

Maha Saman Devala Perahera: A pageant of culture and rituals



The tusker carrying the Dalada Karanduwa flanked by two stately elephants

Sitting or standing on either side of the street people scurried to get closer as the drums and the dancing reached a frenzied pitch heralding the coming of the tusker bearing the sacred relic casket or the Dalada Karanduwa. Along the white cloth he marched, stately and serene as the air filled with the echoes of 'sadu sadu'. This was only the beginning of the Maha Saman Devala Perahera in Ratnapura, a pageant of culture and ritual.

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Saparagrama (Sabaragamuwa) Maha Saman Devalaya is an abode that entwines folklore, history and a heritage that are unique to Sri Lanka. Come every September, the city of Ratnapura and the Devalaya holds a festive air as the Maha Saman Devala Perahera or the Esala Perahera tours the streets in all its splendour calling forth devotees around the Island to witness a pageant that brings to life the age-old traditions that have lingered on for many centuries.

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Preceding the Maha Perahera are several rituals, namely the Pirith Ceremony, *Kap Situveema*, *Kumbal Perahera* and *Dewele Perahera*, which takes a total of 13 days to complete. And following the Maha Perahera is the *Diya Kapeema* (water cutting ceremony) and *Daval Perahera* (Day Perahera), which concludes the pageant. It is imperative that all these rituals are done according to auspicious times as overseen by the incumbent Basnayake Nilame, Kamal Ratwatte who is in charge of ensuring that the pageant continues without any hindrance.

Did you know?

According to the annals of history, during the reign of King Parakramabahu II (1236-70) of the Dambadeniya Kingdom, the royal treasury was reduced to very low levels and the King sought alternate ways to obtain riches to fill the treasury. On one such quest, the King's main minister, Arya Kamadeva came to Ratnapura and to the then Sapparagama Viharaya. Upon seeing a statue of Saman Deviyo and knowing that he is the deity that protects the area, the Minister made a vow to build a shrine if he was able to find gems to fill the treasury. Soon he found a trove of gems and in fulfillment of his vow he built the Devalaya.

However, the first Perahera to be chronicled took place during the time of King Parakramabahu VI. In the time of the Kotte Kingdom, Hiripitiya Nilame—the Diyawadana Nilame of the time in whose protection the sacred Tooth Relic had been bestowed—saw a dream where he was advised to take the sacred Tooth Relic away from Kotte. After replacing the sacred Tooth Relic with an imitation, the Nilame fled to the Papiliyana temple to meet a monk to better understand his dream. There the monk urged him to take the sacred Relic to the Central region as danger was imminent. Therefore, the sacred Relic was then taken to King Rajasinghe of Seethawaka Kingdom who gave it to Mahindalankara Thero of the Delgamuwa Viharaya. The Thero hid the sacred Tooth Relic in a Kurahan gala (girding stone). However, the King wanting to pay his respects decided to hold a Perahera, which started from the Delgamuwa Viharaya and then proceeded to the Saman Devalaya in Ratnapura, joining the annual grand procession there. As such the Dalada Perahera was added onto the Maha Saman Devala Perehara and is conducted to this very day with the symbolic Dalada Karanduwa being carried by a tusker.

Pirith Ceremony And Kap Situveema

A ritual that was started in 1981, the Pirith ceremony followed by an alms giving to 50 monks is performed prior to the *Kap Situveema*, which is carried out in the early morning of the subsequent day.

The *Kap Situveema*, which refers to the custom of cutting and planting a young sanctified Rukattana tree (this is referred to as the Kap tree), is done as a tribute to Saman Deviyo (god) to obtain his blessings and protection for all devotees and to ensure that his blessings are further conveyed to the ensuing Perahera.

Finding a suitable tree for this ritual is the duty of the *Vattoru Rala*—who is part of the *Rajakari Mandalaya* (official council) and aids in the work at the kitchen in the Devalaya. He is also in charge of cleaning and decorating the place that the tree is to be planted. The *Kap Situveema* takes place at the well, surrounded by high walls, located within the premises of the upper terrace of the Devalaya.

After worshipping Lord Buddha, *Vattoru Rala* commences the task of cutting the chosen Rukattana tree and then carries it to the building named the *Sinhasanaya* where it is kept for a short period of time. When the time arrives for the *Kap Situveema* to take place, two processions—one from the *Sinhasanaya* carrying the Kap tree and the other from the Devalaya carrying the jewels of the God—leave from the respective places to meet at the *Vihara Maluwa*. Once this ritual is completed the procession from the Devalaya heads back into the shrine while the other party continues on to complete the *Kap Situveema*.

The Maha Bamba Kolama—An Aspect Unique To The Saman Devala Perahera

Kumbal Perahera

From the day of *Kap Situveema*, for five days the *Kumbal Perahera* is conducted within the premises of the Saman Devalaya. The procession comprises of the Paththini Devala Perahera carrying the sacred ‘anklet’ of the Goddess and of the Devala Perahera carrying only one jewellery piece or *Devabarana* of the Saman Deviyo. Only a few office bearers and dancers participate in this simple procession, which proceeds around the main shrine on the upper terrace of the Devalaya.

Dewele Perahera

After the five days of the *Kumbal Perahera*, the *Dewele Perahera* also known as the *Veedi Perahera* (Street Perahera) is held for a further five days. Touring the main streets of the town, the name, ‘dewele’ was derived long ago as after one perahera starts touring the town another joins the procession at a later time. The dance team carry on a tradition in this perahera being decedents of dancers appointed as part of the official council of the Devalaya by the kings of long ago. These dancers and some office bearers participate in this pageant. Here the *Kapu Mahattaya* (the main priest of the Devalaya) rides atop an elephant carrying the sacred ornaments while the palanquin of the Saman Devalaya is also conveyed

along with the palanquin of the Paththini Devalaya.

Maha Perahera

The next set of five days of the Saman Devala pageant is dedicated towards the Maha Perahera where all the glory and the majesty of a bygone era adorns the streets of the Ratnapura town yet again.

Featuring five processions—Dalada Perahera, Paththini Perahera, Biso Perahera, Kumara Perahera and the Perahera of Saman Deviyo respectively—the Maha Perahera includes various dances, ancient songs and a large number of elephants and all members of the official council of the Devalaya. A sight to behold, each of the five days commence according to the relevant auspicious times with many rituals preceding the time of departure from the Devalaya.

One such ritual is to feed the elephants kavum (sweet oil cakes) and the flesh of the coconut. The kavum for this ritual is prepared by *Arachchi Ammala* (their responsibilities range from cleaning the Devalaya to performing a *pahan pooja* - offering of lamps - prior to the main *pooja*). Vattoru Rala make a preparation of three coconuts by removing only the husk to leave only the white interior intact to tame the elephants and in preparation for the pageant.

Before the time of departure the Basnayake Nilame, dressed in his official attire, makes his way to the Budhu Gey (Buddha Shrine) where he along with the Thero in charge of Pirith places the Casket of the Sacred Tooth Relic atop the head of the *Kapu Mahattaya*. He then places it on top of the specially made receptacle on the back of the tusker and simultaneously a gun shot is fired. The Thero then observes the five precepts after which another gun shot is fired signalling the start of the Perahera. The gun used for the firing is a remnant from the Portuguese era.

Featuring Five Processions—Dalada Perahera, Paththini Perahera, Biso Perahera, Kumara Perahera And The Perahera Of Saman Deviyo Respectively—The Maha Perahera Includes Various Dances, Ancient Songs And A Large Number Of Elephants

The first procession to grace the streets is the Dalada Perahera where the flag bearers march ahead, followed by the much famed *Maha Bamba Kolama*—an

aspect unique to the Saman Devala Perahera. It is said that the *Maha Bamba*, a figure rising to a height of about eight feet, represents King Rajasinghe. Comprising of two faces, the hostile and the benign one, which shows that he will not hesitate to punish those who have wronged and his kind nature respectively, it is the role of the King that is unfolded by this figure. His attire, modest in nature with long sleeves and a 'somaraya'—a sarong like dress—is believed to show the King's civility while the sword in one hand represents his warrior nature and the flowers on the other hand shows his pious nature.

From all the processions, perhaps the Dalada Perahera is the most vibrant with a multitude of dance acts spanning from traditional Sabaragamu dances ushering in the Tusker carrying the Sacred Relic casket to dances such as *pantheru*, *kandyan* and low country presenting a swirl of colour and tradition. Instruments such as *horanewa*, *davula*, *kombuwa*, *thammattama* and many more accompany the dances weaving a melody that speaks of the ritualistic conventions and familiarity of a culture.

After the Dalada Perahera is the Paththini Devala Perahera where a palanquin hued in yellow with the sacred jewels of Paththini Deviyo concealed within, is carried amidst song and dance. Then comes the Biso Perahera that represents the wife and queen of Saman Deviyo. A palanquin decked in gold with jewellery symbolising the queen is carried in this perahera. This is closely followed by the Kumara Perahera, signifying the son and the prince of Saman Deviyo. A specially decorated cart with two cane ropes on the sides to haul forward the vehicle is the main attraction of this procession. The cart is hauled by ten to 12 office bearers and it is said that within is a piece of jewellery placed to symbolise the prince. Following the Kumara Perahera is the Perahera of Saman Deviyo where the ornaments of the God are carried by the *Kapu Mahattaya* who rides atop an elephant. Last but not least comes the Basnayake Nilame escorted by *kandyan* dancers and other office bearers of the Devalaya.

Diya Kapeema And Daval Perahera

Diya Kapeema signifies the end of the Esala Perahera. The ritual is conducted at a place named Rathmal Ella. The Perahera proceeds towards the Kotambaya *Thotupola* (ford) by the Kalu Ganga. At the ford two wooden rafts are used to convey the palanquins of the Saman Devalaya and the Paththini Devalaya to the place appointed for the *Diya Kapeema*. Both the rafts are decorated grandly and

the raft carrying the palanquin of Saman Deviyo is tethered at the highest point reachable at Rathmal Ella where all except the *Kapu Mahattaya*, *Bath Vadavana Rala* and the person ferrying the raft steps onto dry land. The *Diya Kapeema* is done after covering the raft on all sides so that outsiders are not privy to the proceedings taking place.

The Saman Devala Maha Perahera is held from September 5th to 10th

After concluding the *Diya Kapeema* ceremony, a shot is fired and the procession makes its way back first to the *Kotambaya Thotupola* and then joins the Maha Perahera assembled close by. With much pomp and celebration, the procession now returns to the Saman Devalaya. On the pageant back, the tusker carries the ornaments of the god while the water obtained from the ceremony held within a '*Pan Kendiya*', an ewer, is conveyed by the palanquin.

The procession, after reaching the Devalaya, rests for a while at the *Sinhasanaya* until the auspicious time arrives for the pageant to enter the Devalaya. Once the procession enters the Devala premises, the official council—the *Basnayake Nilame* and the other office bearers—are seated on either side near the entrance to the main Devalaya and a *gara yakuma* is conducted. A *gara yakuma* is a ceremony that is done to convey blessings and protection to the office bearers of the Devalaya. This concludes the *Esala Perahera* for the year and the water from the *Diya Kapeema* ceremony is deposited within the shrine to be kept until the *Perahera* next year.

Protecting tradition and posterity the *Perahera* will continue for years to come where each year the town of *Ratnapura* will come alive in a pageant of artistry and time honoured customs.

