

The Grand Kandy Esala Perahera



The Kandy Esala Perahera, is a spectacular historic pageant held in Kandy during the month of August in honour of the Dalada, the Sacred Tooth Relic of the Buddha. Since then this procession has honoured the Sacred Relic and through centuries it has grown in splendour, with more colour, pageantry and beauty. It is generally believed that the Kandy Esala Perahera is the fusion of two separate but interconnected peraheras – the *Dalada* and the *Esala*. The Dalada Perahera is believed to have begun when the Sacred Tooth Relic was brought to Sri Lanka from India during the 4th Century AD. The Esala Perahera is thought to be a ritual dating back to the 3rd Century BC to request the gods for rainfall. The Kandy Esala Perahera started during the reign of Kirthi Sri Rajasingha (1747-1781).

Apart from honouring the Buddha, the procession also celebrates the four colourful guardian deities: *Natha*, *Vishnu*, *Kataragama* and *Pattini*. The perahera begins with the Kap Situweema, when a sanctified young jackfruit tree is cut and planted in the shrines of each god.

Of the ten days of parading, the first five days are called *Kumbal Perahera*, with only a quarter of the glamour of the *Randoli Perahera*. During this procession, there are fewer musicians and the elephants are not caparisoned. The *Randoli Perahera* parades during the last five days and on the fifth day, the *Maha Randoli*, is the grandest of all.

The streets throng with crowds as darkness falls, jostling for a space to witness one of the most spectacular processions in the world.

The firing of cannonballs announces the beginning of the perahera, which involves many intricate traditions. The 'path breakers' who announce the parade are the whip crackers and fireball acrobats. They pave way for the flag bearers. Then comes the *Peramune Raala* seen riding on an elephant. He is the 'front runner', and carries hefty ola- leaf tomes

Source: 'Heritage of Kandy', Graphic: Mahil Wijesinghe

that describe all the offerings that should be made to the Sacred Tooth Relic and the duties that should be performed by those who have been given land belonging to the Temple of the Tooth.

Then come the Kandyan drummers and dancers, in glittering silver, red and white, swirling and moving to fevered rhythm. Elephants in a bejewelled razzle-dazzle of caparisons follow with groups of performers, dancers and flag bearers.

A group of solemn singers dressed in white herald the crowning, monumental feature of the perahera: the *Maligawa* tusker, parades slowly, majestically, with the golden casket containing the Tooth Relic, on his back.

The *Diyawadene Nilame*, the chief lay custodian of the *Dalada Maligawa*, walks dressed in elaborate, glittering Kandyan attire. After this come the processions of the four deities. In god Kataragama's procession, a special feature is the kavadi or peacock arch dancers. The last procession is that of Pattini. Being a goddess, her procession is the only one to feature female dancers.

On the last night the Perahera does not finish at the Temple of the Tooth, but at the *Asgiriya Gedige Raja Maha Vihara*. Early morning after the final *Randoli Perahera*, the four devale *Kapuralas* perform the water-cutting ceremony. The next afternoon a day Perahera starts from the *Dalada Maligawa* and collects the relic casket and returns to the *Dalada Maligawa*, where the casket is kept until the following year.



KANDYAN DANCE

The Kandyan dance encompasses various dance forms popular and native to Kandy which have today spread to other parts of the country. It is an example and considered a masterpiece and a sacred artwork in Sri Lanka. According to the legend the origin of the dance lies in a dance ritual known as the *Kohomba kankariya*. It was originally performed by dancers who were identified as a separate caste under the Kandyan feudal system. They were aligned to the Temple of the Tooth and had a significant role to play in the *Dalada Perahera*.



MUSIC

The Kandyan Dance is traditionally performed to percussion only. The most common drum is the *Geta Beraya*, which is only used in Kandyan Dance. To assist the dancer to keep rhythm a small pair of cymbals known as the *Thalampota* is also used. Another form of twin drums called the *Thammattama* are used with cane drum sticks.