

Navam Maha Perahera: The Cultural Procession in the City

As the Full Moon of February rises in the sky, the city of Colombo becomes a center of cultural splendor, with the sounds of drums, hevisi and dancing reverberating into the night.

Words Udeshi Amarasinghe. **Photographs** BT Images.



Majestically caparisoned tusker with the Sacred Relic is the highlight of the Navam Maha Perahera.

Ven Galboda Gnanissara Thero, Chief Incumbent of the Gangaramaya Temple, fondly known as Podi Hamuduruwo, revived the Navam Maha Perahera in 1979 to give new life or energy to performing artistes and their talents. The Thero saw that the cultural heritage of the country was diminishing during 1970s as it was a time rife with economic hardships. While troupes of drummers, flutists, dancers

and other performers were gathered and assembled, the Temple made arrangements to provide all the musical instruments and costumes to the performers. The families of the artistes were also involved so that they were able to generate an income. The Temple presented them with sewing machines and the children with school materials so that they could obtain an education while learning the family traditional arts and crafts. The Gangaramaya Temple ensured that all performers received the respect and recognition for their talent and skills.

Navam Full Moon Poya signifies two significant events that happened more than 2500 years ago; it is on this day that the Buddha laid down a code of discipline for the Sangha and significantly, the Buddha's Chief Disciples Saripuththa and Moggalana entered the Order of the Sangha also on this day. It is for this reason that the Navam Perahera includes a unique feature, a procession of Bhikkhu within the Perahera.

The environs around the Beira Lake and Navam Mawatha are lit up and exude a spiritual aura. The Perahera begins with the whip crackers leading the way with fire dancers, flag bearers, Uda Rata, Pahatha Rata, and Sabaragamuwa dances together with drummers and hevisi bands enlivening the streets. Majestically caparisoned elephants are an inherent feature of the Perahera creating a sense of pride and regalia.

Another unique feature of the Navam Perahera is that performances from all other religions are also an important aspect of the Perahera. This signifies that the Gangaramaya Temple is a place of worship for everyone, where all regardless of their religion, caste or creed find spiritual sanctuary within. Thus, the Navam Perahera fosters unity and harmony between communities. Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Christians all gather to display their cultural heritage in the procession. As the regal main tusker carries the golden Sacred Relic Casket, those watching the Perahera clasp their palms in deep veneration. The Navam Maha Perahera, organized by the Gangaramaya Temple inculcates a sense of national pride in ensuring the Sri Lankan culture and heritage is preserved for posterity. It is a journey of spiritual awakening and discipline where Ven Galboda Gnanissara Thero has ensured a tradition that will continue as a national festival.

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Ven Galboda Gnanissara Thero, Chief Incumbent of the Gangaramaya Temple.



The dancers use weval (reeds) to perform artistic movements.



Traditional drummers play pulsating beats.



Naiyandi performers dance rhythmically.