

A Musical Offering to the Gods

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By Thilini Kahandawaarachchi. Photography by Menaka Aravinda

Known as *Hak Gediya* in Sinhalese and *Sangu* in Tamil, the conch, which is actually the shell of a sea species is an integral part of both Buddhist and Hindu rituals in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankans believe that owning a rare right-hand curved smooth white conch, known as “Valampuri” could bring its owner good fortune and all the riches that he wishes for. A variety of cultural practices, stories and folklore have rightly carved out a place of pride for the conch through the ancient times till today.



According to the encyclopaedia on South Asian folklore by Margaret Mills et al, the conch was first used in ritual contexts in the Indus Valley civilisation. Afterwards it was borrowed and incorporated into the Vedic culture and as a result, the conch has come to be a distinctive symbol of various Hindu deities. Perhaps that is the origin of the usage of conch in Buddhist and Hindu rituals in Sri Lanka as well. The fact that Sri Lanka is an island and conches could still be found may have ensured that the tradition continued through thousands of years. A conch shell picked up from the sea shore can not be blown as it is, one end of the conch has to be sanded and a tiny canal has to be carved to prepare it for blowing. When blowing the conch shell, the performers use the left hand to hold a right curved shell, while the right hand is used to hold the left curved shell. Conch blowers dip the conch in water prior to blowing as they believe that it gives a better and deeper sound to the conch. Some conches that were elaborately designed with jewels, copper and bronze to add to their beauty and value are said to have been used by our kings as diplomatic gifts. In ancient Sri Lanka, conches have been primarily used in war-fare and associated with victory. The sound of a conch is believed to have great effect, thus it is said that they have been blown to defeat the enemy. Folklore also states

that conches were blown to announce the victory of a war, hence referred to as “*jaya sankha*” literally trans-lated as ‘victory conch’. One of the best-known stories regarding the use of conches is found during the reign of King Dutugemunu. It is common knowledge that King Dutugemunu had ten giants. One of them, Pussadeva, was known for his exceptional ability to blow the conch, which was an important skill in warfare those days. According to Mahawansa, Pussadeva had rallied the armies to engage in the crucial battle of Vijithapura by blowing the conch and it is said that the conch that was used by Pussadeva is enshrined at the Sankapala temple near Embilipitiya where Pussadeva lived a monastic life after his retirement.



The conch is found in a number of literary texts such as Thupawansaya and Mahavansaya. Evidence suggests that conches have been used in coronation ceremonies. Buddhists believe that the footprint of Lord Buddha has 108 auspicious marks and the conch is one of them, thus making the conch an auspicious mark. Conch is also a part of *ashtamangala*, the eight auspicious symbols that bring good fortune and happiness. In Buddhist temples, rituals incorporate the conch shell as an important symbol. It is also used as a vessel to pour holy waters. According to Hindu mythology, the conch is believed to have been one of the findings of Lord Vishnu when the milk sea was churned. It is also believed to be one of the weapons of Lord Vishnu, which is why Lord Vishnu holds a conch shell by his upper left hand. This is referred to as the “*Panchajanya*”, which rep-resents the five elements; water, fire, air, earth and sky and Vishnu’s power to create and maintain the universe.

At present, conch blowing has a special place in arts; it marks the beginning of auspicious events, for example, a *perahera* (cultural pageant) is started with the blowing of the conch and during the annual Kandy perahera, the casket containing the sacred tooth relic of Lord Buddha is taken out amidst blowing the conches and beating of Magul bera (drums). This is believed to be an offering of sounds to God by way of *sushira pooja* (an offering made by wind instruments) to invoke their blessings.



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Thus, throughout history till present day, the use of conch shell has been continued by Sri Lankans. One can only guess that the practice will continue in the times to come as well...be it as a musical offering to the Gods or as a prayer to invoke their blessings.