Pageantry and Colour in the Festivals of Sri Lanka

Posted on

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The festivals of Sri Lanka, most of them springing from a deeply religious background, are a blend of pageantry and penance, of old, established rituals and

new concepts, and the joy of everyday living. The pageantry of a perehara, the ceremonial temple procession, contrasts with the penance of a pilgrim rolling in the hot sand in a jungle shrine, the ritual followed at fire-walking is as absorbing as the end of a bicycle race, and the joy and laughter at new year time brings on an exhilaration that envelopes the whole country.

The diversity in race and religion contributes to the fascinating diversity in the form and content of the country's festivals, spread throughout the year. Buddhism, the religion of the majority, the Sinhala, inspires many of the island's feasts. The influence of Hinduism, the faith of most of the Tamils living in Sri Lanka, permeates not only their own festivals but also those of the Buddhists. The Christians and Muslims, the other two significant minorities, have their own festivals which add lustre to the national calendar.

January opens with the Duruthu Festival commemorating the visit of the Buddha to Kelaniya, now a suburb of Colombo. The focal point of the festival is the historic and magnificent temple marking the spot of the Buddha's visit. For several days before the full-moon day of Duruthu, a perehara brings to life the torch-lit streets of Kelaniya with a magnificent parade, spectacular with dancers and drummers and a cavalcade of caparisoned elephants.

In January is also the celebration of Thai Pongal, the merriest and by far the most popular of the Hindu festivals of Sri Lanka. This feast of the sun, the harbinger of a plentiful harvest, should, strictly speaking, be observed on December 23, the day after the northern solstice. But Hindu astrologers have, however, fixed the date to coincide with January 14, the first day of the auspicious month of Thai. This family festival, with many time-hallowed rituals begins with the boiling of a pot of rice at sunrise on the front doorstep of the house and the delightful cry of the family gathered round the pot: "Pongal! Pongal! auchu!" which means exactly what one would expect: It's boiling! It's boiling!"

February 4, Independence Day, is a national holiday. For many years the celebrations were held in Colombo and pride of place went to parades by the armed services. The main celebration has now moved to the new political capital Sri Jayawardenapura, Kotte, and the main participants are school children who parade in a procession complete with eurhythmics and floats and dances depicting the provinces and progress made in the country.

The Navam Perehera, closely following Independence Day, has now gained

prominence as a festival of importance ·in the heart of Colombo. Organised by the Gangaramaya Temple, sited by the picturesque Beira Lake, this perehera draws devotees and sightseers by the thousands, and naturally many travel agents now arrange for special seating for visitors from abroad along the route.

March sees the culmination of the Sri Pada or Adam’s Peak festival season, centred on Sri Lanka’s holy mountain. For the followers of three main religions, the peak of this mountain is a sanctified rendezvous. Whatever one’s belief, the climbing of Sri Pada during the festival season is an unforgettable experience. The path through the primeval forest and the cool, soothing climate contribute to a sense of peace and tranquillity. Faith strengthens the limbs of young and old, and many make the journey every year.

April ushers in the primary national festival of the country, the Sinhala and Tamil New Year. Though the official government holidays are restricted to two, the celebrations could extend up to a week or even more, depending on the astrologers. From the highest to the humblest in the land follow their dictates and to violate the auspicious times could fill the dawning new year with grim omen.

Sinhala New Year marks the completion of the solar circuit. The festival is celebrated with all its traditional emphasis in the rural areas and is a gathering of the family. In this sense, it is more a social event than a festival, with the young paying their respects to the old and gaining from them the belief in the traditional values of the family.

The start of the New Year is marked by lighting of the hearth at the correct time, facing the right direction, dressed in clothes of the correct colour. The ceremonial pot of milk-rice is cooked and eaten at the time laid down by the astrologers. Once the fates have been propitiated, the fun and games begin. Even in the matter of entertainment, hoary tradition plays a vital part. Especially in the villages, forming 80 percent of inhabited Sri Lanka, community celebrations take pride of place.

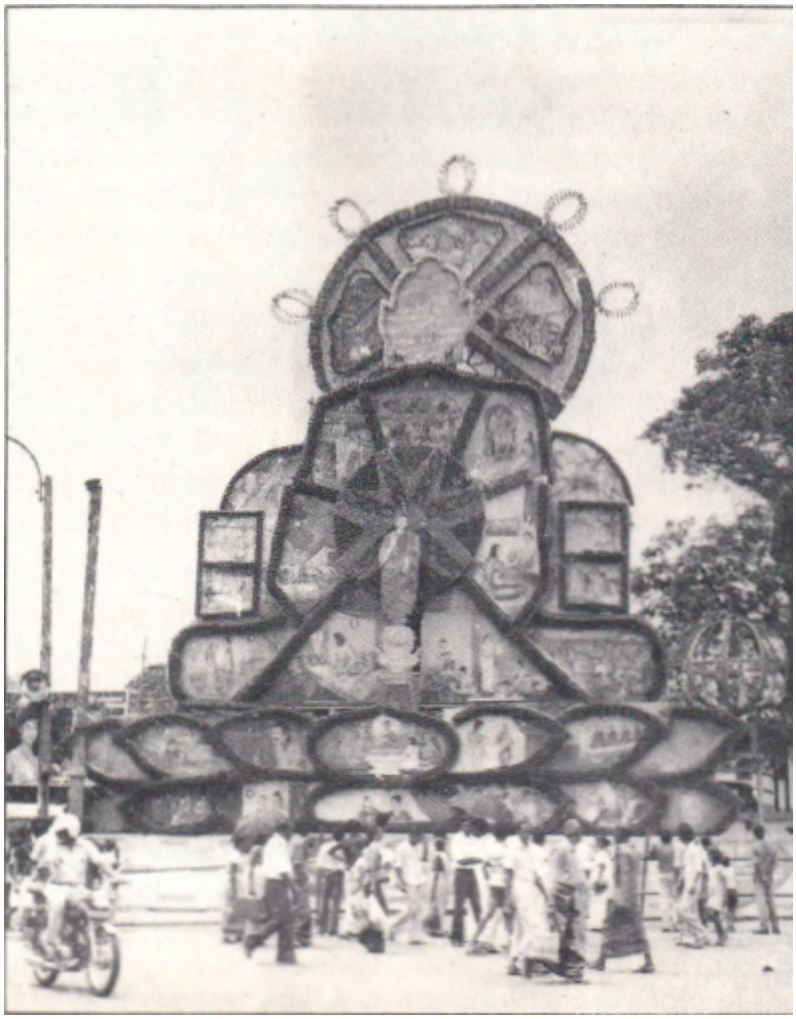
Among the Christians in Sri Lanka, April brings the Easter Festival, preceded by the Passion Plays, one of which staged at the Catholic town of Negombo, draws very large crowds. The actual sites of the play are two villages Duwa and Pitipana, which form outlying suburbs of Negombo.

Vesak, the central festival of Buddhism marking the birth, enlightenment and passing away of the Buddha, occurs on the Full Moon Day in May. The scent of

flowers permeates the air as millions of devotees make their offerings in the thousands of temples that dot the land. Dressed in white, they make their sober, silent way from the dagaba to the preaching hall to listen to the bhikku explaining the Noble Eightfold Path of the Buddha.

Vesak is also a time of sightseeing, specially after darkness falls. The streets are decorated and myriad lights tum night almost into day. Giant Vesak pandals, with stories in pictures on illuminated display panels attract thousands. While multi-coloured electric jets make intricate running patterns round the panels, the part of the story depicted by each panel is explained over loudspeakers.

Vesak is soon followed by Poson, another great Buddhist festival which falls in June. This marks the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka by Arahat Mahinda, the missionary son of the Emperor Asoka of India. The centre of the festival is Anuradhapura and the shrine at nearby Mihintale, a few miles from the ancient royal city.



A Vesak pandal with scenes from the life of the Buddha draws crowds of spectators on the streets of the city.
(Suresh de Silva)

A devotee pays homage to the sacred footprint.

Over a hundred thousand pilgrims camp out at Mihintale and spend their time in meditation, or climb what has been called the grandest stairway in the world, of over a thousand steps, to the summit of the hill where the king of Sri Lanka heard for the first time the message of compassion of the Buddha, more than 2,000 years ago.

Poson is celebrated in many areas with Buddhist pereheras and wayside theatricals which depict stories from Buddhist tradition and scripture.

June also has a festival in the Catholic Church of St. Anthony in Kochchikade, a crowded zone of Colombo, just north of the Fort. The shrine of the saint, revered as a miracle worker, draws devotees from all races and religions, and turns the whole Kochchikade and nearby Kotahena area into a happy carnival.

July and August are the festival months of Sri Lanka. It is the period of the magnificent and renowned Kandy Perehera, the pilgrim season and time of festivity at the southern shrine of Kataragama, a whole string of festivals at Catholic churches dedicated to St. Anne, the mother of Mary, all along the north-western coastline, and at many churches dedicated to Mary too.

July/August is also the time of the colourful Vel festival of the Hindus in Colombo, and of the famous fire-walking ritual at Udappuwa, near Chilaw in the north-west. The highlight of all this is the Kandy Esala Perehera, where for ten unforgettable nights nearly a hundred caparisoned elephants, decked in majesty, parade the streets of Sri I.anka's last independent kingdom in a ritual held in honour of the Tooth Relic of the Buddha. Drummers and dancers, whip-crackers and torch bearers, and the majestically attired temple chieftains add colour and pomp to this most famous of festivals in Asia.

The festivals at Kataragama span the spectrum of human faith. Within the confines of the sacred city, on the banks of the Menik Ganga – the river of gems -there is the shrine dedicated to Skanda, the Hindu god of war, so loved and feared by people of varying faiths. The Kiri Vehera nearby is sacred to Buddhists, and not far away is a shrine which draws hundreds of Muslim pilgrims every festival season. Kataragama is the place of penance, of suffering gladly undertaken, an example of the victory of faith and mind over matter. The ultimate expression of faith is the never-to-be-forgotten fire -walking ceremony, where barefoot devotees, after intense preparation, walk a trench of glowing charcoal brought to white heat.

While the Vel festival brings some of the aura of Kataragama to Colombo, when the insignia of Skanda is paraded through the city streets in a magnificent chariot, some of the colour of the Kandy Perehara is also spread around the city suburbs with the several colourful Esala Pereheras which take place at this time.

August and September are the months when the Esala Pereheras at Bellanwila and Kotte take place. The former has in the past two decades grown into a festival drawing many thousands of sightseers, while the latter continues the tradition from the time Kotte was the last maritime capital of the Sinhalese, when the Tooth Relic was enshrined in the Dalada Maligawa there. Both festivals are complete with processions featuring caparisoned elephants, traditional drummers and dancers.

October sees the revival of a very old ceremony called "Wap Magul", the auspicious inauguration of the ploughing of paddy-fields in preparation for the sowing of the new crop. In ancient days the king participated in this festival, and to this day it is enlivened with many colourful rituals, one of which is the drawing of the ceremonial plough by brightly decorated, magnificent buffaloes.

One of the gentlest and most joyous festivals falls in October-November when Hindus celebrate Deepavali, the festival of lights. Bright and colourful lamps adorn

their homes marking the victory of light over darkness. December is the Sinhala month of Unduwap, when the Buddhists of Sri Lanka, especially women, remember Sanghamitta, daughter of Emperor Asoka, and her arrival in this island bringing a sapling from the Bodhi tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment. This is the sapling that now grows in Anuradhapura as the Sri Maha Bodi, the oldest historically documented tree in the world. There are many religious ceremonies at Anuradhapura to mark Unduwap, and in many parts of the country Buddhists temples arrange colourful pageants where the image of Sanghamitta is honoured.

December is also Christmas time, and this too is one of those many festivals in which the celebration is shared by those of the diverse religions in the country. Most of the festivity here is in the urban and coastal areas where there are larger numbers of Christians Carol singing and special nativity theatricals are among the highlights of this season of good cheer. While the spirit of sharing abounds, there are also the innumerable dances organised by hotels, business houses and sports and service clubs which add to the merriment of the month.

Only the major festivals have been mentioned here. The chance is that whatever time of the year one arrives in Sri Lanka, you are bound to discover and be involved in one festival or other. With the traditional friendship of the Lankans, one is never a stranger at any of these festivals. A visitor could always join in the fun and festivity, and learn much about the rituals and ancient customs which form part of the celebrations.

Kavadi dancer at Kataragama pays penance for a vow.

The church feast at Kudagama is a special occasion for crowds of Roman Catholic devotees.