Inspiring Fusion of Tradition and Culture: Kandy Esala Perahera

Posted on

The Dalada Perahera, as it was originally called, commemorates the time the Buddha’s sacred tooth relic was first brought to Sri Lanka from India. It allows devotees to venerate the Tooth Relic as it is carried through the streets in a casket on the back of a magnificent tusker elephant.



It is the pageant of the Sri Dalada, replete with all the pomp of ceremony and the sacredness of worship as befits the occasion when a nation pays homage to the founder of her religion, Buddhism. Even as it has been done for over 200 years, every year the Tooth Relic of the Buddha is taken in procession for nine nights through a four mile route on the streets of Kandy. But the colorful story of the Sri Dalada, Sri Lanka's most special parade and its annual procession, occupies a more extended passage in the annals of history. In fact, its origins lie over 1,700 years ago when it was brought to the nation's shores. The Tooth Relic had not only been accorded annual royal pageants to honor its presence in Sri Lanka, but it had also come to embody the possessor of it with the legitimacy to be king of Lanka. With the fall of the 1,400-year-old ancient capital of Anuradhapura in 10 AD in the face of a Chola invasion from South India, the Sinhala kingdom moved to Polonnaruwa. So did the Tooth relic. With each successive debacle that followed and with each subsequent retreat the Sinhala kings made, with each shift of the Sinhala capital to safer ground southwest, so did the sacred relic travel on the kingdom train until at last it was lodged in the Kingdom of Kandy by King Vimaladharmasuriya II (1686-1707 AD). He built the Temple of the Tooth, the Dalada Maligawa, and enshrined the sacred relic in it.

In the late 18th Century, the old practice of the yearly road pageant was revived by King Kirthisri Rajasinghe, and this has continued ever since. At that time, there were already in existence four peraheras, collectively called the Esala Perahera, dedicated to the nation's guardian deities. These were held to invoke the help of the deities of the four Devales for victory in war and success in secular under-takings and to seek blessings of the gods to bestow farmers with rain to cultivate their crops. Today it is considered to be the main significance of the Esala Perahera.

The Esala Festival covers 14 days and begins on the first day after the new moon in August. For five nights in the four Devales, processions are conducted within the temple premises with flag bearers, drummers, and torchbearers. On the sixth night, the four temple peraheras emerge from their temple compounds and take to the street. This is the start of the procession known as Kumbal Perahera, held for five more nights. The four peraheras converge at the Temple of the Tooth Relic, where the Dalada Maligawa Perahera joins the pageantry. Initially keeping a low key, with the temple chiefs wearing only their traditional white court dress to walk in the procession, more and more elephants are added to the perahera with each succeeding night. On the eleventh night, the perahera bursts into a rhapsody of color to express devotion's ecstatic enthusiasm. Called the Randoli Perahera on

accounts of the palanquins added to the procession, which in the days of old, bore queens from the royal house-hold, it is staged for the next four nights and will climax on the full moon night of August. After the cannonball boom and the conch shell blast have resounded, and the whip crackers have cleared the streets, the flag bearers step forth in single file, each carrying the standard of different provinces and temples. At the helm of the gathered cast assembled at the main temple, gate is the Peramuna Rala, a Kandyan chieftain representing the administration of the entire gamut of the ‘Rajakariya’ – the feudal system. Sitting astride a caparisoned elephant, he begins the procession at the auspicious hour.

He is attired in the traditional Kandyan costume, and he carries in his hand the silver metallic cylinder bearing the all-important sannasa, called Lekam Mitiya. The royal title deed and edict pertaining to all the lands bestowed and the duties of each holder of the land have to be discharged in favor of the temple at the risk of forfeiture. The richly garbed elephant he strides on belongs to the royal elephant stables. The man following his atop another elephant is the one charged with the responsibility for the welfare of all the king’s elephants. He is known as Gaja Nayake, the keeper of tamed elephants. His jacket is rich in embellishments and red in color and bears ancient motifs of the Sri Lankan kingdom. His matching waistcoat is the same color and design as is his curved headdress, and he brandishes the henduwe or ankusala, the silver goad used to control the elephant.

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A majestic sight to behold, the Sacred Relic in a casket carried atop a caparisoned tusker.

Drums and dance to enthrall the watching devotees with the magic of movement and music enter the frame. First to come is the Hewisi, the men who, with their high-pitched flutes known as horannawes, once tradition-ally served as the royal announcers at momentous occasions. Wearing white cloth wrapped tightly with a broad red slash, which extends up to their chests, are also the Thammettam drummers who use a set of twin drums with two curved cane drum sticks. Bedecked elephants, in vivid and varied hues, start appearing in twos or threes at regular intervals. While they swing rhythmically to the beat of the tantalizing drums, joining the parade are the flame throwers, forming a fiery ring with their fire torches around their bodies with a dexterity born of practice. Accompanying them are the Raban dancers. Twirling the Raban, a circular shaped drum, with one hand, they then deftly place it on the many slender poles they hold in their other hand. As their confidence rise, they raise the thin poles with the spinning raban on top and place it on their heads. They put one end of the pole into the tuft in their headwear and sway and dance hands-free to the sound of the beating drums.

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It’s now the turn of the Uddekki dancers who get the name of the musical instrument they use. It’s a small hand drum in the shape of an hourglass about seven inches in length. The sides of the percussion instrument both bear drum skin. To obtain pitch variations, the strings are tightened, and the drummer dances while he plays it, and on top of it, he also sings. The Uddekki dancer is dressed in a silver color beaded jacket, which winds around his neck. He wears elaborate frills in red at the waist. His headwear consists of a white turban with a colorful gold colored border. Bracelets and amulets are worn on his wrists and arms. Next is the turn of the Pantheru dancers, bearing one of the oldest instruments in the music business. It is a tambourine minus the drum skin, with small cymbals attached around its circumference. It is held in one hand, and it is played by shaking it or striking it with the other hand making a jingling sound of metal clinking. The myth has this as the one used by the Gods to celebrate their battlefield victories over the Asuras, the demons. Following suit on earth, Sinhala kings used to jangle it to raise the triumphant cry over their enemies in war. Now hugging the firelight shed by the flare bearers who stand like street lamps are the crème de la crème: the Ves Dancers performing the hallmark of Kandyan dancing at its best. Of all the dance

troupes, the Ves dancers approach their art with religious fervor and treat it with religious respect. They dance in honor of the Sri Dalada with their bodies facing the venerated object, singing as they do the many hosannas while dressed in an elaborate costume containing over 16 different parts.

The most essential item in the regalia without which the dancer loses his legitimacy to dance the sacred dance of Ves is the Ves Thattuwa. Made out of silver and brass, its engraved designs symbolize the Sun, Buddhism, the Gods, and Kings and bear thirteen brass bo leaves, which hang dangling from ear to ear. Following behind the extravaganza of dance is the Kariya Karawana Korale. He is the man who bears on his costumed puffed shoulders the entire responsibility of the pageant and is the second most important man after the Diyawadana Nilame. He is also responsible for the proper functioning of the Dalada Maligawa, including the kitchen. As he walks in the perahera, he is accompanied by a retinue of temple functionaries, dancers, and drummers. Amidst the song and dance, next comes the moment when the sacred object of a people’s faith, the nation’s priceless treasure, the sacred Tooth Relic of the Buddha. Enshrined in a golden casket and borne aloft on the back of a majestic tusker, takes center stage on the public road before the worshipful gaze of a devout public. Its holy presence stills the air with serenity. It invokes the full gush of reverence, giving rise to a roar of ‘sadhu, sadhu, sadhu – expressions of spontaneous adoration as the sacred faith enshrined in a people’s heart freely breaks out.









Enthralling performances by the dancers and drummers are part of the grand pageant.

Before the public, the tusker proudly stands, swaying gently to the rhythm of the music adorned with a golden garb encrusted with hundreds of lu-minous beads that glitter in the spotlight. For many years now, the Tooth Relic has not been taken out due to security and other reasons. What is paraded today is the replica of the casket but still does not diminish the fervor of the spectators, for faith transcends reality, and belief reign supreme.

Walking behind the casket bearing the tusker is the Kavi maduwa, descendants of the poets of old who entertained the king with poetry, art, and wit. They formed the king’s art circle, the Royal literati. Following the Kavi Maduwa walks the conductor of the entire perahera orchestra, the man of the hour; the Diyawadana Nilame. He is dressed in his Randoli best, the colorful and formal Mul Adhuma. His power as the sole arbiter ceases the moment he disrobes his costume, and the old saying ‘clothes maketh man’ applies to him literally, for, without his uniform, he is like Samson shornof his air. Another troupe of Ves dancers is now before him dancing in his honor as their forefathers used to dance before the king two hundred years ago. They perform the same dance, follow the same motions and sing and dance their vannams facing him as he approaches. Behind the Nilame comes the Gam Vidanas,

the village heads. With the last of the Gam Vidanes passing by, it signals the end of the Sri Dalada Perahera. But still, the entire pageant is not yet over.

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In the trail of the Sri Dalada follow the four peraheras of the nation’s four guardian deities. The first perahera to come is the perahera dedicated to God Natha. God’s color is yellow, and the elephants are all dressed in yellow. This perahera is followed by the perahera of God Vishnu, and the color blue now pervades the scene. Next is the perahera dedicated to God Kataragama, and the elephants and the participants are dressed in red. The last perahera is devoted to Goddess Paththini whose color is translucent and represented by the color white. No female dancer is allowed to perform in any of the peraheras. Still, in the Paththini perahera, since the deity is female, an exception has been made, and women dancers join in on the act.

The Kandy Esala Perahera is a grand pageant that showcases the island’s millennia-old traditions and customs. It represents the legacy of the Dalada Vahansa in Sri Lanka and the great dedication of her people to protect and worship the Sacred Relic.









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