new seated Buddha statue for the temple to serve as a daily reminder of the holiness of the Navam Perahera. A donation from a patron from China, the statue was carved by master artisan Wenhong Sun from white jade flown in from Myanmar. Two pieces of jade arrived but were rejected before work even began because of imperfections. Its forehead embellished with white diamonds, the statue alone weighs eight tonnes while complete with the stone image house it amounts to 48 tonnes. The statue is on display in front of the *stupa* at the Gangaramaya Temple, evoking spirituality and tranquility in all who set eyes on it.

The Navam Perahera will take to the streets of Colombo on

February 21 and 22 from 7pm

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