

Igniting Timeless Tradition

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The majestic tuskers that adorn the perahera with light and exuberance

Each year since 1979, the Navam Perahera has captivated throes of locals as well as tourists with its invigorating dose of cultural and festive fanfare. The only one of its kind to take place in the commercial capital of the Island, the Perahera this year will be a throwback to timeless conventions with the most traditional of performances in the limelight.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara

Imagine an ensemble of performers in the thousands from all parts of the Island, caparisoned tuskers and elephants, each spruced up in their regalia, each lined up and positioned, on schedule to move in coordinated unison. Not only does an event of this magnitude take place each year, it occurs in the city streets in the vicinity of the Gangaramaya Temple. The Navam Perahera has been legendary for its revival of the

traditional performing arts of Sri Lanka. It has staunchly prevailed over the decades, sometimes against many odds, while still acquiring its own flair and authenticity. Although it has progressed with time to include many of the more contemporary performances, this year the Navam Perahera returns to its roots to retain an age-old cultural integrity.

To ensure this ideal, the Navam Perahera this year acquires a novel feature in that two systems will be followed to showcase performances; the strictly traditional perahera procession which would follow a shorter route than has been the practice in the past and in addition, the more contemporary acts would be staged along the Beira Lake. These would commence earlier in the day where, spectators could follow a route around the Lake to view spectacles such as the fire dancers and stilt walkers considered outside the traditional dances.

The Perahera procession itself would have a line-up of performances known to be the most traditional. Commencing with the wind instruments of 25 players blowing the single melody in unison, and likewise the resounding reverberation of the traditional percussion instruments; *daula*, *thammettama*, *udakki*, *geta bera*, 25 or so of each, sound their rhythms, each group in isolation followed by their resounding chorus. This way, it is expected, that the spectators can have a full appreciation of each. The sections together, as it so happens, form a Hewisi band.

Dance troupes form a major portion of the Perahera, with the traditional dances that comprise of the Up Country dances, Low Country dances and Sabaragamu dances, each distinct in their styles, flourishes and costumes. Masked dances or the *ves netuma*, *Naiyyandi*, *Hanumantha*, *Devol dance* and *Raban dance* are some of the few among a cultural melange of dances. These performances are intermitted with flag bearers, torch bearers, and *sesath* bearers that swell the numbers of the procession further. A singular feature of the Navam Perahera is the procession of 500 Buddhist monks and thus completes a representation of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. The Perahera would not be complete without its caparisoned tuskers and elephants. The arrival of the grand tusker bearing the relic casket today is a symbolic presence in the Perahera as it is the lay custodian who bears the actual relic casket.

With its many segments and arrangements, the Navam Perahera overcomes the chaos to reach the starting line through a numbering system in place. Groups of performers are each numbered according to their places that correspond with a roadway or lane where they are to be positioned. This has been proven effective as each year the Perahera commences at 7 pm without delay with participants being promptly able to find their places. These are the many positives that the Navam Perahera has acquired in its lifespan along with other

tweaks and refinements in reaching a display of the finest. Notably it is the artisans themselves that have greatly benefitted through a preservation of the dance acts, from the skills and traditional costumes to the instruments and are often sustained by the generous donations for the upkeep of this valued tradition. The Navam Perahera, with its persistence is as akin to an animate museum of culture that with each year breathes new life as it unveils its splendour.

The Navam Perahera commences at 7 pm on February 6 & 7, 2012

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