As The Perehera Unfolds

Posted on

Clad in white sarongs, the whip crackers bear news of the approaching procession. Their announcement – brought on by the cracking of whips along the tarred road – is a bold and artistic expression. They are followed by fire jugglers, flag bearers, dancers, drummers and richly adorned elephants, among others, as the grand and vibrant pageant that is the Navam Maha Perahera begins to unfold along the streets of Colombo.

Words Madhushala Senaratne Photographs Menaka Aravinda

Held during the month of Navam (February) every year, the perahera coincides with the Navam full moon poya day. It is organised by the Gangaramaya Temple, which is located overlooking the Beira Lake in the country's capital Colombo. During the days of the perahera, the streets in the city along the picturseque Lake comes alive with the sounds of the perahera, giving a rare treat to the visitors. Initiated in 1979, the perahera, much like the troupers themselves, has evolved through time, growing not just in grandeur, but also in its appeal.

The Chief Incumbent of the Gangaramaya Temple, Ven Galaboda Gnanissara Thero, fondly known as Podi Hamuduruwo, describes the perahera not merely as a religious and cultural pageant, but rather as an occasion that brings together people of diverse religions and backgrounds, as well as families and friends. Podi Hamuduruwo invites everyone to be a part of this event as it holds much significance.

The perahera is also a proficient display of skill of the many artistes and craftsmen who participate in the pageant, the Thero notes. Sri Lanka's many forms of traditional dance, both upcountry and low country dances as well as folk, cane and mask dances are showcased by troupes of dancers who pay close attention to detail as they skilfully perform each routine. Numerous drummers parade along the streets depicting the country's rich variety of traditional drums, carefully executing their rhythm and movement. Performances by stilt walkers and fire jugglers add colour and intrigue. Traditional symbols such as sesath (a type of sunshade) and items made of copper depicting objects of nature are also carried. Intricately designed, they portray the versatility and dexterity of the craftsmen.

The perahera itself has undergone changes throughout the years and has even set new standards. The grandly decked tusker bearing the sacred relic casket, followed by the majestically adorned elephants is an enthralling sight. Yet, the mahout who accompanies them is also donned in neat attire, which is equally significant and this, in fact, was introduced by the Navam Perahera.

The perahera was held only for a day at its very onset. Recalling this very first time, Podi Hamuduruwo says that there was a heavy downpour of rain on that day, but it stopped minutes before 7pm, the time the perahera was supposed to start. From thereon, to avoid disappointment, the procession was held for two days, and sometimes even three. As the perahera gained popularity and other temples too initiated such pageants, the Gangaramaya Temple helped them as well, providing attire and sharing knowledge.

The number of participants varied over the years. Today, the perahera consists of around 5,000 dancers. Nearly 170 elephants, including 27 female elephants are part of the parade now.

A graceful sight, the perahera also features hundreds of saffron robed monks and the lay custodian of the temple. The procession of monks is a significant feature of the Navam Perahera and is unique to this pageant.

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Emphasis is attached to detail and it is ensured that all performers are well trained and disciplined. They are also aptly rewarded as a measure of gratitude for their hard work. This again, was another deed that helped uplift the artistes and craftsmen, whose accomplishments were hardly ever acknowledged otherwise. It also helped contribute towards a revival of interest in such traditional forms of art.

As crowds increased, larger spectator stands were set up to facilitate them. In this regard, Podi Hamuduruwo has yet another invitation. If groups of visitors so desire,

especially cultural organisations or tour groups, arrangements can be made to set up separate stalls for them to view the perahera.

Many significant events relating to the sangha had taken place on Navam full moon poya day. Among them was the appointment of Ven Sariputta and Ven Moggallana as the two chief disciples or Aggarasavakas of the Sangha Sasana. The first Buddhist Council was also held during this poya, where for the first time a code of fundamental ethical precepts was established. These events are commemorated at the Navam Maha Perahera.

As the sounds of the bera echo through the air and the vibrant procession parades the streets of the country’s metropolis, there is no doubt that the spectator will be left in awe.

The Navam Maha Perahera will be held on February 16 and 17, 2011 from 7 pm onwards.

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