



Fire-torch dancers

The environs of Navam Mawatha come alive with the sounds of drums and colourful lights. Crowds gather in large numbers as majestic elephants and dancers parade the streets. It is a celebration of culture and spirituality and has been a highlight of the February calendar since 1979. The Navam Maha Perahera will take centre stage in the spirit of peace, harmony and unity.

Words Udeshi Amarasinghe | **Photographs** Mahesh Bandara and Vishwathan Tharmakulasingham



The majestic tusker proudly carries the Sacred Relic Casket

Ven Galaboda Gnanissara Thero, the Chief Incumbent of the Gangaramaya Temple has always ensured that the ancient traditions and culture of our country are preserved. It is with this aim that Podi Hamuduruwo revived our heritage performances of dance and music through the Navam Maha Perahera where thousands of artistes from around the Island gather in celebration. Traditions that were gradually disappearing into the past were brought to life and sustained with the support of the Temple.

But what is most unique about the Gangaramaya Temple and the Navam Perahera is the unity and harmony that it fosters between communities. Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Christians all gather to display their cultural heritage in the procession. Dancers and drummers from the Central region, South, Sabaragamuwa, North and East too perform in unison. Podi Hamuduruwo states that it is important to encourage harmony and unity between communities through religious and cultural events and the Navam Perahera is an excellent example of bringing communities together for more than 37 years.

Therefore, a new addition planned for this year's Perahera is to have separate cultural displays from the four different religions before and after the main Perahera. Thus the audience can experience the diversity of the country.

On the two days of the Perahera, the Sacred Relic Casket is placed on the impressively adorned main tusker by President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe respectively.

The Gangaramaya Navam Perahera

Majestically caparisoned tuskers and elephants gracefully step to the rhythm of the drums. The main tusker bearing the Sacred Relic Casket is flanked by two other tuskers. This is a much anticipated moment of the Perahera. As the magnificent tusker passes the crowd, everyone clasps their hands together in great reverence. The procession of the Buddhist monks gives a sense of spirituality and calm amidst the colour and excitement of the cultural performances. This reflects the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha.

“We do not make any difference between religions or communities, everyone is part of the Perahera. That is our greatest achievement.”

The Chief Dayake of the Gangaramaya Temple, Ranjith Wijewardene together with the lay custodians of the sacred relics will also take part in the procession.

Generally, the month of February is considered as off-season for tourist arrivals in Sri Lanka. As such Podi Hamuduruwo determined that the Perahera of the Gangaramaya Temple should be held during the month of Navam. Amidst great challenges, the Thero persevered and with great resolve the Navam Maha Perahera has been held continuously since 1979. It is an important event in the country's calendar.



Ven Galaboda Gnanissara Thero, Chief Incumbent of the Gangaramaya Temple

“The Navam Perahera has been a reason for the development of the tourist industry, because once we started organising the Perahera tourist arrivals started to increase in the month of February”, explained Podi Hamuduruwo.

The entire city is enlivened by the Navam Maha Perahera, which parades around the Gangaramaya Temple and Navam Mawatha. Crowds throng in large numbers to witness this vibrant event.

With Vesak being recognised as an international religious holiday by the United Nations, teams from member countries will arrive in Sri Lanka this year for a gathering in May. Podi Hamuduruwo explained that elements of the Navam Perahera will be introduced to the Vesak Kalapaya (Vesak Zone) organised by the Gangaramaya Temple, which will be a unique aspect that will be showcased to the visiting delegates. Reflecting reconciliation and harmony, multi-cultural performances will also be an important aspect of the Vesak

Kalapaya.

Podi Hamuduruwo's thinking is far-sighted and every action has a reason, as such the Navam Maha Perahera too, is held with great planning and precision. It is to make a nation proud of its rich religious and cultural heritage that is preserved for posterity.

The Gangaramaya Temple has always been a place of worship to all religions, a place of hope irrespective of race, religion, caste or creed. In an age where reconciliation and harmony are of great importance, Podi Hamuduruwo teaches by example. "Navam Perahera today is a national event that draws tourists to the country and we have thereby supported the development of the economy of Sri Lanka. Furthermore, we do not make any difference between religions or communities, everyone is part of the Perahera. That is our greatest achievement," explained Podi Hamuduruwo who aims to continue this tradition for many years to come.

Navam Maha Perahera

February 9 and 10, from 7pm onwards

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The Gangaramaya Navam Perahera

