Order of the Perahera

Posted on

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The main Kandy Perahera comprises five separate Peraheras from the Dalada Maligawa, the Natha Devale, Maha Vishnu Devale, Kataragama Devale and Pattini Devale in that order. The Devales are shrines built to honour deities worshipped in common by Buddhists and Hindus. The boom of an old cannon in the auspicious hour announces the start, and cracks of whips announce the approach of the procession. This is a practice coming down from the ancient days when similar whip crackers heralded the approach of kings or ministers and at the same time made way for them. This practice continued-even in the early days of British rule in Sri

Lanka. Next come the flag bearers with the National flag, the five coloured Buddhist flag, and standards of the provinces and districts that participate in the Perahera. Riding the first elephant is the Peram une Rala who once carried the royal mandate permitting the Perahera. Today the Peramune Rala carries an ola manuscript - Lekam Mitiya-register of lands owned by the temple, their tenents and traditional services rendered to the temple. The first relays of drummers playing Hewisi or martial drums lead the way for the Gajanayake Nilame -once the head of the king's elephant stables. Except for royalty he alone had the privilege of riding an elephant in Kandy.

The symbol of his authority is still seen in the silver goad -Ankusa- he carries. Next comes the Maligawa Tusker. the elephant of the Temple of the Tooth- with golden comparison, carrying the gilded replica of the tooth relic casket. In the days of Kandyan kings. the relic itself was taken out in the casket. The majestic elephant with its tusks sheathed in silver, with jewelled caparison and headdress, walks on a special white cloth laid on the ground in the manner of a red carpet as a mark of respect for the relic. A huge canopy is also carried over the casket. Flanking the tusker and the casket on each side are two more elephants carrying temple retainers showering jasmines on the casket. At the approach of the Maligawa Tusker the thousands of Buddhist devotees who line the streets raise their hands in worship with cries of "Sadhu" almost drowning the drums. Those who are seated in special enclosures stand up in respect as the Maligawa Tusker passes them.

The tusker bearing the casket is followed by drummers and dancers from lands gifted to the Maligawa by the former kings -Viharagam. They are some of the best exponents of Kandyan dancing and hill country drumming. They perform behind the tusker and before the Diyawadana Nilame, the lay custodian of the Dalada Maligawa and principal official of the Perahera. It is he, who decides on the route of the Perahera each day. He virtually rules the streets of Kandy for the duration of the pageant. The Diyawadana Nilame walks in all his pomp and glory, with forty yards of gold embroidered muslin round his waist, bejewelled four cornered hat of office, jewelled rings on fingers, a sword and dagger at waist.

The Diyawadana Nilame's procession includes other temple functionaries – the ***Korales-*** in white sarongs, red scarves and round red hats. Several relays of drummers and dancers performing different styles of dancing and drumming bring up the rear, each group separated by six to twelve elephants. The pattern of the Perahera has now been set. Each succeeding perahera from the Devales follows the same order but without the whip crackers, Peramune Rala and Gajanayake Nilame.

The next Perahera isfrom the ***Natha Devale.***

The predominant colour is green. Natha is the tutelary deity of Kandy and the next Buddha to be. It is at the natha Devale that the Kandy an kings were crowned. Drummers and dances from the lands of the Devale and the affiliate shrines in the Kandyan regions perform in front of the Devale elephant with its green caparison, carrying theinsignia ofthe deity. The place oftheDiyawadanaNilameis taken by the ***Basnayake Nilame*** of the Natha Devale, Kandy, and the Nilames of the affiliate devales. They follow the devale elephant attended by drummers and dancers, and are followed in turn by elephants in many-hued caparisons, brass bells tinkling as they take each measured step. Green gives way to blue as the Perahera of the *Maha* ***Vishnu*** *Devale* – the Hindu god Vishnu – approaches.

Buddhists believe that Vishnu is the special protector of Buddhism on the island, assigned that task by Sakra. Blue flags and banners, twinkling blue lights and blue caparisons are in marked contrast to the preceding green. The drumming here is of the finest with special drummers from Hanguranket. The Basnayake Nilame of the Vishnu Devale walks behind the devale elephant, accompanied by the Nilames of other Vishnu devales in the region, behind the devale elephant in its blue caparison carrying the insignia of Vishnu. More than a hundred dancers bring up the rear, as do jugglers and acrobats. As the throb of Kandyan drums of the Vishnu Devale fades, there is the sound of Karnatic drumming and flutes heralding the approach of the Perahera from the Kataragama Devale.

This is the shrine of Skanda, the Hindu god of war and victory. The dominant colour is red. The link between Buddhiism and Hinduism is clear. Kandyan drummers and dances lead the way, followed by South Indian style kavadi dancers keeping time to a frenzied rhythm, balancing Kavadi or shoulder poles with peacock plumes. The many elephants are in red caparison. There are more elephants in this procession showing the importance of Skanda. The Devale elephant carries the trident symbol of Skanda.

The Basnayake Nilames in red jacket and red headdress are preceded by a Kapurala, the chief Devale functionary who, with his turban, dhoti and red coat, looks an import from a South Indian Kovil. The last Perahera is that of the Pattini Devale, the shrine of the goddess of purity and chastity. The dominant colour is white. Elephants are draped in shimmering white. The Basnayake Nilame has a pearly white umbrella over him. In this Perahera alone there are women dancers, a more recent innovation. The women dance with Kala Gedi or clay pots, and winnows.

Following the Nilames come the last elephants of the Perahera. Bringing up the rear on the last five nights of the Randoli perahera are the Randoli or Golden Palanquins. these were for the consorts of the deities. There is another tradition that the queens of the reigning monarch travelled in them. Today the devotees put their offerings of coins into the palanquins as they pass by. The first five nights the Perahera are called the Kumbal Perahera which is shorter and only goes round the main temple square. There are fewer drummers, dancers and elephants, although the numbers On the sixth night, begins the Randoli Perahera, the more colourful processions with the principal participants and more and more elephants. The best nights to view it are the last two when the Perahera is in all its grandeur. There will be at least eighty elephants and several hundred.drummers and dancers. The pageant culminates with the Day Perahera held at daytime on the final day.



The “Peramuna Raja” carrying the scroll of the temple lands, who rides an elephant at the head of the Perahera.
Photo: Gamiini Jayasinghe



Kandyan dancers singing to the beat of the “udekki” a small handheld drum. at the Perahera.



The Diya wadana Nilame, the Jay custodian of the Tooth Relic of the Buddha, and the Dalada Maligawa, walking in the tradition attire of his office.
Photo: Gamini Jayasinghe