

THE PROCESSION OF ESALA DURING THE BRITISH COLONIAL ERA

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Introduction

The procession which is not an innovative concept introduced by Buddhism existed in the pre-Buddhist era. For instance, Queen Mahāmāya, the mother of prince Siddhārtha wanted to see her parents. King Suddhodana arranged the procession from the city of Kapilavastu to Devdaha. When Buddhism appeared in the society, Buddhist approach has been given to it.

The term ‘perahera’ was derived from the Pāli term ‘parihāra’ which means honour or a group of gathering.¹ Today it means walking one after another or walking in a line. The Mahāvamsa, the Great Chronicle of Ceylon, shows evidence in this regard. King Vijaya consecrated the daughter of King Pandu accompanied in a great procession.² Another procession was organized by king Devānampiyatissa when the sacred Bodhi-tree was brought to Sri Lanka.³ However, procession has become a special traditional function in modern Sri Lanka.

The main purpose of procession is to get rain in proper time. Economic development in Sri Lanka, being an agricultural country depends on water which comes naturally through rain. Hence, the role of rain is very high. The ceremony of Water Cutting (Diya kapima), the last part of the procession symbolizes the relationship between the procession and water. The other purposes of procession are to show the power and prowess of the king through the procession and to serve a religious purpose like carrying sacred Relic casket. It enhances the faith of devotees who come to watch the procession. Thus, it eventually becomes part of culture.

Keywords: *British Colonial Era. Procession, influence, Temple of Tooth Relics. Tooth Relic*

Objective

The objective of this study is to show the influences made by the British Colonial Era on the procession of Esala. After the great rebellion of up-country in 1818, the procession stopped for ten years. The beginning of the procession in British Colonial Era was very attractive and well organized. It was held in 1828 under the patronage of the British Government. These incidents illustrate both positive and negative influences on the procession.

Methodology

A comparative method is applied using primary and secondary sources for further clarification and observation of the procession.

Discussion

1 Sri Sumangala Dictionary, 1963, P.601.

2 Mahāvamsa, 7th Chapter, 72nd Stanza.

3 Ibid, 19th Chapter, 24th-39th Stanza.

History of the Procession of Tooth Relic

According to the Mahāvamsa, 900,000 kahapanas (a great sum of money) were spent on the celebration of the festival in honour of the Sacred Tooth Relics under the patronage of King Kithsiri Meghavarna. He further announced that the Relics should be taken round the city of Anuradhapura once a year.⁴ The Chinese traveler Ven. Fa-Hien confirms this evidence in his records.

In the kingdom of Polonnaruwa under the patronage of king Parakramabāhu I, the procession was well organized.⁵ In the kingdom of Dambadeniya, king Parakramabāhu II organized the procession under his patronage. It is also mentioned in the Mahāvamsa.⁶ Even though the sacred Tooth Relics was deposited in the kingdom of Yapahuva, no any chronicle evidence on the procession can be found.

In the kingdom of Kurunegala, processions were held and the chronicles explain little evidence on this procession. But the Daladā Sirita⁷ proves a great deal of evidence on processions in Kurunegala. Any acceptable evidence on processions in Kurunegala and Kandy cannot be found.

King Wimaladharmasuriya who defeated the Portuguese and built a Sinhala kingdom in Kandy in 1590⁸ brought the sacred Tooth Relics, but held procession in honour of four Hindu Gods. King Kirthi Sri Rajasinghe became pioneer of the revival of Buddhism. He was instructed by most Ven. Walivita Saranankara and procession was converted as honouring of sacred Tooth Relics instead of gods.⁹ The aspect of procession was also changed. The first part was the procession of sacred Tooth Relics (Daladā Perahera). Hereafter there were the processions of four gods (Devala Perahera). According to the Mahāvamsa, this procession is interpreted as the most dignified procession.

The most ancient historical report on the procession is included in the book called “An Historical Relation of the Island of Ceylon”¹⁰ written by Robert Knox in 1681. Procession during that time, according to his explanations, was conducted in homage of four Hindu Gods.

The Procession during the British Colonial Era

The great rebellion of 1818, the third Kandyan war with British, took place in Kandy against the British Colonial Government. After the rebellion, procession was stopped for ten years. This is the negative influence. With the request of Buddhist leaders and aristocracies, the Governor gave permission to organize the special function of the sacred Tooth Relics on 29th of May in 1828 under the patronage of British Government.

There were three pavilions to watch the procession. The biggest pavilion is for monks. The second one is for the Governor and the English Officials. The third one is for the aristocracies. The pavilions were well decorated by using curtain and arcade. Fifty three gateways were constructed in the city. Whole city was decorated under the order of the government. Another

⁴ Ibid, 37th Chapter, 97th Stanza.

⁵ Mahāvamsa - 72nd Chapter, 199th-207th Stanza.

⁶ do- 83rd Chapter, from 4th Stanza.

⁷ Dalanda Sirita, Colombo, 1970, P.50-53.

⁸ Saranankara Sangharaja Samaya, Ven. Wacissara, Kotagama, Colombo, 1960, P.9.

⁹ Mahāvamsa, 97th Chapter, from 54th Stanza.

¹⁰ Knox, Robert, 1681, P.78-79.

procession was arranged for the Governor to come to the Temple of Tooth Relics. The Governor was the person who brought the casket of Sacred Tooth Relics from the temple on the Maligawa Elephant. The casket was placed inside the Ransivige (a dome-like structure) affixed on the back of the Elephant. Then the Governor came to the pavilion and commanded to start the procession.¹¹ The other special thing is participation of the Buddhist monks in the procession. Some commentators mention that this is the best and the well-organized procession. This explanation helps to identify how procession was organized in 1828. This is the positive influence made by the British Colonial Government.

Conclusion

The influences made by the British Colonial Government have both positive and negative effects.

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¹¹ Peris Ralf, *Sinhala Samaja Sanvidhana,* Colombo, 1964, 131-138 p.