

Avurudu and Bak Poya: National Festival of Sun and Moon

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Bak Poya is very important due to a number of significant events in the life of the Buddha. After attaining Enlightenment at the age of 35, the Buddha's intention was to travel from place to place and preach the Dhamma, and help people to be free from suffering. He was born not for a particular community, but for the sake of mankind— for all people irrespective of their race, caste, religion, and creed. He was a great teacher who showed the right path.

The Buddha visited Sri Lanka on three occasions - Mahiyanganaya, Nagadeepa and Kelaniya. Buddha's second visit was on the Bak Full Moon Day, and it was during the fifth year of his Enlightenment. The Buddha saw with his divine eye that a dispute had arisen between two Naga kings Chulodara and Mahodara. *Mahavamsa* says, Mahodara was a king in Nagadeepa. His younger sister Thirachchika was married to a Naga king. Chulodara was their offspring. Thirachchika's father gifted her a gem-studded throne prior to his death.

To settle the dispute between Chulodara and Mahodara who were uncle and nephew, the Buddha appeared in the sky under the shade of a Kiripalu tree. They were fighting over the ownership of the gem-studded throne. Today, Nagadeepa which is 30 kilometres from Jaffna has become a commonplace of worship for devotees of all religions. Buddhist pilgrims visit Nagadeepa and Hindus too visit the Kovil in the vicinity. Chulodara and Mahodara built Nagadeepa Stupa which stands magnificently even today at Nagadeepa. Nagadeepa Purana Rajamaha Viharaya stands at the very site where the Buddha sermonised his message of peace. This Viharaya has two shrine rooms constructed in the traditional Jaffna architectural style. One of the shrines houses a bronze Buddha statue gifted by the Burmese Government, while the ancient Bodhi Tree nearby spreads its branches in every direction. To protect from the salty sea breeze, the Stupa is painted in silver colour.

‘Sun God’

The hymns that go with the swing, *onchili varam*, they plead favour from Sun and Moon; 2022 Bak full moon Poya falls on the National festive week of Sinhala/Hindu New Year.

Saranai saranai Irudevi saranaayi — Saranai saranai Sandadevi saranaayi

Is the worship of the Sun God by ancient Sinhala Buddhists is unimpressive and weak? Is it only a borrowing from Hinduism? There is evidence that the Sinhala Buddhists paid homage to Sun and Moon from medieval times. The worship of the Sun was widespread then; even today, some in villages look upon Sun as a protector saviour. However, in the absence of any research undertaken by anybody, it is difficult to dispute or accept either of the views expressed by them on the extent of the presence of factional practices in folklife in relation to the Sun and the Moon.

My nostalgic memories of trekking Sripada in the mid-20th century, as a child are vivid. I remember the ordinary Sinhala Buddhist folk scale the strenuous final lap called Mahagirid-



ambe, shivering in the cold and rain, and they remained there at the peak for hours for the popularly known phenomenon, *Irasevaya* and paying respect to the Sun. Solar and Moon worship was one of the earliest religions of man. In any civilised society, at some stage in history, they possessed to a certain degree the worship of the Sun and the Moon.

According to *Diga Nikhaya*, Sun God was present at the preaching of *Mahasamaya Sutta*, and in *Sammyukta Nikhaya*, both Sun and Moon ‘Gods’ made pleas to the Buddha asking for protection from *Rahu*.

“The Sun and the Moon have a place in the fertility festivals, dances, amusement and other activities of a folk character of the Sinhalese. The Sun and the Moon were also regarded as objects of veneration among the ancient Sinhalese before the arrival of Buddhism; and since then was pushed to the background, began to hold a distinct place in their folk practices which have come down to the present times. The lunar and solar representations in Sinhalese art may, therefore, be better regarded as folk symbols rather than Buddhist symbols. – Professor V. Vitharana – *Sun and Moon in Sinhala Culture:1993*

Another significant event is the sighting of the moon, *Sanda beleema*, on the very next day that follows oil anointing. The moon, irrespective of its phase, emerges to have been held in a high degree of cleanliness and honour

by the Sinhalese in the past. But the Bak Full Moon seems to have possessed special importance.

‘Nava bag lasanddut - minisak – hunovajannevi’ -Sigirigraffiti as translated by Professor S. Paranawithana, means,

‘A man who has seen the tender Moon of Bak, should not be rejected’

Among the societal traditions of our people,

the Sun and Moon acquire a place of distinction; however, the larger likelihood is that these symbols had added value among Sinhalese during the pre-Buddhist times itself, when as in many other communities, prior to the institution of proper religion. Particularly, almost all the conventional civilisations of the region, including our giant neighbour, they do not appear to have signified in a lasting medi-



um, the solar and lunar ‘deities’ with human form or attributes; but only limited them to symbolic illustrations.

Freedom and Final Goal

How to free ourselves from the bonds of life? Give up all thoughts about yourself; start as if you knew nothing, and begin to understand yourself for the first time. We have to investigate ourselves – not someone explaining while we listen, agreeing or disagreeing, but taking a journey of detection into the deepest corners of our minds. And to take such an expedition, we cannot be burdened with opinions, prejudices, and conclusions - all that we have collected over the eons.

We can be free and learn from the moment we are born to the moment we die, our minds are shaped by a particular society in the narrow pattern of the ‘I’, ‘me’ and ‘mine’? We have been trained for centuries by nationality, religion, caste, custom, language, class, tradition, education, literature, art, convention and propaganda.

The pressures, the climate we live in, the food we eat, our family, our friends, our experiences - and therefore, our responses and reactions to every problem are conditioned. We will never be free of it, and if we think, ‘I must be free of it’, you will fall into another form of conditioning. Even when you look at a tree and say, ‘That is a mango tree’, or ‘that is a jak tree’, the naming of the tree, which is knowledge, it has so conditioned you that the word comes between you and actually observing the tree.

If we say we do, then we have to understand the character and structure of freedom. Is it freedom when you are free from pain, free from anxiety? Or is freedom itself something completely different? You can be free from envy, and resentment says, but isn’t that freedom a response and therefore not freedom at all?

All youth, are in revolt against the world, but revolt is not freedom because when you revolt it is a reaction and that response sets up its own pattern and you get trapped in that pattern. You can effortlessly put that away. Or you may counter against some religious or political leader who has guaranteed you freedom as a result of restraint or revolt. But has such rationalism, such commonsense conclusion anything to do with liberty? You think it is something novel, but it is the old in a different mould. Any societal or political rebellion will inevitably slip back to the good old bourgeois frame of mind.

If you say you are free from something, it is a rejoinder which will then become another reaction which will bring about another conventionality, another form of authority. In this way, you can have a chain of responses and accept each reaction as independence. But it is not freedom; it is merely a link of a modified history which the mind adheres to.

May all beings be happy!
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