The Majestic Stars of the Perahera

Posted on



The majestic tusker Raja from the
Kotte Rajamaha Viharaya

Elephants and tuskers, from near and far, had gathered in Colombo for the city's majestic cultural pageant, the Navam Maha Perahera. Every move the gentle giants made entertained the crowds. It was after all a golden opportunity to see an entire herd of jumbos in the centre of Colombo.

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Kelanie loves to be bathed but also scrubbed and lies on the ground for a good brush up

The vast Stanley Janz Playground in Kompanna Veediya, Colombo transforms into an elephant gathering on full moon day in February every year when a herd of trumpeting elephants storm its field.

The sounds that normally emanate from this playing field, of the ball hitting the bat, of spectators cheering, of children laughing as they glide down the mat slide or climb aboard the mini merry go round in the play area, are all hushed. The jumbos begin to audibly make their presence felt with their siren calls and assert their status.

They were here on invitation, by temple decree and the ground had been especially reserved for them, much in advance. After all they are the crowd pullers, the stars of the great pageant held at night on the streets of Colombo, as it had been held continuously for nearly four decades. They had come to participate in the Navam Maha Perahera of the Gangaramaya Temple in Colombo every year in the month of February.

The jumbos arrive early in the morning, one by one, with their own mahout, each chauffeur driven to the site. They come to the site from near and far. From Kotte, Gampaha, Kegalle, Aluthgama, Kandy, Kelaniya and many other parts of the country. A few years ago most of them had walked the distance. This had been too tiring for both elephant and mahout. But today the Temple has made arrangements so that they come by lorry which is a safer, easier and faster way to reach the capital. Elephants of all sizes – small, medium, large and extra large gather here, while a few even have tusks. For those in Colombo, a visit to the Stanley Janz Playground to meet these gentle giants is a golden opportunity.

On one such visit, I met Gune, an elephant who comes early morning from Kurunegala accompanied by his two mahouts Sarath and Kumara and the wife of one as they have done for many years. They will all come in a lorry. After having the customary bath, he munches his daily diet, which is 300 kilos of fodder and 50 litres of water.

> The Navam Maha Perahera began in 1979, under the helm of Ven Galboda Gnanissara Thero of the Gangaramaya Temple. This year The procession will be on February 28 and March 1

The 24-year-old Sundaree enjoyed her bath tremendously, watered down by her mahout Ramesh. Kelanie, from Kelaniya insisted on going down on the ground – being the pampered girl that she is – and demands not only to be bathed but also to be scrubbed. Amongst the many elephants gathered, were Seedevi – the elder, and Kumari – the younger, who bathe together.



Gal Kiriya, the giant from Kegalle munches on a crunchy meal

At first sight, they appear to be mother and daughter. But, they happen to share the same grassland for leisure and feeding back home in Kithulgala, and as a result have formed a special relationship, which connects them together.

The 32-year-old Gal Kiriya, travels all the way from Kegalle. Now, as his mahout Simon Singho warned, this is a mischief-maker and beneath the demeanour of a friendly nature, he hides a fiery temper and can without notice lash out with his trunk.

The tusker is the undoubted star of the pageant. Raja from the Kotte Rajamaha Viharaya had carried the sacred relic casket of that particular year. When I met the majestic tusker, it was obvious that he considered himself the king of the

pachyderm pack. He well deserves the title bestowed upon himself.

Just as thousand come to see the perahera in the night, so do they come during the day to see the elephants close at hand. It’s not only the children, the adults too enjoy the opportunity to have them eating out their hands. They bring fruits, mangoes, durian, pineapples and most of all, bunches of plantains. The tuskers always get the best and the most for they come before its presence to pay their fruity obeisance to the king that carries the sacred relic casket in the perahera.

At sunset on the day of the Navam Perahera, the elephants were dressed for the grand occasion. Like brides being dressed for the great wedding ceremony, their mahouts begin the meticulous task of adorning the elephants in the most colourful and grandiose designer attire, star-studded to make them sparkle, transforming the jumbos into a startling splendour. First the head and trunk were dressed. Next the two ears, followed by yards and yards of colourful clothing that goes far beyond the whole six yards required for a bridal sari. Later on they walked through narrow lanes, in single file, until they reach the gathering point where they stayed until summoned to the start of the perahera, which begins at the gates of the temple.



The regally adorned majestic elephants, the tusker Indi Raja carried the sacred relics in 2017

In the meantime, the tusker who will bear the sacred relics is dressed in the temple premises. He is decked in a majestic colour. The octagonal frame where the casket containing the sacred relics will be placed is strapped onto his back. The tusker is the cynosure of all eyes as the perahera winds its way around the Beira Lake and returns to the temple shortly after midnight.

Once the Navam Perahera starts, the majestic animals parade the streets. They were at times alone, or often in pairs and serve as fascinating interludes to the parade of troupes of dancers, Hewisi drummers, whip crackers and fire dancers. They journeyed amidst dancers, such as the skilled Ves dancers with their beautiful and traditional head dressers, well trained Pantheru (tambourines) performers twirling their instruments and making a tucking delightful sound as well as

entertainers who walk the entire route on stilts.

The Navam Maha Perahera, which began in 1979, under the helm of Ven Galboda Gnanissara Thero, Chief Incumbent of the Gangaramaya Temple has been an overwhelming success year after year. This year the procession will be on February 28 and March 1.

It is indeed a much anticipated event in the city of Colombo.



