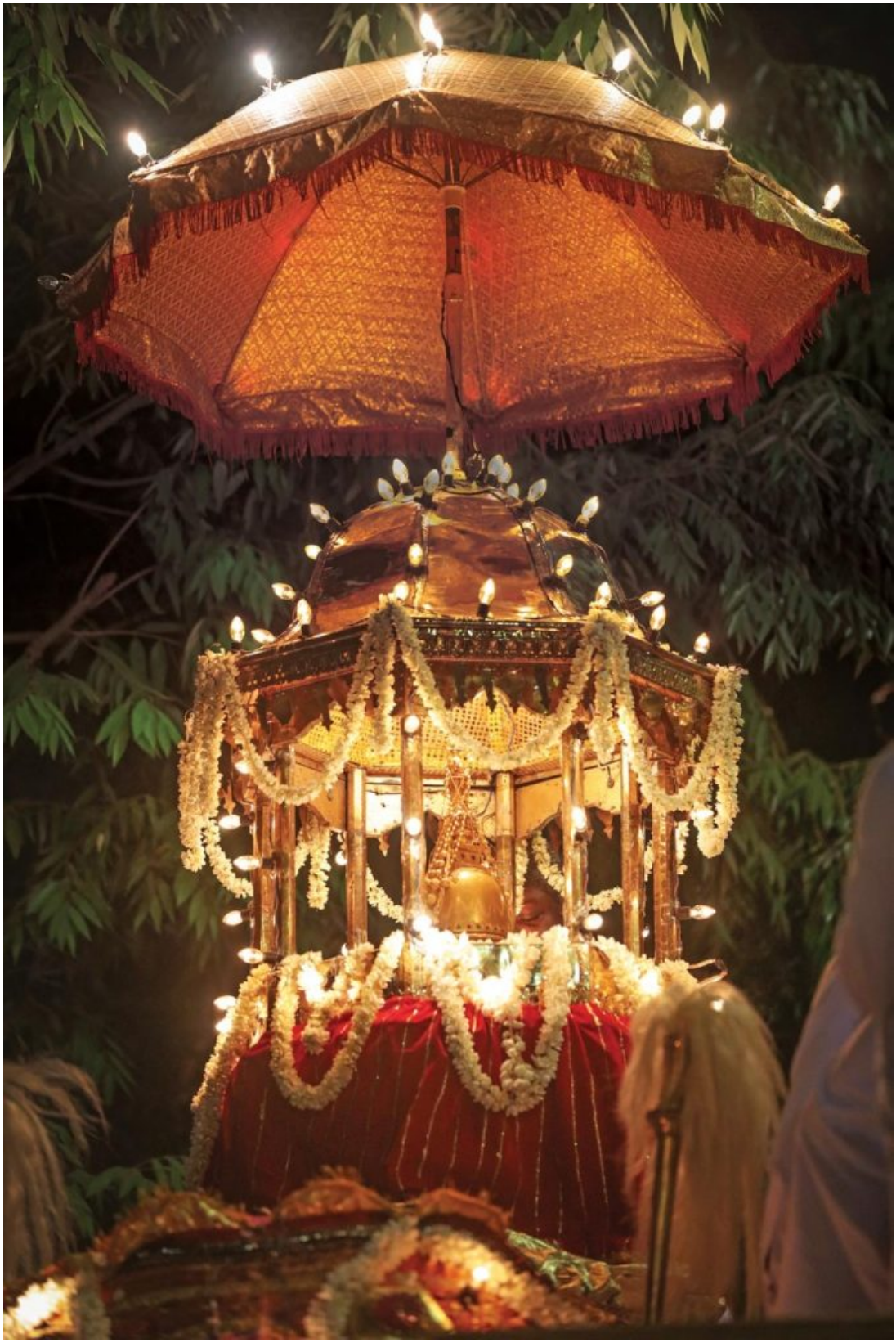
Duruthu Perahera: A Long Journey of History, Religion, and Culture

Posted on

The Buddhist calendar of events for 2022 begins with the annual street procession of the Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya on Duruthu Poya day in January. The festival spanning several days is a religious-cultural display from thousands of performers, acrobats, dancers, drummers, and elephants.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.



Just about seven miles from Colombo, the Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya, one of the sixteen hallowed places of worship in Sri Lanka, with a history dating back to the third century BC, holds its annual street procession in celebration of the Buddha's first visit to the island. The parade that takes to the streets surrounding the Temple at night disturbs the darkness with an explosion of light, color, and sound, from the drums and the double-reed oboe, the Horanawa. There's abundant mirth and mythical tales woven around the dances and their costumes and accessories, some elaborate and even mysterious, while others are an ode to the deities of the land. Although full-blown celebrations seem quite distant in an altered landscape, the Duruthu Perahera used to be a colorful event that attracted visitors from around the world. The historical origins of the event keep the street procession a grand celebration even amid a limiting environment.

On a Duruthu Poya day of the full moon, many millennia ago, the Buddha descended upon the island to meet the native clan of Yaksha. A dispute between two groups ensued. Buddha's first visit turned out to be the first of many such missionary journeys that the island would experience subsequently. The Buddha preached the Dhamma to two contending groups in the Yaksha tribe who embraced Buddhism on this visit. It so happened that Naga King Maniakkhika, upon visiting the Buddha, had also embraced Buddhism and invited the Enlightened One to visit Kelaniya. Buddha's third and final visit to the island was to Kelaniya at the invitation of King Maniakkhika, which took place on a Vesak Poya day. Kelaniya then was a Naga settlement. Hence, the significance of Duruthu Poya is connected to Buddha's first visit to Sri Lanka, which is commemorated in the Temple's annual procession. At the same time, the Temple was built on the hallowed ground upon which the Buddha set foot on his third and final visit more than 2600 years ago.

> Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya, holds its annual street procession in celebration of the Buddha's first visit to the island.



Ves dancers and Geta Bera drummers in perfect unison.



The magnificent tusker with the sacred casket.

The Kelaniya Temple, built by one king Yatala Tissa to mark the Buddha's visit to Kelaniya, had one of the grandest street processions associated with a Buddhist place of worship. The popularity of the 'Perahera' is chiefly due to the significance of Kelaniya. The Temple's popularity is unmistakably the sacred presence of the Buddha. To this day, the Temple is regarded with great awe. It's sheathed in the perception of magnificence due to its place in history. Before the pandemic, the Duruthu Perahera was a looked-forward-to event among the natives and tourists. What started off as a one-day procession that paraded the sacred relics of the Buddha encased in a casket atop a caparisoned elephant has extended to several days with pageants dedicated to the guardian deities of the Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya – Vishnu, Vibhishana, and Kataragama.

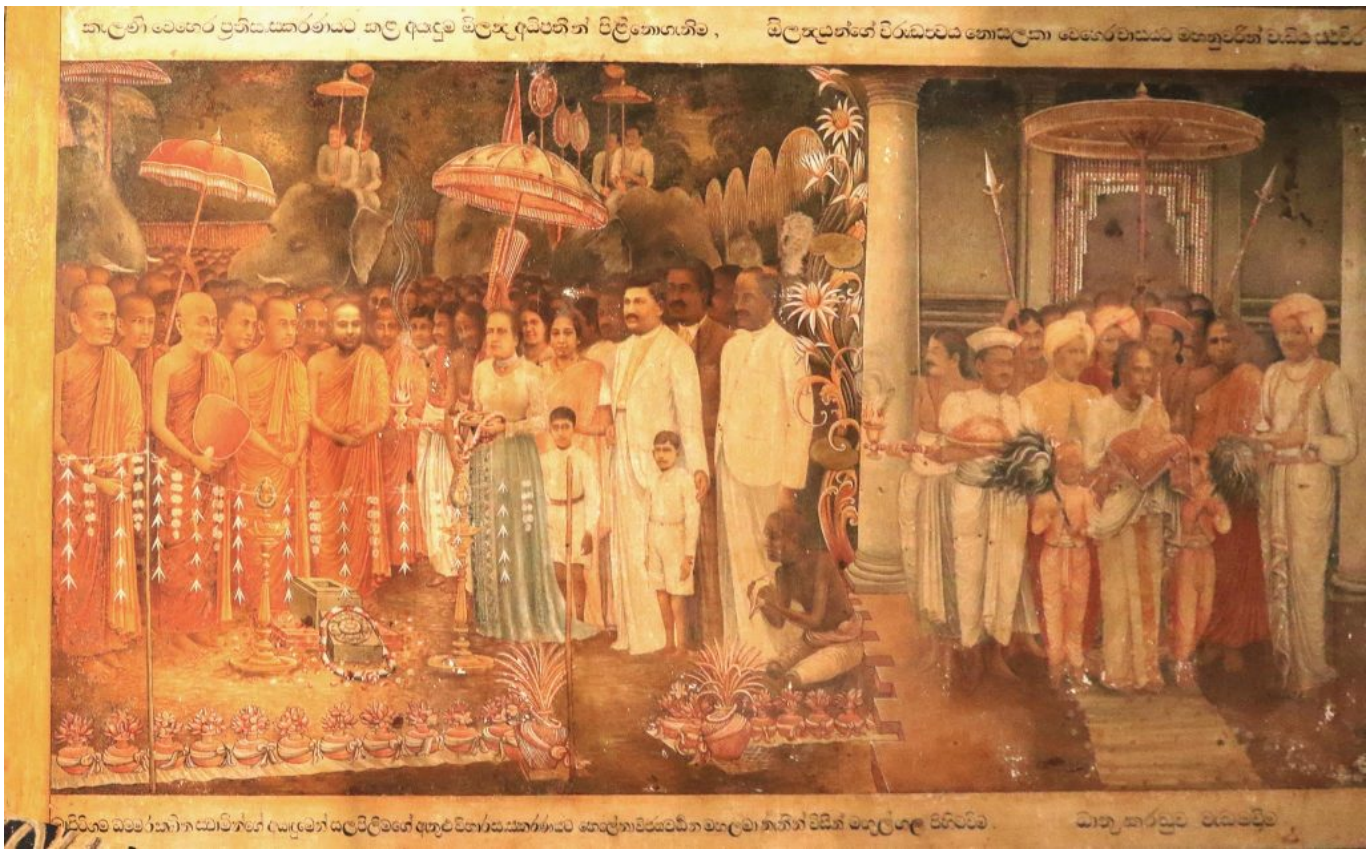
> Having etched its importance in history, the Temple has demonstrated its resilience even in the harshest of times.

The Duruthu Perahera is such a sacred occasion in the Temple's calendar of events that preparation begins two months prior. Daily Dhamma sermons are held every evening for 72 days. At the end of the sermon series, there is continuous chanting of Pirith for seven days, blessing the Duruthu Perahera. The first mini street procession – the Deva Dutha Perahera is intended to invoke the deities to descend upon the Temple grounds to accept the blessings of the Pirith ceremony. The Udamaluwa Perahera, the second event, begins at the Temple's upper terrace with the ritual of handing over a casket of relics that tours the upper deck. Canon fire marks the beginning of the parade.

The Sacred Relic casket is placed on a cushion and is carried around the Temple thrice by the Chief Basnayake Nilame. Dancers and drummers and a few elephants make up the procession. The Pahalamaluwe Perahera on the following day, which circles the outer terrace of the Temple, is grander than the earlier one, with intensity in the display of performances and caparisoned elephants. On this night, as the procession makes its way around the lower temple square, it's joined by processions of the three shrines dedicated to the deities Vishnu, Vibhishana, and Kataragama. The final procession begins with an elaborate ceremony involving the Sacred Relic casket.

The Temple’s chief priest hands over the relic casket to the Basnayake Nilame – the lay custodian of the Temple to be placed upon the elephant bearing the casket. Of course, as everyone knows, the Maha Perahera is the grand finale on the evening of Duruthu Poya day, celebrated with an enormous presence of performers, along with dance recitals dedicated to the guardian deities of the Kelaniya Temple and routines that represent the dynamic performing arts of Sri Lanka.

The final street procession is, of course, a sacred event. The holy of holies is the majestically clad elephant carrying the casket containing the Sacred Relic, which transforms the atmosphere into one of supreme reverence with the people gathered in the streets chanting ‘Sadhu Sadhu’ with hands clasped in worship. Duruthu Perahera is now confined to the temple premises and the surrounding roads.



A mural from the temple premises depicts Helena Wijewardena’s contribution to the Kelaniya Temple.

As one of the oldest temples, the Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya, has been through

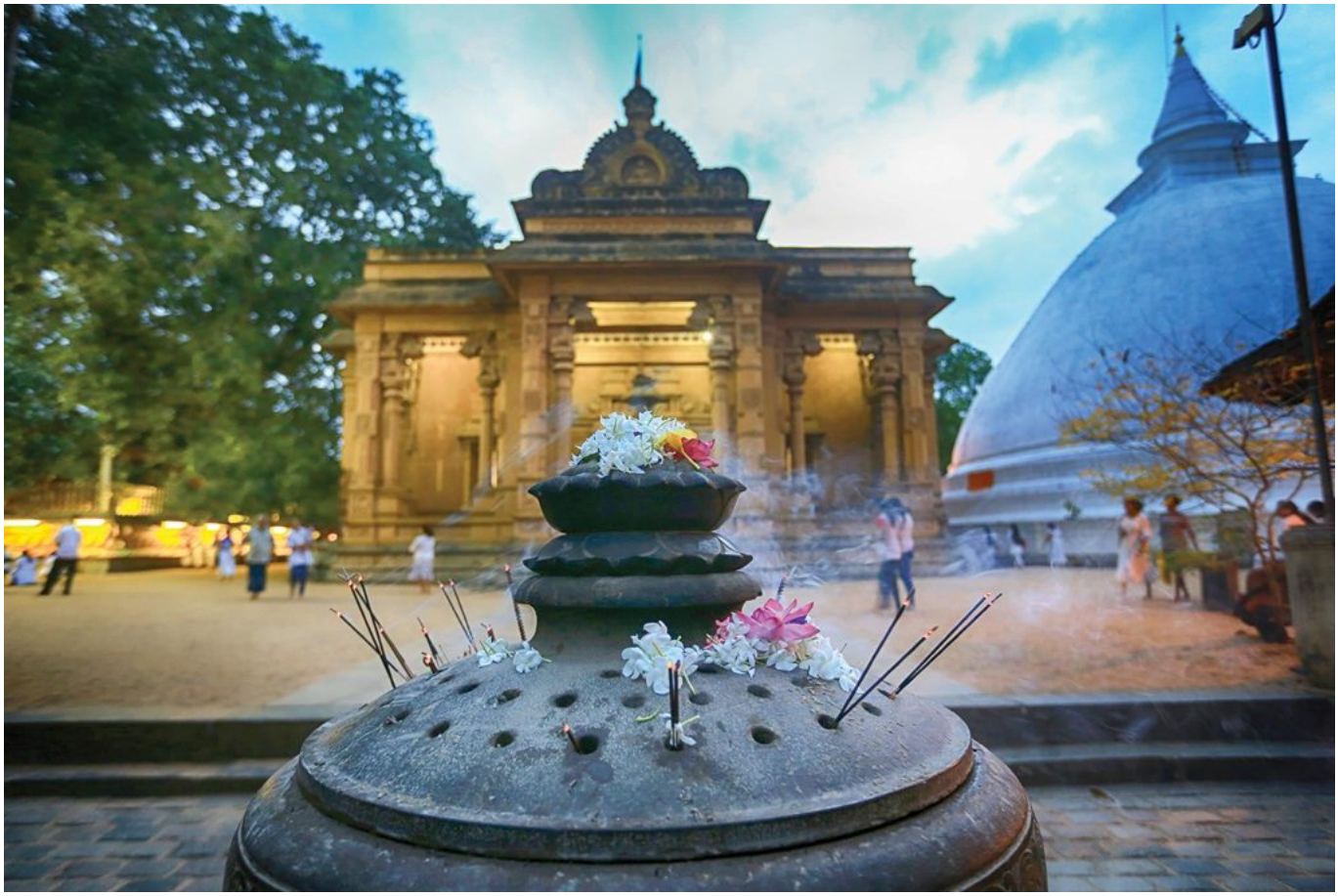
the vagaries of time. Since its inception, the Temple has been the victim of invasions and enemy attacks. When in the 13th century, the Temple was attacked by invading South Indian king Kalinga-Maga, it was restored by King Vijayabahu III. The marauding Portuguese did the same when they occupied the island's coastal areas in the 16th century, razing the edifice to the ground in 1575. Even with such intense onslaughts, Kelaniya continued receiving the patronage of the kings due to its important place in history.

Although King Kirthi Sri Rajasinghe of Kandy rebuilt it in 1767, colonial rule under the British meant that the Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya became part of a concerted damage to the collective Buddhist built environment. Devoted natives had a watchful eye on this historical site and averted total ruin through it all. Thanks to the initiative of Buddhist philanthropist Helena Wijewardena, who sponsored the revival of this historical monument, which at the hands of artist Soliyas Mendis bears one of the most beautiful temple paintings in the country. The hiatus under colonial rule was slowly coming to an end, and in 1927, with the patronage of Helena Wijewardene, her son D W Wijewardene pioneered the annual street procession on Duruthu Poya.

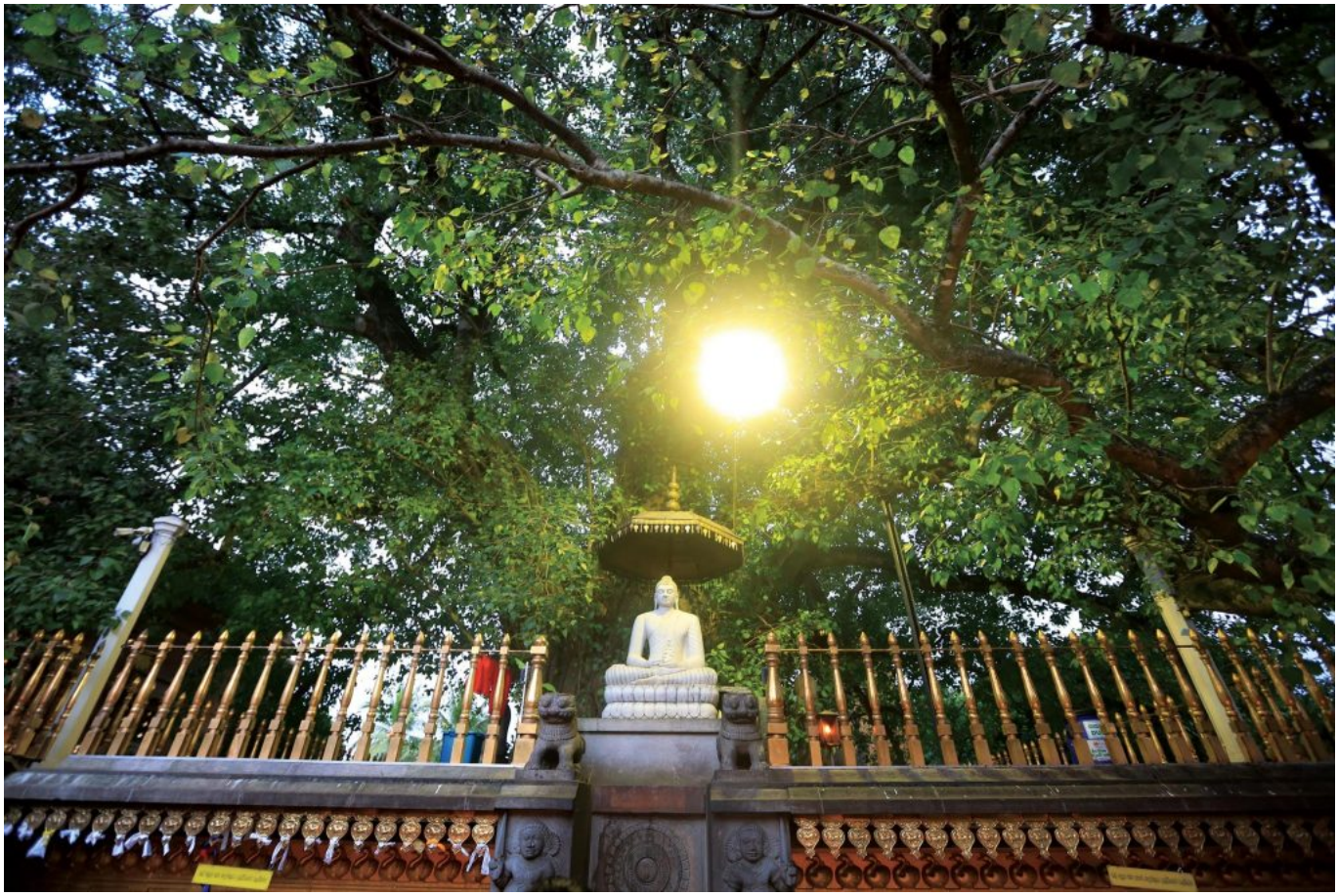
It's not an overstatement to say that today January is synonymous with the Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya. Having etched its importance in history, the Temple has demonstrated its resilience even in the harshest of times. The Temple has risen from the ashes as a historically rich refuge for Buddhists every time it has been subdued.



The inner sanctum with the sacred relic casket. The surroundings with the paintings depict several significant tales



The religious site evokes a sense of reverence.



Pristine white Buddha statue under the sacred Bo tree sanctifies the holy grounds.



The historical monument has a strong blend of spiritual art and architecture.