

Colombo's Navam Perahera

Posted on

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In February, Colombo comes alive to the throbbing of drums and the mystic rhythms of the Orient. Yes, it is time once again for the annual Colombo Navam Maha Perehera. This pageant is the biggest cultural happening in Colombo.

Kandy, situated in the hilly climes of Sri Lanka, is synonymous with its historic and magnificent Kandy Esala Perehera, which has brought Sri Lanka recognition the world over. Likewise, the Navam Maha Perehera is rapidly gaining association with the City of Colombo.

According to the Buddhist calendar, February, or the second month in the year, is known as

Navam. It was in the month of Navam that the Buddha proclaimed Sariputta and Moggallana, who were monks in the Buddhist Order, to be his two chief disciples. It is to commemorate this important event in Buddhism that the perehera is held.

The perehera first commenced in 1979. Organisation of the pageant was by the Hunupitiya Gangarama Temple, which remains the centre of activity of the perehera. Most of its participants live in Colombo and its suburbs and usually arrive in the city a few days prior to the pageant and reside at the temple.

The elephants taking part in the perehera are brought from distant places where they are employed in logging and other heavy work. During the period of the perehera, they usually spend their time in the Viharamahadevi Park, a short distance away from the temple. This provides an ideal time to befriend and take a closer look at these gentle pachyderms.

People from near and far flock to the city to get a glimpse of this grandiose event. They line up along the perehera route and watch spellbound with awe and reverence the procession winding its way before their eyes.

The perahera is held on two consecutive days. On the first day it takes to the streets in the night. There are over 5,000 participants each playing their own role in this great pageant. The sharp crack of whips that rent the night heralds the start of the perahera.



Diyawadane Nilame in glittering costume walk in the Perahera under a gold braided umbrella.



Drummers stepping to the rhythm of their own drum beats.

The whips are wielded by a handful of Kasakarayas or whip crackers who head the perahera. Their arrival is a sure indication that the perahera is on its way.

A combination of excitement and nostalgia strikes one on hearing the first drumbeats. The drummers are an integral part of the perahera. Without their active participation no perahera is complete. Unlike the other participants the drummers do not have exotic costumes. They are simply dressed in white cloth, red sash and band. Rhythmically they step sideways and backwards and move along in the perahera drumming the beat with their fingers and sticks, infusing with the beat of their drums the very life and sustenance of the pageant. The blending of the different drumbeats soothing and harmonious.

Stepping in tune to the beat of the drums are the Kandyan and low country dance troupes. Each troupe consists of 50 or more dancers. Altogether there are about 3,000 dancers who thrill the crowds of onlookers with dance forms special to Sri Lanka.

Attired in flowing, frilled, glittering outfits, complete with head-dress and anklets, these dancers jump, twirl and whirl about and step to the rhythm of the drums with the expertise that comes naturally to the traditional dancer. The lithe and graceful movements of the female dancers have a language of their own.

The majority of the dancers and drummers are tradition bound. They hail from families where these forms of aesthetic art are handed down over the generations. As a result, it is rarely that you come across a non-professional.

Mingling with the dancers and drummers are the brightly caparisoned elephants. Some of them are even adorned with little twinkling jets. Over a 100 elephants, both big and small, take part in the Navam Perehera every year. You may even spot a restless baby elephant swaying and swinging his trunk to and fro impatient to get the perehera over and done with. Walking abreast the road in twos and threes these massive beasts patiently tread the perehera route guided by their mahouts or keepers. Taking pride of place is the majestic tusker bearing the casket of relics. Swathed in rich silks, his tusks sheathed in silver and gilded covering, very gently he sets foot aware of the precious load on his back, carrying out its responsibilities to perfection.



Masked dancers in the Perehera.



Peramune Raja rides at the head of the procession.

The lay custodians and “Mohottalas” add a touch of regal splendour to the pageant. Their dresses are exquisite: they are draped in yards of richly textured cloth and the jackets they wear are made of brocade. The four-cornered hats, curved gilded footwear and the heavy rings on their fingers enhance their look of majesty. They exude an aura of dignity and pomp as they walk in the perehera.

In contrast, amidst the pomp and pageantry are the rows and rows of Buddhist monks who walk serenely clad in their humble yellow robes. A feeling of calm pervades the air. A beautifully illuminated Buddha image and a chariot carrying 28 ‘Atawisi’ Buddha statues is something unique to this perehera. Occasionally a child among the onlookers is scared out of his wits by a masked dancer. After the initial scary experience the dancer becomes a source of laughter to all. Sometimes the perehera may spring a surprise by featuring stilt-walkers, a fast disappearing group of performers in the country. Another feature in the perehera is the flag-bearer. Men and boys bare-bodied and dressed in knee-length cloth carry Buddhist flags, national flags, provincial flags, ‘Sesath’ and ‘Murayuda’ traditional banners and weapons. Torch-bearers, carrying flaming piles of dried copra in wire-mesh baskets, give a glow of warmth while illuminating the path and showing the participants the way. For that extra bit of spice are the fire-eaters. Their daredevil antics keep the crowd in suspense. The Kavadi dance, an ode to the God Kataragama, is a must at every perehera. Balancing acts, where dancers balance brass pots and wooden ‘rabanas’ or hand drums on their heads and bodies, make the crowd watch in admiration. The perehera culminates with the day perehera on the following day. The day perehera, although commencing in the morning, is held in the same grandeur as the night before. And all too soon another Navam Perehera comes to an end.



The colorfully dressed drummers weave their way along the streets, during the day Perahera.