Esala: Season of Festivals

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By an interesting coincidence the month of Esala in Sri Lanka’s traditional lunar Buddhist calendar is a period of festivals in Sri Lanka.

Beginning in mid-July and extending till end – August or early September, there are festivals associated with all four major faiths in Sri Lanka: Buddhist, Hindu, Islam and Christian, bringing fervour and festivity to all regions of the country. The Esala season, starting with the Esala Full Moon. which falls on July 18 this year is the period when the Esala Pereheras, or religious processions. of the Buddhists take place. While prime import is given to the Kandy Esala Perehera, there are several other pereheras in other parts of the country which. although smaller in size, are interesting display) of local ritual and pageantry. Among these the more famous are the Esala Pereheras held at Bellanwila and Kotte, both suburbs of Colombo. It is the custom for the other Buddhist temples which carry out the Esala rituals to begin their festivals after the Kandy Perehera, first as a sign of respect for the Tooth Relic of the Buddha which is honoured in the Kandy pageant, and also to achieve greater success in organization. As the number of elephants participating in a perehera is one of the key standards by which its success and grandeur is judged, the organizers of the lesser pageants delay their own events until the owners of

elephants, who send their pets to Kandy, can release them for the other festivals. The Bellanwila Perehera which follows close on the Kandy Perehera is held in Colombo's southern suburb of Dehiwela. In the past few years this perehera has earned a reputation as a well-organized pageant, which attracts numerous devotees and visitors from many parts of the country.

The Kotte Perehera, the main festival of Sri Lanka's political capital, Sri Jayawardhanapura Kotte, traces its history to the time when the Tooth Relic of the Buddha was enshrined in a temple here, the seat of the Sinhalese kings of the Kotte period in the 15th and 16th Centuries. The relic was shifted to Kandy for safety after the conquest of the maritime regions by the Portuguese in the 16th Century. The Kotte Perehera is conducted by the medieval Temple of the Tooth Relic of Sri Jayawardhanapura Kotte and still keeps to much of its old route around the rums of the temple, destroyed by the Portuguese, and the ramparts of the old city. It has gained in status m recent years after Sri Jayawardhanapura Kotte was established as the new political capital of Sri Lanka in the early and became the seat of the country's Parliament Both the Bellanwila and Kotte pageants have at least-40 to 50 caparisoned elephants participating in the procession, and dancers and drummers from the several regions of the country. In both these pageants there is greater emphasis on the low-country styles of dancing, which trace their origin in large measure to the rituals of exorcism. Masked dancers of the South are a major attraction, and there is also the noticeable participation of children in these pageants. giving them a greater touch of spontaneity. A modem trend at these pageants is the participation of floats depicting various events of Buddhist history. legend and lore. The Esala festival season is also the time when the Buddhists of the gem-mining area of Ratnapura, in the South-Western Sabaragamuwa Province, conduct their annual festival in honour of "Saman Deviyo" – the God Saman, who is considered the guardian of the sacred mountain, Adam's Peak, and the surrounding country. This festival which traces its beginnings to ancient rituals of the Veddahs – the aboriginal tribes of Sri Lanka – has as its highlight the dances of Sabaragamuwa in which there is a blend of the dancing styles of the Southern low country and the Central hill country.

A special feature here are the various "animal dances" – the dancing and clowning by persons wearing huge masks depicting animals-mainly the lion, tiger and bear. Some of the dances here depict the martial arts and the dances of the Veddahs add to the colour of the event. The Ratnapura District being the home of many elephant owners, the "Maha Saman Devale Perehera", as the pageant is known, always has a

large number of elephants participating in it.

For those interested in seeing more of Veddah dancing, the place to visit is Mahiyangana, about 50 miles east of Kandy, which is close to the heart of Veddah country. Here the Veddahs themselves, and those descended from them (through intermarriage with the villagers) join in the annual ‘Vedi Perehera” (Procession of the Veddahs) dancing with bows, arrows and spears in an ancient ritual of homage to the Buddha. Mahiyangana is one of the places in Sri Lanka which, tradition holds, has been made sacred by a visit of the Buddha, and it has an ancient Buddhist temple which is much venerated. The Veddah rituals of the Mahiyangana date back to more than 2,000 years when Buddhism was introduced to the country.

From ancient days, the Buddhist period of Esala festivity has been the time of many celebrations of Sri Lanka’s Hindus, especially those held in honor of Skanda, the God of War and Victory. The most important of these festivals is the annual pageant and the many rituals at Kataragama, the Hindu shrine in the deep South of the island. Here too the pageant which takes the form of a grand procession, complete with elephants, drummers and dance , culminate with a ritual fire-walking ceremony in which many devotees participate.

In Colombo, the main festival in season of ritual and festivity is the Hindu Yel Festival, which coincides with the ancient rituals of Kataragama. The Vel Festival, which was introduced b the South Indian Chettiar community in the last century, includes a procession of the chariot of the God Skanda from its temple in the busy bazaar area of Pettah to one of two temples in Bambalapitiya in the South of Colombo. The procession takes several hours to complete the journey of not more than five miles, pausing along the route to receive the offerings from thousands of devotees who line the street and to sprinkle holy ash and blessings on many including leaders of business and government who await the arrival of the chariot near their door to make ritual offerings.

The temple to which the chariot is brought is the centre of the Vel Festival each year. This becomes the venue of a busy, colourful oriental fair lasting two days, where thousands gather in a spirit of festivity, and merry-go-rounds and Ferris-wheels add to the fun which lasts into the night. There are three other festivals in honour of Skanda which attract a large number of visitors. These are the festival of the Munneswaram Kovil at Chilaw, 50 miles north of Colombo ; the Udappvwa Festival, close to Chilaw, which has a fire-walking ceremony as famous as the one at Kataragama ; and the festival of the Nallur Kandaswamy Temple in Jaffna in the

North. The Christians of Sri Lanka, mainly the Roman Catholics who comprise the largest Christian denomination, have several interesting festivals during the same season. The most famous is the Madhu Festival, held at a jungle shrine dedicated to the Virgin Mary, in the Northern Mannar District, which has not taken place for the past few years due to the troubled conditions in that area. However, all along the South Western, Western and North Western coastline of the island there are several Catholic festivals during this period. The feast of Saint Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary, is celebrated at many Catholic shrines from mid-July. What draws the largest number of pilgrims and other visitors is the festival at the shrine of St Anne at Talawila near Puttala, 90 miles North of Colombo.

The festival takes place at a shrine that dominates a large desert-like sandy stretch by the sea Crowds gather here in their thousands for a week of prayer and ritual, ending in a procession in which the statue of the saint, believed to have miraculous powers, is carried shoulder high. The processions of the Christians in Sri Lanka are very much in contrast with those of the Buddhists. They are directly inspired by similar rituals of the Spanish and Portuguese, with the accent on religious hymns and prayer. Western brass bands lead the way, followed by choristers – men and women, singing the praise of the saint who is being honoured. Once the procession is over, there is an air of festivity in the whole area, with generous invitations to feasts by people who have spent a week in tents and makeshift houses. There is much singing and dancing filling the air from the many camp sites where people have completed rituals of penance and prayer.

August 15th being the date when the Catholics celebrate the feast of the “Assumption of the Virgin Mary”, there are many festivals held at the large number of shrines dedicated to the Mother of Christ in the coastline areas, where there are more Catholics. Outside Colombo, it is easy to spot the location of a church festival. In the compound of a church, or at the lop of the road leading to a church celebrating a feast, there will be a huge flagstaff raised, more like the main mast of an old clipper. It will be flying flags, with the colours and pennant of the patronal saint at the peak. The many strong ropes which tether the mast will also be decked with flags. This is a tradition which has come down from the Portuguese seamen who brought Christianity to the island. They marked the beginning of a church festival by raising a “flagmast in the same way as they did when sailing out into the sea Once the ritual services such as vespers and the festive celebration of mass is over, a church festival also takes on the air of a large oriental fair. People gather in their thousands to buy sweets, fruits, toys, trinkets and baubles from the many

itinerant vendors who set up stalls in the fairground. And in all the Catholic homes which are part of the parish there is much celebration with plenty of music, song and feasting.



A kavadi dancer at a Kataragama festival.



A part of the procession at the Catholic church feast of Kudagama.