

Pageantry of the Perahera

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The crack of a whip cuts across the stillness of the Kandy Lake. It is followed by the throbbing of drums and the distant wail of wind instruments. Soon one feels an air of expectancy. It is the final night of the Kandy Perehera, the magnificent pageant that continues to draw thousands to Sri Lanka year after year.

On August 7th this year, the grand pageant of Kandy will begin, and will continue to thrill crowds which line its streets for ten nights and a day. Described as the most colourful spectacle in Asia, the Kandy Esala Perehera, to give its full name, is held in honour of the sacred Tooth Relic of the Buddha, which is enshrined in Kandy's famous Temple of the Tooth, the Dalada Maligawa.

Annual processions in honour of the Tooth Relic date back to nearly two thousand years when the Relic was brought to Sri Lanka. There are records of such processions held in Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, and there is sculpture depicting such pageants of the past, in the ancient temples of Sri Lanka.

The Kandy Perehera itself traces its history to the late 17th Century reign of King Wimaladharmasuriya who ordered the conduct of the perehera in the Buddhist month of Esala (July/August) accompanied by the processions of the four devalas (Hindu shrines) of Kandy.

Today, the Kandy Perehera is a recreation of the pageantry of the past in the last kingdom of the Sinhalese. The rituals and traditions of the perehera have changed little from the time they were done in the days of the kings of Kandy. The route of the perehera is still lit with flares of burning copra, and the participants in the pageant still follow the old order as laid down by the king in the 17th Century. Whip-crackers still herald the procession, as they did in the past, when they cleared the path for royalty or a religious procession. They are followed by the flag and standard bearers who carry the flags of the various ancient provinces or 'disawas' and "korales" of Sri Lanka, as well as the national flag and Buddhist flag. Following closely is the Peramune Raja, astride an elephant and dressed in handsome Kandyan costume. He carries in his hands an ola manuscript, with a cover delicately done in gold and silver, which contains the original 11th Century royal proclamation to conduct the perehera, and a list of all the temple lands which are expected to contribute to the pageant.

Following the Peramune Raja comes the first "Hewisi Band", the martial drummers led by Malagammana, the leader of the royal drummers. The bare-bodied drummers in striking red and white costumes provide an irresistible beat for the min Kandyan dancers who follow.

Next comes the Gajanayake, in the old days the head of the royal elephant stables. The Gajanayake rides an elephant with a silver goad in his hand, symbolic of his power over the elephants and the mahouts, the elephant keepers.

The perahera is now on its way. In the lead is the procession from the Dalada Maligawa, the cynosure of which is the Maligawa Tusker, the stately elephant, beautifully caparisoned and with its tusks sheathed in silver, carrying on its back the replica of the relics casket of the Temple of the Tooth. As the thousands lining the streets raise cries of Sadhu Sadhu, the Buddhist salutation of worship, the elephant steps gently on the white cloth spread before it. It is flanked by two other elephants on which ride bare-bodied men, showering the casket with white jasmines, and it is sheltered from the sky with a huge canopy of cloth carried on four lengthy poles.

The Diyawadana Nilame, the lay custodian of the Tooth Relic, follows accompanied by the several other Basnayake Nilames, or custodians of lesser temples of shrines, all in the colourful dress of the Kandyan chieftains of the past. The procession of the Dalada Maligawa, which gets pride of place, is followed by

the processions of the four Hindu shrines of Kandy: those dedicated to Natha, the Buddha to be; Vishnu, the protector of the Buddhist religion; Skanda, the Hindu God of War and Victory; and Pattini, Goddess of Chastity, deeply revered by the Buddhists in Sri Lanka, especially in times of illness.

Each procession has its own relays of drummers and dancers, several hundred of them performing in an unbelievable spectacle of sight and sound. Groups of dancers stepping to the captivating rhythm of the drums in the glow of burning flares. Drummers marching in martial formation, the throb of their drums echoing in the hills surrounding Kandy. And the whole area near Kandy taking the look of a great amphitheatre of colour. Adding to all this spectacle are the elephants, nearly a hundred in all—from little babies to majestic tuskers almost nine feet tall, all in lovely caparison, with bells tinkling at their feet, walking in a great pageant which for ten nights transports sightseers into a little of the medieval splendour of Kandy.