

The Great Walukaramaya Renaissance



The perahera with the first elephant carrying the Gaja Nilame leading the procession on Galle Road

Colombo's oldest perahera takes to the streets for the 52nd year.

Words and Photographs Manu Gunasena

It was the first stirrings of a Buddhist renaissance. The Portuguese and the Dutch invaders had occupied the maritime provinces of the land for over three hundred years. Now in the early 19th Century, the British had usurped their place; and with the fall of Senkadagala, the last stronghold of Sri Lanka, the entire island was under the colonial yoke of a foreign power.

In 1815, the 2000 year old kingdom of Sinhala kings was at an end with the last King of Kandy a condemned prisoner in an English cell. Buddhism to which the nation owed its every cultural impulse and fashioned its way of life, lay under siege, its very existence threatened by alien proselytisers wielding alien gospels as the new enlightened, eternal truths.

It was at a turbulent time like this in the nation's chequered history when Arnolis Silva, a renowned ayurvedic physician decided to brave the rising tides of colonisers that threatened to swamp the national spirit and safeguard Buddhism's flickering flame in the wind.

He donated his land of over two acres in Kollupitiya to build a Buddhist temple in the cherished hope it would become—along with Colombo's oldest temple Deepaduttaramaya, built in 1785 in Kotahena and where the Ven Migettuewatte Sri Gunanada Thero took up residence in 1862 to launch the famous Five Great Debates, known as the Pancha Maha Vadaya—the hub of Buddhist resurgence. Constructed in 1841, the name given for the new temple was Walukaramaya; and its founding monk was Ven Pandit Walane Sri Siddhartha Nayaka Thero. The great scholar monk had already established the Paramadhamma Chetiya Pirivena,

Ratmalana while Sri Siddhatharamaya, Walana, Palliyagodelle Moratuwa Viharaya, Siddhartharamaya Galtude, Panadura also came under his sagacious leadership and purview. Now he had brought the fight to the very heart of Sri Lanka, to the new capital city of Colombo to spearhead the great Buddhist comeback.

Thus began the 'golden era' of Walukaramaya. Since then there have been eight chief prelates of the temple each one playing their individual role to uphold and promote the ideals upon which the temple was founded. The founding chief monk Ven Walane Sri Siddhartha is credited as having ordained monks in the low country following the restoration of the Noble Order of Monks with the establishment of the Siam Nikaya in the 1760's in Kandy.

Successive chief monks were ably assisted by the lay gentry who nobly answered the call and rallied round the temple as it strove to keep Buddhism alive in the land and beating in the people's hearts. Many volunteered their services and donated their resources to help advance Buddhist activities at a time when the nation was under foreign occupation and such activities were considered to be anti social. Among the families who rose to meet the challenge and came forward to support the national endeavour at the risk of being black balled by the colonial masters, are the ancestors of Sri Lanka's present Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. His great grandfather, Walter Wijewardena, the son of the well known philanthropist and Buddhist benefactor Helena Wijewardena, played an active role in the development of Walukaramaya Temple and also laid the foundation stone of the Image House in 1926.

Another chief monk of the temple Ven Mawittara Sri Revata Thero is considered as the monk mainly responsible for the establishment of Mahanama College in the 1950's at the Walukaramaya Dharmasalawa with 60 students. Today Mahanama has become a leading government school and adjoins the temple premises.

In 1963, the then chief monk of the temple the Venerable Niwantidiye Ananda Thero, who held the incumbency for fifty years, decided to take the message of Walukaramaya to the streets, in the manner Kandy's Dalada Maligawa held its world famous annual pageant, the Esala Perahera in August each year. Timed to be held at the tail end of the Esala Perahera season each year, the Walukaramaya Maha Viharaya holds its annual perahera late September or October. This year too on Saturday, October, 3, 2015, Colombo's oldest perahera will take to the

streets for the 52nd consecutive year. The boast of pageantry will include, the whip crackers, the fire torch bearers, the drummers, the hevisi bands, the raban twirlers, the troupes of dances and the riveting parade of 20 caparisoned elephants as it had done for over half a century.

The Walukaramaya Perahera will be held on Saturday, October 3, 2015

Amongst the traditional dance form on display will be the ritualistic forms of low country dancing designed to appease sickness bearing evil spirits, the highland dance of the Pantheru troupe with their skinless tambourines and small cymbals to invoke the blessings of the Goddess Paththini, the Sabaragamuwa dances are dedicated to God Saman and *kawadi* dancing is performed in honour of God Kataragama, the God of Love and War.

As brief interludes between these dazzling spells of dance spectacles, will come the elephants, two or three in a row swaying their trunks in rhythm to the drummer's heady beat. All this and more will be marshalled into one enthralling spectacle of reverence in motion as devotees throng the sidewalks to worship and venerate the cynosure of the grandiose train: the sacred relics of Arahats, the Enlightened Ones, contained in a silver casket and borne atop the grandiosely bedecked majestic tusker Vasana of the Kataragama Devalaya.

Following the main perahera, will come the peraheras of the Gods, namely Vishnu, Kataragama, Paththini, Iswara, Dadimunda, Gambara and Kali. The entire procession will make its way from the temple to Walukarama Road on to Galle Road. Here it will turn right and proceed to the Colpetty junction; and turn right and proceed to the Liberty roundabout. It will turn right again and proceed down R A De Mel Mawatha and then turn right to Walukarama Road again and return to the temple. The entire journey is approximately three kilometres long and will take three hours from start to finish.

But this year there will be a slight difference. This is due to an innovation introduced last year by the present chief monk of the temple, the Ven Maharagama Nanda Thero. To foster racial harmony, to bridge the divide between the two communities and to promote Buddhist Hindu accord, he extended a symbolic hand of amity and goodwill last year to the Hindu clergy, which was warmly accepted.

As a result, on the eve of the main perahera, the temple's statue of Lord Ganesh is taken in procession to the Sri Kathiresan Kovil in Bambalapitiya, a distance of approximately three kilometres. It is accompanied by a hevisi band and theme dancers. The statue is kept overnight at the kovil and is accorded worship with Hindu rites and ceremonies. The following afternoon it is transported back atop an elephant along with the rest of the elephants who had been lodged at the kovil's expansive property during their stay in Colombo. Once the statue has returned to the temple, it then joins the main perahera.

Today there are new stirrings of a renaissance of a different kind at the Walukaramaya Temple. The chief monk, the Ven Maharagama Nanda Thero has new plans to meet the needs of the future. The monk who was awarded the Parittha Daja, the symbolic flag of the pirith maestro by the Maha Nayake of the Malwatte Nikaya for his 20 year record for reciting pirith to the nation every morning over the national radio, now intends to focus on community services and social welfare programmes.

Along with the guidance and assistance of the temple's Dayaka Sabha, an ambitious programme is underway to see realisation of long held ambitious dreams. Plans are afoot to afford more facilities to cater to the spiritual needs of the laity and a comprehensive programme consisting of Buddhist discourses coupled with meditational training has been devised. Also underway is a plan to provide employment orientated training for the youth. Initially it will mainly consist of establishing free English and Chinese classes. It is envisaged to replicate the vocational training programmes conducted by the nearby Gangaramaya Temple at Hunupitiya.

Though still in its planning stage, it reveals the new stirrings of the Walukaramaya Temple to once more be at the forefront of a national revitalising movement and give impetus to the economy of the nation, even as the temple, 175 years ago, rose to successfully lead the Buddhist renaissance.

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