

WESAK

Editorial from *The Buddhist* 1889 Vol. No.22

The festival we have just celebrated is the greatest of our year. Our Christian friends celebrate the birth, death, resurrection, and ascension of their leader on as many different days, but in our case all is concentrated in this one great occasion - the Full-Moon Day of Wesak, on which we commemorate at once the birth of our Lord, His attainment of the Buddhahood, and His departure from the World... No other festival, therefore, can approach this in importance...

The Government holiday on this day was procured for us by the exertions of our noble President, Colonel Henry S. Olcott and the thanks of all Buddhists are due both to him and to His Excellency the Governor, who showed his liberality of mind and kindness of heart by the readiness with which he granted the boon asked for.

It has now indeed assumed the proportions of a great national and religious holiday, and year by year the accounts of its celebration become more and more glowing... This happy change is principally due to the energetic action of the Theosophical Society...

The manner in which the Festival has been celebrated in Ceylon this year must be a source of deep gratification to all true-hearted Buddhists. There were at one time those among our countrymen who despairingly expressed the opinion that the reign of Buddhism in this island was past - that the bitter persecutions of the Portuguese and the Dutch had succeeded in stamping out the life of the religion; but such pessimists would have been thoroughly undeceived if they had lived to see the outburst of national rejoicing on Tuesday last. All over the island towns and villages vied with one another in doing honour to the great occasion; flags and coloured lamps, decorations and processions, were everywhere to be seen. And this deep national joy was universally expressed with the most perfect order and decency. What a contrast to the observance of a religious holiday in England - say Whit-Monday, for example, at Hampstead Heath or Epping Forest, with its crowds of drunken ruffians commemorating the supposed descent of the Holy Spirit by bestial orgies, savage combats, and brutal horseplay...

We would specially note the gay aspect presented by the principal roads in Colombo what with flags and garlands by day, and coloured lanterns at night; the streets all through Maradana, Grandpass and the Pettah looked as though decorated for the passing of some great procession; the Temples at Maligakanda, Kotahena, and above all Kelaniya were thronged all day and night with enormous crowds of enthusiastic worshippers.

One very striking and pleasant feature in the decorations was the frequent use of the glorious standard of our Lord Buddha. This magnificent flag, which represents in their proper order the colours of the 'aura' of our blessed Lord, was introduced

by the Theosophical Society, and has now been universally accepted as a most fitting symbol of our faith.

The number of carolling parties was greater than ever before; indeed it seems to increase steadily every year, and on this occasion it is said that more than forty parties applied for carol licences. The Theosophical Society's carol party visited the temples in the neighbourhood of Colombo as usual, commencing at midnight with Maligakanda, where they were received by the High Priest in person, surrounded by his attendant monks. First of all the "Pancha Sila" was solemnly recited, many of those present joining in with great fervour... Before them was the brilliantly-illuminated Vihara, through whose arched doorway was visible the alabaster figure of our Lord; at the top of the steps stood the greatest Priest of the Southern Church; at his feet were grouped the white-robed Choristers, and in the centre waved the glorious flag of Buddha, full in the flood of light which poured from the open door. Well might the hearts of all true Buddhists thrill when they looked upon such a sight, ... when they heard the clear, sweet, childish voices upon the still midnight air the time-honoured formula of their faith.

It is well known that we are no advocates for the indiscriminate adoption of Western customs, so our readers may give us full credence when we say that in our opinion modern European music is infinitely better suited to the requirements of the Wesak carol than the tuneless, timeless Hindustani airs of which we hear so much in this country. We have heard these airs properly performed in India by the members of the Poona Gayan Samaj, and under these circumstances are certainly fully prepared to concede to them a wild and melancholy beauty of their own; but as they are usually sung in this Island they are simply not music at all. We would remind the managers of our carols that our business is not to pander to the popular taste, but to elevate it, and that it can readily be done is proved by the popularity already attained by several European airs which have managed to get themselves naturalized in Colombo. If it were a question of maintaining our own national system of music against innovation our counsel might be different; but since Hindustani and European music are both equally foreign to the Sinhalese, why should we hesitate to choose that which is obviously better suited to our wants?

There has not yet been time to receive full reports from other parts of the country, but it is already evident that in spite of the atrocious weather the same enthusiasm prevailed everywhere. Clearly the proclamation of the day as a Government holiday has had a most remarkable effect upon the feelings of the people, and it may hereafter be found that this was one of the most important steps in the great revival of the Buddhist religion now in progress in this Island.