Stop! It’s A Dansala

Posted on



Yellow rice by buckets at Kirulapone

The blaring music is a mix of placid religious refrain and lively pop music. The décor is unmistakable. Lanterns of different shades, sizes and shapes are accentuated by the colours of the Buddhist flag. The aroma of food spurts the air and strokes the taste buds of the passerby. There are long queues of people by the side of the road, the young and old waiting patiently for their turn. The setting is a ‘dansala’, or an ‘Alms Hall’ where people are treated to food that is served generously, free of charge.

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Dansala is associated with the festival of Vesak in Sri Lanka. Apart from the many external trappings that one sees in the city of Colombo, the suburbs and in the villages, what sets apart the festival of Vesak in the month of May is the free distribution of various types of food to people. What started as a practice that was limited to Vesak has spread to other days of Poya like the Poson festival in the month of June. Giving alms is a noble gesture associated with the core teachings of

Buddhism. It has an elaborate history and a modern story that has evolved and will evolve in the years to come.

The philosophy of giving is associated with Buddhism. Benevolence in giving food or ‘Dhana’ has been a great Buddhist practice from yore as elaborated in the chronicle, the Mahavamsa. In Buddhism, Dhana (giving of alms), Seela (good conduct) and Bhavana (meditation) are three ways of acquiring merit during a person’s life. And ‘Dhana’ is considered the ultimate act of merit.

The tradition of organising ‘Dansal’ during the festival of Vesak began with the declaration of Vesak as a national holiday in 1884. It was a time when Sri Lanka was under the rule of the British Empire. But, it was a remarkable period in the annals of this country’s history. The Buddhist Revival Movement led by Anagarika Dharmapala was at its zenith, which gave an impetus to the celebration of the Vesak festival in all its pomp and grandeur. Buddhist philanthropists belonging to wealthy trading families contributed generously to build resting houses and food stalls to serve pilgrims visiting the hallowed precincts of Anuradhapura during Vesak. The common food that was served to pilgrims then, was a simple menu of Sri Lankan rice and curry and herbal drinks.

The concept of charity remains the same today. But, the ‘add-ons’ of modern times have made the task of organising a dansala quite a meticulous undertaking. The Sri Lankan rice and its accompaniments are sought after by the majority of Vesak and Poson pilgrims and visitors. Equally popular are dansal serving noodles, boiled gram and manioc, herbal drinks, ice cream, ice coffee, sherbet and other beverages. Quite often, youth who are the feisty organisers of such dansal, flag-down passing vehicles or even cheerfully thrust a glass of drink to a passerby.

Putting together a ‘rice’ dansala is not a simple task. Since it involves a sizeable amount of money and a large quantity of food, it is generally organised by mature men folk, ably assisted by women in the kitchen. Dansal serve food on all days of Vesak and Poson. A rice dansala serves at least 3,000 people a day. This demands a great deal of work not only in organising the nitty-gritty of things but more in getting the exact amount of provisions. According to some seasoned organisers of rice dansal, 400 kilograms of rice is cooked for a day. Rice is served with something simple like onions cooked to a spicy dish, which requires 200 kilograms of big onions. In addition, if the dansala serves cooked potatoes, the requirement is 60 kilograms of potatoes. The popular dhal curry requires 80 kilograms and all this for a single day. At least 30 litres of vegetable oil is used for the purpose of frying,

which is the secret behind the tantalising taste of dansal rice. The approximate cost for a day to feed the host of patronisers is 250,000 rupees or more.

The swelling number of patrons has increased the work load of dansal organisers. Some organisers hire ‘cooks’ to prepare the food, with womenfolk assisting in peeling and chopping onions and vegetables. The large cooking utensils are also hired for a fee and so are the crockery and cutlery, tables and chairs. The accessories of modernity are evident in today’s dansal with the introduction of buffet style serving, which has made refilling the dishes easy.

Dansal organisers range from traders, local organisations, youth clubs, sports clubs to tuk-tuk drivers. Money is often collected from people in the area. Yet, for the organisers it is a meritorious deed rooted in the precepts of the sacred teaching. Thus, their noble act is blessed by a reverend monk prior to the commencement of the dansala. As one looks beyond the many acts of benevolence, the pious serenity of this holy day is uplifted not only by the festival of colour that dazzle along the sidewalks, but also by the enthusiasm and generosity of the dansal organisers.

