

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

GENDERED PERFOR(MAN)CE: A STUDY OF THE POSITION OF WOMEN IN THE KANDY ESALA PROCESSION

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(Published 15 October 2021)

Abstract

Sri Dalada Maligawa, Kandy, Sri Lanka is considered a religious centre of paramount significance. It is also deemed home to certain age-old rituals, customs and an influential belief system. This study focuses on the subordinate position that women occupy in the context of the Dalada Maligawa, in relation to the grand Esala Procession which is one of the main ceremonies that is annually conducted there. It examines the (mis)conceptions that emerge under the pretext of religious practices and reinforce certain mainstream, stereotypical gender identities, thus excluding women from performing in the procession. The transcripts of the discussions held with selected stakeholders at the Dalada Maligawa constitute the primary data of the study. Through an analysis of the role of women in the Kandy Esala Procession, the study looks at the ways in which dominant perceptions of gender shape the gender relations within the context of the Dalada Maligawa.

Keywords: Dalada Maligawa, Esala Procession, gender politics, gender marginalization

1. Introduction

Sri Dalada Maligawa holds a prime position as a religious place and it is deemed home to certain age-old rituals, customs and an influential belief system. When looking at the earlier and present day practices, we seldom find occasions where women were/are actively involved in the rituals and practices at the Dalada Maligawa. Women occupy only marginal importance in the Dalada Maligawa context and that they are deemed *kili*, which means “unclean” or “unfitting” to perform the so-called paramount duties at the Dalada Maligawa. The aim of this study is to examine the gender discrimination and the subordinate position that women occupy in relation to the Kandy Esala Procession which is conducted at the Dalada Maligawa.

2. Methodology

This study is done in the form of a content analysis, examining the (mis)conceptions and deep-rooted beliefs which exclude women from performing in the Esala Procession. The transcripts of the discussions held with two male employees who work at two important recently established places in the Dalada Maligawa constitute the primary data of this study while the existing literature is also analyzed to revisit the selected research problem which does not seem to have been sufficiently addressed by any researcher before.

3. Discussion

The Esala Perahera is one of the four main ceremonies in the Dalada Maligawa which is held in veneration of the Sacred Tooth Relic of Lord Buddha. However, women do not take part in the Dalada Perahera, except in the final Randoli Perhera, where only the two Alaththi Ammas¹ could go behind the Randoliya (Queen's palanquin) that is being carried at the end of the Dalada Maligawa Perahera, on the final day of the Esala Perahera Mangallaya². Yet according to Chulavamsa, there have been female dancers and female musicians in the Dalada Perahera during the reign of King Parakramabahu I. As it records “මණ්ඩපය පිරිවරාගත් සියගණන් වාහන තුළ ඒවායේ නාට්‍යාංගනාවෝද සංගීත වාදකයෝද වූහ. මෙසේ වූල වංශයේ දැක්වෙන දළදා විස්තරයට අනුව එම යුගයේදී [...] දළදා පෙරහැරේ වූ සංගීත අංශයෙන් වූ දායකත්වය ලබා දෙන ලද්දේ කාන්තාවන් විසිනි(There were female dancers and musicians in the hundreds of carriages that were in the pavilion. According to the narrative of the Relic provided by the Chulavamsa, women have contributed to musical performances in the Dalada Perahera during that period)”.³

This shows the different conditions during that time which gave women an opportunity to participate in the Dalada Perahera unlike today. As Dambadeni Asna reveals, female dancers have been there in the Perahera during the Dambadeni period too⁴. Moreover, Robert Knox records the nature of the Dalada Perahera in the Kandyan period as follows: ...පෙරහැරේ පැවති අනෙකුත් ක්රීඩා අතර කළගෙඩි ක්රීඩාවේ යෙදෙන නළඟනෝද තුන්දෙනා බැගින් අතින් ගෙන රඟ ස්ත්රීහූද වූහ [...] මෙයින් පසු ගමන් කළේ මල් බඳුන් අතින් ගත් ස්ත්රීහූය. දෙවියන් වෙනුවෙන් ගමන් කළ කපුවන් ගෙන් පසු එම දෙවියන්ගේ මෙහෙකරුවන් වශයෙන් සළකන රටවැසි වංශාධිපති ස්ත්රී පුරුෂයන් දෙන්නා බැගින් එක්ව අත්වැල් බැඳගෙන ගමන් ගත්හ⁵ Among the other performances in the Perahera, there were female dancers who were performing pot dance, women who danced while holding hands in groups of three. This was followed by women who carried baskets of flowers. Following the lay priests who marched in the Perahera in veneration of the gods, noblewomen and noblemen of the country who were deemed the servants of the gods marched hand in hand). Knox's description on the Dalada Perahera discloses that there have been female dancers in the Dalada Perahera which was held during the Kandyan period too, whereas today, female dancers could be seen neither in the perahera of the Dalada Maligawa nor in the peraheras of Natha, Vishnu, Katharagama devalas, except in the perahera of the Paththini Devalaya.⁶ John Davy, a physician of the British forces, has also recorded how women took part in the Dalada Perahera in a very sportive manner. In Ralph Pieris' book *Sinhala Samaaja Sanwidhaanaya Mahanuwara Yugaya*, Davy's records are translated as

1. Alaththi Ammas “engage in a ritual blessing called Alaththibama on the days of nanumura mangallaya (days of applying shampoo), on the days of the full moon, on the days of conducting the perahera mangallaya, on the days of the exposition of the Sacred Tooth Relic and on the days of holding special events” [...] “Alaththibama [is] a ritual done as a blessing by oscillating two silver lamps in their hands while staying in front of the ‘gandha kutiya’, but away from the silver step. Folk tradition state[s] that the service of Alaththi Ammas had been obtained in order to disclose confidential information which would be harmful for the security of the Sacred Tooth Relic”. P 202, Meegahakumbura K. *Heritage of the Sacred Tooth Relic*.

2. The Esala Perahera comprises ten processions altogether. The first five processions are called Kumbal and the remaining five are called Randoli. “The Randoli Perahera is the most magnificent event in the whole of the perahera process [...]. It begins [...] immediately after the last Kumbal Perahera of Sri Dalada Maligawa. The word “Randoli” derives from the words “Queen's Palanquin”. The palanquins were carried alongside the elephants in the procession until King Keerthi Sri Rajasinghe passed a decree in 1775 A.D. that the palanquins should be added at the end of the Perahera [...] There are two opinions about the palanquins. One is that the palanquins are a symbol of presence of the consorts of the Deities. Yet, the other is that the queens of the reigning monarch travelled in those palanquins. At the present, Alaththi Ammas of [the Dalada Maligawa] and the four devalayas walk alongside the palanquins. P 119, Costa, Sunil De. *Chronicle of the Sacred Tooth*.

3. P 62, Hettiarachchy, Ramani. “Dalada Sanskruthiya thula Kaanthaa Bhumikaawa”.

4. P 62, Hettiarachchy, Ramani. “Dalada Sanskruthiya thula Kaanthaa Bhumikaawa”.

5. P 104-106, Knox Dutu Lakdiva. Tr. Premachandra Alwis.

6. “... [T]he Esala Perahera came to be known as the procession of the Perahera of the four main devalayas and was held as an offering in dedication to the Gods. King Keerthi Sri Rajasinghe initiated to hold the present day lining-up of the perahera in [...] 1753. The Perahera of the Sacred Tooth Relic took the lead, while the other 4 Peraheras, those of Gods Natha, Vishnu, Katharagama and Paththini [...] followed suit” P 248-249, Meegahakumbura, K. *Heritage of the Sacred Tooth Relic*.

“කම උඩ ගමන් ගනිමින් විජ්ජා පෙත්වූයේ ස්ත්රීන් දෙදෙනෙකි. සමරතාව රැකගැනීම සඳහා ඊට භාවිත නොකළ බැවින් ඔවුන් ගේ දස්කම් හා ශූරවීරභාවය සුළුකොට තැකිය නොහේ. එයින් ස්ත්රීයක් කමේ උඩ සිටියදීම අඩි හත අටකට නොඅඩු උසකට පිට පිටම ශීර්ෂයෙන් පැත්තාය These spellbinding acts were performed by two women who walked on ropes. They did not use poles/sticks to maintain balance, hence their talents and bravery cannot be belittled. One of those women kept jumping rapidly about eight feet in height, while being on the rope)” (Pieris 130). This is a statement which captures the position of women in the Dalada Perahera during the Kandyan period. It indicates that women were allowed to play a significant role in entertaining the public, even though the Dalada Perahera was a religious procession. At the same time it suggests that women have been able to take part in the Dalada Perahera even though there were restrictions for them to contribute to the rituals and practices within the inner space of the Dalada Maligawa. However, the continuous process of marginalization of women that takes place in the context of the Esala Procession captures the male hegemony that operates there in the guise of religious beliefs. As an Assistant Librarian of the Sri Dalada Maligawa Oriental Library states, the beliefs of Hinduism have an impact on the Dalada Perahera too. He says “මේක දළදා පූජාවක් නේ. දළදා පූජාවක් කියන එක කොයි කොයි තැන්වලදී ද වෙනස් උණේ කියන එක ටිකක් හිතාගන්න බෑ. හින්දු සංකල්පය තමා මෙතන තියෙන්නේ. This is a pooja which is being performed in veneration of the Tooth Relic. I can’t think when and how the concept of pooja changed. What we can see here is the Hindu concept)” (Assistant Librarian, personal communication, September 24, 2017). It is evident that he attributes the changes that have taken place in the context of the Maligawa, particularly the ones which are seemingly negative, to Hinduism. During an interview with a demonstrator of the International Buddhist Museum, he was asked whether Hinduism has some impact on the dominant beliefs in the Maligawa context, he said that it is not Hinduism but Brahmanism that has influenced some of the beliefs to a certain extent:හින්දු ආගම තියෙන්නේ තිරුක්කුරල් පොතේ හගවත් ගීතාවේ. මේ හගවත් ගීතාවේ ස්ත්රීත්වය කියන එක හෙලා දැකීමක් කිසිම තැනක කරලා නෑ. බමුණුවාදයේදී විතරයි [...] බමුණුවාදයයි හින්දු වාදයයි කියන්නෙ දෙකක් [...] කොච්චර දේවතාවියො ඉන්නවද, කාලි, කන්නගී - දේවත්වය දෙනවා ස්ත්රීයකට [...] එතකොට ඒකෙ එහෙම ජරනික්ෂේප කිරීමක් වෙන්නෙ නෑ. හැබැයි කරනවා, බමුණන්ගෙ දර්ශනෙන් එක්ක ආවහම - “කිලි” කියලා. කිලි කියන්නෙ කිලිටි, අපිරිසිදු. ලේ කියන එක අපි කිලිටි දෙයක් විදියට ගන්නෙ. ලේ වලට කැමති රාක්ෂයො, යක්ෂයො, භූතයෝ, කුම්භාණ්ඩයෝ. කිලි වර්ග මහා කිලි, කිලි කියලා වර්ග කෙරෙනවා, ඒ මත්තර ශාස්තර, ගුප්ත විද්‍යාවල. බුදුහාමුදුරුවෝ ඒ දේවල් ජරනික්ෂේප කළා. හැබැයි ස්ත්රීත්වයේ තිබෙන ඒ කිලිවලට අපි කියනවා විකර්ෂණය වෙනවා යහපත් බලවේග, උදාහරණ විදියට දෙවියෝ Hinduism is found in Thirukkural, Bhagawath Geetha. Bhagawath Geetha never rejects femininity.(It is humiliated) only in Brahmanism. Brahmanism and Hinduism are two different concepts. In Hinduism there are so many goddesses such as Kaali, Kannagi – so it attributes divinity to a woman. Hence it doesn’t reject femininity. But Brahmanism keeps women away by considering them as having “kili”, therefore “dirty” and “impure”. We consider blood as unclean. It is preferred by evil forces. Kili is categorized into two as “mahaa kili” and “kili” in gupta vidya. The Buddha didn’t approve such beliefs. But we may say that good forces such as gods are repelled when they come into contact with kili that is found in women). (Demonstrator of the Museum, personal communication, November 05, 2017) Here, he says that the concept of kili which interferes with women’s freedom has derived from the Brahmanic social code and that the Buddha counteracts such beliefs. Even after saying so, he seems to embrace the so-called Brahmin ideology again, as he states “හැබැයි ස්ත්රීත්වයේ තිබෙන ඒ කිලිවලට අපි කියනවා විකර්ෂණය වෙනවා යහපත් බලවේග, උදාහරණ විදියට දෙවියෝ” Good forces such as gods are repelled when they come into contact with kili that is found in women) (Demonstrator of the Museum, personal communication, November 05, 2017). When analyzing such remarks, it could be said that some narrow ideologies (which are apparently formed by men) emerge in the Maligawa context under the pretext of religious, cultural, and ritualistic practices.

Individuals in the Maligawa context do not question the deep-rooted beliefs and the pre-existing norms and customs that determine women's position there. The demonstrator of the museum also expressed his perception regarding the representation of women in the Dalada Perahera as "මාළිගාවේ පෙරහැරේ කාන්තා නියෝජනයක් සිද්ධ වෙන්නේ නෑ හැබැයි ඊට කලින් සදහන් වෙලා නියෙනවා ඔය Knox ගෙ වාර්තාවල, කාන්තාවන් පෙරහැරේ උඩ කරණම් ගැනුවා, gymnastic පෙන්නුවා කියලා There is no representation of women in the procession of the Maligawa. But it has being said in the records of Knox that back then women performed somersaults in the Perahera)" (Demonstrator of the Museum, personal communication, November 05, 2017). However, even though what he said is true when it is compared with the given records, the way he voiced his idea encapsulates his attitude to women's participation in the Perahera. We see how his use of language acts "both [as] an element in the exercise of power and a metaphor for how power operates" (Ives, 2004). For example, phrases such as "උඩ කරණම් ගැනුවා, gymnastic පෙන්නුවා" seem to be sarcastic comments on what women are believed to have performed in the Dalada Perahera during the past, which are now deemed hilarious impossibilities. Sudarshana Bandara, in his article "Mahanuwara Dalada Perahera saha Samaajaya", discusses the representation of women in the Perahera as follows: විශේෂයෙන් සදහන් කළ යුතු කරුණකි දළදා මාළිගාවේ පෙරහැර තුළදී කිසිදු ස්ත්රී චරිතයක් හමු නොවීම. එයින් එදා සමාජයේ ස්ත්රීයගේ තත්වය පිළිබඳ අවබෝධයක් ලබාගත හැකිය. මන්දයත් ආගමික කටයුතුවලදී විශේෂයෙන් දන්න ධාතුන් වහන්සේට පුද සන්කාර පැවැත්වීමේදී ස්ත්රී පාර්ශවයට එතරම්ම වැදගත්කමක් හිමි නොවූ බව පෙනේ. බොහෝ විට ඒ සදහා බලපෑ හේතූන් ගණනාවකි. රොබට් නොක්ස්ට අනුව "ඔසප්වීම" හෙවත් "බැරිකම" පවතින තුරු ස්ත්රීහු අශුද්ධ ලෙස සළකති. මෙය කොතරම් උග්ර වීද යනොත් ඇය සිටිනා නිවස පවා කිළිටි වූවක් සේ සලකා එතැනට යාමටද බොහෝ දෙනා පසුබට වේ. මෙවැනි වාතාවරණයක් පැවතීම නිසාම බොහෝ විට ස්ත්රීන් දළදා පෙරහැරට හා දළදා මාළිගයේ වත්පිළිවෙත් සදහා යොදා නොගත් බව පෙනේ [...] මෙලෙස මහනුවර සමයේ ස්ත්රී පාර්ශවය තරමක් පුරුෂ පාර්ශවයට වඩා අඩු තක්සේරුවකින් ඇගයීම් කළ බව දළදා මාළිගාවේ පෙරහැරේදී කිසිදු ලෙසකින් යොදා නොගැනීම මගින් තහවුරු වේ. දළදා පෙරහැර අතිශය ශුද්ධ මංගල්යයක් ලෙස විවිධ ජේවස්ථි සිදුකරන නිසා ස්ත්රීයක් යොදා ගතහොත් එය කිළිටි වේ යැයි පාරම්පරිකව මිනිසුන් තුළ බියක් තිබුණ බව දැකිය හැක. එමෙන්ම ස්ත්රීයට සමාජයේ පුරුෂයාට වඩා පහළ තත්වයක් හිමි වූ බවද මෙයින් ගම්යමාන වේ. It should be noted that no female character was found in the procession of the Dalada Maligawa. It enables an understanding of the status of the woman in the society in the past. It seems that the women were not given an important role to play in religious activities, especially in the rituals that are held in veneration of the sacred Tooth Relic. A number of factors seems to have affected the given situation. According to Robert Knox, women are deemed "impure" as long as they menstruate, which is considered to be their "weakness". (As Knox states) many were reluctant to go to a house where there was a menstruating woman. It seems that such conditions that prevailed (during that time) prevented women from participating in the procession of the Temple of the Tooth Relic. [...] Thus, this suggests that women were deemed somewhat inferior to men in the Kandyan period. Since the Dalada Perahera was a ceremony that comprised many special rituals, it was feared that employing a woman in it would make the whole procession an impure one. This also suggests that back then women occupied a lower status than men).⁷ Sudarshana Bandara's discussion compares the position of women in the Kandyan period with that of men. Yet he presents his findings as if some conditions that he highlights were prevalent only during the past. He does not engage in a comparative analysis of the women's condition in the Maligawa context both in the past and the present. Besides, he does not question why these ideologies (i.e. menstruation in women as something dreadful) remain to have a strong impact on the position of the women in the Dalada Maligawa even today. When analyzing the existing literature and the utterances of the selected interviewees, it could be stated

7. P 112-113, Bandara, Sudarshana W.M.P., "Mahanuwara Dalada Perahera saha Samaajaya".

that the stereotypical gender identities in the Maligawa context are buttressed by people's ignorance, internalization of the dominant beliefs and gender norms, and their reluctance to question the mis(conceptions) that emerge in the form of truth.

4. Conclusion

According to the above findings, it is evident that the so-called "impurity" in women has denied them of enjoying the privileges that men enjoy in the context of the Dalada Maligawa. They are supposed to succumb to "some mystical male ideological hold that never changes" (Lindsey, 2006). As a result they would never be able to create an identity of their own, beyond the fixed identity which is attributed to them by the males on the basis of "crude biological assessments" (Lindsey, 2006). It is the male worldview which has become the accepted cultural norm or the dominant ideology in the context of the Dalada Maligawa. When taking all these ideas into consideration, it is evident that women do not/cannot contest the hegemony of the males that operates in the context of the Dalada Maligawa and they often hesitate to voice their insecurities. When it comes to the Dalada Perahera, it is not women's abilities, skills and the potential that have been taken into consideration, but the presumptions of men that women are "dirty" and "feeble", which is seemingly constructed on the basis of the biological difference between men and women.

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