Kandy and Kataragama Esala Perahera: The Island’s Cultural Splendor

Posted on



The Temple of the Tooth – Sri Dalada Maligawa dazzles during the Esala Perahera.

According to the Buddhist calendar, Esala is the eighth month that recalls several significant religious and historic events etched in Buddhism. The Esala full moon celebrates the island’s two impressive cultural pageants. The Kandy Esala Perahera is celebrated every August and reflects its grandeur and elaborate religious rituals. The Kataragama Esala Perahera is a vibrant traditional festival celebrated with great pomp and pageantry.



An elaborately and beautifully illuminated casket with the sacred Dalada Vahansa.

Kandy Esala Perahera

Kandy Esala Perahera has been part of the island’s cultural heritage for over several thousand years. The Perahera takes place every year, attracting thousands of devotees, pilgrims, and foreign visitors to witness one of the grandest festivals of the island taking place in the hill capital.

The Perahera commemorates the arrival of the Buddha’s sacred tooth relic, Dalada Vahansa, during King Kirthi Sri Meghavarna’s reign. Since then, the Sacred Tooth Relic has been taken on a grand cultural parade as devotees gather to venerate it with great faith.

The Kandy Perahera is in fact, a fusion of the Dalada Perahera and the Esala Perahera. The former celebrates the arrival of the Dalada Vahansa, the Sacred Tooth Relic of the Buddha in Sri Lanka, and the latter, the ritual veneration of the

four guardian deities of Buddhism (Gods Natha, Vishnu, Kataragama, and Goddess Pattini) to invoke divine blessings for the rain to nourish crop harvests. According to some beliefs, the entire perahera is a symbolic celebration of monsoon rains, the whip crackers and lamp bearers representing thunder and lightning, respectively; the drummers and dancers signifying the sound of rain. The rituals are conducted to appeal to the gods for rain and thereby a bountiful harvest.

The grand pageant is a celebration of rituals and ceremonies organized several weeks ahead.

The religious festivities begin with the Kap Situweema, Kap Tree Planting Ceremony, where the ceremonious Kap (a sanctified young Jackfruit tree) is planted at the four devales dedicated to Gods Natha, Vishnu, Kataragama, and Goddess Pattini. This act invokes the blessings of the four guardian deities for the ceremony’s success and the new crop cycle.

The celebrations begin with five Kumbal Perahera and four Randoli Perahera preceded by the Maha Randoli Perahera (held in the evening), concluding with the water cutting ceremony (Diya Kapeema). On the day of the Maha Randoli Perahera, it is a day of extravaganza and extra grandeur, as the cracks of whip announce the approach of the procession. This practice, which began during ancient times, still continues. The flag bearers appear with the National flag, and the fire twirlers perform and, adding to the illumination, are torch bearers. The enthralling performance of the drummers and performers in traditional attires captivate the onlookers. A procession of gloriously adorned elephants parade through.

The Sacred Tooth Relic enshrined in a canopied karanduwa, golden casket is placed on the majestic tusker. As the magnificently caparisoned tusker proceeds, devotees lining the streets chant ‘Sadhu Sadhu’ in veneration.

The Peramune Rala (an officer) on a tusker holding the perahera sannasa and customs; the Kariya Karavana Korala responsible for the Sacred Casket; the Gajanayake Nilame and the Diyawadana Nilame of the Maligawa participate.

The processions are dedicated to four guardian deities, each with its own elephants, dancers, drummers, and performers. It is a majestic sight to behold. Throughout the festival period, the Temple of the Tooth, Sri Dalada Maligawa, is flocked by

devotees, and the aura of the festive spirit pervades the air.

The Ceremony of Planting Kap will take place on July 29th. The first Kumbal Perahera parades the streets on August 2nd, followed by four Kumbal and four Randoli peraheras consecutively. The Maha Perahera (Grand Randoli Procession) takes place on August 11th, while the water cutting ceremony (Diya Kapeema) takes place on August 12th.

Kataragama Esala Perahera

The Esala Perahera of the Ruhunu Maha Kataragama Devalaya is another cultural phenomenon celebrated in the southeast part of the island in a grand manner. A festival attended by devotees of all faith and ethnicities is driven to witness the Perahera, dedicated to the Kataragama Deviyo. The Perahera is a celebration of the unison of Kataragama Deviyo (God Skanda) and Valli Amma. One of the most surreal thing to witness is the divinity among the communities that get together to celebrate the festival in a grand manner.

The sacred and cultural festival begins with the first ritual of Kap Situveema, where a tree trunk called Rathkaravu is used. The two-week- long perahera is a celebration of elaborate age-old traditions and cultural performances expressed with grand spectacle and pageantry. Adding to the vibrancy of the festival is the illumination of colorful lights surrounding the temple premises and the reverberating sounds of the drummers, and adding to the highlight are the Kavadi dancers, an amazing attraction.

The Perahera commences at the auspicious time with the cracking of whips and drumming sound. A multitude of dancers, drummers, and flag bearers flow in rhythm. Adding to the glow of the perahera are the torch bearers, and it is a kaleidoscope of colors, rhythm, and performances.

Beautifully caparisoned elephants captivate the spectators’ attention while a majestic tusker bears the revered Yantra. Moving cohesively are the women, known as Alatti amma, who perform the daily pooja of lamps before God Skanda, clad in their traditional attire. Dancers attired in costumes resembling peacocks and move gracefully in motion.

Another form of expressing devotion is when devotees pierce their lips, cheeks, or tongue with vel (silver- arrow-headed pins) as they perform Kavadi. It is a form of the offering of sacrifice done in gratitude for fulfilled vows or as a form of veneration. Devotees follow an extensive preparation period from fasting and praying before taking Kavadi.

While some show an ardent devotion by suspending from beams or dragging carts through hooks pierced into their backs. Upon seeking blessings, some devotees engage in firewalking – an overwhelming act of penance by walking over a long stretch of embers raised by burning logs, which takes place in the main temple yard. It is a moment of spiritual divinity with the deity.

Adding to the festival is the Paada Yathra, a devotional journey by pilgrims as they travel on foot from Jaffna to Kataragama through road and jungle amidst the sun and rain. Chanting prayers and spending nights in tents and places of worship, the villagers provide alms to those embarking on the journey. These pilgrims aim to participate in the festival celebrations and invoke the blessings of god Skanda. As devotees chant ‘haro hara,’ the procession with the Basnayake Nilame, temple officials, elephants, drummers, and dancers wends its way to the temples within the complex and then to the Valli Amma temple before returning to the Maha Devalaya. The Perahera concludes with Diya Kepeema Mangalyaya (water cutting ceremony) at the Menik Ganga. This year, the first Perahera begins on July 29th, followed by other peraheras consecutively. The Final Perahera (Main Perahera) and fire walking ceremony will be held on August 8th, concluding with the water cutting ceremony on August 12th.

This July is a time to venerate and recall the traditions and cultural significances intertwined with the island’s festive celebrations with Kandy and Kataragama Esala Perahera.



Caparisoned elephants and the majestic tusker with the sacred casket are the highlights of the perahera.



Drummers in traditional attire add to the reverberating sounds of the perahera.



Wewal dancers synchronize with the flow of the procession.



Ves dancers in rhythmic movement.



Ruhunu Maha Kataragama Devalaya is illuminated in sparkling lights during the annual perahera.



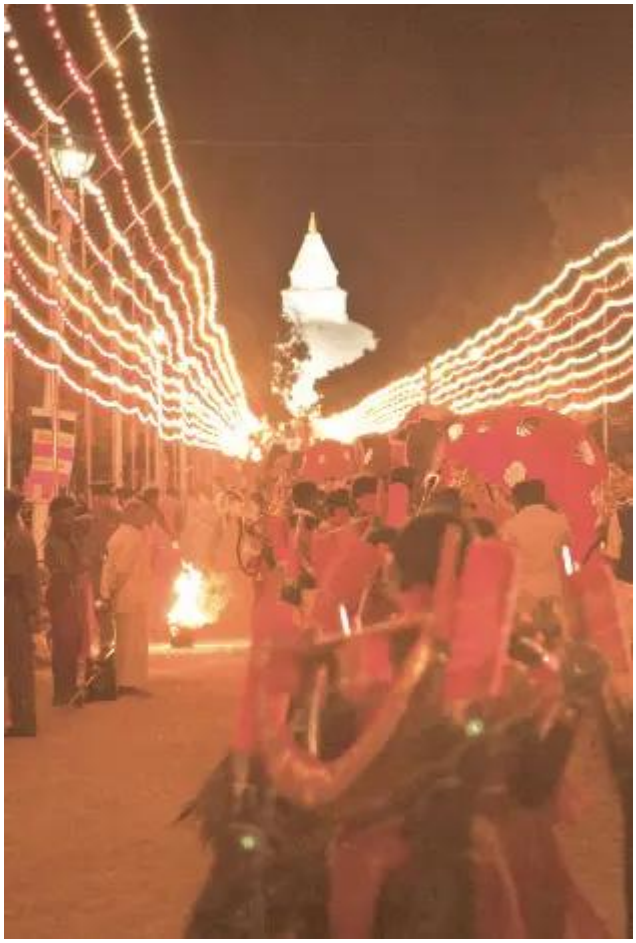
Thukku kavadi is a ceremonial practice of sacrifice by hanging on hooks to fulfil a vow.



Devotees pierce vel (silver-arrow headed pins) in veneration.



Devotees taking part in the firewalking ceremony express their profound faith.



The Perahera is a spectacular celebration of faith, traditions and culture.



Adding to the sparkle of the perahera are the colorful lights, caparisoned elephants, dancers and drummers.