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Buddhist New Year

In April (the month of Bak) when the sun moves from the Meena Rashiya (House of Pisces) to the Mesha Rashiya (House of Aries) in the celestial sphere, Sri Lankans begin celebrating their New Year or Aluth Avurudhu (in Sinhala) and Puththandu (in Tamil). It marks the end of the harvest season and also coincides with one of two instances when the sun is directly above Sri Lanka. On the day of celebrations, the sun is directly above Koggala (where a sun devale can be found). A New Year of the Saka era begins with each festival.

However, unlike the Western celebration of the new year at midnight on December 31st, the Sri Lankan New Year begins at a time determined by astrological signs. Also unlike western traditions, the ending of the old year and the beginning of the new year occur several hours apart from one another. This span is determined by astrology as well and is called the nona gathe (neutral period). During this time Sri Lankans are, according to custom, encouraged to refrain from material pursuits and engage solely in religious activities and traditional games.

The date of the Sri Lankan New Year, while determined by astrological signs, also tends to coincide with the end of the harvest season - for this reason, many farming communities celebrate the New Year while gathering fruits that have fallen from their trees.

Sue writes:

“ I arrived in Colombo on 13th April 2008, New Year’s Eve for Buddhists, and was met by Sid at the airport. We went straight to the village in the Knuckles Mountains as we were expected for the New Year ceremonies. I had no idea what to expect but as I was feeling pretty jetlagged after twenty odd hours travelling from Manchester via Doha and almost a day’s travel in Sri Lanka along pot holed and rutted roads in the pouring monsoon rain, I was so laid back with exhaustion and the excitement of being back, that I was probably in the most auspicious of moods myself to enjoy the rituals.

It was dark by then, after six and some of the cultural rituals had already begun: the cleaning of the house and lighting of an oil lamp. The ritual bath, in my case, was a necessity having lived in my clothes for nearly two days but by then, after several trips to Sri Lanka, I was familiar with the procedure.”



“Here in the valley at Vije’s house where we were guests for the night, washing is by the tank which fills up continuously from a pipe hanging from the stream on the mountainside. In full view of the valley, you become practised in the art of having a satisfying ‘bath’ in public, for there is always someone watching, even if you cannot see them. Curiosity, I might add, not voyeurism!”

Families indulge in a variety of rituals which are carefully determined by astrological calculations. The start of the New Year ceremonies is by looking at the so-called "old moon" and continues at the ‘right’ time to light the fire to make the kiribath, (milk rice).



Food is served ritually, by the youngest person in the household, to each person in turn. For us this meant Vije’s daughter, Menicke, serving all of us before her mother her last and we all sat down to eat.

Aurudu has become an important national holiday for both the cultures of the Sinhalese Buddhists and the Tamil Hindu Sri Lankans, and is unique as it is not celebrated in the same manner elsewhere in the world even though some countries do celebrate a similar festival on the same date or a near date.

The structure of the New Year rites, customs and ceremonies would prove an important point. Sri Lankan Buddhist influence turned this act to an act of gratitude for the past year. To Hinduism it was one of establishing purity - specially bodily purity, gradually making way to spiritual purity.

The New Year for the Buddhists and maybe according to Hindu practice, provided an important break with the past. It was a break undertaken with two important principles in mind. On the one hand, you break away from the past, but with gratitude. On the other, you do this with a firm resolve to do better in the New Year. The prayers of the Hindus to gods and the transfer of merit to gods by the Buddhists were believed to ensure a prosperous harvest and a successful New Year. This resolve was very important to both cultures - Sinhala and Tamil. It was observed on a number of occasions associated with the New Year; particularly in the astrological beliefs which gave life to certain rituals.

