

Ushering in the rains

Posted on



Since time immemorial, the inhabitants of this island have had a lifestyle based on agriculture. Hence appeals to Rain Gods to bring in timely rains were not uncommon in the past, and even today, they still continue in various forms. The annual Esala Perahera (pageant) of the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy has been called a celebration of lights, colours, sounds and beats; a parade that showcases our rich culture and of course a spectacle in veneration of the Sacred Tooth Relic of Lord Buddha. Yet, it is also a ritual to invoke the powers of the Tooth Relic, and a plea addressed to the Gods in the skies up above, for rain...

Words Thilini Kahandawaarachchi

When you hear the thrash- ing of thunder you know that the rains would follow soon. Similarly, at the first sound of the whips cracking, almost imitating the crack of thunder, you might even look up at the sky to see if it was actually thunder, unless you knew better; the Perahera is approaching.

Thunder does not come on its own; it is always associated with bolts of lightning. The men who carry the flaming torches illuminate the pageant, like flashes of lightning, a prelude to the rains.

In the 3rd Century when Princess Hemamala and Prince Dantha, brought the Sacred Tooth Relic of Lord Buddha to this country, the elated King Kithsirimevan enshrined it in a specially built shrine and ordered an annual procession in its honour. Since that time, the Sacred Tooth Relic has always held highest importance, religiously, politically and socially. It was believed that whoever held possession of the Relic had the divine right to rule this land, and people accepted such a person as their ruler.

In ancient agriculture based Sri Lanka, the main duty of the king was to ensure that the rains arrived on time, so that the peasants had sufficient water to engage in their agricultural work, which in turn was the path to a prosperous country. From

the times of the kings it was believed that the Sacred Tooth Relic had the power to bring in rains. Thus, our kings believed that by performing religious rites and venerating the Sacred Tooth Relic it was possible to ensure that the rains fell when they were needed. It was the main expectation of the peasants from their king. Being well aware of this Dancers moving to the beats of the drums expectation of the people, during the Anuradhapura period, it was laid down in a stone inscription that the processions in veneration of the Tooth Relic should be conducted by all the kings to follow.

History records of various instances when there were droughts and the parading of the Sacred Tooth Relic resulted in rains. During the reign of King Parakramabahu I, a pageant is said to have been held during the drought to bring in rains. It had actually resulted in such a torrential rain that it filled the dried up tanks. Similarly during the British rule there had been a dry spell. On the recommendation of the Kandyan chieftains the Tooth Relic had been taken in procession. It is said that the heavy rains that followed flooded the low-lying areas around Kandy and of course amazed the foreign rulers of the powers of the Sacred Tooth Relic.

Following the traditions of the kings, every year the Esala Perahera parades the streets of Kandy, that have been sanctified by sprinkling turmeric water. Hundreds of flag bearers slowly step in carrying colourful Buddhist flags. Many dozens of elaborately adorned elephants stride in all their glory. The first majestic being bears the Peramune Rala, an officer carrying a casket containing what is known as Lekam Mitiya. Gajanayaka Nilame, the person in charge of the elephants of the Temple follows on the second elephant. An elaborately decorated elephant accompanied by two more elephants carries the golden casket containing the Sacred Tooth Relic. Men sing praise of the Relic and the many dancers both young and old, some belonging to families of dancers who have customarily performed at the Perahera, move in perfect synchronisation to the beats of the drums, flutes and cymbals. Be it song or dance, all of these are various forms of veneration of the Sacred Tooth Relic.

The Diyawadana Nilame follows the elephant that carries the casket. “Diyawadana Nilame” which literally translates to the officer who ushers in water, is the chief lay custodian of the Sacred Tooth Relic, and he is responsible for ensuring the performance of the rituals related to it. Though in ancient times he was appointed by the king, most of the duties performed by the present Diyawadana Nilame were laid down during British rule.

Over the centuries, the pageants of the four shrines Natha, Vishnu, Kataragama and Pattini have also been added to the Dalada Perahera. They are held in respect of these deities.

Even today, when the Tooth Relic is brought out there is at least a drizzle. If you are in Kandy during this Perahera season, don't be surprised if there is a shower, or even a heavy downpour, it may be the divine blessings of the Sacred Tooth Relic, the rainmaker.

Photo courtesy: Mahesh Bandara and Sri Dalada Maligawa Media Bureau