

Universal Goddess

A look at little known Sri Lanka by Carol Aloysius

Photos: Suresh de Silva

*A rare photo of
the statue of the
Goddess Pattini.*



A beautiful goddess of Indian origin, wearing a pair of pearl anklets on her feet draws thousands of devotees and curious visitors to the tiny hamlet of Nawagamuwa, just 16km from Colombo. While the goddess, Pattini, representing chastity, has several shrines throughout the island the one at Nawagamuwa is the main one as well as the oldest. According to legend, the Pattini cult was introduced to Sri Lanka in the 2nd century. AD. by King Gajabahu I. The king.

who reigned from 174 to 196. took an army of Sinhalese soldiers to invade the Cholas in south India after they had taken 12.000 of the king's men as slaves. In India the king was present at the opening of a temple built by the Chola king for the worship of Pattini. He was so impressed with this cult that he built a magnificent temple at Nawagamuwa on his return. He placed a statue of the goddess, wearing her pearl anklets, in the temple, thus inaugurating the cult in this country. The first religious procession in Sri Lanka began in honour of the goddess, on the initiative of King Gajabahu.

Today the Pattini cult is one of Sri Lanka's most prominent. She is worshipped by both Hindus and Buddhists and they seek her help for all kinds of reasons. What is the appeal of this beautiful goddess that makes her so special? As well as the emphasis placed on her chastity she has, perhaps curiously, become the symbol also of motherhood, fertility and abundance. Her devotees seek her help to avoid barrenness, to ensure safe births and to receive protection for their new-born babies. As a symbol of fertility, Pattini is also worshipped by farmers and her help is sought to ward off droughts, famines and infectious diseases in crops, while her blessings are invoked to multiply the harvest. Pattini is also the patroness of mothers and infants. She is the goddess who presides at the first milk feeding ceremony of a new-born child, in the same way that she presides over all rites and rituals connected with agriculture. The name Pattini also means Moon Goddess. She is represented thus in several forms, such as the planets Jupiter and Venus as well as the moon. It was a custom in ancient Sri Lanka (before the fall of the Kandyan kingdom) to look at the new moon and to worship the full moon. This was the practice in the month preceding and following the Sinhala (national) New Year. It was supposed to bring wealth and health to the worshipper. Pattini is also regarded as a goddess who gives special protection to men. She is said to help them be fertile. She thus has universal appeal, and through it has won many devotees. Unlike the formal veneration of most deities, Pattini inspires warm, folksy worship. People call her endearingly Patiini Amma, Mother Pattini.



Fire-walking has been recently revived at Nawagamuwa

The special aura surrounding Pattini has given rise to several legends and invested the goddess at Nawagamuwa with miraculous powers. One concerns a king in India named Seraman. While the king was inhaling the perfume of a lotus flower in a stream, a tiny frog from the flower entered his nostril. The king's attempts to remove it were in vain. In a dream, the king was asked to visit the Pattini shrine at Nawagamuwa. He journeyed to Sri Lanka and made obeisance to the goddess. A few days later the frog came out of his nostril.

The grateful king built nine villages in his kingdom, dedicating them to the goddess and ensuring that offerings were given to her. The grateful king built nine villages in his kingdom, dedicating them to the goddess and ensuring that offerings were given to her. The devale shrine at Nawagamuwa has suffered extensive damage and was actually razed to the ground by the Portuguese in the 16th century. The statue, with its pearl anklets, fortuitously disappeared only to be found later and reinstalled when the temple was rebuilt. The cult of the universal goddess Pattini, has recently been given a fillip with the revival of fire-walking ceremonies and other rituals by devotees. These include the apparently magical boiling of water and attract many people to the area. In addition, Nawagamuwa itself has seen a reawakening under a government redevelopment scheme with the result that this little known corner of Sri Lanka is becoming a fascinating place to visit.

