Vesak: The Buddhist Festival of Lights

Posted on



There was dancing, singing and garlands of coloured lamps in Colombo–the country was celebrating the Vesak festival. The garlands of multicoloured lamps and graceful lanterns cut out of cardboard showed the inexhaustible imagination of the craftsmen . . . I see the huge colourful pandals with the images of the Buddha and the contagious merriment of the young people in the streets…

That was how the Vesak Festival impressed Mr. Vladimir Yakovlov, the first Soviet Ambassador to Sri Lanka in 1957. He described the festival as something that impressed itself on his memory and “remained for life”. Many more like him from East and West alike have carried away pleasant memories of Vesak, Sri Lanka’s premier Buddhist festival, which commemorates the triple events of the birth, enlightenment and passing away of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, more than 2500 years ago.

The dancing and singing in Colombo, and the garlands of coloured lamps described here, are not those of a carnival, but aspects of one of the most deeply religious

festivals in all of Asia. The dancing is by the young sightseers who walk the brightly lit streets in the full moon night in May, making their way from one giant illumination to another. The singing is mainly by young people who join in groups to sing ” Bhakthi Gee “, devotional songs, in praise of the virtues of the Buddha and give lyrical expression of the teachings of the Buddha.

Buddhism, one of the oldest of living religions, had its origin in the 6th Century B.C., in India’s Ganges Valley. According to history and Buddhist tradition, its founder, the Sakya Prince Siddhartha Gautama, left his kingdom and family while still young, to seek the causes for the suffering prevalent in the inescapable cycle of birth, decay and death which all beings are subject to. The prince who became an ascetic and mendicant spent six years in his search for the truth.

He probed the existing philosophies of India to their depths, and subjected himself to extreme rigours of asceticism. Tradition holds it that he found the answers to his search on a full moon day in May, similar to the day he was born on. Enlightenment came to him as he was meditating seated under a peepul tree (Ficus religiosa), and then preached his philosophy built on uncompromising reason, and a ccx.ie of ethics espousing unsurpassed compassion and gentleness towards all.

For Sri Lankan Buddhists, Vesak has another major significance too. While it is believed that the Buddha passed away on the full moon day in May, it is the Sri Lankan tradition as laid down the ancient chronicles of the country that Prince Vijaya, the first Sinhalese settler, also arrived here from North India on the same day. In fact, the dying Buddha is believed to have said that his teachings should be preserved for 5,000 years in Sri Lanka.

Vesak, therefore, while celebrating the three major events in the life of the Buddha, also marks the anniversary of the founding of the Sinhalese race, Sri Lanka’s majority community On this eventful day. rich and poor alike participate in the mood of festivity. From dawn, when temple bells announce the festival, thousands of Buddhist devotees throng the many thousand Buddhist temples on the island. The are clad in white signifying purity of mind, and carry with them trays of fresh fragrant flowers to offer at the feet of the Buddha. Many of them also carry joss-sticks or incense sticks to be lit in the shrine rooms and bottles of coconut oil with which to fuel the brass and clay lamps in the temple.

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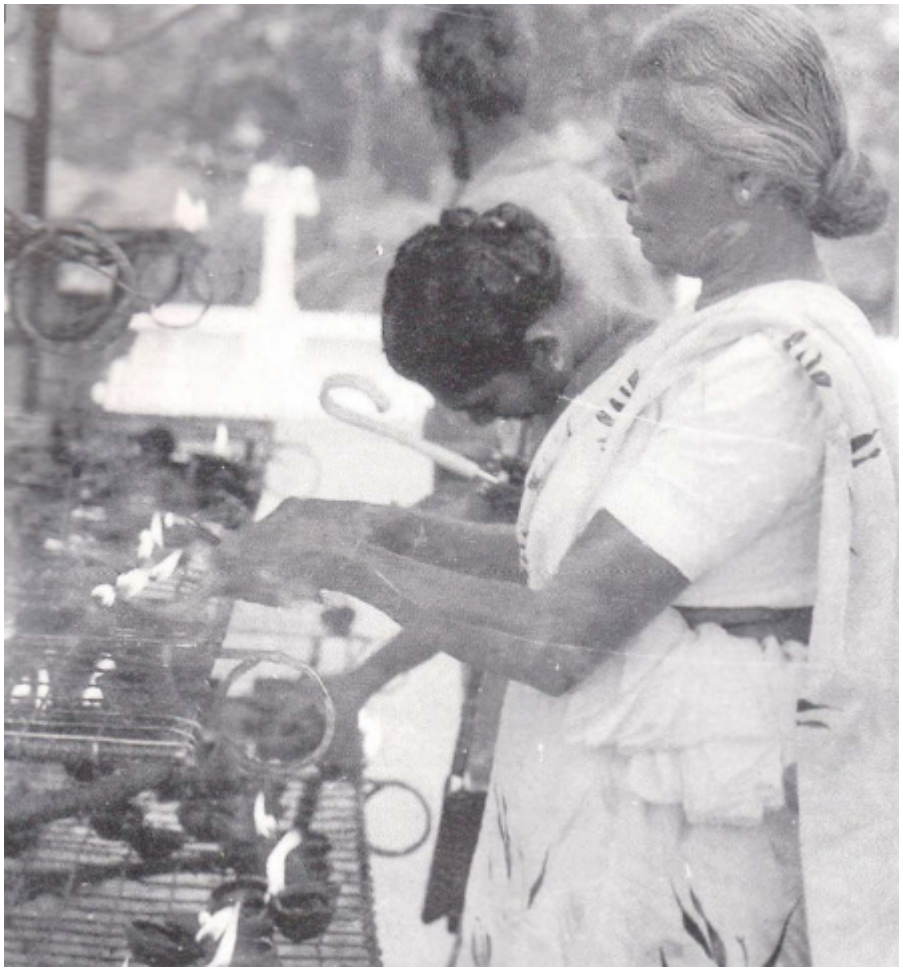
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Outside the shrine room they pay homage to the peepul or bodhi tree which is always part of a temple, in thanksgiving for the shelter it gave the Buddha at the time of his meditation. Prayer flags are hung on the branches of the tree, and it is also customary for many Buddhists to make symbolic offerings of rice, freshly cooked vegetables and fruits to the Buddha.

The religious observances over, the celebration of Vesak begins at dusk, when the dust of the day settles down, and the full moon sheds its gentle glow on the land. Every household, from the smallest to the largest, even the homes of non-Buddhists in many areas. are illuminated with myriad lights. The lights of Vesak signify the Buddha's success in dispelling the darkness of ignorance. The lights are in many forms. They range from the little flicker of flames from clay lamp- that burn coconut oil to the paper and bamboo lanterns- better known as "Vesak lanterns", to a variety of forms of illumination using electric jets. It is the Vesak lantern which is synonymous with Vesak illumination. They are usually octagonal shapes, with a mother lantern carrying from four to sixteen little kid lanterns around it. Depending on the skill and imagination of the makers, the shapes and designs can form that of lotus blossoms to the shapes of modern aircraft and space vehicles.



Devotees light lamps at a shrine on Vesak day. (Suresh de Silva)

A great public attraction are the giant lanterns, some more than eighty feet tall and half that in circumference. These comprise huge lanterns made of paper and bamboo, with sometimes more than a hundred clusters of smaller lanterns around a giant mother creation. The large panels on the sides of the lanterns are used to depict pictures and paintings of Buddhist stories. The making of these lanterns takes several months, and it is not unusual to see young men start on them from as early as end-March in any year. These giant lanterns are on display for at least two weeks after the Vesak full moon and draw thousands of sightseers each night.

Another special feature of Vesak illumination are the “pandals”. These are large, lit-up screens with several panels depicting Buddhist stories. One panda! is generally devoted to one story. The more popular are the Jataka’ stories or the tales of the

previous incarnations of the Buddha. There are more than 500 such stories in Buddhist lore, giving a wealth of material for the artists who are skilled in painting these larger than life panels. The Vesak pandals are the biggest public draw of the two nights of the festival. People come from distant towns and villages to see them, and follow the story as described over the public address system. Special buses operate to the pandals that draw the largest crowds, and the State buses run a special panda! service during the Vesak nights.

The streets of Colombo and the larger towns become parts of a constantly changing tableau of activity during the nights ofVesak. Puppeteers display their skills at some street junctions, and amateur dramatists present wayside theatricals at other places. At some key points in the city there will be popular musical groups giving special performances of local pop. Music from electronic synthesizers will mingle with the sound of the sitar and drums in some places, and white-clad singers of devotional songs will hold up traffic as they arrive in their special decorated floats.

The thousands upon thousands who will be going from place to place, viewing one decoration after another. will never go hungry or thirsty. They will be pampered with invitations to enjoy a coloured fruit drink or the refreshing juice of a young coconut from volunteers who have set up “dansalas” or alms halls. If you are in the mood for a meal of rice and vegetables, it will be difficult to resist the invitations of the larger “dansalas” that offer just this, for free, and shared merit.