



in a way it is an unkind act to call the open expression or broadcast of immense piety, compassion and generosity shown by various Buddhist leaders and ordinary citizens a road show. However cynical it looks I cannot help giving my thoughts on the recent display of this superficial enthusiasm by men and women of my motherland.

The now famous or infamous Lotus Pond again is in the news, this time because of the grand celebration by Buddhist monks from a number of countries. This international gathering was on the occasion of

of some adoring fans. Their religion and ritual are for private consumption only, and they would not want anyone to come over and watch and applaud them.

That cannot be said about the large number of activities and occasions that most leaders and politicians are taking a leading role in. A leader or a politician stands above the level of the ordinary masses and are not carried away by the glamour or clamour of the popular practices and rituals. They would resort to more serene practices if at all they want to observe their religion. That itself is

occasions, particularly on Sundays. Aren't those monks made victims of the vain attempt by power-hungry politicians making them mere puppets in their game? A simple and inexpensive meal usually prepared by innocent ordinary villager according to his ability has now turned out to be a glamorous show of exuberent food and drinks being served by the rich and famous on the grandest manner possible in order to satisfy the whims and fancies of some individuals who stand much lower in their piety or devotion than those innocent villagers.

ple act of alms giving. One should also remember that this is something done in the particular house with the participation of only family members. No outsider is invited or welcome. It is something sacred for the hostess and her family. She would not compromise and harm the sanctity of that ritual with

extra onlookers or participants.

All that sanctity and serenity has now been blasted by modernized ceremonies going under the same name. Kiri Ammalage Dane on a grand scale has become the order of the day, it is no more confined to the house of a hostess or the number of invitees limited



THE GRAND ROADSHOW OF BUDDHIST SPLENDOUR

the Vesak Full moon, coinciding with another milestone in the Sambuddhathva Jayanthi.

I have nothing but praise for the international nature of the event, but I want to comment on the continuing mustering of people and resources for an unending operation the ultimate benefit of which must necessarily be questioned. Who actually gains by such mass display? What moral or spiritual advancement is brought about by them?

We must not forget that outward show which normally falls under ritual is part and parcel of the religious life and activities of the adherents of any religion. The piety or the quality of religious conduct of ordinary men and women is embedded in their practice of these rituals. It is really through these rituals that they achieve some sort of moral advancement or upliftment to become more useful citizens hopefully coming closer and closer to ultimate goal set before them by their religion. What is even more significant is the fact that they do all this with no intention whatever of impressing others or gaining the approval

proof of the fact that they have enough strength and self-confidence not to be led astray by unwanted outward shows

Then comes the more important question, as to why so much importance is attached to these popular activities and mass celebrations. To name a few, first and foremost is the age old custom of Buddhist monks going round for alms without waiting for devotees to bring to bring them meals. This was what the Buddha himself did, and it is on record that when on his first visit to his old city Kapilavastu, he was blamed by his father for bringing insult to his family and caste. But the Buddha told his father that he was following the practice of Buddhas before him.

This practice again is not for public display but simply for obtaining what is absolutely essential for sustaining life. Now this too has become part of the public display, monks being invited to attend pinda-patha, which is the begging for alms, and made to go in a queue to be served with a variety of items of food laid out on a table. One is reminded of the usual buffet that an expensive hotel serves at a reasonable cost on

Then comes the pious act of offering at-pirikara to mark an important occasion such as remembering a dead relative or transferring merit to the deceased. This again is done with utmost devotion and participation of members of a family usually in their simple abode. Even the number of monks invited would be limited according to the means of the invitee, only the minimum required for at-pirikara being usually present. The monks deliver their sermons after the meal explaining the value of such offering and the benefits accruing to the devotees. It is not a generalized thanks giving but a highly individualized affair where the particular devotees are given credit. As against this age-old practice comes the modern version of at-pirikara in which hundreds of devotees go in procession to a temple, each carrying a bundle containing an at-pirikara, to be offered on a grand scale for a questionable purpose, because no one knows why these people are there carrying these items maybe at the bidding of some big shot. This spectacle too gives the same impression and ridiculous appearance that the mass-scale pinda-patha gives. The simple act of ordinary villager has become an excuse for some important men and women to put up an exhibition to declare to the whole world that they are performing a grand religious ceremony for the benefit of a country or a nation.

This exercise becomes even more ridiculous when one considers the fact, that as it is, any temple in Sri Lanka possesses enough and more at-pikara without being burdened with additional stock. Villagers continue the practice simply because it is considered essential after the death of someone or in remembering the dead. What an act of folly to give such a temple hundreds of this stuff?

It is only to satisfy the vain individuals who want to earn the respect of the masses by flaunting their wealth and power.

Then there is the very innocent and simple practice that village women have been carrying on for generations in cases where a family member is sick with a particular kind of illness such as measles. The lady of the house would religiously tie pandura, a coin washed in pure water and tied in a pure white cloth with the promise of giving alms to Kiri-Ammas, milk mothers or women bearing children. This ceremony popularly known as Kiri Ammalage Dane has been part of village life for a long long time. Villagers have had immense faith in the efficacy of this sim-

according to the practice and ability. Now a ceremony is conducted at some important location and advertised through media over a number of days for people to gather and take part. One such ceremony was held according to reports at Mirisvetiya Temple in Anuradhapura. Maybe to give it some sacred atmosphere. Ladies from all over the island invited to attend. I wonder whether anyone took the trouble to ascertain whether all of them came under child bearing category. That would not have been a problem for the organizers for they were keen on the number more than anything else.

A simple act of faith by ordinary village women has now been transformed into a popular tamasha for the masses to watch and be entertained. One wonders whether any of them ever think of the simple act as it used to be performed, any more.

Looking beyond such acts of questionable faith, one can see some silly exercise been carried on by the rich and famous again on a grand scale. One is going for big statues of the Buddha, taller the better. At a certain point in the development of popular Buddhism, the image of the Buddha, who was an ordinary human being to start with, was made to appear more than normal so that ordinary men and women would pay him more respect. That was the beginning of the introduction of statues of eighteen cubits and even more. That is something anyone admits now, but for the showmen who want to cash in on popular Buddhism this gives a grand opportunity to make his mark by erecting the tallest Buddha statue in the island. At what cost? The man who comes with the idea would not be so foolish as to bear it himself. Either the religious masses or the government coffers would come to his rescue. Government money is again public funds, which politicians would have no hesitation in spending lavishly for religion.

There was a proposal by the President to erect a number of Stupas in the island in order to commemorate their victory over the terrorists. That proposal I think is not going to be shelved and would be carried out soon. Who will bear the cost? Mahinda Rajapakse would not spend his money on this. It would no doubt be government money that is spent. At what cost and what benefit? Mahinda Rajapakse would no doubt be added to list of Kings who built stupas all over the country.

And the grand road show show goes on.

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