

DRUMS OF DEVOTION

Colombo's dazzling Gangaramaya Navam Maha Perahera celebrates community spirit

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Gangaramaya Maha Viharaya, situated in the heart of Colombo, has served a preeminent role in society, memories of which will be evoked in any reader. On the one hand the Navam Maha Perahera and the 'Buddha Rashmi Vesak Zone' provide an opportunity for the communities to unite in celebration. On the other hand, the Jinarathana Technical College and the Kataragama Retirement Hall offer continuous service to society. The strength behind these accomplishments is the Chief Incumbent of the Gangaramaya Maha Viharaya, Venerable Galboda Sri Gnanissara Maha Thera, who is fondly known among the lay followers as Podi Hamuduruwo. Moreover, the support given by the community of monks led by the Deputy Incumbent of the Gangaramaya Maha Viharaya, Ven. Dr. Kirinde Assaji Thera has tremendously facilitated its journey to success.

The student monks' continuous commitment with the Podi Hamuduruwo's blessing has led to numerous achievements. Among these achievements were the launch of the Haritha TV channel, promoting self-sufficiency through agriculture that Podi Hamuduruwo had constantly envisaged for the betterment of society, and the declaration of the Gangaramaya Maha Viharaya as a place of worship by President Ranil Wickramasinghe. As such, Gangaramaya has shown excellence in achieving various goals.

At present, Gangaramaya Maha Vihara is preparing for the city of Colombo and the entire Island, with the cultural festival Navam Maha Perahera bringing splendour, majesty, and enchantment. The Navam Maha Perahera has become an iconic symbol of Sri Lanka, revered by countless locals and foreigners worldwide. It is also one of the main reasons for the more significant influx of visitors during February, becoming one of the main Perahera festivals attracting tourists to Sri Lanka. It has become a cultural festival cherished by many foreign visitors over the past decades.

Grand scale

It gives great pleasure to witness the ability of the Nawam Maha Perahera to revive and celebrate the strength and pride of Sri Lankan heritage. Amid a severe economic crisis, it is an enormous challenge to hold a procession on a grand scale. However, by overcoming all such adversities, Ven. Dr. Kirinde Assaji Thera, with the aid of the community of resident monks and lay devotees, has successfully organised the upcoming Nawam Maha Perahera.

Considering the history related to Buddhist processions, it is thought to extend as far back as the era of the Buddha. Although it had been a cultural element even before the birth of the Buddha, it gained greater significance following the connection with Buddhism.

According to the Buddhist chronicles, Queen Maha Maya left Kapilavatthu, heading towards her parents' home in Devdaha, in a beautiful procession for the birth of Prince Siddhartha Gautama. The route was adorned with magnificent flags. A large entourage had travelled along with the queen to perform various tasks, such as reciting songs of blessings. It is said that the Bodhisatta was born in the course of the journey to Kapilavatthu at the Sala Grove of Lumbini.

Furthermore, subsequent to the Tathagata Parinirvana, many devotees, including housholds of both the Royals and the Brahmins, attended to pay homage by making offerings for seven days. On the seventh day, the body of the Buddha was wrapped in alternating layers of five hundred pieces, each of new cloth and cotton wool, and finally placed in a casket anointed with fragrant oil. A procession was held, and with due honour, the body of Buddha was cremated within a scented pyre.



Venerable Galboda Sri Gnanissara Maha Thera

During the reign of King Dhammasoka, the devotees held processions based on Buddhist religious rituals in the sacred sites of Pataliputra, Isipatana, Lumbini, Sanchi, and Kusinara.

The concept of Perahera, with its connection to Buddhism, is believed to have emerged within Sri Lankan culture following the arrival of Arahant Mahinda. Mahavamsa records that the sacred collarbone relic of the Buddha was carried in a procession for the relic enshrinement ceremony in the Thuparamaya stupa. It has been recorded in history that the sapling from the sacred Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi tree, which was brought to Sri Lanka by Sanghamitta Therini, was taken in a grand procession from Dambakola Patuna to Anuradhapura, in which the entire route had been beautifully decorated with flags. Moreover, the Dalada Perahera is believed to have begun as a form of offering of homage when the sacred Tooth relic of the Buddha was brought to Sri Lanka. There are historical records indicating that the sacred tooth relic received royal patronage. Even to date, it is customary to perform the rituals and processions connected with the Tooth Relic.

Homage

Accordingly, a procession can be considered a supreme form of offering deeply ingrained in Buddhist devotees' minds since the Buddha's era. A Buddhist procession is not merely an elegant display highlighting colourful cultural elements. It is an act of worship based on a series of Buddhist events. A comparable basic core is connected to every procession performed in the temples of Sri Lanka.

At the core of the Nawam Maha Perahera of Gangaramaya, which is held annually, lies the offering of homage to the noble Triple Gem, the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. Furthermore, the bestowal of the titles of chief disciples to both Sariputta Thera and Moggallana Thera is also commemorated through the Navam Maha Perahera. Hence, regardless of consistently being referred to as the great cultural festival and the colourful procession of Colombo, it is worth thinking about it as an offering to the noble triple gem, highlighting the essence and purpose of Buddhism.

Since the beginning, Gangaramaya Maha Viharaya has been committed to conducting the Nawam Maha Perahera in the grandest manner. Podi Hamuduruwo intended to fulfil multiple functions with the aid of the Nawam Maha Perahera. According to Podi Hamuduruwo, the unique crafts of the performers can be preserved for generations only by conducting the processions. Those observing the way in which a procession is organised will be encouraged to be committed to maintaining and continuing to preserve these crafts for future generations. Thus, the practicality of each event organised by Podi Hamuduruwo can be clearly understood upon deep examination of the underlying purpose.



The recent history of the Navam Maha Perahera is also worth a brief note. The first procession of the Gangaramaya Temple was instituted in the month of Esala to commemorate the first sermon of the Buddha by the Most Venerable Devundara Sri Vachissara Thera, who was the Chief Incumbent of the Gangaramaya Temple at the time. However, the Perahera festival had to be put on hold due to the sudden ailment inflicted upon Ven. Vachissara Thera and due to the fact that his students were not old enough to take charge of the activities at the temple.

At the tender age of 16, Podi Hamuduruwo accepted the duty of managing the Gangaramaya Maha Viharaya. Leadership qualities, a responsible attitude, and a great personality were inherent characteristics possessed by Podi Hamuduruwo from a much younger age. Within a short period, Podi Hamuduruwo built a good rapport with his superior, Ven Vachissara Thera, and the lay devotees.

Since then, Podi Hamuduruwo has secured Gangaramaya Maha Viharaya from any downfall and brought it into its current prestigious state.

Elephants

As recollected by Podi Hamuduruwo, if the largest number of elephants in Sri Lanka had ever travelled together in any particular procession, it would have been in the Gangaramaya Navam Maha Perahera. At one procession held in the past, 189 elephants had been included. Gangaramaya Temple has also possessed some valuable elephants and tuskers such as Navam Raja. The tuskers Nedungamuwa Raja and Navam Raja, who were casket bearers at the Temple of the Tooth Relic, were gifted to Sri Lanka at the same time. Although both elephants are no longer alive, the services they rendered for the Perahera culture in this country are invaluable.

Gangaramaya Navam Perahera is a spectacular festival consisting of a variety of traditional performances. It comprises upcountry, low country, and Sabaragamuwa dance and drumming styles and several unique elements that would not be seen in any other perahera procession, exquisitely portraying the magnificence and excellence of local art and craftsmanship. Another special component is the long line of Maha Sangha parading in the Navam Maha Perahera.

With the full blessings of the Venerable Galboda Sri Gnanissara Maha Thera, the community of monks led by the Deputy Incumbent of the Gangaramaya Maha Viharaya, Ven Dr. Kirinde Assaji Thera, the Gangaramaya Dayaka Sabha presided over by Ranjith Wijewardene, along with foreign and local philanthropists and several government and private institutions, have contributed to making the Nawam Maha Perahera a great success.

Gangaramaya Navam Maha Perahera, an illustrious procession depicting Sri Lankan heritage, will be held on February 23 and 24.

(Translated by Pooja Ranasinghe)

