

The Kandy Esala Perahera: Stepping into a Colourful Past

Posted on

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The people begin to gather by Kandy's famous lake from morning. Whole families, sometimes the population of entire villages from near and distant hills, take up every available inch on the sidewalk. Hand-woven mats or plastic sheets to sit upon, multi-hued umbrellas or more plastic sheets for shelter from the sun and occasional rain. As evening approaches, the sidewalks of Kandy are packed with eager, expectant people. There are others perched on trees. The special tiered stands for tourists are sold out. An elephant carrying a huge load of palm leaves with its trunk does a quick trot towards the Temple of the Tooth Relic, almost rushing for a delayed appointment.

Shortly after sunset all approaching traffic is diverted from the city streets. Bare roads lined with thousands of eager people await the pageant of Kandy. Myriad little sounds fill the air. Bursting balloons, babies crying, stern whistles of policemen, the playful whistles blown by small children, the jingle of bells on the nutcrackers of betel vendors, rattles to lull little babies and the wolf whistles of young blades, all add up to a growing din of expectancy.

As the night grows older and the August moon rises shedding its glow on the placid lake, one's patience begins to wear. Those used to city schedules wonder whether it is all worth it. And then one hears the distant boom of a cannon. An 'aah' of relief ripples among the gathered throng. The signal is given. The Perehera has left the Maligawa at the auspicious hour. It is easy to pick up the distant sound of drums and oboe. One more night of pageantry has begun in Kandy-the Kandy Esala Perehera is on its way.

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A perehera in Sri Lanka is a colourful ceremonial procession. They are held in little villages, small towns and big cities. There are political processions, wedding processions, funeral processions. The tradition is observed by the adherents of several faiths, each bringing a touch of their own ritual and colour. But the most common of pereheras are those associated with the ceremonies in Buddhist temples and there are more than 12,000 such temples on the island, each having at least two or three occasions a year for a perahera. But in a land of peraheras many of them replete with the necessary elephants drummers and dancers the Kandy Perahera is the Perahera of Peraheras.

It is the continuance of a tradition more than 2000 years old, from the time the Tooth Relic of the Buddha was brought to Sri Lanka from India. It is the annual tribute paid to the Relic, the palladium of the former kings of Sri Lanka, which is now enshrined in the Dalada Maligawa - The Temple of the Tooth Relic. The perahera in Kandy itself dates back to the 17th century when it took its present form. But peraheras and pageants in honor of the Relic have been held in the ancient cities of Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Yapahuwa and Dambedeniya right up to the Kotte where the Tooth Relic was enshrines until the Portuguese arrived in the 16th century and then it was shifted to the mountain safety of Kandy.

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As a resplendent revival of ritual and tradition, Kandy's Perahera has little comparison elsewhere. It is at best a fascinating spectacle of sight and sound and a rare manifestation of simple religious fervour. The thousands of peasants from Kandy and the outlying districts who line the streets for hour for just a glimpse of this spectacle are both spectators and devotees.

As the sound of the drums draw nearer, torchbearers take their positions along the route. They carry long poles at one end of which are metal kets full of burning copra. The flames spread a soft glow on the street and the faces of the spectators nearby. This is how the streets were lit when processions were held in ancient days.

There is a hush among the crowd as the sound of drums comes closer, mingling with the crack of whips. Almost stealthily the whip-crackers walk on to their action stations on the street. Soon the air is full of the crack of more than a dozen whips like the bursting of large firecrackers. The crowds on the kerbside press backwards. Make way for the Perahera say the whips in the same way that the road was cleared for a king in the past.

As the whip-crackers proceed to their next halt, the perahera is upon you. Torch-spinners whirling their wheels of fire, juggling with flames, spinning bright torches light up the path for the first elephant. Riding it, attired in the traditional dress of an official of the old Kandyan court is the bearded Peramune Rala. He carries in his hands a scroll bearing the edict ordering the Perahera to take place and the streets through which it will proceed this night.

The jingle of bells worn by elephants grows louder as the next elephant approaches bearing the Gajanayake Nilame – the keeper of the Temple elephants, in the days of royalty the Keeper of the Royal Elephant Stable. He carries a silver goad in his hand as a symbol of his authority. The sound of drums reverberate and the first large group of drummers moves up. As their martial beat bounces back from the hills across the Kandy Lake, the first group of dancers draws up. Brown-skinned Kandyan dancers, their bodies glowing in the torchlight, with beaded vests, billowing white skirts, silver shoulder plates and headdresses dancing with gusto on the asphalt.

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Dancers and drummers in the day procession in front of the Dalada Maligawa in Kandy.

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A drummer stepping to the rhythm in the spectacular Kandy Perahera.

Dancing, bowing, curtsying they lead the way for the centrepiece of the Perahera: The Maligawa Tusker. A truly majestic elephant, its forehead more than ten feet high, body and trunk draped in the most colourful of caparisons. Polished silver, brass and glass beads on the caparison reflecting the torchlight. The edge of the huge batik drapery glowing with tiny electric jets. The tusker steps with practised

ease on the long white cloth laid before, a special white carpet salute. It walks with all the knowledge that it is the cynosure of all eyes. Atop the tusker in a special ornamental cradle is the gilded relics casket of the Temple -of the Tooth. It is an exact replica of the bejewelled, golden casket in which the Tooth Relic of the Buddha is kept. In ancient days the casket with the Relic itself was taken in procession. Concern for its safety altered that practice more than a century ago.

As the great tusker approaches, the villagers on the sidewalks raise cries of “Sadhu, Sadhu”. Some may give expression to their joy and applaud. Attendants on two elephants riding on either side of the tusker strew the casket with jasmynes and popcorn. Other attendants carry a huge gold-frilled canopy above the casket, and some others, also on elephant-back, “fan” the casket with huge whisks, like punkahwallahs in an oriental palace.

The tusker proceeds with dignified gait, the dancers performing before it and after stepping to the ever present beat of the drums. And then the next touch of pageantry. The Nilames or temple custodians, led by the Diyawadana Nilame, the lay custodian of the Tooth Relic. It is a complete re-creation of the past. The Nilames in their medieval attire: yards and yards of silk and muslin round their waists creating waistlines of pomp; jackets of velvet and gold lace, gem studded and gold braided; four-cornered bejewelled headdresses. Each with a large dagger, with ornamental, gem-studded handle at the waist and Moghul-type moccasins on their feet. Dancers performing before them, singing ancient songs of obeisance. It is a fragment of a colourful past moving before you.

This is the pattern of the Perehera. The first segment is the Maligawa Perehera, the procession of the Temple of the Tooth Relic, which ends with the first group of Nilames. Next come the pereheras of the four “de.vales” or shrines of the four principal deities in Kandy: that of Skanda -the God of War and Protection, Vishnu - the Protector of the Buddhist religion, Natha-tutelary, deity of Kandy, and Pattini - the Goddess of Chastity.

Each segment of the perehera with its distinctive colour -red for Skanda, blue for Vishnu. green for Natha and white for Pattini. Each complete with hundreds of dancers, some performing the classic Kandyan dances, others with twirling tambourines and novices dancing to a rhythm kept with wooden sticks.

Hindu dancers in the procession of Skanda dancing in a frenzy balancing shoulder poles decorated with peacock plumes. South Indian drums dominant for a brief spell

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over the all-pervading sound of Sri Lankan drums. With all the activity of dancers and musicians and the vivid attire and pomp of the chieftains, it is the night of the elephants. They steal the show with their numbers and their obvious delight in participation. Little babies sometimes going astray, adolescents sometimes stubborn and in need of urging, and the rows upon rows of adult elephants in their caparisons of red, blue, green, gold, silver and white, walking with their mahouts beside them. Ten, twenty, thirty, you can count up to seventy or eighty elephants on the best nights of the Perahera, which are the final nights.

The Perahera goes on in Kandy for ten nights and a day. The first five nights are known as the Kumbal Perahera. The procession is much smaller on these nights and goes only around the Temple square. But after the fifth night it is the colourful Randoli Perahera. With more elephants, dancers, drummers and chieftains joining each night, until on the final night it is a full three-hour spectacle of unbelievable sight and sound, going on into the night. It concludes with a perahera held during daytime the next day. The Day Perahera, as it is popularly called, can give good photo opportunities and is an interesting contrast with the nightly pageant. But the real splendour of the Perahera is at night, when in the glow of torches Kandy step back into a glorious past.



The caparisoned Maligawa tusker, flanked by two others, carries the casket in the

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torchlit pagaent.
(Gamini Jayasinghe)