

# THE RE - MAKING OF VESAK

**T**he Vesak poya day was declared a public holiday on March 27th 1885 by the Governor, Sir Arthur Gordon; the first official holiday was celebrated on April 28th 1885. The background to this concession lies in the physical violence that erupted in 1883 between Roman Catholics and Buddhists in Kotahena, an area where half the population was Catholic.

A series of processions had been taken out to mark the completion of a Buddhist temple in Kotahena, controlled by Mohottivatte Gunananda, a figure prominent in Buddhist-Christian debates; these processions had culminated in the Christian Holy Week at Eastér. Owing to inflammatory rumors that the Buddhists were carrying images insulting to Christians, and the wounding of Catholic sensibilities over what they saw as an invasion of their religious territory on the days of their main religious festival, the largely peaceful Buddhist procession was attacked by Roman Catholics; police incompetence concerning the granting of procession permits also appear to have played a part. One person died in the resulting confrontation. Charges, however, were eventually dismissed. Not one Catholic was brought to justice and this caused considerable anger among Buddhists.

A Buddhist Defence Committee was formed in January 1884 which deputed Colonel Olcott to present Buddhist grievances to the Colonial Office in London. Four demands were put forward: the lifting of restrictions on Buddhist processions; a fresh inquiry into the Kotahena Riot and the punishment of Roman Catholic offenders; a formal declaration of religious neutrality by the Government; and the proclamation of Vesak as a public holiday. The last demand, which was a measure that could be granted without any admission of guilt by the British government, was the only demand granted. Sir Arthur Gordon, who himself met Olcott at the beginning of 1884, was more than willing to accede.

During the debate in the Legislative Council, the representative of the Low County Sinhalese, A.L.de Alwis, a Protestant Christian by faith, objected to the declaration of Vesak as a public holiday; he preferred the Sinhala New Year day which normally fell on 13th or 14th of April as the public holiday of the Sinhalese. However the Tamil representative in the Council, Ponnambalam Ramanathan, read out a letter from Hikkaduve Sumangala Thera in which he stated that the Buddhists unanimously appealed to the Council to declare Vesak a public holiday and supported the proposal (*Legislative Council Debates*, 1883-6 pp. 84-5).

The first Vesak holiday in 1885 was a fairly low key affair because of the lack of time for preparation. According to *Sarasavi Sandaresa*, the bi-weekly Sinhala newspaper, Mohottiwatte Gunandanda Thera delivered a talk at the Kelani Temple on the "Vesak Holiday" to a large group of devotees. A new feature was the ceremonial hoisting of the newly designed Buddhist flag on the morning of April 28th. The ceremonial hoistings were conducted simultaneously at Deepaduttamaramaya in Kotahena, Vidyodaya Buddhist College at Maligakanda, and a number of other places in Colombo. Buddhists were advised to hoist the flag in as many public places as possible in all parts of the country. The festivities also included a procession from Pettah to Maligakanda, sponsored by H. Don Carolis, a timber merchant at Pettah and his father-in-law, Andris Perera Dharmagunawardhana, another businessman. This procession with music was the first to be permitted in the city of Colombo after the Kotahena riot and was therefore cause for celebration.

The Vesak holiday was celebrated in the succeeding years with greater fervour and with the addition of many more features. We have a very interesting account of the celebrations in 1889 from C.W. Leadbeater, an Anglican clergyman who had turned theosophist, first Headmaster of Ananda College and Editor of Volume one of *The Buddhist* (see page 11 for extracts from this editorial).

## Vesak in Pre-colonial Sri Lanka

Poya days, including that which fell in the month of Vesak, appear to have been celebrated in the medieval past mainly with religious observances. There are, however, indications that Vesak was also celebrated with some element of festivity. Actual descriptions of specifically Vesak festivities are difficult to find, but there is an interesting account in the *Pujavaliya* of the festivities associated with what it describes as the "great festival of the Buddha" (in Sinhalese, *Budunge Maha Mangallayehi*). Since it is customary to describe Vesak as *Temagula*, the Triple Festival, and it is also the chief festival associated with the Buddha, one can with justice assume that this refers to a celebration of Vesak. This book was written during the reign of Parakramabahu II who reigned from 1236 to about 1270 and describes what was then prevalent.

There was a procession in which the king, the four forces (elephant, horse, chariot and foot soldiers) and the Sangha

→

participated; Buddha relics, like the Tooth and the Begging Bowl, were carried in this procession. Some aspects of the festivities are worth recording here :

- \* thousands of lamps round the viharas, like a star-lit sky;
- \* stages set up here and there with troupes of dancers performing on them;
- \* groups of *balibhojakas* singing the praises of the Buddha and calling for his blessings on the people ('balibhojakas' are those concerned with the practice of *bali* and other rituals);
- \* groups of musicians playing the five-fold music;
- \* Buddha relics exhibited for public worship;

The festivities went on for seven days and in the classical rhetorical tradition, the author describes the scene as one that "manifested in the human world the festivities in the Nandana Uyana of the heaven of Sakra." Be that as it may, it is obvious that this was a state festival carried out under the auspices of the king.

One cannot be sure of developments in the intervening period, but documents of the Kandyan period indicate that Vesak was no longer a state festival. The Kandyan state had 'Four Great Festivals' (*satara maha mangall*):

- \* the New Year in April
- \* the procession of the Tooth Relic
- \* the Kartikeya festival and
- \* the harvest festival - *alut sal mangallaya*.

It is possible that by the time the religious needs of the Buddhists and the ideological needs of the state had coalesced round the Tooth Relic, festival associated with it had become the most important and most attractive. However, what is important to note is that by the time Vesak is declared a public holiday in 1885 and, by that very reason, is compelled to become a festive occasion, there had been no tradition extant of a Vesak celebration. The forms of celebration had to be recreated in a new colonial context.

### The Recreation of Vesak

This colonial context meant primarily the dominance of forms of ideological expression popularised by the colonial power and their imitation by the colonised. This was a process manifest in the activities of the Buddhist revival.

The Buddhists of the revival derived inspiration from Christian practice in the organization of their religion to meet changing needs and face the modern world. Mohottiwatte Gunananda Thera (1823-1891) was one of the pioneer imitators of Christian missionary methods to revitalize Buddhism. His *Bodhiraja Samitiya*, *Abhayagiri Caitya Araksaka Samitiya* and *Sarvajna Sasanabhivruddhi Dayaka Samagam* (Society for Propagation of Buddhism) are some organization he set up copying Christian missionary methods. When Olcott arrived in Sri Lanka in 1880 he injected new vigour to the process

already begun by Mohottiwatte Gunananda. Theosophists were determined to carry the Vesak celebrations along modern lines as early as 1881 when they selected the Vesak poya (May 13th in 1881) to inaugurate the Buddhist Education Fund. They were also the driving force behind Buddhist Sunday schools, Buddhist schools and the preparation of such teaching manuals like the significantly named Buddhist Catechism.

But the Buddhists still lacked a day of jubilation around which religious fervour could be mobilised in a public way, somewhat like Christmas for the Christians. And this is what they got when Vesak was declared a public holiday. The desire to emulate Christmas had another rationale. The celebration of Christmas had been done in a grand scale in the 1870s. From information which can be gathered from Christian newspapers like *Satvalankarava* and *Baptist Pravritti*, it is clear that the Christians did want to use the celebrations as an instrument of proselytisation and encouraged non-Christians to participate in the festivities. Buddhist children who attended the schools managed by Christian missionaries also found participation in the Christmas fun and games enjoyable.

Theosophists as well as monks and laymen of the Buddhist revival had a hand in fashioning the celebrations that were now required by the Vesak holiday. While some scholar monks may have had some knowledge of celebrations such as those described in the *Pujavaliya*, the general inspiration for Vesak festivities was derived from Christian practice.

For example carol parties became a chief feature of Vesak. The carol cart which toured the city with a carol party was the most attractive public act during Christmas of this period. The Buddhists who lacked a religious musical tradition imitated the Christian practice and organised Buddhist carols for Vesak. They toured the city in the night and visited residences of selected group of Buddhists. Some of them also visited temples and offered flowers to images of the Buddha.

At the beginning, the words for Buddhist carols were adapted from Christian hymns. Leadbeater became adept at changing, by moving a few words, Christian hymns of praise to God into homages to the Dhamma. For instance:

<i>Leadbeater's Buddhist hymn</i> (1st Verse)	<i>The Christian hymn</i>
Praise we the Holy DHARMA	O Word of God incarnate
The wisdom of our Lord	O Wisdom from on high
The truth unchanged, unchanging	O Truth unchanged, unchanging
His own eternal Word	O light of our dark sky
We praise him for the radiance	We praise Thee for the radiance
That from its hallowed page	That from the hallowed page
A lantern to our footsteps	A lantern to our footsteps
Shines on from age to age	Shines on from age to age
( <i>The Buddhist January</i> , 1893)	( <i>The Methodist Hymn</i> Book No 303)

The music too was derived from the same sources. Western musical instruments like the cornet, harmonium and violin were used in these carol parties. As the extracts from Leadbeater's editorial that we have reproduced shows, the use of Western musical forms was justified on the basis of appropriateness.

As Vesak begun to take on a festive form, Sinhalese Buddhist businessmen imported lamps and lanterns from Japan and China as the Christians did on Christmas. The practice of illuminating the streets to give a festival atmosphere was already well known among Christians. The Catholics used *pandals* to depict in pictures the life stories of Jesus or of the Saints. Buddhist *pandals* substituted pictures depicting incidents from the life of the Buddha or from the *Jataka Stories*.

The using of Christian traditions for Buddhist purposes was evidence of the assimilation of Western culture through the colonial process. But there was also an element of defiance present, an aspect sized upon by evangelical Protestant missionaries to denounce Governor Gordon and western sympathisers of Buddhism. Revd. Thomas Moscrip, a Methodist missionary in Sri Lanka from 1883-1900, can be taken as an example. Writing on the theme 'present day Buddhism' he strongly criticised western dalliance with Buddhism and accused European sympathisers of "moral vagrancy". He writes further:

An explanation of the present 'Buddhist revival' would be incomplete without a reference to another influence. Sir Arthur Gordon has gained no little notoriety by his attitude towards Buddhism. His interest has no doubt been largely archeological, but it has often appeared wilful patronage. He has been taken to task in the Legislative Council for allowing priests to say *Pirit* over him and chant their mystic and sacred stanzas in his presence. He has also appointed Buddha's birthday as a public holiday. The result of these things has been to make Buddhists confident and defiant, and now they do hesitate to use anything that will make their religion look plausible. Even the dishonest use of Christian phraseology so conspicuously manifest in *The Light of Asia* is being

imitated. All "the glorious names" of Christ are used to 'set forth' Buddha..... During Buddhist festivals, transparencies have been carried through the streets bearing the words: 'Glory to Buddha in the highest,' 'on earth peace,' 'good will toward men.' Another favourite motto is; 'Our Lord Buddha is Supreme.' Carols in imitation of Christmas hymns are also sung. The Anniversary of Buddha's birth day is kept in grand style" (*The Ceylon Friend*) 16th October, 1889).

Moscrip is attacked in graphic terms in *The Buddhist* of 8th November, 1889. However, his was not an isolated view. Most evangelical missionaries denied that the Governor had a right to respect the religion of the majority. Any religious concessions given to Buddhists were seen as an affirmation of falsehood and untruth. It was an undermining of what they saw as Britain's God-given role as an imperial power—the saving of souls from eternal damnation by conversion to Christianity. They also felt it was a source of disorientation for converts, most of whom had been conditioned to see their former beliefs as a dangerous delusion. The religious ideals of the missionaries neither admitted of political expediency nor genuine respect for a religion other than Christianity.

Vesak as we know it in Sri Lanka today was thus born in the context of a Buddhist revival, psychologically orientated towards the appropriating of practices from the dominant colonial culture, both in emulation and defiance. At the same time as the missionaries were being defied, the West itself was still being loyally followed. And in the defiance was the ascension of a religious identity, in a socio-religious situation which had denied dignity for many decades. But the impetus for such an opportunity was a political situation in which a Governor, albeit sympathetic to Buddhism, felt it expedient to grant certain concessions after an unacknowledged miscarriage of justice. With such roots, a critical attitude should be taken towards its contemporary manifestations.

(*Pravada thanks Professor G. P. V. Somaratne and Elizabeth Harris for sharing their research material used in this essay*)

"Our Sinhala men are still trying to confine us to the kitchen. They are not interested in teaching us anything beyond that". Dialogue between 2 women criticising the old Sinhala texts on women in *The Buddhist companion* 1914