

# Giribhaṇḍa Pūjā

— V. VITHARANA

Of the several festivals of Sri Lanka referred to in the *Mahāvamsa* the Giribhaṇḍa Pūjā performed by King Mahādāṭhika Māhā Nāga (7-19 A.D.) is the best described. The translation of a few of these verses devoted to the description is worthy of being quoted here :

‘When he had made ready around the Cetiya-mountain a (tract of land measuring a) yojana, and had made four gateways and a beautiful road about (the mountain), and when he had then set up (traders’) shops (*āpana*) on both sides of the road and had adorned (the road) here and there with flags, arches and triumphal gates (*dhajagghikatoraṇa*), and had illuminated all with chains of lamps (*dīpamālā*), he commanded mimic dances, songs and music (*naṭanaccāni gītāni vāditāni*). That the people might go with clean feet on the road from the Kadamba river to the Cetiya-mountain he had it laid with carpets (*attharaṇa*) — the gods themselves might hold a festival assembly (*samajja*) there with dance and music — and he gave great largess (*mahādānaṃ*) at the four gates of the capital. Over the whole island he put up chains of lamps without a break, and over the waters of the ocean within a distance of a yojana around. At the festival of (consecrating of) the cetiya these beautiful offerings were appointed by him: the splendid feast is called here (in the country) the great Giribhaṇḍa-offering.

‘When the lord of the earth had commanded alms-giving in eight places to the bhikkhus who were coming together in the festal assembly (*pūjāsamaṅgama*) he, with the beating of the eight golden drums that were set up even there, allotted lavish gifts to twenty-four thousand (bhikkhus). He distributed the six garments, commanded the remission of the prison penalties (*bandhamokkhaṃ*) and he ordered the barbers (*nahāpita*) to carry on their trade continually at the four gates’ (XXXIV. 75-84).

The Pūjāvaliya - a thirteenth century Sinhala prose work, elaborates on the performance on ‘the waters of the ocean’<sup>1</sup>: *muhudu piṭa yodanak tān yatā horu anavakāsa koṭa tabā horu piṭa āviri baṇḍavā, tāna tāna maṇḍapa karavā sūvisi dahasak mahā saṅghayā muhudu piṭa vaḍā hiṇḍuvā...*(725)

1. The king is referred to here as Mahadāliyā Mānā - the Sinhalesed form of the Pali term of the *Mahāvamsa*.

(‘Having compactly stationed canoes over the ocean to a distance of about a yojana, having erected platforms on the canoes, having erected pavilions at various places and having invited 24,000 of the great fraternity of monks and assembled them over the ocean.....’)

It is noteworthy that this event, though mainly centered round the Cētiya mountain (now called Mihintalē - ‘the hill of Mihiñdu’) located 7 miles to the east of Anurādhapura, was held on a national scale with popular participation inclusive of even coastal boatmen, as seen above.

The Dipavaṃsa compiled *circa* 4th century, refers to this ceremony as Giribhaṇḍagahana Pūjā (XXI. 32). In the Vaṃsatthappakāsinī (the Mahāvaṃsa Commentary) the event is referred to as Giribhaṇḍa Mahā Pūjā which was a *pūjāsamāgama*, i.e. a ‘festival of offering’, and seven verses supply details of the *puññakamma* (‘meritorious acts’) performed - mainly the gifts of alms and robes to the monks (636). The Visuddhi Magga compiled about a century later and its Sinhala *sanya* (commentary) compiled about eight centuries later refer to this as Giribhaṇḍavāhana Pūjā, and the latter introduces this as *cētiyagiri adi koṭa siyalu siñhala dvīpayehit yodanak tñ dakvā samudra-yehit pūvātvū mahā pradīpa pūjāvayī*.

(‘the great offering of lights performed over the whole of the Siñhala Dvīpa - i.e., Sri Lanka, and over the ocean to a distance of a *yōjana* (around) with the Cētiyagiri as the chief venue’ (Mahā Sanya Sahita Viśuddhi Mārgaya 913).

The Rasavāhinī of the 14th century refers to it as Girimaṇḍa Mahā Pūjā (II. 184), and the Sinhala prose work, the Saddharmālaṅkāraya, containing translations of the Rasavāhinī stories, renders it as Girihaṇḍu Pūjā (720).<sup>2</sup>

There is no doubt that the terms Giribhaṇḍagahana, Giribhaṇḍavāhana and Girimaṇḍa refer to the same event. Giribhaṇḍa means ‘articles or goods of or belonging to the mountain’, Giribhaṇḍagahana means ‘the taking of goods of the mountain’ and Giribhaṇḍavāhana means ‘the conveyance of goods to the mountain’. Giribhaṇḍa Mahā Pūjā means ‘the great mountain offering’.<sup>3</sup> Girimaṇḍa and Girihaṇḍu<sup>4</sup> seem to be variants of the principal term Giribhaṇḍa.

It is significant that this event was a religious festival - a *pūjā* (‘offering’), performed in honour of the Cētiyagiri, the hillock hallowed by the visit and (later) residence of the Ven. Mahinda who introduced to the island the Doctrine

2. In these two works the king is referred to as Dubbiṭṭhi Mahā Rāja and Dumbiṭṭhi. The Ven. W. Rahula identifies him as Mahā Dāṭhika Mahā Nāga of the Mahāvaṃsa (University of Ceylon Review. I. 2. 82).

Incidentally the Sanskrit work Avadāna Śataka (II. 24) makes reference to a Girivaggu Samāgama, i. e., ‘the Assembly of the Mountain’s Roar’. Note the use of the Pali term *aggu* (‘roar’, ‘sound’) instead of the Skt. *vaggu*.

3. The term Giribhaṇḍa can also mean ‘a mountain of goods’ as suggested by the Ven. Rahula (History of Buddhism in Ceylon. 276. fn. 2), but is not applicable here with the Cētiyagiri as the venue of the festive activities.

4. Girihaṇḍu is a derivative of Girikaṇḍa (name of a district in pre-Buddhist Sri Lanka: Mahāvaṃsa. X. 83) and Girikaṇḍa Caityaya is popularly rendered as Girihaṇḍu Sāya. The use of the form here probably reflects the author’s indiscretion.

of the Buddha over two centuries previously. And of particular importance is the fact that it took the nature of a *samajja* in which dancing, singing and orchestral music (*naṭanaccāni gītāni vāditāni*) were commanded by the king. Māra, it is said, in order to ruin the festival, caused a rain of coal which was prevented by the miraculous power of an elder. Among the gifts given on the occasion was a costly garment which a young novice named Tissa Lōnagiri wore on account of his proficiency in the Sārāṇīya Dharma (Aṅguttara Nikāya Aṭṭhakathā. II. 653, Sumaṅgala Vilāsīnī. II. 535, Majjhima Nikāya Aṭṭhakathā. I. 545).

Religious or social, many festivals for prayer, homage, sacrifice or pleasure have been closely associated with hillocks and mountains among several peoples of the world throughout the course of human history (Ency. of Religion and Ethics); and according to the Ṛg Vēda (VI. 49. 14, VII. 34. 23) the Vedic Aryans paid homage to Parvata - the Mountain Divinity, and sought his protection. Mountains were also considered as doors to heaven (Taitrēya Samhitā. III. 12. 2. 9, IV. 2. 4. 3), and the Māha Bhārata refers to the participants to a sacrificial festival worshipping a mountain (II. 17. 10).

Although the nature of the celebration is evident from the above references, they do not lead directly to identify what it was, or why it was so called. There is also no record of a repetition of this festival in Sri Lanka.<sup>5</sup> Ven. Rahula notes that 'it was a grand festival which was like a carnival' but admits that it is 'not quite clear' as to why it was so called (History of Buddhism in Ceylon. 276). Kekulawala, on the other hand, sees a relationship between this festival and Mahāyāna religious practices (Anurādhapura Yugaya.132), but unfortunately he does not exemplify.

In India during the contemporary times there appear to have been two outstanding social festivals, viz., the *samajja* and the *giragga samajja*. The first, *samajja* (a term used in the Mahāvamsa too with reference to the Giribhaṇḍa Pūjā: see quotation on first page), was evidently held at convenient places in or near cities, while the other was held on 'the top of a hill' (*giri+agga*) and their nature can be understood by an awareness of what the expression *samajja* has meant in its various references in the literatures of India, whether the term is rendered as *samaja*, *samajja* or *samāja*. The difference, however, between an ordinary *samajja* and a *giragga samajja* is, likely, in respect of geographical location only.

5. Only the term 'Giribhaṇḍa' recurs in the Mahāvamsa (49. 29), and that as the name of a *vihāra* restored by Udaya II (9th c.). The Kaṇṭhaka Cētiya at Mihintalē is referred to in the Archaeological Survey of Ceylon Annual Report (1910-11) as 'Giribhaṇḍa', and is popularly so called (see also *infra* fn.10). One may only surmise that what was restored by Udaya II was in some way connected with this Cētiya, and that its older name has not totally disappeared as yet.

In the Mahā Bhārata (I. 134) a *samaja* appears to have been a tournament. Dṛtarāṣṭra and Drōna had a bit of ground cleared, a *prēkṣāgāra* (auditorium) constructed and a *bali* (offering or sacrifice) offered along with the performance of music before the show began. Many men and women attended it. On the occasion of Draupadi's *svayamvara* the arena for the 16-day *samaja* was designed with walls, moats, doorways and arched gateways; it was also perfumed, and performances of drama, dancing and music were held. There is also a reference to a religious *samaja* held at a Śaiva festival where singing, dancing and drinking provided the diversions.

At a *samaja* described in the Hari Vaṁśa (II. 85. 71-2) a grand feast of meat, savouries and sweets was held, followed by a wrestling match. At another instance (II. 17. 10) reference is made to a Giriyañña, 'sacrifice on the mountain', at which a three-day holiday appears to have been declared and a sacrifice of cattle was on the agenda; and the participants worshipped the mountain with perfumes, flowers and incense.

The Kāma Sūtra (I. IV 26) indicates that at a *samaja* held at a temple at Śrāvasti people gathered to hear songs and see dances.

The Arthaśāstra (II. 25, XIII. 5) refers to three recreative performances viz., *utsava*, *samaja* and *yātrā*, where unrestricted drinking took place for four days, and declares that a conqueror should respect the *samaja* institution of a subject people.

Several Pali works too make reference to the *samajja*. At Rājagṛha a *samajja* was organised by a company of 500 who gave periodical performances to the king and obtained rich rewards. One of their outstanding performances was by a girl who walked, danced and sang on a horizontal bar (Dīgha Nikāyaṭṭhakathā. IV. 59). It was an open-air event held in the afternoon and was well attended by members of all social ranks of the Aṅga and the Magadha regions. The more eminent of them sat on special seats to view, particularly, the nautch dances (Sutta Nipātaṭṭhakathā. I. 326). Another in the same city was held on a hill, and there was much dancing, singing, feasting, etc. (Vinaya II. 5. 6, IV. 37.1). In another, story-telling was an additional item (Dīgha Nikāya, III. 183), while *visūka dassana* ('objectionable scenes') were evident in yet another (*Ibid.* I. 6). A *samajja* held on a hill - *giragga samajja* - is said to have been an annual festival of the Jambudvīpa from the times of the Dipaṅkara Buddha (Buddhavaṁsaṭṭhakathā. 102), and it was the custom of even the members of the *saṅgha* (monks) to attend it (Vinaya. II 107, 150), and the Buddha took appropriate steps to prevent them.

The attendance at a *samajja* held sometimes by royal proclamation was regarded as compulsory, and parents of sons who studied at the universities at Takṣaśilā and Bārāṇasi sent messages for them to return. At such gatherings slaves, women of the harem, courtiers, *brāhmaṇas* and citizens sat round the royal seat (*phallaṅka*). Wrestling, archery, acrobatics and fights between rāms and between elephants were on the agenda.

Buddhaghōṣa, in his *Samantapāsādikā* (IV. 831) says that a *samajja* was held on seven days on level ground under the shadow of a hill outside the city. The *Vinayaṭṭhakathā* (831) explains a *samajja* as a high festival on a mountain, or on a high place on a mountain itself, and says that it was held on level ground in the shadow of a mountain-slope outside a city, and that it was announced seven days before-hand.

Nevertheless, the attendance of monks at shows has definitely been discouraged. As such, the *Brahmajāla Sutta* refers to *pekham*, 'shows at fairs', which were explained by Buddhaghōṣa as 'dancing festivals' - *naṭa samajja*; the *Sigālōvāda Sutta* which indicates six dangers to the life of a recluse - dancing, (*nakkaṃ*), singing (*gītaṃ*), music (*vāditaṃ*), recitations (*akkhānaṃ*), conjuring tricks and acrobatic shows (*dhōpanam*) - refers to recitation of stories in mixed prose and verse - *akkhana* - that took place in a *samajja* (*Dialogues of the Buddha* II. 7. fn. 3). The latter *Sutta* also indicates that *samajjābhicaraṇa*, - the 'haunting of fairs' - was one of the six means of enjoyment. What one experienced at these shows was sensual in the extreme, and repulsive at least to those with a spiritual bent. So was it particularly to Śāriputta and Moggallāna - the two chief disciples of the Buddha - who as layman, were so disgusted with their experiences at a *samajja* that they renounced the world and entered the Order of Monks (*Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā*. I. 73, *Manōrathapūraṇī* I. 89).

The term *giragga samajja* also occurs in two Sinhala classical works - the *Dhampiyā Aṭuvā Gāṭapadaya* (318) and the *Kaṅkhāvitaraṇī Piṭapota* (146) - both exegetical works in which textual portions from the original Pali works too occur. The first work explains the term as *galag-hi karana samaja*..... *nāṭum* ('*samaja* performed on a hill-top ..... dancing') which likely inspired Ven. Sorata to insert the gloss '*kaṅḍu mudunhi karana nṛtyaya* ('dancing performed on a hill-top') in his *Śrī Sumaṅgala Śabdakōṣaya*. He also adds a second gloss: *parvatacchāyūgṛhayehi karana nāṭuma* - 'the dance performed in the pavilion (located) in the shade of a mountain.'

Max-Muller tends to be of opinion that the *samajja* is a survival of the old exogamic communistic dancing associated with pagan religious rites (*Dialogues* II. 7 fn., 4 *Vinaya*. III. 11. fn. 3), and that 'it is probably connected with ancient local worship, a worship in high places as little allied to Vedic Brahmanism as it was to Buddhism' (*Sacred Books of the East*. XX. 71 fn. 3), whereas Rhys-Davids sees in it 'evidence of the first steps towards a future drama - the production before a tribal concourse on fixed feast days of shows with scenery, music and dancing' (*Buddhist India*. 83).

The description of *bhūdhara krīḍā*, 'mountain sports', as supplied by Moti Chandra in his 'The World of Courtesans' (298) seems apposite here:

'The king accompanied by his palace women, his courtiers and courtesans entered the forest and climbed the hill.....the women laughed and played, and the king sat under a picturesque tree and gave away gifts to the attendants. Then under the shade of a tree or on the bank of a river he dallied

with the women. He personally picked up flowers and offered them to the women who sang and danced to please him. Finally he mounted an elephant and returned to the city.'

The term *bhūdhara*, it may be noted, means not only 'mountain' but also Śiva - the 'Great God' or Mahā Dēva of Hinduism who is supposed to reside on the Kailāśa Mountain. That the *krīḍā* was a mountain rite held in his honour appears to be a reasonable assumption.

What generally conforms to the description of a *samajja* in pre-Buddhist Sri Lanka is the periodical festival held by Paṇḍukābhaya in which 'he sat with Cittaraja beside him on a seat of equal height, and having gods and men to dance before him' (*dibbamanussanāṭakam*). Geiger, in translating the Mahāvamsa text (X. 87-8) here, fails to do justice to the phrase *ratikhiddāsamappitō* which however, has been appropriately rendered into Sinhala by the Ven. Sumangala and Batuvantudave as *rati krīḍāven yuktava*, i. e., 'complete with erotic sports'. Evidently, this was a fertility ritual of the contemporary times replete with the constituents of a *samajja* referred to above.<sup>6</sup>

The *samajja*, thus, was so much associated with pleasures sensual that it did not appeal to the spartan tastes of King Aśoka. In the Shahbazgarhi Edict I he proclaims:

'here not a single living creature should be slaughtered and sacrificed. Nor should any *samaja* be held (*no pi cha samaja kaṭava*). For, his Sacred and Gracious Majesty sees much objective in such *samaja* (*bahukahi dōṣa samayaspi..... dakhati*)'.

This monarch also went to the extent of replacing the royal *viharayatra* i.e., 'excursions for enjoyment' or 'pleasure tours' (Skt. *viḥārayātrā*), where hunting, drinking, gambling, keeping company with courtesans and such other diversions took pride of place, by *drammayatra* (Skt. *dharmayātrā*) i.e., 'excursions for the (propagation of the) Doctrine'. According to the Girnar Edict he substituted the usual items of a *samajja* (likely the *visūka dassana* mentioned in the Dīgha Nikāya) with *divyāni rūpāni* ('heavenly shows') consisting of sights of chariots of the gods, etc.<sup>7</sup>

It would also not be irrelevant here to make a closer examination of the purpose of the elaborate lay-out and the beautification of the rock of Sīgiriya and its immediate environs. No doubt, in its physical aspect it contains the requirements and accessories of a pleasure garden far larger than the other example of its type - the Ran Masu Uyana or the 'Park of the Golden Fish' near the Isurumuṇi Vihāra at Anurādhapura. No details are necessary here of the artistically laid out park, the path-ways leading up to the summit, the

6. For a more detailed interpretation of this festival see 'The Sun and the Moon in Sinhala Culture' — V. Vitharana (mimeographed: 22-3).

7. Inscriptions of Asoka—E. Hultzsch. Oxford 1925: Shahbazgarhi Edicts I & IV (51 & 54), Girnar Edicts I & IV (1 & 6), Kalsi Edict I (27).

stairs, the seats, the ponds, the terraces, the platforms, the mirror wall, the paintings, the recesses and the many circuitous path-ways that go about them, the lion's mouth and the several pavilions both large and small that would have once existed at all levels, and the larger edifices on the summit. What remains of them are, indeed, the erstwhile witnesses to hosts of pleasure-seekers that would have patronised the surroundings unsurpassed in beauty by any other site in the island.

To add to these silent witnesses are those that are ever-eloquent - the verses of the graffiti on the mirror wall. They are very popularly regarded as the creations of visitors from the four corners of Sri Lanka who were enamoured by the maidens depicted on the frescoes of which only a few now remain. But a closer scrutiny reveals that at least some of the subjects were not the 'non-speaking' and 'hard-hearted' maidens of the frescoes, but those with actual flesh and blood, and that the visitors climbed the rock not merely to see the paintings and enjoy the aesthetic pleasure obtainable therefrom, but also with the intention of experiencing the full pleasures of a different nature. Instances are available of Paranavitana himself (whose monumental work, the 'Sigiriya Graffiti', Oxford 1956, is well known) being convinced at least of one live maiden being made the subject of a verse here, and of 'some special significance of a saturnalian nature' being attached to an observance alluded to in another.<sup>8</sup>

It is also significant that Ariyapala in his 'Society in Mediaeval Ceylon' (358) considers the *giragga samajja* of India as being identical with the *giri-bhaṇḍa pūjā* of Sri Lanka. There is, no doubt, all the justification for such a conclusion as both possessed the all-pervading atmosphere of a carnival with the only difference that the latter had the complexion of a religious festival - *pūjā*, 'offering' - performed on a holy hillock where meritorious activities would certainly have taken pride of place.

But why was the Giribhaṇḍa Pūjā so called? The *giri*, no doubt, signifies the hill or mountain which formed the venue for the festival; but there seems to have been no association with any *bhaṇḍa*, 'goods' or 'commodities', connected with it.

At this juncture the idea expressed by Max-Muller (see *supra* p. 48) that this was originally a pagan festival is noteworthy. It appears that in Sri Lanka it had only changed its complexion from what it originally was to a Buddhist festival without a change of venue, and the venue itself had gathered a novel importance by having been visited by a historic Buddhist mission from the court of a great emperor of the neighbouring Jambu Dvīpa (see *supra* pp. 45-6).

What, in particular, was this 'mountain cult' or 'pagan festival'? Mountains, as referred to earlier, were very significant centers of worship and, among the Hindus of India, Śiva was and is the pre-eminent mountain deity. He, as popularly known, is a phallic deity and has his abode in Kailāśa - the great

8. An article on this subject by the present author is expected to appear in the next number of the 'Rōhaṇa'.

mountain known in their cosmology. There is no doubt that the cult of Śiva was known in Sri Lanka during the pre-Buddhist era among the descendents of the early Aryans, and it is not impossible that mountain rites associated with this Dēva were popularly practised by them.<sup>9</sup>

Edmund Hardy in his research article entitled 'Ueber den Ursprung des Samajja' (Album Kern. 65-66) points out that the *giragga samajja* of India belongs to this pre-Buddhist Śiva cult - Śiva himself being regarded as a dancing god whose abode is a mountain - and that it lost its orgy and religious characters with the elapse of time, and transformed itself to an entertaining social festival at which the participants could get away from the monotony of every-day life.

Owing to the association of the Kailāśa mountain with Śiva he was known under several names of which *giri*, 'mountain', formed the principal part: Giriśa, Girīśa, Girika, Girikapriya, Girīnām Śikharāṇi, Giriruha, Girisādhana and Girivṛkṣālaya occurring in the Mahā Bhārata (Sorensen. Delhi 1965. Siva s.v.), Giriśanta, Girīsa (Dowson. London 1957. s.v.) and Girisanta (Monier-Williams. Oxford 1956. s.v.). But the most significant of these in the present study is the epithet Giribhāṇḍava, meaning 'the friend of the mountain' applied to this great god (*Ibid.*).

Now, with the evidence to the presence of adherents of Saivism in early Sri Lanka, it is not unreasonable to imagine that an outstanding ritual to honour the supreme deity was held in the island in association with a hill which later came to be called Cētiyagiri (mod. Mihintalē) located near the capital city, and that the ritual was called Giribhaṇḍa. It may have been the local counterpart of the Giragga Samajja and the Bhūdhara Kriḍā of the Jambu Dvīpa (referred to above).

One may even go to the extent of fixing the exact location of the festival on the sprawling hillock: Would it not have been the site of the present Kaṇṭaka Cētiya (yet called Giribhaṇḍa: see *supra* fn. 5)? Very likely, this *cētiya* was built on the principal venue, and tradition safeguarded the application of this term to the site for the past two millenia.<sup>10</sup>

9. See also Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society. XXXI. 82. 326-. Further, the construction of a *sivikāsoththisālā*, (also) regarded as halls where phalli of Śiva were kept, by the pre-Buddhist king Paṇḍukābhaya (Vaṁsathappakāsini 296) and the presence of 'śiva' as parts of names of people of various ranks (Girikaṇḍa Śiva, Mahā Śiva, Muṭa Śiva, Sivaguta, Sivabuti, Sivarakita: Mahāvamsa X. 29; XI. 4, Inscriptions of Ceylon I. Glossary & Index) are indicative of the homage paid to this god.

10. The Kaṇṭhaka Cētiya is popularly referred to also as Kiribaḍapavu Dāgāba and Kiribat Vehera (Glimpses of Ceylon's Past. 59). This is undoubtedly the 'corrupt' form of Giribhaṇḍa (Giribhaṇḍa > Kiribhaṇḍa > Kiribaḍa > Kiribaḍ > Kiribat). Kiribat, incidentally, is 'milk-rice' — a favourite rice and coconut-milk preparation of the people of Sri Lanka.

A classical term, consequent to the loss of the awareness of its original meaning and significance, has been transformed to a phonetically similar and very common usage regardless of its meaning.



With its initial associations forgotten, the term Giribhāṇḍava can lend itself to other forms as indicated above (see *supra* fnn. 2-4) by which it came to be known among the Buddhists of Sri Lanka two and a half centuries after the introduction of Buddhism. The original mountain cult associated with Śiva too would have under-gone a transformation to a Buddhist *pūjā* ceremony dedicated to the hill now hallowed by the visit of the Ven. Mahinda. An epithet applied to a Hindu deity would, thereafter, have been found inappropriate to designate this new festival with its rites very much different from those of the former, much as it would have been unworthy to have given it up altogether. The solution would have been a compromise effected by the shortening of a long vowel (-ā->-a-), the cerebralisation of the dentals (-nd->-ṇd-) and the elision of the terminal -va, whereby the form 'Giribhāṇḍava' was transformed to 'Giribhaṇḍa' as seen in the Mahāvamsa. Other authors modified the term further each after his own fancy, or accepted the form in vogue at the time of writing, regardless of whether the meaning of the new term was appropriate or not, or whether it had a meaning at all.

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