

A Handbook on Celebrating Religious and Cultural Festivals in Togetherness



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தேசிய ஒருமைப்பாட்டிற்கும் நல்லிணக்கத்திற்குமான அலுவலகம்
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A Handbook on Celebrating Religious and Cultural Festivals in Togetherness

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School-based Programme to Celebrate Religious and Cultural Festivals in a Spirit of Togetherness

In the year 2009, ethnic violence that plagued our country for nearly three decades was put to an end. Then followed the post war period during which, time priority was given to the development of essential basic requirements of the people such as houses, schools, hospitals, irrigational facilities and transportation, to rebuild community life that had got destroyed.

While paying deep attention to the causes that had led to the ethnic conflicts in this country, the present Government, which came to power in 2015 has accepted, as a Government policy, that the responsibility to ensuring such a situation leading to a similar ethnic disunity would never arise in the future. In addition to improving the infrastructure facilities, the need to institute long term measures towards healing the minds of men and women, while making them contented has also been identified as a priority.

To accomplish these objectives, His Excellency the President of Sri Lanka has given priority to build up national unity and reconciliation, and has handed over the responsibility of fulfilling the task under his leadership and guidance, to Madam Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, the former President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka.

Accordingly, the Office for National Unity and Reconciliation established in the first half of the year 2015 is manned under the Chairmanship of Madam Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga through an Executive Committee, and a National Policy on Reconciliation and Co-existence has also been declared as a matter priority.

One of the major targets of this National Policy is the implementation of a reconciliation programme focusing on the student population through a school based programme. It has also been identified to build a national reconciliation through community based activities. Under the annual programme of activities of the Office for National Unity and Reconciliation, a main feature is the provision of the requisite allocation and guidance to all schools to carry out religious and cultural festivals, in the spirit of togetherness.

Further, the need to give a high priority to activities that enhance the knowledge and expand the understanding of the religious and cultural identity within the Sri Lankan community through a school based programme, has also been identified. Accordingly, a pilot project was launched in several selected schools, to build national unity and reconciliation through community based activities.

Since the need to make the school communities aware of the activities in celebrating religious and cultural festivals in togetherness is a prerequisite, this Hand Book was compiled as a source of reference for guidance, and further information.

The information provided in this Hand Book is sure to be a strong support in conducting school based religious and cultural activities.

Message of the Chairperson of the Office for National Unity and Reconciliation

The Sri Lankans, representing adverse religious, ethnic and cultural identity, have been able to promote a life style of religious harmony and co-existence for several centuries. This has contributed to a harmonious society sans religion based conflicts. However, a few occasions have been arisen in the recent past where this peaceful environment was subjected to a setback, threatening the harmony and co-existence.

In a pluralistic society, it is essential to have a profound understanding of the differences and appreciation of the religious, ethnic and cultural diversities to establish a long-term peace and unity.

It is also necessary to create an environment where diverse ethnic and religious groups could interact towards a peaceful environment, if we are to consolidate the efforts for national unity and peace. Inculcating a life style whereby one could understand and pay due respect to other religions and act with empathy and tolerance, requires to be developed. This lays the foundation to alleviate suspicion, mistrust and fear among the different communities, and better understanding of the social environment, which will guarantee the sustainable peace and harmony in a pluralistic society.

The Office for National Unity and Reconciliation in pursuance of its vision of building a harmonious multicultural society, initiated many activities with the school communities to facilitate enduring peace and religious harmony. Among these, one of the most important activities is the celebration of the festivals of national and religious significance at school level, in a spirit of togetherness.

This Handbook compiled with the experts' knowledge in which the common characteristics of the religious teachers have been highlighted, will be of much help to the teachers and students in creating an understanding among the communities of the different religions.

I express my deep gratitude to His Excellency the President Maithripala Sirisena for guidance and leadership to implement this difficult task.

I take the opportunity to thank the Experts' Committee, the Secretary of the Ministry of Education, the Secretaries of Provincial Ministries of Education including the regional and zonal Directors for their valuable contribution for the preparation of this Handbook.

My special thanks are due to the Director General and his staff of the Office for National Unity and Reconciliation for accomplishing this valuable task.

Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga

Former President of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka
Chairperson, Office for National Unity and Reconciliation

Message of the Secretary, Ministry of Education

Children are the greatest asset of a country. It is the undeniable responsibility of the elders to guide them on the correct path, kindling their creative talents and nurturing them with morals and discipline, kindness and intelligence. Towards accomplishing these goals, this Handbook has been prepared explaining the significance of the celebration of the religious, and cultural festivals. It is our intention to make the children and youth appreciate the rich diversity of this society.

Although this Handbook compiled by the Office for National Unity and Reconciliation is intended for teachers and students, I believe that it will be also beneficial to the entire Sri Lankan community. It facilitates to reduce mistrust and divisions among the different communities arising from poor information and lack of understanding. This Handbook incorporates the required facts and knowledge needed by the school community.

I expect this Handbook will be made use of, by the National and Provincial schools and the relevant Principals in carrying out the school based celebration of religious and cultural festivals.

This is a timely publication.

Sunil Hettiarachchi
Secretary,
Ministry of Education

Message of the Director General of the Office for National Unity and Reconciliation

Facilitating an environment conducive to economic, social and cultural advancement for every citizen is the main objective of the Sustainable Development Approach embarked on by the Government of Sri Lanka. In the pursuit of this goal it is essential to maintain unity, harmony and co-existence among the peoples of Sri Lanka.

Launching of a school based programme aiming at unity and reconciliation is one of the strategic measures taken by the Government as a post war activity. In this exercise the Office for National Unity and Reconciliation launched a pilot programme in selected schools to promote carrying out religious and cultural festivals collectively. Encouraged by the positive experience gathered through this effort, a national level programme has been planned.

I believe that this Handbook, which includes the necessary information to guide the school community will be a strong foundation to build religious harmony, reconciliation and co-existence in Sri Lanka.

I express my gratitude to the Experts' Committee, The Embassy of U. S. A., in Sri Lanka for granting financial assistance and the staff of the Office for National Unity and Reconciliation for their valuable efforts.

M. S. Jayasinghe
Director General
Office for National Unity and Reconciliation

Introduction

It is an accepted fact that a religious upbringing of the people in a society creates a very positive impact on that society. Throughout human civilization man has lived along with and amidst of various beliefs, rituals, religious practices, habits, isms and schisms building up his own individual identity, as provided by historical evidence.

It is noted that the influence of the main religions of the world has made an enormous contribution in moulding the cultural identity of this small Island nation of Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankans, who had moulded their life pattern within such a religious background, had cultivated a very high standard of religious reconciliation and consequently, Sri Lanka has been recorded throughout history as a country without religious conflict: this is a very especial characteristic of the country.

The Sri Lankan population while representing the four major religions of the world has had a history of a community at peace for over thousands of years with the Buddhists and Hindus living together in peace and harmony. It is no secret that the cultural heritage rooted in the similarity of the beliefs, systems, types of ritual, and rites between the two religions had contributed acting as a reinforcing force.

Simultaneously, with the Arab reawakening, because of improved intercontinental trade around the 7th - 8th centuries, there was a migration of Arabian traders who can be considered to have had introduced the culture of Islam into this country. Thereafter, at the beginning of the 16th century along with the coming of the Europeans viz., the Portuguese, the Dutch and then the British from time to time, Christianity had been introduced to this country bringing about a new impetus in development in the sphere of education and culture.

In association with such religious and cultural diversity, a religious environment was created within the country giving precedence to the extraordinary vivid and colorful belief systems, rites, rituals, customs, and manners. One would be able to gauge as to how well these practices got rooted in the Sri Lankan society, by the fact that there had never been a warlike situation originating in religious conflicts whatsoever when one considers the entire long history of the country.

The present Government has identified, as its priority, the need to develop and reinforce ethnic and religious tolerance within the Sri Lankan society, and take necessary steps to eliminate any occurrence of doubts and suspicions as to a possible communal conflict in the future. The Government strongly believes that in order to ensure that this is realized, it is very necessary to give priority to school based activities and programmes that have, as their objectives, the national unity, reconciliation and co-existence, and through it to lay a clear road towards religious and cultural harmony.

In the attempt at achieving success for this commitment, the initial foundation is being laid by the Government through the existing network of over 10,000 Primary and Secondary schools scattered all over the country. This foundation of attitudes and skills development will support the inculcation of awareness, knowledge and experience of activities, which will fill the hearts of the children with a sense of reconciliation and unity. The school curricula do not contain sufficient information to implement this programme on a broad

scale. Therefore, in order to overcome this shortcoming as a preliminary step, this Hand Book is prepared and will be made available for use in all schools with the necessary information and guidance to commemorate religious and cultural festivals in a spirit of togetherness. There is no doubt that this will provide a strong foundation to reinforce national unity and reconciliation in the country through the school community. It will also provide adequate guidance to both students and teachers.

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Instructions for the Users

In order to conduct the activities associated with the celebration of Cultural or Religious festivals of the country at national level and on a school basis, they must be incorporated with the annual school programme or the school calendar containing all common activities that must be invariably implemented in every school.

This document contains school term notes, dates on which term tests should be held, national and religious festival days, and the manner, in which the co-curricular and extracurricular activities must be conducted. Each school will prepare its own individual annual plan that it expects to implement during the year according to this annual plan instructions sent out by the Ministry of Education.

A plan is a collection of a series of actions proposed by an Institute or Organization in the present, regarding the aims and objectives it expects to achieve in the future. Accordingly, every school must plan the programme containing the projects and activities for the following year before the onset of that year. Whatever other projects there may be conducted through the zonal and divisional offices; those too must be included in the annual plan.

Given below is a skeleton with the preliminaries that should be included in the planning of a project. If the project planned on the given sketch or another accepted model, incorporates the participation of another school or schools, the project proposal must be prepared in consultation with the principal(s) of that school/those schools.

The draft format of a Project Report is given below:

1. Name of the Project
2. Objectives
3. Proposed activity/programme
4. Target group
5. Expected results/benefits and how school children are to take part/join
6. Nature of the required physical and human resources
7. Required financial resources and how they are to be obtained
8. Time frame
9. Possible unexpected obstacles and the plan to minimize them
10. Experience gained and lessons learnt

Important facts in celebrating religious and cultural festivals

There are several areas on which further attention is required to be paid in the celebration of national and religious festivals of the country and they are incorporated in this chapter. If the school community of teachers, students and or the parties connected with the school bear different views, it is advisable if a subject oriented expert will be consulted for further guidance.

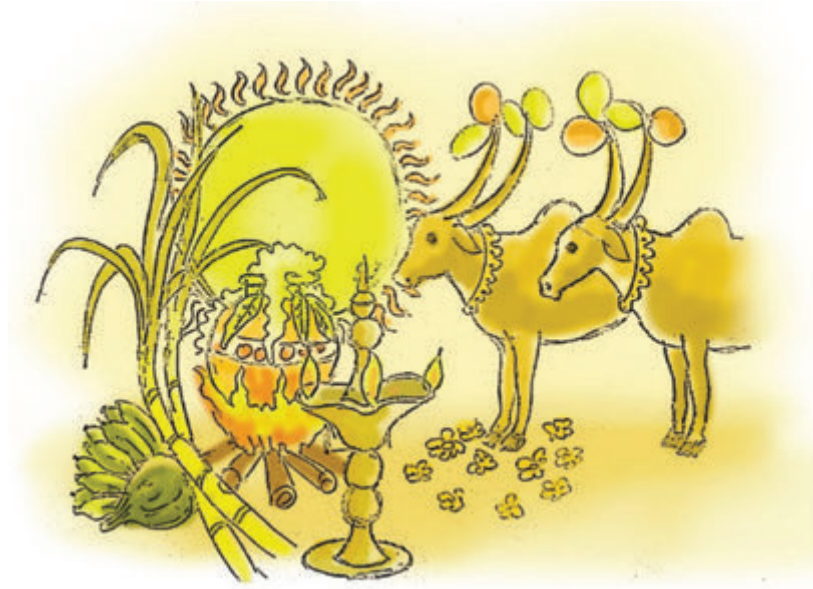
The festivals and celebrations in this Hand Book are lined up for the year in a serial order beginning with the month of January. In using this Hand Book, it would be most appropriate to pay attention to the cultural diversity at the local level and make use of other sources that contain information about the different festivals and then plan the projects, activities and work programmes, as appropriate.

- 1 In planning school based activities / projects/ programmes, priority must be given to displaying the ethnic and religious diversity. In that respect, model activities at the end of each Festival / Celebration given in this Hand Book can be implemented with suitable changes.
- 2 The customs, manners, rites and rituals associated with the cultural and religious festivals of the relevant social groups are very sensitive factors that are closely linked with their aspirations and identities. Therefore, when implementing the model activities given in this Hand Book or any other activities that you may plan, it must be ensured that they do not infringe in any manner on the fundamental values underlining the conduct of such celebrations or festivals and they do not inflict any harm on the value systems of the said social group concerned.
- 3 At the prior discussions on the planning of the proposed activities, it would be prudent to seek the assistance of a recognized expert representing the relevant religion or culture. In a situation where such action cannot be taken, it is best to avoid proposing the controversial activities.
- 4 In celebrating religious and cultural festivals, the objective of doing so needs to be highlighted for the advancement of the inter-cultural knowledge and the inter-religious knowledge and understanding. Furthermore, in transmitting the details of the festival, both Sinhala and Tamil languages must be used.
- 5 In choosing an activity, which will reflect on the diversity prevalent in the area, it is of the utmost importance to get a prior assessment of the possible obstacles that may be harmful to the unity and harmony existing among the community members. In case, if there is a possibility of the eruption of such a problem, it must be solved at the outset itself. Then only, a suitable atmosphere will be created and the relevant activity should be done.
- 6 In the planning of activities, the need to devote attention to minimizing the harm to the environment viz., to refrain from activities that will subject the animals as well as the vegetation(fauna and flora) to danger, so that the national and religious co-existence is emphasized.
- 7 Attempts must be made to maximize the benefits from the involvement of resource persons or special guests by making them fully aware of the objectives of the project.
- 8 It is of the greatest benefit to enlist the cooperation of the other cultural or religious institutions engaged at the local level, and to maintain close relationships with the officials attached to those institutions.
- 9 The common objectives in organizing religious and cultural festivals at the national level have been listed under each festival. Out of those objectives, at least one or several could be identified as the prime objective of your project or activity.
- 10 Priority must be given to the organization and planning of the projects that contribute to the fulfilment of the identified objectives.

Main targets in the collective celebration of Religious & Cultural Festivals

- 1 Acquiring an understanding of the customs and manners prevalent among other various religious communities
- 2 Acquiring the competence to live in a multiplex environment of social, religious and cultural backgrounds
- 3 Identifying the religious and cultural background of the human society in which one happens to live
- 4 Acquiring knowledge and understanding of one's own religion as well as in the other religions
- 5 Paying due respect to other religions in the same way that one pays respect to one's own religion
- 6 Acquiring the experience of working as a team
- 7 Getting the opportunity for the exchange of collective experience
- 8 Developing cooperation among the students
- 9 Handing over the religious festival traditions, customs and manners into the hands of the future generations
- 10 Consolidating the peace, reconciliation and unity through religious co-existence.

The Thai Pongal Festival



Introduction

The Thai Pongal Festival can be identified as a Thanks-giving occasion. It is an acknowledgement of the manifestation of the harmonious relationship between man and nature, as well as an expression of gratitude and thanks to the Sun, followed by the cattle and farm animals who have equally contributed to the reaping of a harvest of farm produce. The Thai Pongal Festival is an occasion, which exhibits the co-existence of the family with the society. The members of the family and the neighbours get together to pay homage to the Sun God, praying for blessings so that the following a year too, a rich harvest will be gathered, and wholesome expectations will be realized.

The Thai Pongal Festival is an occasion that has been commemorated unbroken for over centuries by the Hindu societies. The word Thai Pongal denotes the ceremony of harvesting and is celebrated every year in the month of January. The Hindu devotees begin their new year only after the Thai Pongal Festival.

According to the Tamil calendar, the word '*Thai*' indicates the first month of the year. The word Pongal means "over-flowing". Accordingly, on the Thai Pongal day, a clay pot full of milk is allowed to boil on the hearth to overflow. The belief is that such overflowing of milk symbolizes the future prosperity of the family.

The Thai Pongal is also known as '*Tamilar Thirunar*' meaning, the ceremony of the Tamil people. Their belief is that when the year begins with the offering of the first portion of milk to the God and obtaining divine blessings of the God, it would be a more successful year.

The Tamil expression '*Thai pirandal wali sirukkum*' is much believed during this festive season, which means that the birth in the Thai month paves the way to new opportunities that are precious and excellent.

Thai Pongal and the Worship of the Sun

When considering the origin of Thai Pongal Festival, it is noted that the custom of worshipping the Sun God had been the basis. Both the Egyptians as well as the Sumerians of the past had

been practicing the worship of the Sun God, while the Aryans who had migrated from Western Asia to India had also been known for practicing the worship of the Sun God. The main activity in the Thai Pongal ceremony is the offering of the very first share of the new harvest of the year to the Sun God for having given the blessings for a suitable weather, which has helped them to get a good crop of paddy that is well matured for harvesting in the cropping season.

The Thai Pongal ceremony is celebrated by the people of Tamil Nadu in India as well as the Tamils all over Sri Lanka, Malaysia, the Mauritius Island, South Africa, the United States of America, Canada and Singapore.

The Thai Pongal festival is not only confined to the Tamil people. As mentioned in the Epic Mahabharatha, it is celebrated throughout India as a common custom of the entire Indian community. According to Mahabharatha, when Bheeshma turned the Sun in the direction of the North, he had to drop his human form. This incident is known as '*Uttarayanam*'. As stated by the prophets, while the first month of the year dawns or the transition of Capricorn takes place on the 14th of January, it also marks the end of the partial Aquarius festivals. Therefore, the Thai Pongal is celebrated to mark the beginning of the journey of the Sun for another year.

It is believed that the earliest of the Thai Pongal Festival was originated in Tamil Nadu and accordingly, it is mentioned that it has a history of a minimum of thousand years. However, there is also another belief that this festival has had a history of over two thousand years.

The first day of the Thai Pongal festival is identified as '*hosi*' and on this day, the people get rid of old ideas and beliefs, thereby signifying the end of the old year and at the same time, prepare themselves to welcome the new year. According to the Tamil calendar system, the first day of the Thai month is the day to celebrate the festival of Pongal that is the first of January. However, according to the Gregorian calendar system, the Thai Pongal festival day could be either the 14th or 15th of January.

Veettu Pongal

The most important day of the Thai Pongal Festival arrives on the second day since it is celebrated at home and this day is known as the '*Sarkarai*' or '*Veettu Pongal*'.

The Hindu devotees get ready to celebrate *Veettu pongal* from the previous day itself. On the festival day all will wake up well before the Sun rises. The site of the celebration- premises or compound will be swept and cleaned. On the floor of the selected room or place, a pattern of a huge picture known as '*Kolam*' is built with the use flour and colorful grains such as rice, gingelly, green gram and turmeric powder.

The '*Kolam*' a much attractive decoration gets discolored or wiped out a little while after it was created. It helps the people to understand everything on this earth is subjected to change and decay and that "beauty" is not something permanent but temporary.

There is a custom of keeping a lighted brass lamp and a pot filled with water in the centre of the '*Kolam*'. A statue of the *Gana Devi* will be kept, lamp will be lit and the surrounding area will be covered with the spread of rice or paddy on which will be kept a coconut, banana, beetle leaves and arecanut. These objects are considered auspicious. At first, *Gana Devi* will be worshiped followed by offerings to the representation of other deities. The Lighting of lamps represents the dispelling of darkness and dawn of light, while the pot filled with water signifies the prosperity and plentiful of crops.

Kotikkum Pal (Boiling of milk)

A brand-new pot will be used for this purpose. Leaves of turmeric, ginger and mango will be kept on the mouth of the pot and tied round. On the outside of the pot on three sides, there will be a drawing of a *Thrishula* - a tri-point weapon or *Thrinuur* used by the deities. Having daubed it with perfumery ingredients, a dot like mark on the forefront will be drawn. Then water and milk will be poured into the pot. The husband and wife will worship the Sun God together. Then the pot as has been prepared will be placed carefully on the fire lit with camphor, with the participation of everyone in the family. As the milk boils and overflows, everyone will say aloud the words "*pongaalo pongal*" and sometimes, a musical instrument known as '*sangu*' will be played. They believe that just as the milk boils over, their joy of life and heart, and the happiness will spill over in abundance. The main symbol of the Thai Pongal Festival is the Pongal Rice that will be made with the rice of the new harvest and the fresh milk, jaggery, ghee, cashew and dried plums. Food is prepared without meat, fish or eggs, but using only fresh milk, ghee, whey, grains, flour, sugar, trickle and jaggery.

After offering Pongal Rice to the Sun God with flowers, beetle and incense sticks, the inmates of the house and their kith and kin dress in clean garments to go to the Kovil and participate in the religious activities that will be held there. On their return from the Kovil they would witness the entire neighbourhood in festive mood.

Matta Pongal

The important activity of the third day known as *Matta Pongal*, is to pay special attention to the domestic animals like the cattle, especially, the milking cow. The cow dung will be cleaned, and the cows will be bathed and decorated with garlands on their heads, patterns on their bodies and adorned with the small twinkling bells. The horns of the bulls will be covered with gold and copper caps. The prime objective of this activity is to show appreciation to the bull and the cow for the immense service rendered by them in cultivation and family sustenance. The stray cattle roaming about are also entertained with special food and sweet meats, which are consumed by the humans.

Kanum Pongal

The last day of the festival is *Kanum Pongal*. *Kanum* means visit to honour or pay respect. A visit is paid to pay respect to all the relatives, friends and neighbours who had helped them in the cultivation work. For the Tamil community, this is the day to visit relatives for the New Year. Nevertheless, some prefer to spend this day at leisure with the family members enjoying themselves at beaches or parks.

In the very early times, the Thai Pongal festival was basically limited to the farmer community. However, by now it has evolved to a level of a national festival of the Tamil or Hindu people irrespective of ethnic, religious, caste and other divisions. Pongal Festival continues for three to four days and one of these days is declared by the Government as a public holiday.

The Hindu community honour the custom of entertaining neighbours by offering meals to them on the Thai Pongal day. This helps to maintain goodwill among the neighbours and strengthen the unity, peace and harmony among the different communities.

The traditional customs/taboo, practices followed in celebrating the Thai Pongal Festival carry admirable cultural values and therefore, celebrating the Thai Pongal day with understanding will contribute immensely to maintaining co-existence and the national reconciliation.

Model Activities

A. Carrying the Pongal - rice to a public institute in the area

To celebrate the Pongal festival in a symbolic manner, the Pongal - rice and other gifts are offered to the inmates of a common institute such as Elders' Home, Children's Home etc., and it would symbolize the spirit of the festival that they had contributed to a most deserving social group

Methodology

1. Preparation for the festival: Having discussed with the relevant institution, fix a date well in time
2. On the relevant date, engage in appropriate activities in the Institute
3. In order to make others knowledgeable about the Thai Pongal festival, arrange a discussion or deliver a lecture on the Topic

B. Arranging a guest visit to a school in the village

This is an activity that can be organized by a school where most of students are Hindus and they may take the Pongal rice and gifts to another school where the majority is non-Hindus.

Methodology

1. Select a suitable school for the visit of guests and make the prior preparation for the event
2. Collect the suitable gifts that would be useful for students through the student contributions
3. Make the selected school aware of the Thai Pongal Festival
4. Conduct cultural activities based on the Thai Pongal Festival
5. Arrange the scheduled school to participate in the festival through activities associated with receiving and welcoming relatives

C. Preparation of the Pongal rice

This is an activity that can be practiced in a school where the majority represents the Hindu students.

Methodology

1. Awareness on the customs that are followed in the preparation of the Pongal rice. Guidance of an elderly person may be obtained
2. Make the students aware of the required ingredients for the preparation of the Pongal rice and its nutrition values
3. When grouping of students, it is necessary to ensure that students of different religious faiths mix up and plan activities that will help them to build up closer relationships
4. Organize a programme and a plan of action where the students of a Hindu school prepare the Pongal rice and carry it to a non-Hindu school

D. Introduction of a dramatic presentation of the Thai Pongal Festival

It is appropriate that this drama be enacted by students of a Hindu school and a non-Hindu school while paying special attention to the traditional customs and taboos. It is better if the students above Grade 6 are encouraged to participate.

Methodology

1. Write of a drama script on the Thai Pongal festival under the direction or leadership of a competent teacher
2. In the performance of the drama, emphasize on the common customs and rituals practiced in the celebration of the New Year by the Sinhala and Hindu people. For example, the worshipping of the Sun God, boiling milk until overflow etc.
3. In the performance of the traditional customs and rituals, food should not be prepared with fish, meat and eggs at any time or place.
4. The neighbouring schools and the community must be invited to watch the drama.
5. Visitors and the community should be treated and entertained with the traditional rituals performed to signal the Thai Pongal Festival.

E. Celebration of Matta Pongal festival

This day can be used to pay heed to the domesticated animals without any difference based on the religion. Special treatment given to the milking cows can be considered as an act of gratitude.

Methodology

1. Make the students aware of the Matta Pongal customs
2. Make the students aware of the services rendered by the cow
3. Make the student population aware of the gratitude to be offered to animals such as looking after the milking cows in respect of Matta Pongal
4. Ensure student participation in the proceedings without any religious or other distinction

F. Staging an arts festival to coincide with the Veettu Pongal Celebrations

With the objective of improving inter-cooperation among linguistic and religious groups, an arts festival can be organized to commemorate the Veettu Pongal customs.

Methodology

1. Make the student population knowledgeable of the Veettu Pongal celebrations
2. Organize a concert with a mix of cultural presentations of drama, lyrics and singing
3. Organize an inter-school participatory festival and invite students of a school of different religious faith to be the guest

G. Spending the day with a Hindu family

By spending a day with a Hindu family during the Thai Pongal day will provide an opportunity for students of other ethnic or religious faith, in gaining first hand experience on the Thai Pongal customs.

Methodology

1. Organize group activities in collaboration with the students of a Tamil medium school in the neighbourhood

2. Select houses or residences amenable to providing opportunities to the students to gain experience
3. Make the students knowledgeable about ways and means to be followed when living in group situations
4. Share the experiences gained with other co-students and evaluate the experiences

H. Observing a Thai Pongal celebration and participating in it

To strengthen the national unity and reconciliation, it is important that a selected group of students representing different religions to participate in the festivities and observe the proceedings of Thai Pongal Festival at a suitable place such as home, school or any other suitable place.

Methodology

1. Obtain prior permission from the festival organizers
2. Make the participating students aware of the details of the programme
3. Encourage students to participate in the programme by observing customs, rites, rituals and taboos etc., and discuss the value of acquiring knowledge of the festival while respecting and conforming to the traditional customs, rituals, etc.

The Maha Shiva Raathri Celebration



Introduction

The festival of the Maha Shiva Raathri is observed by the Hindu devotees all over the world. It is an occasion where the arts combine with the religious background. The objective of this festival is to brighten the spiritual life of man by chasing away the darkness of ignorance through the light of knowledge and understanding.

The Maha Shiva Raathri day is regarded as the day on which the Dance of Shiva occurred in the night. On this day, special attention is paid to fasting, meditation and worship of God Shiva. Hindu devotees believe that spending this night in meditation is considered to be the most important night to respect and honour the God Shiva and by engaging in meritorious activities, the devotees could attain spiritual emancipation. It is customary for the family, relations, friends and neighbours to gather in the night and observe the Maha Shiva Raathri day with the expectation of spiritual emancipation through co-existence and togetherness.

The God Shiva

According to the Hindu concept of Trinity, as explained in Hinduism, the Brahma, the Vishnu and the Shiva are the three principal gods in Hindu religion. Shivasites consider God Shiva to be the principal god and believe in him. They call God Shiva by other names of Mahadev, Maheshvara and Eashvara. As per the concept of the Trinity, the God Shiva, while symbolizing the nature also has the power to destroy the world. The devotees believe that by making offerings to God Shiva, good health, prosperity and fertility would follow.

The Hindus also believe that the palace of the God Shiva is situated on the top of *Kailasha-koota* rock. The consort of God Shiva is Parvathi (Parvati Devi). She is identified by several other names such as Kaali, Durgaa, Gauri, and Matha. The vehicle of God Shiva is a bull called Nandi. His weapon is the Thrishula (three-pointed weapon). On the forehead of God Shiva is a third eye and it is said that if one is seen by the third

eye he will be burnt to ashes. However, it is the belief that God Shiva will never look at anyone with the third eye.

The God Shiva is also known to be a super Yogi. The name Shiva means “giving up” or “emptiness”. The way to approach God Shiva is through deep meditation. The offering to God Shiva is performed as an offering to a sex organ namely the ‘Shiva lingam’. A traditional custom prevailing among the Hindus is the bathing of Shiva-lingam that is constructed out of rock with the milk on special religious days.

The Background of the Observance of the Maha Shiva Raathri

The Hindu devotees observe the Maha Shiva Raathri to honour the great virtues of God Shiva. However, there are two versions of the reason for observing the Maha Shiva Raathri. One version is that it is for observing the moment the God Shiva attained an ecstatic trance. The other version is to celebrate the day of the marriage of God Shiva to Parvathi. According to one of the stories, Parvathi Devi liked nine nights, but Shiva liked only the night of Shiva. In the evening of the thirteenth day, God Shiva drank the poison that surfaced on the sea of milk (*kiri muhuda*), which is a mythical entity, and pretending he had lost consciousness, and then performed a dance called Sandhya. Associated with the same event, on the thirteenth lunar night the other gods made offerings to God Shiva chanting lyrics through all four quarters of the night. The Hindus consider this night as the Shiva Raathri and have been celebrating it in a festive mood from the earliest times. They keep awake throughout all four quarters of this night and make offerings to the God Shiva.

Similarly, it is mentioned in the Puranas of Ahamahela that at one time there had been a total destruction of the world and the entire world had been brought under the rule of God Shiva. In this night filled with total darkness, the goddess Parvathi having made offerings and prayed to God Shiva through the four quarters of the day had approached him in the night still dark and prayed as follows:

“Oh! my Lord, how did I make offerings to you and pray to you this night? To those devotees who prayed to you in the same way on the Shiva Raathri may you shower the prosperity in this birth, the heaven in the next birth, and emancipation (moksha) finally”.

The God Shiva having sympathy with responded by granting her boon. Accordingly, the Hindu devotees from that day itself commemorate the Maha Shiva Raathri with festivity.

Every year, the Maha Shiva Raathri falls on the day of the new moon in the month of February or Krishna chaturdasi - the day of the half-moon. According to the Hindu philosophy, the Hindu devotees are keen on spending the Shiva Raathri in a meaningful manner with the aim of attaining emancipation. They believe that by spending this night in fasting will provide them with security, prosperity and joy in the present life and the heavenly fortunes after the death.

The Maha Shiva Raathri Offerings

On the day of the Shiva Raathri, people wake up very early in the morning with an energetic frame of mind to spend that night meaningfully along with those of his household and neighbours, so that they may achieve the status of trance. They take a bath to purify themselves

before approaching the auspicious time, attend to their day-to-day work and then begin the fasting. The Purana texts mention that during the auspicious time that comes under God Shiva, one must concentrate only on God Shiva and meditate. Those who make offerings to God Shiva will also go to the shrines of Shiva known as 'Shiva Devala'. Incantations to the God Shiva are rendered, offerings for the worship of God Shiva are kept ready, and then, the 'Shivalingam' is bathed with milk. The devotees plead to God Shiva for sympathy and protection.

There are eight types of fasting rituals mentioned in the Shiva Mahapuranas, the Lingapuranas and in the Kandapuranas. Accordingly, the Shiva Raathri is divided into *three, viz.,uttama sivaraathri, matthama sivaraathri and adhama sivaraathri*. On all three Shivaraathris, the devotees continue to engage in fasting uninterruptedly and meditate according to the fundamental religious doctrine of Hinduism. The Puranas mention that engaging in such meditations in the name of God Shiva would help them acquire merit. As mentioned previously, the Hindus strongly believe that fasting on this night would result in the protection, progress, happiness etc., in this life and in the receipt of heavenly gifts after death.

Cultural Activities

All the Hindu devotees spend the day and the night on the Maha Shiva Raathri day without any sleep, but dwelling on the memory of god Shiva and engage in cultural activities in association with the Dance of God Shiva. The Maha Shiva Rathri commemoration has been instrumental in consolidating the Hindu cultural aspects and enriching the Hindu culture. More details about these cultural aspects can be found in the works such as "Sivanandalahiri" and "Sahithyarathnakraya". Out of the dance items, the Nadarajan dance is the foremost. "Sahithyarathnakaraya" has the following mention about the dance of Nadarajan:

"as summer wanes, and the season of rain approaches, there comes a moment when the sky gets dark gathering clouds as they accumulate when there would be an eruption of thunder and lightning. Then falls a light drizzle of rain. On this situation when nature's loveliness is enhanced the peacock danced his premiere to the peahen almost to say "here -I spread out my feathers" and generated a great joy. Beautifying the dance further for goddess Parvathi too, joined in"

Sivanandalahri too has described the Nadarajan dance in almost the identical manner.

The Shiva and Parvathy dance performance has contributed immensely towards the enrichment of the Hindu arts while the Nadarajan dance performance can be identified as an occasion when the Hindu culture, the philosophy and the arts are wedded together.

The historical Shiva Devalaya built in stone during the Polonnaruwa period is an evidence to prove that the worship of God Shiva had been prevalent in this country too. It has been mentioned that the King Rajasinghe of Seethavaka was a strong believer of God Shiva. According to mythology, God Shiva is the father of Skandakumara (the God Katharagama) and God Ganesha.

Significance of observing the Maha Shiva Raathri

To inculcate reconciliation, peace and equality we need much dedication, patience, perseverance and faith in humanity. An occasion that reflects dedication and perseverance devoted to

achieving a goal is best expressed in the efforts taken by the devotees in fasting and keeping up the whole night and devoting that time to other meritorious deeds on the Maha Shiva Raathri day. This day is also celebrated as a festival day where the attempts taken to spread the darkness of ignorance and make the people disunited are defeated and saved; the lamps that burn through the night keep the darkness away, so do the people's spiritual life lit up with knowledge.

The religious features of Shivaism are clearly discernible in the Sri Lankan identity. The fact that Buddhism and the worship of God Shiva for several centuries had been enriching each other, a practice continued to the present day, is clearly visible from the various religious rites and rituals performed in association with the Buddhist religious offerings at the places of the Buddhist worship.

The Maha Shiva Raathri observed by the Hindu devotees maintaining their moral discipline and conduct their day-to-day affairs in a better way of sharing the sacred bond of man, which is good and wholesome. Through the religious observances and offerings made by millions of the Hindu devotees throughout the world on the Maha Shiva Raathri, indicates the man's great and sacred bond with Good.

Model Activities

A. Watching a Maha Shiva Raathri Festival

The students of a Hindu school may observe a Shiva pooja in a temple (*Kovil*) on a Maha Shiva Raathri festival with the participation of students from other schools.

Methodology

1. Obtain permission from the religious officials in charge of the relevant temple (*Kovil*) and make the initial preparations.
2. Make an opportunity to obtain a clear awareness of the festival of the Maha Shiva Raathri.
3. Obtain permission of the parents for the participating students.
4. Obtain instructions from the religious authorities on the religious traditions and the way to conduct them within the temple premises and guide the students to follow those instructions.

B. Organizing the offerings to God Shiva and a cultural entertainment

This is an activity that can be organized in a Hindu school involving schools having students of other religions.

Methodology

1. Invite the students of the schools in the neighbourhood where there are students of other religions to join in with the offerings to God Shiva.
2. Make awareness of the Maha Shiva Raathri through a discussion forum.
3. Organize a cultural entertainment linked to the Maha Shiva Raathri in accordance with the Hindu Culture.
4. Organize a cultural show and creative presentations based on the experiences gained through the activities of the Maha Shiva Raathri, in an appropriate manner.

The Sinhala and Tamil (Hindu) New Year



Introduction

The Sinhala and Tamil (Hindu) New Year, joyfully celebrated by both the Sinhalese and the Tamils irrespective of social divisions such as religion and language, is the foremost festival rooted in society along with the rites and taboos founded on the transition of the Sun. The Sinhala and Tamil festival, which exhibits the remarkable connection both physical and spiritual that existed between man and nature from the birth of man on Earth, marks the gratitude of man for nature evident, for having given everything necessary for the sustenance of man's livelihood.

The Sinhala and Tamil New Year is the major festival based on the customs and practices associated with the movement of the Sun (*Surya Sankranthiya*) embedded in the society of the Sinhala and Tamil people to celebrate with much enthusiasm and joy, in unity and in harmony leaving aside all divisive factors like religion, language and so on. Ever since the birth of the human beings on earth, the unprecedented nature of the physical and moral bond between the man and the natural environment was displayed through the Sinhala and Tamil New Year, by way of expressing their gratitude to the nature, which provided all their requirements to keep their life moving. Hence, the Sinhala and Tamil New Year festival is an occasion to express the gratitude of the people to the nature.

Sri Lankans who had got accustomed to an agricultural civilization had always maintained fair and healthy relations with the environment. Symbolic of their show of gratitude to the environment are the celebrations resorted to environmental friendly traditional customs and practices replete with humanism. The Sinhala names for April being "*Bak*", month being "*Maha*" and festival being "*Ulela*", the celebration is known as "*Bak Maha Ulela*". Since it is based on the transition of the Sun, it is also known as "*Surya Mangallaya*", the feast of the Sun. It provides a strong foundation to build peace, happiness and reconciliation among the nations.

The New Year and the Worship of the Sun

In almost all the civilizations in the world, worshipping of the Sun had been prevalent well over several centuries in different forms. Very reliable evidence can be found to prove that the human species that lived in the different periods of prehistoric era has resorted to offerings,

rites, rituals initiated with the Sun and wished for expected fertility, prosperity and happiness. Accordingly, many countries hold festivals granting divinity to the Sun; Greeks and Romans worshipped the Sun as Apollo, Incas as Qwetsalcott? (check), Indians as Suryadeva.

Later, the Aryans as well, who had spread throughout the world from very ancient times had been worshipping the Sun God. The Sun has been accorded a very special place in the New Year festival, which is believed to have been spread over to this country. The Spring festival celebrated by the Aryans to worship the Sun is dedicated to observing their rituals of religious activities and celebrating the festival in togetherness.

The people of this country too who had got accustomed to an agricultural lifestyle believed in the Sun as a powerful God who provided energy and sustenance to all beings, trees, plants, animals (fauna and flora). The time after harvesting the crop was considered as a period of relaxation dedicated to the nature. Our ancestors made sure that they paid tribute in festive terms to nature and principally to the Sun, for having been helpful in getting the harvest. People seek the blessing of the Sun further, to obtain physical health and mental strength so that they could begin the next season of agricultural activities afresh. The Sinhala and Tamil New Year, which is identified as the festival of the Sun, the *Surya Mangallaya*, have a variety of cultural aspects and evolving so, is the only ceremony in this country giving priority to the Sun. All other ceremonies are performed according to the lunar calendar.

The month of April or *Bak* is the prettiest of all months of the Year. It is the most prosperous month with all the trees and plants blossoming and bearing fruit. Every year the transition of the Sun on the 12th, 13th and 14th day of the month of April occurs that symbolizes the splendour of nature. Based on this inseparable bond between man and nature, it has become customary among most of the social groups in the world to engage in celebrations that are of different type.

Sinhala and Tamil New Year and Astrology

The Sinhala and Tamil New Year is determined on the transition pattern of the Sun. According to Astrology, the Sun travels along the orbit of the twelve Signs in the Zodiac. The first of these is known as Aries and the twelfth is known as Pisces. The Sun's journey through the twelve signs takes one year, when the Sun reaches the sign of Aries it signifies the end of a year. Thus, the last day when the Sun moves from Pisces to Aries is considered as the old year. According to Astrology, the day the Sun enters Aries is called the New Year, which is called Aluth Avurudda in Sinhala language and Puttaandu in Tamil language.

There is evidence that the Astrology knowledge regarding the auspicious times had been prevailed in the ancient times of Sri Lanka and such knowledge had been used for special activities. The people competent in Astrology were employed in the Government service. Some of the official designations given to them were: *Maha Nekathina*, *Sanvathsarika Nayaka*, *Ganana Nayaka* and *Ganithaya*. Historical records reveal that those 'designations' had the responsibility of determining the auspicious times for the New Year and other significant activities. All activities related to Royal functions, religious functions and cultural activities were done at the auspicious times. The Sinhala and Tamil New Year was declared a public holiday by the British in 1886 by the Holiday Act of 1866.

History of the New Year

The Sinhala New Year celebrations, believed to have come down from the time of the King Pandukabhaya, have been originally celebrated as a festival marking special auspicious times. Later, during the period of the Kandyan kings, there had been four major festivals held in the up country known as “*Kanda Udarata*” under the patronage of the royal palace. The New Year festival held in the month of *Bak* was the prime festival among them.

Both Robert Knox and John Davy had written about New Year festival celebrated at the auspicious times, under the royal patronage of the Kandyan kings. With the invasion of the Europeans, the commemoration of some of the religious and cultural celebrations of this country were threatened with gradual extinction. As a solution to this problem, some of the leaders of the Ceylon national movement, with the participation of large number of people, had organized a full scale New Year festival held in Colombo in 1913 at the Victoria Park, presently known as the *Vihara Maha Devi Udyanaya*. Since then, the commemorating of the New Year celebrations had increased gradually spreading throughout the country. It has entered the social psyche as a festival replete with activities reinforcing the social bonds founded in the family, which exhibits the identity of the Sri Lanka nation.

Commemoration of the Dawn of the New Year

The commemoration of the dawn of the New Year can be considered as a procedure with special features fostered through Buddhist and Hindu religious traditions. Although the Astrological basis of the dawn of the New Year is the transition of the Sun from Pisces to Aries, for the Sri Lankans it is much more than a mere scientific matter to do with stars. Those countries where the Gregorian calendar is used, the 31st of December is considered as the last day of the year and the midnight of the day will mark the dawn of the 1st of January, hence the dawn of the New Year, which is celebrated. According to the Sinhala and Tamil New Year, there is a time gap between the end of the old year and the dawn of the New Year, which is considered as a period of transition. During this transition, there is ‘no auspicious time’ and hence, called the ‘*nonagathataya*’. It is expected that during the ‘no auspicious time’ no any activity, not even the partaking of food, will be done except engaging in religious activities. Due to this reason, the Buddhists gathering at temples and the Hindus congregating in the Kovils is a common sight during this period.

New Year customs and taboos

During this period of ‘no auspicious time’, a special place is accorded to religious offerings. Also, through the rituals associated with customs and taboos, one could achieve relief and joy both physically and mentally. In examining the Buddhist and Hindu traditions followed in the New Year customs and practices, it is noted that a greater space is given for the reinforcement of unity, reconciliation and co-existence among races. Given below is a list of the New Year customs followed by both Buddhists and Hindus during the dawn of the New Year:

1. Observing the new moon for the new year
2. Last bathing for the old year
3. ‘Nil auspicious time’ or time for piety
4. Lighting the hearth fire and cooking of meals

5. Partaking of meals
6. Exchange of gifts and starting work
7. Anointing oil on the head and the first bath for the new year
8. Visiting kinsman and friends

Viewing the new moon for the New Year

The first custom of the New Year is the observing of the new moon; reminiscent of following the custom of worshipping the moon, which was prevalent in the society of olden times. The moon symbolizes completeness or fullness as well as gentleness. It is believed that the mental satisfaction gained by observing the new moon will be conducive to ensuring good health throughout the year and long life. There are more reasons for observing the new moon. Foremost among them is the expectation of a new spirit throughout the approaching year and the determination to ensure a very successful completion of the future activities embarked on.

According to the Buddhist tradition, the date system is planned based on the journey of the moon. The moon reaches fullness within a 28-day journey. As mentioned in the Vedic texts, the Maha Brahman had named the moon as the chief authority over the medicinal herbs, seeds and stars of auspicious times. There is a social acceptance in general that the moon as well the sun exerts a very close influence over the life of the ordinary man.

Last bathing for the passing year

It is a custom followed since in the ancient times to engage in auspicious activities only after bathing and cleansing oneself in preparation for the New Year. In this context, with the hope of enjoying a healthy life in the approaching New Year, the last bath for the passing year will be fulfilled at an auspicious time anointing oneself with the preparation made from plants known to possess medicinal values.

Nonagathaya or Punya kaalaya (meritorious time)

The Sinhala term '*nongathaya*' is the period of transition between the waning of the old year and the dawn of the New Year. The term itself means "nil auspicious", which is a period having no auspicious times. It is customary to finish all other activities including consuming of food before the onset of '*nonagathaya*' time and engage in religious activities. People go to religious places with a single objective of obtaining blessings and hence, positive mutual human relationships are reinforced. Giving primacy to religious activities as the new year dawns provides room for blessings to conduct one's future activities with success. Thus, it is a common sight to see family members getting together and going to temple during this period.

Lighting the hearth and cooking the meals

With the dawn of the New Year, the first and the foremost activity is the lighting of the hearth that takes place simultaneously. In the traditional society, the dawn of the New Year is announced by the young women getting together and playing the rabaana, a traditional musical instrument. This is reminiscent of the custom of worshipping the god of fire (*Gini Devi*) that prevailed in the ancient society. Lighting of the hearth is performed at the auspicious time as determined by the astrologers and usually it is done by the mother of the family, dressed in a prescribed colour and facing the prescribed direction as per the directive of the astrologers. After the lighting of the hearth, the food is prepared in a brand-new pot. Although there may be variations in

this custom at different localities, every locality follows the common practice of preparing traditional food *kiribath* (milk rice) and traditional sweetmeats such as *kevum*, *kokis*, *aggala*, *aluva* etc.

Partaking of food

The food is the foremost need of every living being, and the main factor that provides life's attributes. Therefore, among the traditional customs, cooking food at an auspicious time with the dawn of the New Year is very special. The food cooked on a fire lit at an auspicious time is also partaken by the family members at an auspicious time. This is also done facing the stipulated direction, and dressed in the stipulated colour. This is a very special occasion which exhibits the unity and togetherness of the family. This custom of partaking of food is observed with the leadership of the father. As the head of the household, the first mouthful of *kiribath* is taken by the father first, wishing every member of the family a healthy and prosperous New Year. This custom is then followed by the mother and the rest of the members of the family. Then everybody gets together and consume the food prepared for the New Year. Therefore, among the customs, the rites and taboos of the New Year and partaking of food is continued as a very especial custom.

Another commendable custom is the beginning of one's livelihood work, at an auspicious time. The formal livelihood work will begin symbolically in the New Year by engaging in whatever activity that one prefers or one used to do. However, all transactions are the reminiscent of the bond with the nature. Since from the ancient times, the transaction done with the well was a custom, which was traditionally maintained. It was believed that the wish to live in the approaching year without any hardship would be fulfilled by this transaction done with the well. The money transaction is another custom conducted by exchanging a coin wrapped in a betel leaf with a person who leads his life with virtuous earnings. The belief associated with this custom is that by doing such a transaction will bring peace and amity, and hence, one's own life would be fortunate in the New Year dawn.

Following the initial ritualistic customs, it was customary for people to engage in traditional games to ensure a period of recreation. The significance of the games is that everyone regardless of the age, get themselves involved in the competitions which enhances the unity and eliminate the misunderstandings of the past. There are two types of games *viz.*, indoor games and outdoor games. The indoor games played usually on the floor of the house are: *Pancha keliya* (board game played with small sea shells) and *Olinda keliya* (played with Olinda seeds, usually by women). The outdoor games are: *Onchili vaarama* (going on a swing while singing traditional songs); *Raban sural* (playing a tambourine accompanied with the singing of lyrics); *Kamba edeema* (tug of war); *Kana mutti bindeema* (breaking a pot hanging on a line of rope); *Kotta pora* (a game where one of two combatants would try to unseat the other hitting him hard with a pillow); *Lissanagaha negima* (climbing the greasy pole) and so on. It is a common occurrence for the villagers to get together in the open air and participate in these games. Selecting the Queen of the Sinhala New Year from the young women who participate at the event is another special activity.

Visiting relatives

Visiting relatives during the festival times is a very important custom during the period of the Sinhala and Tamil New Year in reinforcing traditions as well as in strengthening the bonds of kinship. Visiting parents and offering gifts is a valuable social custom associated with the New Year. It helps to renew and strengthen existing relationships and forget and forgive previous misunderstanding and hurt feelings.

Anointing oil on the head and bathing

The prime expectation from the custom of anointing oil on the head and bathing is to ensure good health. As per this custom, the head is washed with the essence of the crushed medicinal herbs, and anointed with oil. This is done under the leadership of a distinguished person of the village, the kovil or devalya or the temple. In observing this custom also as per the auspicious time, the colour of the clothes that would be worn and the direction to be faced would be stipulated. The first bath for the New Year takes place after the anointing of oil.

The Tamil New Year

The Hindus believe that the bringing of peace and prosperity to the earth by *Indra deva* who is the sovereign Prince of Peace in Hinduism will be the dawn of the New Year. According to the traditional solar calendar, the first month of the year is the month of April, which is also known as the month of *Chittara*. This month is known in Tamil as *Varuda Payirappu* or *Chittarai Thirunal*.

It is mentioned in Hinduism that the New Year season based on the month of Chittara is celebrated based on the creation of a new era known as Sathya Yuga (era of truth) as referenced by Brahman in creating the universe. This ceremony is known by different names in different parts of South India viz., *Udagi*, *Vugadi*, *Samvathsara* etc., is very similar to the Sinhala New Year. This is commemorated towards the end of March or at the beginning of the month of April.

Some South Indian provinces commemorate the ceremony of Puttaandu that falls on the 14th of April. This festival, launched as a harvesting festival, coincides with the ceremonies organized to commemorate the transit of the sun from Pisces to Aries, has gained much recognition as a provincial New Year festival in India. Bathing of holy water has become the main feature associated with this festival.

Tamil New Year customs

On the New Year's Day, the mother being the first one to wake up early in the morning blind folds the family members and takes them to the spot having a lucky view where a statue of a deity is kept in the house. Similarly, they will be exposed to the sight of gold, jewellery, fruits etc., and thereafter, they will be shown their own faces through a mirror. Then only, the Hindus believe that by engaging in these activities prosperity will be dawn on them.

Getting ready for the New Year is a procedure following a set of very special customs. The area adjacent to the entrance of the house will be beautified with colorful patterns known as *Kolam* and *Rangoli*. In the centre of the *Kolam* decoration, a lamp known as *Kukku vilakku* will be kept. This will be followed by the observation of the custom of *Kanni*, which means the lucky sight for to begin the activities. Goods such as gold, fruits, vegetables, jewellery, flowers, rice, etc., are considered as the special lucky objects and it is believed that looking at these will produce prosperity.

The most important custom followed on the New Year day is the washing of the head of oneself with special medicinal herb extracts. Followed by a bath after the purification, one gets dressed up in the stipulated colour decided for the New Year.

It is a custom to clean the house with a fresh application of clay and cow-dung and offer flowers and light lamps seeking the protection from God Ganesha. The main customs are: putting up seven mango leaves in the main threshold seeking protection; and decorating with betel, arecanut and fruits and bringing in a pot full of water to the compound from the front. All these customs are observed before the dawn of the New Year. The New Year begins afterwards. The main customs are the lighting of the hearth at the auspicious time followed by preparation *Kiribath* (milk rice) and partake the same at the auspicious time. These customs are observed under the leadership of the head of household (usually, the father) with the participation of the entire family.

The auspicious time for transaction will come after the said activities. This custom is known as *Kai visesham*. There will be the exchange of gifts with the Head of the household. Transaction and exchange of gifts are very special customs observed on the New Year day.

One of the main customs of the Hindus is going to the Kovil, worshipping the gods and receiving blessings for the new year after all the major activities are done at the auspicious time. The gifts to the poor, the helpless and the beggars are also distributed.

To symbolize the commencement of the agricultural activities for the New Year, a sod of earth is cut at an auspicious time. This is known as '*Arpidi*', which is similar to the Sinhala custom of starting work in the New Year. The Sinhalese and Sri Lankan Tamils both engaged in religious activities during the period is known as *Punya kaalya*' (time for merits). The Tamils too engage in bathing using a medicinal mixture known as *Maruthiniyar*. This custom is observed in anticipation of good health throughout the year and is like the Sinhala custom of anointing oil on the head for the New Year. The difference between the Sinhalese New year customs and the Tamil New Year customs is that the Sinhala New Year customs are observed over several days while the Tamils customs are confined to a single day.

Both the Sinhalese and the Sri Lankan Tamils, celebrate the New Year on the same day. There is much similarity in the customs and beliefs of both these communities. In Sri Lanka, the auspicious times are decided by the National Committee on Auspicious Times. However, among the Tamil community, there are some who follow the auspicious times declared by the State of Tamil Nadu, India

Symbols of the New Year

The Kowla

The kowla is a special bird that can be sighted during the new year period. There is a special relationship between the New Year and this bird. The sound of this bird (kuhoo kuoo) is considered as a message of announcement of the new year that is approaching.

Erabadu flowers

By March-April of the year the season of the Spring arrives. All trees and vines are laden with multi coloured flowers and fruits. *Erabadu* is a special type of flower that blossoms during the New Year season. The *Erabadu* tree gets covered with red flowers signaling the dawn of the New Year.

Information on Folk games of the New Year

The traditional folk games that are performed during the Sinhala and Tamil New Year season have a long history. These games conducted with the co-operation and participation of the villagers contribute strongly towards improving the co-operation, bond and the friendship among the people in the community, in addition to dispelling suspicion, and distrust among the people. In the past, the friendship and cooperation were considered the invaluable prizes that are received for participating in the games at festivals.

According to the opinion of Professor Ludo wyke who had done a research on the folk games of Asia that, compared to the games in other Asian countries, the Sri Lanka folk games had been developed under a very special background. It is mentioned that the folk games springing out of singing are unique to Sri Lanka. These folk games had cemented and consolidated the fact of people living together in peace and harmony with all races and communities.

The origin of folk games shows a close relationship with the concept of the belief in the goddess *Patthini* (Patthini amma) in initiating the New Year games or the *Bakmaha* games. In these New Year games, there is a commemoration of the goddess Patthini and the promise to accept both victory and defeat in the same spirit. In addition, a promise is given by everyone (himself/herself) to be just and fair in engaging in games.

Pancha Keliya (game played with sea shells)

This game appears to have originated in India. According to folklore, the King Gajaba of Sri Lanka invaded the Chola Kingdom and brought back 12,000 men to compensate for the Sinhala soldiers that had been taken. It is believed that the anklet of the goddess Patthini and the games like *Pancha Keliya* had also been brought along, at the time. It is the general belief that by participating in the game *Pancha Keliya* one can get the blessings of the goddess Patthini.

The game *Pancha Keliya* can be played between two teams. The number of players must be divisible by two. When there is an odd number, a dummy but active player called '*Hunga*' will be appointed. When there are two teams playing, the two leaders will be appointed for the two teams. To enter the game, one must get what is called '*Ondu*', which is a shell that falls face up. If all shells fall face up, there will be no credit. The last square on the *Pancha* board is identified as 'water'. To take the shells out of the water '*ondu*' must occur. The team that gets all its shells across, is the winner.

Olinda Keliya (rosary bead game)

This is a game played on a mathematical calculation system. The game is played by two women and the chorus singing will continue from the beginning to the end. These lyrics relate the story of the birth of the game and the strategies required to win the game.

The playing board is 10 - 14 inches long and 6 - 8 inches wide. On each side of the board (length wise), there is a row of 7 scooped out depressions or 'holes'. On the two ends of the board between the two rows are two similar larger slots (one on each side) of about 2 by 2 inches. The Olinda Board is also known as *Muthu puwaruwa* (pearl board) or *Olinda kolombuwa* (olinda bench). From the lyrics associated with the game it can be assumed that the game had its origin in Bangladesh.

There are 56 playing pieces at 4 pieces for each of the 14 holes. This is called sowing. After this, one female player picks up the seed in the first hole on her side. This is called 'scowling'.

The scowled seeds are then put one each to all the holes on the side of the player. The seeds in the next hole are picked up, and action is repeated. If in putting the seeds thus, the player finishes all the seeds in her hand, and finds the next hole empty, all the 'seeds' on the other side fall on to the hands of the other player to 'sow'. This is identified as 'eating'. If two empty holes occur one after the other the player is not entitled to put the seeds in the third hole. Then that situation is considered a blank and then, the other player gets the opportunity to play. When one row is fully empty of pieces, it is called '*Re puhula kapanawa*' (cutting the pumpkins in the night). The one who had collected the most number of pieces is declared the winner. When there is one piece in a hole between two empty holes, it is called 'son'.

Kadju keliya (Game played with Kadju nuts)

This is a game well known among small children; the number of kadju nuts required is 6. All kadju nuts are thrown in the air with both hands. A line is drawn through the fallen nuts. In drawing the line, the finger must not touch the nuts. Those nuts can then be claimed by the players. At the end of the play, one who had collected the most number of nuts is the winner.

Chakgudu peneema (game of trespass)

This game is played in a wide and spacious open area, especially in a harvested paddy field or the bank of a tank. First two boundaries will be marked in the playing area. The playing field will be divided into two equal sections and a leader will be chosen for each side. A toss of a coin will decide, which team will take the first turn. Then the teams will enter the field and occupy their sides when the captain of the team chosen takes the first chance and gives orders to the rest of the team to start the play. The players of one team will start running into the opponents' area repeating loudly '*chakgudu chakgudu*' and try to touch or hit the opponents and run to their side. The one who is attacked as well as the attacker who stops saying '*gudu gudu*' are defeated. The one who says '*gudu*' is called '*gudda*'. In playing '*dumb gudu*', the *gudda* must not talk at all; if he talks he will lose the game.

Iniveta peraleema (pulling down the fence)

A group of persons tries to prevent the bulls breaking down a strong fence that has been put up. This is done in the form of a dialogue in lyrics.

Kalli keliya (game played with wooden sticks)

This game "*Kalli keliya*" is also known as '*Gudu penilla*'. It can be played by 2- 12 players at a time. It needs a vast open area for the play and also a long stick of about 3 feet (*Kalliya*) and a short stick of about 6 inches (*Kutta*). The *gudu* hole is about 3 inches long and one inch wide. A small hole is dug as the *gudu* hole and the smaller of the sticks (*Kutta*) is placed across the same, which will be tossed far with the longer stick. In this game, which is played by two teams: if *kutta* is caught in the air four (4) times by the fielding team, they will get the chance to play. If *kutta* will not be caught, then the fielding team will throw it back to the *gudu* hole from where it had fallen. If it falls into the hole, the shooter is out and loses his chance. If it falls on the ground away from the hole, then distance from there to the hole is measured with the length of the long stick, *kalliya*. Then *kalliya* will give a *varama* or *gudda*, for another to play.

Koppara koppara pipignna

This is a game played by the village children where a large number can take part. At the beginning all the children stand in a circle. A player takes an object like a twig in his or her hand and goes around the circle while a dialogue gets built up with the others in the circle, who respond to the inquiries made by the player moving around the circle. The player moving around the circle recites '*koppara koppara pipignna, passa beluwoth desagnna*' (if you look

back, you will be beaten up) to which those standing in the circle, will respond saying ‘*Ko neno panawa*’ (my dear cousin, where is the comb?). A reply comes “*yata leeye panawa*” (comb is at the rafter). Those in the circle say ‘*kalagedi kalagedi*’ (pots, pots) to which the player going around the circle replies ‘*botala botala*’ (bottles, bottles). While continuing the game, the player going around keeps the twig behind somebody in the circle, without being noticed or seen by others and then runs. Before the player comes back to where the twig was kept, the one behind whom the twig was kept takes the twig and chases after the player. Or the player may be caught and beaten by the one with the twig. If the latter looks back, he or she will be beaten too. This game will continue with players taking turns.

Buhu keliya (game played with an artificial ball)

This game *Buhu keliya*, is also known as *Jalli geseema* or *Matta kedeema* and it has many regional variations. A large orange is put under hot ash to bring it to the required consistency. The players divide themselves into two teams called *Udupila* (upper team) and *Yatipila* (lower team). The effort of the player of the *Udupila* is to move backwards and reach to protect the pillar of the team. Their aim is to protect the team’s pillar as well as to catch the ball before it touches the ground. If they fail to catch the ball, they cannot move forward. The ball should be thrown from the spot it had fallen. If the ball cannot be caught before it is thrown beyond the pillar, the victory will go to the team that throws the ball.

Mevara keliya

Another very popular folk game is *Mevara keliya*, which is played with the participation of women. The ball thrown to the lower team is caught in the mid air, and taken running to the place from where it was thrown. Those who throw the ball run backwards to defend the ‘goal’. There are variations about how to play the game. According to one opinion, *mevara* is a bangle. The story is of a woman searching for a bangle that belongs to her. She enquires from her friends whether they had seen her bangle. The friends swear that they had not seen it. Yet in fact, it is hidden by her friends. The group singing occurs in this game takes the form of a dialogue. When the singing comes to an end, the women who have been going around say ‘bet’ and bend down to get the bangle, which had been kept under foot. Everybody bends down to get hold of the bangle. In the melee, the ones who get the bangle are the winners.

Another version of this story is that *mevara* refers to an ear ornament. In a similar fashion, the woman asks her friends whether they had seen her ear ornament. They swear they had not seen, but it is them who had hidden it. Yet according to another version, *Mevaraya* is a servant (*mehekaru*). It is supposed to be conveyed by the apprehension: The woman asks, “has my servant gone wild and fallen into a pit?” and so on.

Eluwan kema (goat hunting)

This is a folk game staged by the participation of a large group with a combination of singing and acting. This folk game is created based on a conversation between a goat and a tiger. The up and down of the delivery reflect the competition.

Panaa hengima (hiding of combs)

The game of *Panaa hengima* or hiding of combs is also known as ‘hiding the handkerchief or hiding the wigs’. A certain item is hidden and the efforts to find it are described in verse. This game has mythically arisen in association with the goddess Patthini and the Prince Palanga played expecting rain and prosperity. It is through praying during this game that relief was sought from the epidemics of fever, diseases spread through cattle, poultry and drought.

Porapol gesima (game played with coconuts)

In ancient times the coconuts that were used in this game were the king-coconuts that had fallen off the tree. Since it was believed that the area used to play this game is possessed by gods, it is necessary that the land selected would be flat and contain a special tree called “*Bo*” or “*Na*” (iron wood) or “*Nuga*” (banyan tree). There are two types of coconut used in this game namely, the coconuts sent and the coconuts dashed. Some of the coconuts that were thrown were the most difficult to crack and called the dud ones or ‘*Eta puhu*’. The ones used for dashing were known as ‘hand-nuts’ or ‘*Ath gedi*’. The normal coconut known as ‘*Nipol*’ was not used in this game.

On a flat land, the boundaries and two grottos facing each other were put up with young coconut leaves. An elder person (*Anumathi raala*) giving approval or sanction, will make an appeal to the gods. The upper team will seek victory by cracking the coconut sent by the lower teams. The players in the lower team will seek victory by cracking the coconuts sent by the upper team. In this game, it is an asset to have reserve coconuts. If there are coconuts remaining with the upper team, the advantage goes to them and, if there are coconuts remaining with the lower team, the advantage goes to them. Not only the coconut that is thrown, the one in hand too, may both be cracked.

Onchili pedima (on the swing)

There are several folk tales regarding these wings, coming down from ancient times. According to the earliest story, a person named *Asura* enjoyed himself very much by looking after and attending to God *Eashvara*. As time passed, *Asura* taking into consideration the powerful position of *Eashvara* thought that he should ask for a boon, and awaited a suitable occasion to make the request. Depending on his faith in *Asura*, God *Eashvara* consented to grant the boon. The request of *Asura* was for a power that would instantly reduce anybody to ashes, when *Asura* keeps his hand on the head of any person. No sooner *Easwara* granted this boon *Asura* was overcome with the desire to test the authenticity of the boon then and there itself. As *Asura* attempted to put his hand on God *Eashwara*’s head, the latter escaped from him and ran away. God *Vishnu* having seen this situation felt sorry for God *Eashwara*. He took the guise of a woman and took to a swing crossing the path where *Asura* was chasing behind God *Eashwara*. *Asura*, seeing the woman in danger, felt sorry for her while wondering what misfortune had befallen her and put his hand on his own forehead. Instantly *Asura* was reduced to ashes. It is said that swings are often made for the goddess *Patthini*. There are many varieties of swings and among them are, the following: *Kudu onchillawa* (box swing), *Bambara onchillawa* (revolving swing), *Depata onchillawa* (double rope swing), *Vel onchillawa* (swing made of creepers), *Kathuru onchillawa* (mechanized swing), *Mal onchillawa* (floral swing) and so on.

According to the legend related to the origin of this game, Prince *Palanga*, son of King *Maya* of the *Chola* clan married *Patthini Devi*. One day when the two went to the garden with their retinue, they got the fragrance of the *Champaka* flowers. Following the scent of these out of season *Champaka* flowers, they came across the area where the trees were in flower. They cut two sticks to pick the flowers that were out of reach. One was with the retinue of *Patthini Devi* and the other with the retinue of Prince *Palanga*. Both parties attempting to pick the flowers got their sticks entangled making the stick that was with the males breaking off. It is mentioned in folklore that this game has arisen to commemorate this incident.

During the period of the *Sinhala New Year*, the swing used commonly is made with ropes. While two persons sit on the swing, another two persons stand on the either side of the swing

and give it a push to go up. The lyrics associated with the swing that come to the limelight during the New Year times are known as '*Onchili varam*'. This is a game specific to women.

Aun keliya (game of pulling horns)

This is believed to be the first of the twelve games that had sprung up associated with the goddess *Paththini*. This game is specific for males. There are two teams called *udupila* and *yatipila*. The players are conducted into the ground in a ceremonious procession. The players are expected to refrain from the consumption of meat and fish during the game.

The start of the game is marked by the planting of *Kapruka*, a symbolic tree planted according to the auspicious time. The horns considered as religious are brought in a procession from the Devala. A branch, which has sprouted at the right angles from a tree is selected as a horn. The horns are of two types: *Polu aun* (batton type) and *Keki aun* (hook type). These horns are made of wood varieties such as *Andara*, *Pihimbiya*, *Atteriya*, *Karanda* and *Kaluwara*.

The game played between the two teams of *Udupila* and *Yatipila* has the ultimate objective of the preserving of horns from being broken off. In this game played with the horns entangled, the ones whose horn is not broken will take it out and go around the village with joyous drumming. The game closes with homage paid to the gods as the final step.

Kamba edilla (Tug of War)

This is a very special game seen among the folk games that are played during the New Year festival season. This game is believed to have originated with the navy. It is believed that the sailors who are confined to the sea for many months have engaged in this game for recreation and exercise. In this game, the centre of a strong rope is kept at a marked place on the ground and the two teams, equal in number stand either side of the rope and pull it to their own side. The team that could pull the rope to their side wins the game.

Raban gesima (playing the tambourine)

Playing the Rabana (tambourine) is a folk game engaged at festivals, which is mostly confined to women. There are several folk tales associated with the tambourine. One version is that it was made according to a dream of God Eashwara and that it had been made from scented Sandal wood. The characteristic feature of this game is that it begins with a simple lyric and played on the tambourine and moves gradually onto more difficult lyrics. There are very clever players who would play the instrument while dancing around it, sometimes using both hands, and sometimes using their elbows.

Valakadju gesima (playing with Kadju nuts)

This folk game is very popular with little boys and has been adopted to suit the conditions endemic to each player. Kadju nuts, available in plenty around the New Year season, are used for this game. All nuts selected for the game should be thrown beyond a marked boundary. The competitor must hit all the nuts with the disk one at a time without touching away other nuts. The boy who meets the will win and he gets all the nuts.

Keta gesima (Dice game)

This is a folk game considered to be specific for men. The game is played in the compound of a house or at a dice spot. The dice is a hexagon with values marked is used for this game. The game is played by throwing the dice against the board kept supported by a wall or any other support. The game is played with the players declaring the value that will be on the face up of the dice before he throws it at the board from a distance.

Kotta pora (Pillow fighting)

The platform for the game is prepared at a height of about 6 feet with a cross bar tied to the two posts at either end. As for the cross bar, a trunk of a strong arecanut tree is used. The two contestants sit on the cross bar facing each other at arms' length with their legs dangling down. They hit each other with a cotton filled pillow and they may use whichever hand they are used to. They must tie up the other hand at the back making it immobile. They may not even touch with that hand. They hit the opponent on the face, keeping their minds and bodies balanced on the cross pole without toppling down. It is considered that this pillow fighting is an off shoot of the art of the traditional 'ungampora', a martial art that came down to the present time, as a folk game.

Kanaa ellima (blind man's buff)

A game participated by both men and women, which is played in the house compound or in an uncluttered open space. To begin with, a circle is drawn in the selected area. There is no fixed number of players but it is considered that more the number, the greater the fun would be. One of the players will be the blind person whose eyes are covered with a piece of cloth leaving no room to see through. Then the blind would be conducted to the centre. The blind player runs about inside the circle hoping to catch the others and if by chance the blind had moved away from the circle he would be brought back inside the circle by the players themselves. When a player runs out of the circle to escape or is touched by the blind, he is considered as out, or disqualified. The ultimate winner will be the one who had escaped and not been touched by the blinded.

Gus katti penima (playing in the woods)

This is a game played in such a way that everyone associated with the festival is given an opportunity to learn lessons on the value of environment protection, which is a concept that was greatly appreciated by the Sri Lankan society. An open area with trees is selected for this game. A minimum of five (5) players will be taking part; the area ought to have several trees close to each other or even sticks planted for the occasion to stand as trees. Five players can play at a time with four players to four trees and the fifth in the centre. The four at the trees will move from tree to tree and during the interval the one in the centre will attempt to occupy a tree. Then the one who loses the tree will have to go to the centre and the play continues. The players cannot occupy a tree too long and doing so, will disinherit him of the tree. It will be claimed by the player in the centre, and the person who disinherited the tree will go to the centre.

Model Activities

Certain traditional games are being modernized and added into the series of the New Year festivals while some other folk games are facing extinction. By planning the New Year folk games at school level and getting the participation of all communities, it will immensely help in promoting and strengthening cordial relations, trust and confidence in others towards national unity, co-operation and coexistence.

A. Carrying the New Year gifts to the schools

This is an activity that can be organized without any religious bias in Sinhala and Tamil schools. Visiting a school of any other denomination carrying New Year gifts is an activity that will foster unity.

Methodology

1. Select a suitable school to visit and obtain the permission of the parents.
2. Assign the responsibility on the students to bring sweets of selected varieties

3. Make awareness on the New Year festival related customs, rites, rituals and manners
4. Organize a cultural programme associated with the New Year customs.

Additional points:

It is appropriate to choose an underprivileged school in the area to conduct the activity

B. Commemorating the Sinhala and Tamil New Year through dramatization

This activity can be organized with participation of both the Sinhala and the Tamil medium students in a school.

Methodology

1. Learn and understand the Sinhala and Tamil traditions related to the New Year customs
2. Practice to dramatize the New Year customs
3. Highlight the similarities and the dissimilarities between the Sinhala and Tamil rites, customs and taboos, in the dramatization
4. Invite the students of the close - by schools to watch the dramatization

C. Visit to observe and participate at a New Year festival

A selected group representing students of all religions could participate in this event. It is necessary to select a school or household to observing a traditional New Year festival and may be planned accordingly.

Methodology

1. Obtain permission from the relevant parties
2. Make the participating students knowledgeable of the festival
3. Provide opportunities for the observers to participate in the activities
4. Refrain from behaving in a manner obstructive to the proceedings or disrespectful of the customs and traditions.

D. Playing Sinhala /Tamil New Year games

A joint New Year games festival by the students of a Sinhala Buddhist school and a Tamil Hindu school may be organized. Students of schools where there are students of all denominations could be taken together.

Methodology

1. Provide a basic knowledge of the Sinhala and Tamil New Year games
2. Take part in the Sinhala and Tamil New Year games
3. Treat all participants with traditional sweets of Sinhala and Tamil communities
4. Make announcements both in Sinhala and Tamil languages

E. Exchange of experience through residential participation

An activity could be organized where the Sinhala students spending the New Year day in Tamil homes and the Tamil students spending in Sinhala homes to get first hand experience on the customs, rites, rituals, practices etc. associated with the celebration.

Methodology

1. Select a Sinhala or Tamil school as appropriate, in the proximity to the school
2. Select students who are from the higher grades

3. Ensure students learn and appreciate the different aspects of the cultural diversity
4. Ensure students abide by the accepted norms of behaviour at the host household.
5. Provide an opportunity for exchange of the benefits of the experiences gained with students of other community

Additional points:

Activities can be organized to provide an opportunity for the selected Muslim and Christian students to stay with a Sinhala or Tamil family during the New Year.

F. Preparation of traditional varieties of sweets

The students can get familiarized with the preparation of food items specific to the New Year festival, with the leadership of the Home Science students.

Methodology

1. Learn about the Sinhala and Tamil traditional foods from the elders
2. Organize the activities under the supervision of a culinary expert or the school or the Home Science teacher
3. Make aware of the preparation of the food and their nutrients
4. Prepare a document carrying the list of food items

The Pasku Festival (Easter Festival)



Introduction

The Lord Jesus Christ who sacrificed himself is a great prophet who had come to this world to lead the entire humanity on to the path of salvation. He who was generous enough to sacrifice his life for the betterment of mankind and made the people understand that one who leads a meaningful life striving for the emancipation of man cannot be defeated by death. The illimitable service rendered by him to save the man from sin is ever present eternally through Easter. The crucifixion of Lord Jesus Christ is one commemoration by Christians all over the world in prayer, fasting and meritorious deeds in great faith.

While the Christians all over the world consider Christmas as a special celebration, the Easter is the commemoration of the resurrection of the Jesus Christ, which is considered the holiest of all celebrations. Easter does not fall on an exact date in a year. The first Sunday of the week following the full moon day after the 21st of March is considered the Vernal equinox in the year and accepted as Easter Sunday. Therefore, the Easter can fall on any Sunday between the 22nd of March and the 25th of April.

The Easter (Pasku) Festival

The English word Easter is what this festival is known, but the exact origin of the word Easter is uncertain. One theory is that in ancient times the ones baptized during this period were clad in white and the Latin term to describe the white week '*hebdomada alba*' was erroneously translated into German as '*esotarium*' and later evolved into Easter. Another version is that a festival held in April - Easter - month to honour the German Goddess of Spring and Prosperity named Eostre and later the Christians celebrated Easter instead of Eostre. Therefore, the word Easter is a derivative of the name of the German goddess Eostre.

As has been mentioned in the Old Testament of the Bible, the celebration in memory of the Jews exodus or the pass over from Egypt in search of freedom from slavery had been identified in the Hebrew language as '*Pesach*'. This word is used as Pascoa in Portuguese. It has been converted from Portuguese to Sinhala as Paskuwa.

The Period of Lent

The Christians observe a period of 40 days known as Lent making ready to commemorate the feast of Easter. It starts on the day known as 'Ash Wednesday'. At the religious observances held on the Ash Wednesday, the priest to symbolize that man who is made of dust will go back to dust apply ash on the foreheads of the devotees. As mentioned in the Bible, the God made the first man and the first woman namely, Adam and Eve out of dust and breathed life into them. The theological message is that since man has got life because of God, the value of the life too, is dependent upon God. Accordingly, the Ash Wednesday reminds us that the value of our life is dependent on our affinity with the God. Therefore, throughout the period of 40 days, Christians give alms, fast, worship at the feet of the God, hold church services, and do penance to commemorate sufferings undergone by Lord Jesus Christ and for laying His life upon the Cross. They also persevere listening to the God's word and improve the spiritual quality of their own lives.

Holy week

The last week of Lent is known as the holy week. This week starts with Palm Sunday and the specialty of Palm Sunday is that it was on this day that he began his efforts to accomplish his objectives of missionary service. The Holy week that follows has several special days like Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Alleluia Saturday and Easter Sunday. Out of these days Maundy Thursday is significant since it is the day on which He had His last supper with His disciples and established priesthood and Holy Communion. Similarly, on this day the historical incident of Jesus Christ washing the feet of his twelve disciples is enacted in all the churches under the direction of the priest through offerings to God.

Good Friday is the day on which Jesus Christ was put to death on the Cross, and Christians all over the world commemorate the Passion of Christ through High Mass to represent the sacrifice of the life of the Son of God, Jesus Christ upon the Cross to emancipate the Christians from the life of Sin. On Good Friday all churches commemorate this sacrifice through a three - hour long prayer and service. The feast of Easter that follows reminiscent of Good Friday is the one commemorated by Christians all over the world in prayer, fasting, meritorious deeds and great faith.

On Alleluia Saturday the feast of the resurrection recalls how God has kept his promise to man. With the end of the rites and observances of Alleluia Saturday, dawns the Easter Sunday. Christians believe that Jesus Christ was resurrected from death on this day; Sunday becoming the day of worship for the Christians is a result of Jesus Christ's resurrection from death. This resurrection is the central focus of Christianity. Saint Paul has stated to the Corinthians that if there was no resurrection from death our belief would be in vein.

During the Holy week and from earlier, there will be dramatic presentations of the Easter Pageant in many areas. In these shows, the sufferings or the Death and Resurrection will be recreated on the stage. Jesus Christ went through immense sufferings and the passion of Christ, to save mankind, therefore by presenting such productions; it is expected to make some effort to take Christians away from sin.

Resurrection is not just giving life to a dead body to live but, it is entering a special existence superseding the laws of the physical world, maintaining a relationship with human beings in the physical world and being so. The Resurrected Lord enters an immortal state, which has

no more death. As stated in the Bible, the Resurrected Lord has appeared to the Apostles who were within the locked doors. The Christians believe that Christ has appeared among his disciples and partaken of food.

Easter Pageants and Father Jacome Gonsalves

A series of dirges written by father Joachim Gonzales to commemorate the passion of Christ is sung in a style considered unique to Sri Lanka. Christians go on pilgrimages to recall how Jesus Christ had to carry the Cross to Calvary, and thereby become shareholders and participants of the Passion of Christ. They also engage in singing Easter lyrics in these pilgrimages.

The Easter festival has been performed in many different places in Sri Lanka from a long time. Productions based on the creations of Father James Gonzalez are used at these festivals. The Easter shows have evolved over time according to the sub cultures of different regions, absorbing many changes. Many Christians have become sharer of the passion of Christ reflecting on it through viewing these Easter pageants.

During the Holy week and from earlier, there will be dramatic presentations of the Easter Pageant in many areas. In these shows, the sufferings or Death and Resurrection will be recreated on the stage. Jesus Christ went through immense sufferings/ the passion of Christ, in order to save mankind, therefore by presenting such productions, it is expected to make some effort to take Christians away from sin.

Model Activities

A. Staging an Easter Play

This can be implemented in schools where there are Christian students.

Methodology

1. Create an Easter play with the participation of students in the school and stage it in the neighbourhood schools.
2. Deliver a short lecture on Easter prior to the play

B. Staging a festival of Easter songs

This is an activity that can be staged in schools where there are Christian students as well as students of denominations other than Christianity. It can be organized as a skills improvement programme where Easter based creations such as lyrics, dramas, singing and composing are entertained.

Methodology

1. Provide opportunities for the students who like to compose lyrics, produce short plays, compose tunes on the inspiration of Easter, to do so
2. Provide a basic knowledge on the feast of Easter and give students the opportunity to attempt to the relevant creations
3. Provide opportunity to students to compose the music for the lyrics and practice singing and short dramas, based on the songs composed
4. Organize a drama and lyrics festival appreciating the skills displayed and inviting the nearby schools to see the play and listen to the songs
5. Organize the festival in the relevant schools, if the festival is a combined effort of a few

schools.

6. Invite other religious and social leaders of the neighbourhood and the people of the community to the festival.

B. Organizing a memorial exhibition of the works of Father Jacome Gonsalves and a musical programme of his songs

This a programme can be collectively organized with the children of Christian schools as well as with children of other denominations.

Methodology

1. Inform those concerned that a memorial programme of Fr. Jacome Gonsalves is being organized and attend to the pre-preparatory work
2. Make facilities available to study information relevant to Fr. Jacome Gonsalves
3. Make use of the students' successful scripts for the variety entertainment
4. Organize an exhibition and concert
5. Invite the students of close by schools, community and religious personnel to see the exhibition and watch the concert
6. Stage the exhibition and the concert in the neighbouring schools as well

C. Easter Festival drawings: Group work

This can be accomplished through the participation of children in schools where there are Christian children as well as children of other religious denominations.

Additional Points

It is better to hold an art exhibition in all the schools where the children took part in the art creations.

Methodology

1. Call the students who participate to a selected school (student number about 200)
2. Make the students who participate in painting aware of the Easter festival
3. Instruct all student groups to work on their paintings on the theme: Easter and Peace
4. Make use of a framed canvass of about 6 feet in length and appropriate breadth and suitable paints
5. Ensure that students associated with the activities of painting and exhibition, get the opportunity to see the exhibition
6. Use criteria such as unity, togetherness, reconciliation etc., in assessing the picture
7. Enlist religious personnel in assessing the pictures

Additional Points:

It is best if the Exhibition of Painting would be held in other schools where the students participating.

The Vesak Festival



Introduction

The day commemorating the triple joyous events in the life of the Buddha viz., the birth, enlightenment and passing away, is the most significant day for the Buddhists worldwide. The primary objective of celebrating the Vesak full moon day is to dedicate oneself and train in humanistic qualities enunciated in the Buddha's teachings such as, extending loving kindness to all living beings; helping the helpless; being grateful to all; working for the good of the others as much as one's own self; and refrain from thoughts and actions harmful to others.

All full moon days of the year have some significance to the Buddhists, as the days on which they pay special reverence to the Buddha and His teachings. Many Buddhists resolve to follow the teachings by adhering to the eight precepts that means additional three more than the normal five precepts, which constitute the minimum that any Buddhist is committed to follow. The Vesak Poya assumes a pre-eminent place for the reason given above and is the most important day of religious significance for the Buddhists world over.

The unique tradition associated with the Vesak Day is paying veneration to the Buddha by integrating the Buddha's teachings along with the underlying value system to practical life. The veneration takes two forms viz, Commitment to ethical life and mental concentration or meditation to gain spiritual maturity and Commitment to observe the Five precepts (*panchasilā*) in the daily life and higher precepts on Poya days. The latter is widespread among the Sri Lankan Buddhists, which contributes to the well-being of the individuals and society. Restraint in mind and thoughts through the practice of mindfulness or meditation is the way to gain higher forms of spiritual development.

Vesak has become well-known for the festive aspect of it as seen by the abundance of decorations with a variety of lanterns, display of colourfully illuminated pandols etc. As mentioned in the travel records of the Chinese Buddhist monk Fa-hi-en who had visited Sri Lanka in the 5th century CE, the practice of celebrating Vesak as a religious and cultural festival with colourful

processions had continued over several centuries. Buddhists world over belonging to the different cultural traditions enjoy in celebrating this triple joyous and sacred day with much splendour and great devotion.

Biography of the Buddha

The Vesak Poya day is of great meaning to the Buddhists because on this day falls the three significant events of the life of the Buddha – the birth, enlightenment and passing away. The Buddha as Prince Siddhartha was born to King Suddhodana and the princess Mahamaya in the year 623 BCE in the city of Kapilavastu close to the southern border of the present - day Nepal, whose ruler at that time, was the King Suddhodana. Soothsayers had made two predictions on the birth of the Prince: that he would reach the pinnacle of worldly power should it become possible to retain him in lay life; or, if he were to abandon lay-life and gone into ascetic life he would attain the Buddhahood - the pinnacle of mental capacity development. The parents with worldly expectations, anxious to see him in the position of most powerful king took care to provide him with all the luxuries with this end in view. Accordingly, three palaces (Ramya Suramya, Subha) were built for him to suit the three weather seasons and he was showered with all comforts to strengthen his bonds to the lay life.

Prince Siddhartha who had gained a deep understanding of the fate that befalls anyone born to this world viz., old age, sickness, death and of the tranquillity that would be hoped for in a holy life, developed a great preference to a holy life with a determination to realize his goal. On the 'Esala Poya' day of 594 BCE, Prince Siddhartha, leaving behind his wife Yasodara and son Rahula and all the comforts he was enjoying left the palace to pursue the ascetic path.

Searching the path of escaping from the discontentment and suffering associated with birth and impermanence of life, ascetic Siddhartha sought guidance of the well-known teachers who were also engaged in exploring the Truth. Even though ascetic Siddhartha well understood their teachings, he realized the reality of life eluded their guidance. Having attempted to find the desired path through subjecting his physical body to extreme hardship and austerity and then again switching back to a normal life of gratifying senses, he found both those pursuits as futile. Then he realized that the road to his goal is only through the Middle Path.

The recluse Siddhartha who with great strength and determination cultivated his mind on the lines of gaining knowledge and wisdom attained the supreme height of Enlightenment at Gaya in the Uruwela country town on the full moon day of the Vesak month in 588 BCE. Ascetic Siddhartha then became famous by the clan name as Gothama the Buddha. The Buddha used the following verse to explain the newly acquired state of Buddhahood:

“To be born again and again in the cycle of life (*samsara*) is suffering
I have seen the craftsman greed who builds the house that is birth
Oh! Craftsman, you will not be permitted to build the house again
Rafters (*tanha*) forming the axis have been broken
Delusion removed. The mind is freed. No more birth”.

This statement explains the interpretation of the Truth or the true understanding of the process of existence. Yet, the Buddha was disheartened about the inability of the uninitiated man seized with the thoughts of greed, hatred and delusion to comprehend this deep doctrine of truth and showed reluctance to expound the newly found doctrine, the “Dhamma” to the people at large.

Thereafter, although he decided to share the new knowledge with his teachers who guided him when living as a hermit, by this time they had all passed away. The first Dhamma discourse was then addressed to the Five ascetics whom he had associated for a long period. They who absorbed the Dhamma gradually became the followers of the Buddha.

The Buddha who was engaged in propagating the Dhamma for forty - five years centering round the North - Eastern region of the Northern India and *Parinirvana* of the Buddha took place at the Upavattana 'Sal' grove in the city of Kusinagar in the Malla township. History records that this was on the Vesak full moon day of 543 BCE.

The teachings of the Buddha

The teachings of the Buddha are collected and compiled in three parts referred to as the '*Tipitaka*' or three baskets namely, the Sutta or the discourses, the Vinaya or the Disciplinary regulations and the Abhidhamma or the philosophical doctrine. Historical records show that the *Tipitaka* was first written into scripts in Sri Lanka in the language of the land '*hela*' at the Alokalena – Cave temple in the Matale District. Later, it was translated into *Pali* language in the 5th century CE, which has now been translated into many different languages.

The teachings of the Buddha can be used alike to improve one's daily life and conduct in this life and the life after. An important feature of the teachings is that it recognizes the capability lies in the mankind to decide and act with due inquiry and the freedom to do so. The Buddha makes it clear that religious veneration is to be understood by the practice of the teachings with an open mind, which is declared as follows:

“ he who wishes to see and venerate the Buddha has only to follow the path of the Dhamma; and conduct himself or herself in accordance with the Dhamma”.

Buddhist Philosophy

According to the Buddhist teachings, the eternal truth that is seen in the world is that what is born or arise in the world and does not rest the way one wishes. The change is a natural process or the order of the day. Change that one abhors brings about unhappiness and discontent and the efforts to eliminate discontent or suffering requires the understanding of the true nature of life or the truth. This is the state explained by the concept of *nibbana*, the extinction of all causes and effects leading to birth and the cycle of existence.

The Buddhist doctrine holds that one who conducts his life according to the teachings is a true follower of the Buddha. He who sees his capability to do so without depending on any other forces outside him reaches the supreme state in this life itself. The Dhammapada states:

“Salvation of any person is by his or her own efforts;it cannot be done by a god or any other divinity or eternal force one's welfare, advancement and salvation have to be brought about by oneself through only one's own efforts and understanding”

The Buddha who made such a bold assertion about individual freedom and capability expounds the fact that any challenge confronting the man and him emerging victorious lies in the hands of the man himself. This was appealing to the fair-minded people of the time and swelling the number of followers far and wide in the Northern parts of India.

The Buddha in his very first discourse on the Dhamma (Dhammachakkapavattana Sutra) presented a philosophical analysis of the concept of wisdom (*paññā*) he had realized. Its essence was described as the four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. It was explained in this discourse that through abiding in virtuous conduct (*sīla*), concentration in mental development or meditation (*samādhi*) and focusing on real nature of phenomena or wisdom (*paññā*) will lead the way to gain knowledge and understanding of the nature of reality. Such an understanding paves the way to discard the defilements arising in the mind and associate the mind progressively in higher mental states described in four ways: *sotāpatti*, *sakadāgāmi*, *anāgāmi* and *arhat* that can be reached.

The equality of mankind

According to the teachings of the Buddha, man can reach nobility or rise to the upper class by resorting nothing but to virtuous conduct. The man has the potential to do so. By activating the latent potential, man becomes capable of generating knowledge and ability to decide what is good and beneficial and vice versa. By resorting to action benefiting both the self and the society man becomes noble. Man does not become high or low by mere fact of birth; his conduct only determines where he belongs.

The Dahmmapada states:

*“najachchā vasalo hoti, na jachchā hoti brahmano
kammanā vasalo hoti kammanā hoti brahmano”.*

Accordingly, a rationale for alienating the human society by race, religion, caste, tribe etc., is unfounded. It is stressed that the single characteristic visible among the human beings is the gender diversity - male and female. However, it is not so among the other living beings; including all types of flora and fauna, which exhibits much diversity. For example, all varieties of flora own intrinsically diverse features; they may be seen as floss, algae, grass, bushes, trees-tall, short or wide spanned and the like. In their external features they are different and not alike. So too with fauna varieties, like the ones with no feet, bipeds, quadrupeds and centipedes are to be found. Bird varieties too are similar and no two bird varieties look alike. Such differences however, are not to be seen among the humans. The organs of the human body such as eyes, ears, the nose, the tongue, hands and feet are the same. Biologically the human body does not show difference either. It can only show diversity by way of skin tone viz., white, blonde, brown, yellow etc., depending on geographical distribution of their spread. The Buddha's teachings states categorically that all human beings are equal in their physical stature but there is difference and that is only to do with how a person thinks and acts.

Buddhism stresses the point that every person has the capacity to become a distinguished personality and that is by following the path of virtuous conduct (*sīla*) and restraint in thoughts (*samadhi*) and act wisely committing harm to none (*paññā*). Buddhist literature cites ample evidence where two young men - Sunitha and Sopaka who belonged to lower castes, were able to reach the higher states of mental development in the Buddhist Order, is a case in point. While recognizing the competencies of Eighty Great Disciples (Anguttara Nikaya), the Buddha emphasized the fact that each person has the capability to reach excellence by training the mental faculties and conforming to moral conduct.

Taking action only after inquiry

A unique feature of the Buddha's teachings is the freedom allowed to man to take decisions after giving due care on the possible outcome of the intended action. The Pali phrase '*ehi passika*' assumes the meaning as 'Come, take a closer look, and evaluate the facts before arriving at your decision'.

Many discourses in the *Tipitaka* elaborate discussions, dialogues and debates taken place between the Buddha and the lay persons of all walks of life representing kings and his ministers, notables, teachers, students and ordinary persons in clarifying their doubts about life and seeking advice on matters of concern.

The Kālāma sutra is an example of educational instructions for such an inquiry. The citizens of the township of Kalama were in a state of unease as various religious leaders who visited their township insisted that they should accept their respective teachings and nothing else. The Kalama people who were intelligent posed this question to the Buddha who visited their township and expected an answer. The Buddha while illustrating ten ways and means of how knowledge comes down to play instructed that one should carefully investigate and reflect upon on them before arriving at a decision or conclusion. The ten ways the acquaintance of knowledge are as follows:

That something exists in the tradition,
That comes from generation to generation,
That because it is said that something has happened in a particular way,
That it is stated thus in sacred texts,
That it accords with logic,
That it conforms to the theory,
That because one feels something is good,
That it is in keeping with teachings that one follows,
That it is stated thus by a recognized person,
That out of respect for one's teachers

Respecting these ten ways, one should only accept a teaching or advice if it does no harm to the self or any other in the society at large. If it does harm, such a teaching or advice should be rejected. The teaching in the Kalama Sutra received acclaim as unselfish and socially beneficial, which are praised and practiced by the wise and sensible people of a society.

The Pancha - sila for moulding the day-to-day living

It is a fundamental teaching of Buddhism that a person in lay life should, in his daily activities control his action in two ways; in words and in deeds. This is possible by bearing on the Five Precepts (*Pancha - sheela*), which is a recipe for self-discipline in the day-to-day life. Its objective is to inculcate self-discipline to ensure that one gets engaged only in those activities that are for the benefit of oneself and society at large. In no way one resort to action that poses a threat, harm or unease to the self or to any other around him or her.

The first precept of the *Pancha - sheela* is to refrain from killing. This encompasses a much broader meaning that even mere thought of harming any living being must be avoided. At the same time, one should encourage others to do so while also engage in supporting the weak and destitute out of sympathy and kindness towards them. This is the practice of loving kindness

and compassion, one of the basic tenets of non-violence or non-harming (*avihinsa*). The second precept is to refrain from stealing viz., taking something that is not offered to one and also encouraging another to do so. Such action benefits a society by reducing tension and fear in the minds of people and to prevail peaceful and harmonious living environments. The third precept is meant for restraint conduct by a person avoiding abuse in gratifying the five senses viz., eye, ear, nose, tongue and the body. For example, indulgence to possess modern gadgets and their abuse brings harm to the user as well as others. The fourth precept stresses on abstain from telling lies, cheating, casting hurtful remarks, spreading gossip etc., which will contribute to social cohesion, unity and co-existence among the different communities, a society is made of. The fifth precept will lead to the avoidance of intoxicating drinks and other substances, which bring about mental confusion and deterioration. The youngsters and school children are vulnerable to being dragged into vice and crime influenced by intoxicating substances. These tendencies will be with far reaching repercussions on society, devastating their families and so forth. Therefore, self-discipline in the Five Precepts will effectively contribute to the well-being of a society and it will support minimizing all social wrongs associated with human conduct.

Control of excessive desire or greed

A praiseworthy conduct that should be developed in daily living is giving and sharing (*dāna*). The practice of giving and sharing is a noble act as it contributes to the good and welfare of people and society. Buddhist ethics promote the cultivation and fostering of giving and sharing what one has at his disposal; materials needed for schooling such as books, clothes, and material for writing, drawing etc., and other ancillary items. Food and medicine too falls into this category. Donations like blood, tissues and bodily organs rank among the most celebrated gifts. Sharing of knowledge through preaching the Dhamma is regarded as the noblest gift. The *Pali* phrase reads as: “*sabba dānam dhamma dānam jināti*”. The person who upholds the principle of giving and sharing is able to discard harmful thoughts like intense greed, jealousy, conceit etc. Such person will receive high social recognition and his fame will spread out.

Four kinds of social morals or hospitalities (*sangraha vasthu*) figure high in the Buddhist ethical conduct. It benefits society as a whole, by sharing what one has with others; speaking beneficial and pleasant words; resorting to honest conduct, and treating all in fairness and equality. The ideal conduct of one in this manner whether in the family, school, temple or in a place in public domain will facilitate a peaceful atmosphere to prevail, devoid of conflict, disharmony and bitterness among people and communities.

The bonds or the sense of trust and unity that emerge among people should find expression in word, action, and thought. Benevolent friendship extends far and wide in creating a harmonious living environment among communities. The Culaghosinga Sutra reveals an incidence of harmonious co-existence that prevailed among three novice monks resided in a forest monastery. The friendliness that developed and cemented among them was so profound that it was explained in a simile where a state of milk and water remain blended and may not be separable. Such a high degree of understanding and mutual bond supports durable peace and harmony among the members of the family, religious institutions, ethnic communities as well and among the different regions and states.

Practice of Mindfulness

A great importance is given in both the Buddhist philosophy and the practice is the control of mind and thoughts. It requires closer investigation of the thought process and understanding of

its subtle workings. All actions of man are determined and directed by the mind and thoughts. A basic teaching of the Buddhist doctrine is that good thoughts lead to favorable and beneficial outcomes and bad thoughts lead to harmful and unbeneficial outcomes to the self and those around. The first two verses of the Dhammapada illustrates that one must to make effort to associate good thoughts while keeping at bay the bad thoughts. The first verse of the Yamaka vagga illustrates this fact as follows:

“mano pubbangamā dhmmā mano setthā manomayā”

The Buddhist meditation calls for a careful observation of the thoughts that originates in the mind. For this, the mind has to be trained and it could only be done when the body is in its relaxing state. This requires the application of a special skill or technique - inhalation and exhalation. When one gets used to tracking the inhaling and the exhaling process, an opportunity is provided to identify the mind and the thoughts that arises in it. When a person gets accustomed to calming the mind, when that practice is developed, several results will flow from it: such as enhancement of memory power, ability to recollect speedily, clarity of thoughts and so on. Training in mental concentration based on inhaling and exhaling, it can improve the ability of students to recollect what they have learnt and to enhance their memory power. Meditation will also be helpful to promote morality and virtuous conduct in daily life.

Ascetic Siddhartha had to spend long years to explore the workings of the mind in order to gain Enlightenment or Buddhahood; the state of gaining profound knowledge about the reality of existence of the phenomena. During the period of training, the various states of the mental progression were observed and finally he was able to extricate all the bonds that characterize the normal mind and in that way to end the cycle of existence or the rebirth.

Commemoration of the International Vesak Day

The Buddhists of the world over celebrate Vesak in various ways. ‘Vesak’ the Sinhala word derived from the original Pali term ‘Veshaka’ has come to be recognized internationally. Vesak assumes different word forms depending on different linguistic practices in different countries thus; in India, Bangladesh, and Nepal the terms Visaka puja, Buddha Purnima are used. In Thailand the term used is Visakha Buwa; in Vietnam it is Phat Dan, In Indonesia Vyshakh and in Malaysia it is Vesak. The Chinese call it ‘Fodam’ and the Tibetans, ‘Saga Dava’. Laos refers to Vesak as Vishaka bouxa and Myanmar calls it Ka-sone-La-pyae.

The Vesak day is a public holiday in Asian countries such as Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, Singapore, Vietnam, Indonesia, Hong Kong and Taiwan and it was recognized internationally by the United Nations Organization in 2001. The relevant proposal was introduced at the UN conference by the late Lakshman Kathirgamar, the Foreign minister of Sri Lanka. Steps have been taken from 2002 to celebrate Vesak under the auspices of the United Nations; and to strengthen cooperation among the Buddhist countries by means of closer dialogue, discussions, tours and propagating the teachings of the Buddha.

Celebration of Vesak in present day Sri Lanka

Vesak is celebrated in two ways viz., paying homage to the Buddha through festivities and paying homage through religious practices focusing on the spiritual side. The former is based on the belief that the Buddha is present in real life. Here, the homage takes the form of tributes

through illuminations, offering scented fragrance, musical sounds, and organizing colourful processions with flags, banners, dances, devotional music, and pandols depicting important incidents of the life of the Buddha.

Spiritual practice consists of disciplining the mind, restraining of thoughts, words and action with a view to fashioning one's life in accordance with the life of the Buddha. Accordingly, the genuine Buddhists devote the Vesak day for spiritual enhancement. Buddhists of all ages, of both sexes engage themselves with great enthusiasm in both forms of veneration on the Vesak day. All these fall within the festive celebration of Vesak.

The lay people who gather in temples on Vesak day observe precepts at differing levels of vigor. For example, some committing themselves to observe the Eight Precepts, and some to observe the Ten Precepts – endeavour to discipline themselves through the control of bodily action – words, deeds, and mind. At the same time by calming the mind one aims to resort to the sublime virtues such as loving, kindness, compassion, rejoice at the success of others, and tranquillity. The Vesak day also sees vast numbers of devotees listening with great dedication to sermons delivered by the monks and lay people in temples and over the electronic media – radio and television. It is also seen that people engaging in the Dhamma discussions for knowledge and better understanding of the teachings of the Buddha.

By way of promoting and encouraging ethical conduct, the Government of Sri Lanka has introduced restrictions applicable to the Vesak day viz., sale of intoxicating drinks, animal slaughter for food, sale of fish and meat etc. Among the cultural features figured primarily of the Vesak day aimed at value creation and instructive, like the pandols depicting birth stories of the Buddha, based on well-known literary works namely, the Jataka Katha. They are both artistic and informative. They are erected mostly in towns and cities and drawn large crowds. Houses are also decorated and illuminated with the Vesak lanterns. Persons of all walks of life join in the Vesak celebrations and in a well deep-rooted custom of providing food and refreshment to the vast crowds (*Dansal*). This is a living testimony to the national unity and co-existence that continue to prevail among the different communities in the country exhibiting a great enthusiasm taking part in various ways in solidarity with the Buddhist ethics and associated practices.

Social Care

People celebrate Vesak in many ways; among them various kinds of donations figure prominence. Donations in money and in-kind are made to places of religious worship for their upkeep and improvement by the business community. Different organizations engage in activities to promote social care such as blood donation campaigns, conducting medical clinics, supporting Elderly care homes and Children homes with necessary care and provision are common during the Vesak season. These activities are planned and carried out with much eagerness and devotion expecting no personal gain but wishing well of those others. Such activities generate a spirit of rejoice in the hearts and minds of the rest of the community and promotes others to follow suit and get involved in pursuing meritorious activities during the Vesak season. These activities help social cohesion and strengthen co-operation among the people, which will positively contribute to promote the spirit of religious harmony and co-existence among the communities in society.

Historical importance of the Vesak Festival in Sri Lanka

Apart from the Vesak poya commemorating the three most significant events in the life of the Buddha, the Mahavansa records several other events that make the Vesak day of particular importance to Sri Lankans. Two of the events are as follows: The third visit of the Buddha to Sri Lanka – his arrival in Kelaniya to settle a dispute that had arisen between Chulodara and Mahodara, two rulers of the Naga clan – and leaving a foot imprint at the summit of the Mountain Samanola. The arrival of Prince Vijaya in Sri Lanka also coincides with the date of the passing away of the Buddha. Among other facts, which figure in the history of Sri Lanka occurring on the Vesak Poya day is the second coronation of King Devanampiyatissa and the commencement of the construction work of Ruwanveli Maha Seya in Anuradhapura.

Historical sources confirm that the Vesak festival was held in Sri Lanka from ancient times. The travel notes of the Chinese monk Fa-he-in who visited Sri Lanka in the 5th century CE refers to a Vesak festival held in Anuradhapura. As recorded in the Mahavansa, during the reign of King Dutugemunu (101-77 BC), twenty-four Vesak festivals had been held. It is further stated in the same source that during the rule of King Bhathiya (38-67 CE), twenty-eight Vesak festivals were held with processions along with the distribution food and drinks among the poor and the travellers. There had been twenty-four Vesak festivals during the period of the King Vasabha (121-171 CE). During the reign of King Voharikatissa (269-291 CE), the Buddhist monks had been offered with three-layer saffron robes after the Vesak festival. There is a record of King Pandith Parakramabahu II (1250-1285 CE) conducting a Vesak festival and making offerings of saffron robes to Buddhist monks.

The well-known historical publication Poojavaliya devoted to the study of the practice of worship makes a detailed reference to a flamboyant Vesak festival of the time. The account given there shows that:

“ instructions had been given with royal blessing to stage magnificent displays showing divine figures descending upon earth to participate in Vesak and pay tribute to the Buddha, assuming the image of elephants. The images were to be shown walking by means of mechanical devices - images of forces to be shown to run in sympathy with waves of the ocean, constituted by teaming devotees. The temples were decorated lavishly; members of the Sangha and battalions of people lined up in procession of worshippers, so closely that no vacant space can be seen.....”

The Mahavansa refers to four festivals held during the period of the Kandyan kingdom. It is also stated that regulations had been passed clarifying the manner in which the Vesak festival should be held.

Buddhism suffered a setback as a result of foreign invasions from the 16th century. However, renaissance of Buddhism occurred by early 19th century due to the steps taken by the Venerable Veliwita Sri Saranankara Thera. Henry Steel Olcott, the great Buddhist activist had made a request from the authorities that the Vesak day should be made a public holiday. Later, through a letter addressed by Venerable Hikkaduwe Sri Sumangala Thera to Sir Ponnambalam Ramanathan, a member of the State Council, representing local interests, a request had been made from the State Council to make Vesak a public holiday. As a result of this request, Vesak has been declared a Public Holiday.

Model Activities

A. Designing the Vesak Greeting cards on the theme of religious co-existence

This is an activity to be carried out by groups of students representing Buddhist and other faiths.

Methodology

1. Search for the concepts that teach the oneness of the Humans
2. Study and understand the slogans, captions etc., to describe co-existence
3. Organize a workshop on the designing of greeting cards.
4. Evaluate and display the Greeting Cards.

B. Compilation of phrases of Greeting through verses, songs etc.

(The Methodology under A can be used)

C. Making and Exhibition of Vesak Lanterns

This activity can be organized jointly by students from schools where there are Buddhist and non-Buddhist students.

Methodology

1. Acquire knowledge about the religious background of designing the Vesak lanterns
2. Guide to be creative and make use of appropriate colours
3. Ensure using the environment friendly materials
4. Invite parents and people of authority to watch the display of lanterns

Additional points

Preparation of the Vesak Lanterns can be organized in a selected school where there are Buddhist and non-Buddhist students.

D. Organizing a festival of Vesak songs

This can be organized in schools with the participation of both Buddhist and non-Buddhist students.

Methodology

1. Provide an opportunity to the teachers and students capable in composing
2. Use concepts from the Tipitaka on peace, harmony, co-existence etc., in composing
3. Invite the students and teachers capable of singing to participate
4. Select a suitable place for the show and invite non-Buddhists to listen

Additional points

- Give priority to compose songs in both Sinhala and Tamil languages
- A public show can be organized at Regional/zonal basis

E. Creation of Vesak paintings by Groups

Methodology

- Gather knowledge about the basic concepts of Buddhist teachings
- Select themes depicting peace and religious co-existence
- Use suitable material such as canvass, frames, paints etc.
- Use appropriate criteria for evaluation such as like co-existence and togetherness

Additional points

Selected art works to be taken for exhibition in the neighbourhood schools

F. Visit to a Buddhist Religious place

An observation tour can be organized to visit a Buddhist temple or a monument and invite the non-Buddhist students to join.

Methodology

1. Obtain prior permission from the authorities intended to visit
2. Gain an understanding of the ritual and practices performed and obtain blessings and guidance from the resident monks

Additional Points

- Conform to the religious observances and practices being followed
- Restrict the participation by the students in higher grades

G. Offering meals (dāna) on a poya day to those who have observed higher precepts

Methodology

1. Obtain prior permission of the chief monk of the selected temple
2. Make aware of the type of meal to be served
3. Make aware of the practices in offering the daana
4. Listen to a sermon on the merits of the alms - giving

Additional points:

- Pay attention to the conformity with rules governed by the institution

The Poson Festival



Introduction

The Poson Festival is a day of religious as well as of National importance for Sri Lanka. The Poson Poya day marks the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka. It is, in addition, the day from which commences the distinctive National culture, which gives the country its unique identity. The group of persons headed by Arhat Mahinda Thero who introduced Buddhism to Sri Lanka arrived in the Island on the day of the Poson Poya in the year 236 BC. Thus, it is that Sri Lankans accord a place, next only to the Buddha to Venerable Mahinda Thera, the reverential reference to him as the second Buddha (*anubudu*) testifies.

The Buddhism introduced to Sri Lanka by Arhat Mahinda Thero is not only a religious philosophy. With the welfare of the people as its focus, it paved the way for a harmonious co-existence in an environment, which accommodated and looked after both fauna and flora; provided the base for an economic, social and cultural resurgence through its teachings.

The strong foundation that was needed for a new social resurgence in this country was laid with the arrival of Arhat Mahinda Thero. By providing nourishment to all aspects of the life of the people viz., the language, literature, art and customs. The opportunity was open for an innovative progression in the social, economic, religious, and cultural fields in this country. The Sri Lankan people got accustomed to an agricultural way of life, economically self-sufficient and environment friendly. The discipline and spiritual development that the philosophy of Buddhism fostered contributed to a development in the country, which in turn resulted in the emergence of a distinctive cultural identity.

The commemoration of Poson, which commences with the full moon day of the month of June continues for about a week all over the country with Anuradhapura and Mihintale as the main centres of activity and attraction.

The Historical Background to the arrival of Arahata Mahinda Thera

The Emperor Asoka who belonged to the Maurya dynasty had succeeded by the 3rd century BC to establish his empire over a large part of the Indian sub-continent. He was such an aggressive warrior that the people who came under his yoke called him Chandasoka emphasizing his

ruthlessness. However, he felt a great sense of remorse when he saw the enormous loss of life in his battle to overcome the Kalinga region. The emperor who was greatly disturbed in mind was much influenced by Nigrodha, an apprentice monk. He was so impressed with the Buddhist teachings that he embraced Buddhism and thereafter achieved fame as Dharmasoka.

The Emperor Dharmasoka took several organizational measures to strengthen Buddhism, which had been entered a period of decline. The Emperor encouraged the conducting Buddhist Council (Dharma Sangayana) to discuss issues relating to Dhamma under the leadership of Arhat Moggaliputtatissa Thera and took much interest to establish a philosophy of life based on *Panchasila* viz., the five precepts that constitute the minimum that any Buddhist should abide by daily. History records that the adoption of the principle of *Panchasila*, based on non-violence was a turning point in establishing a new administration throughout the Indian subcontinent based on the far - sighted system of governance. It is as part of the spreading the Buddhist messengers of the doctrine, a service that the Emperor launched that a delegation of seven persons headed by his son Arahat Mahinda Thera came to Sri Lanka to introduce Buddhism in the Year 247 BC (year 236 according to the Buddhist Calendar). The Mahavansa records this day as the beginning of the Sri Lankan Buddhist history.

The Arahat Mahinda Thera meeting King Devanampiyatissa

The King Devanampiyatissa who ruled Sri Lanka at that time met Arahat Mahinda Thero while he was deer hunting and enjoying himself with other diversions in the region of the “Missaka” hills. The King hearing himself being addressed, ‘Tissa, Tissa’ wished to know who was bold enough to address him in this way and received the following response from Arahat MahindaThero.

“Your majesty: we, the followers of the king of the Dhamma, are monks and we have arrived from Jambudipa – India out of sympathy for you”.

The first intelligence test conducted in Sri Lanka

The Arhat Mahinda Thero with a view to ascertaining whether the King and his subjects had the capacity to grasp the complex doctrine preached by the Buddha addressed two questions to the King, linked to trees and relations as referred in Mahavansa, the historical chronicle.

The questions of the tree of the mango:

- Arhat Mahinda - Showing a tree “Your Majesty what is the name of this tree?”
The King - Venerable Sir, this is a mango tree
Arhat Mahinda - Your Majesty, are there any mango trees other than this?
The King - Yes, Venerable Sir, there are many other mango trees.
Arhat Mahinda - Your Majesty, apart from this mango tree and other mango trees, are there any other trees?
The King - Yes, Venerable Sir, there are many trees; but they are not mango trees
Arhat Mahinda - Your Majesty, apart from those mango trees and trees that are not mango trees, are there any other trees?
The King - Yes, Venerable Sir, that is this mango tree
Arhat Mahinda - Your Majesty, you are intelligent.

The question of Relatives:

- Arahat Mahinda - Your Majesty, do you have relatives?
The King - Yes Venerable Sir, many relatives
Arahat Mahinda - Your Majesty, are there persons not related to you?
The King - Yes, Venerable Sir, very many
Arahat Mahinda - Your Majesty, apart from those related and non-related persons are there others?
The King - Yes Venerable Sir, that is me
Arahat Mahinda - Your Majesty! you are intelligent

Following the Intelligence Test, Arhat Mahinda Thero who realized that the King and his subjects had the capacity to absorb Buddhism, explained to the King and his retinue the matters related to the Buddha Dhamma covering the Buddha Sasana, which includes the ‘Noble Triple Gem’ viz., the Buddha, the Dhamma (the Teachings) and the Sangha (the monks), the simple pattern of living practiced by the monks and the nobility that is associated with the living according to high moral standards. Having listened to this discourse, the King Devanampiyatissa and those that accompanied him accepted Buddhism and the protection that flows from the ‘Noble Triple Gem’.

The Discourse on the Chula-hatthipadopama Sutra

The discourse on which this Sutra is based in the middle section of the Tipitaka or the Three Baskets, which contain the Buddha’s Teachings. The selection of this Sutra for the first Dhamma sermon by Arhat Mahinda Thero shows his recognition of the people of this country as equipped with an inquiring intelligence. This discourse, which takes the footsteps of an elephant spells out a scientific methodology that should be used for observation, investigation and conclusion. The lesson that is emphatically targeted in this sutra is that no conclusion should be arrived at, with a general understanding or when in doubt about some matter; that real nature of anything must be understood through investigation, close observation and careful analysis before a conclusion is arrived at.

The simile of the footprint of the elephant is used to explain that merely because one sees a big elephant footprint, it should not be concluded that that is the biggest elephant in the jungle because there can be smaller elephants with similar footprints. One should proceed further and make observations. In doing so, other signs, which reveal the behaviour of elephants should be examined. Finally, it is only after seeing the biggest elephant that one can arrive at the conclusion that is the biggest elephant that one is searching for.

Coming to know something with doubts or through one or more parts is not helpful to a full understanding of it. The lesson of the Sutra discourse using the simile of the elephant foot is that a definite conclusion about something can surely be arrived at only after obtaining confirmed knowledge about it.

The spreading of Buddhism in Sri Lanka

After listening to the Dhamma sermons of Arhat Mahinda Thero and other Arhat Theros, the people of this country commenced embracing Buddhism gradually. Discourses such as the one on the “Vimanavatthu” Sutra, which shows that as a result of good deeds that purify the mind and thoughts, the heavenly comforts can be enjoyed. The “Petavatthu” discourse, which shows

when sinful acts are committed, punishment follows in the form of hell that went deep in to the hearts and minds of the listeners and they understood the value of the Dhamma or the religious path and the benefits both in this world and the next. As such these sutra discourses contributed greatly in fashioning the lives of the Sri Lanka people. As a result of prominent people in society embracing Buddhism and entering the monkhood along with the state patronage that was provided, there was a rapid spread of Buddhism throughout the country.

The dynastic stories related to the planting of the sacred Bo-sapling brought to this country by Arhat Sangamitta Theri revealed the spread of customary practices originating with worship and religious offerings of Buddhists.

The establishment of the Bhikkhuni Sasana (female religious Order)

After King Devanampiyatissa, other royals and prominent persons embraced Buddhism, and the female royals and other females expressed a desire to become Buddhists. When King Dharmasoka was informed about this desire by Arhat Mahinda Thero who had acted with much kindness towards women, the King's daughter, Arhat Sangamitta Theri visited Sri Lanka with a delegation of women. After royal ladies along with Princess Anula had obtained the permission to enter the Order, thousands of other ladies were admitted by Arhat Sangamitta Theri to the Bhikkhuni Order. The country saw a remarkable expansion of the Bhikkhuni in numbers and spreading throughout the country, since the Bhikkhuni Order was established. Historical sources reveal that Bhikkhuni's commitment to the development of the Buddha Sasana was noteworthy. They had engaged themselves in the Buddhist missionary work in foreign countries such as China and Cambodia. There is much evidence to show that prominent women in the society had become pious followers of Buddhism and rose to the higher levels of spiritual development. Following them, the ordinary women were able to change their way of life and paving the way for sustaining a peaceful and contented society.

There are references to recent developments that had taken place as cited in the publication 'Historical Relations of Ceylon' written by the British national Robert Knox who had spent some 19 years as a prisoner of the Kandyan rulers in the middle of the 17th century.

The cultural resurgence that occurred in Sri Lanka

The dialogue initiated by the Arhat Mahinda Thero with King Devanampiyatissa before the Thera preached the Dhamma to the King to assess his intellectual power establishes the fact that people living in Sri Lanka were possessed of an inquiring intelligence. At the time when the visit of Arhat Mahinda Thero to Sri Lanka took place, the practices such as worship of trees and worship of different deities were prevalent among some tribes that had made Sri Lanka their home from ancient times. Arhat Mahinda Thero rather than rejecting them outright, showing the way to practice and brought Buddhism closer to the people. For example, in place of the then widespread tree worship, he turned the people to the meaningful practices of worshipping the Bo-tree, the tree that gave protection to the Buddha when he was pursuing Buddhahood. In this way, worshipping the Bo-tree assumed the form of worshipping the Buddha himself.

The information on the bringing of the sacred Bo-sapling to Sri Lanka establishes that this incident had made a significant impact on the cultural development of the country centred on the art and literature. The Mahavamsa records information that persons professionally skilled in 18 different arts and crafts had come to Sri Lanka when the Bo-sapling was brought and engaged in many activities connected with the economy and culture. As a result, people in

Sri Lanka gradually got accustomed to a highly developed agricultural economy as well and to a simple pattern of living with tolerance and accommodating habits. The irrigation related development that was seen in this country is ample testimony to the cleverness and skills of the people and the prosperity they enjoyed, as revealed in the ancient records.

Centred on the 'Dagoba', which attracted so much reverence and homage from the Buddhist worshippers, the architecture, sculpture, wood craft, and art flourished. Also, the evolution of creations such as moonstone, guard-stones, footsteps stairs, balustrades, and wall paintings arose because of the visit made by Arhat Mahinda Thero.

The art of sculptures, which arose out of the attempts to erect the statues of the Buddha developed to the extent of producing such master pieces like the Samadhi statue in Anuradhapura, the statue of Standing Buddha in Avukana and the reclining Buddha in Polonnaruwa. The creativity of the artists disciplined by the philosophy of the Buddha left a legacy of lasting artistic creations to the Nation.

The graffiti found on the Sigiriya rock is evidence of the intellectual radiance of the ordinary people. The history of Sri Lanka is replete with evidence, which shows that the nourishment of cultural features such as art, language and literature over a period extending 1800 years from the time of the Anuradhapura kingdom to Kotte period can be attributed to the visit of Arhat Mahinda Thero to Sri Lanka.

The Moonstone

The moonstone at the approach to the '*Panchavasa vihara*' in the city of Anuradhapura holds a special place in the field of artistic creations on the stone. The carvings depicting the elephant, the horse, the cow and the swan and the lotus symbolize the co-existence of man and nature. It conveys the message that wholesome living is sublime. It shows the path to be followed to rekindle the potential power inherent in the human mind so that a fruitful full life could be spent. The elephant, horse, and cow are depicted to signify that the start of the path is difficult. At the same time, the lines of swans of lotus flowers suggest man's innate ability to finally attain a swan's lightness and the purity of a white colour. What is depicted is that when Buddhism is studied and used by man as a way of life, an untarnished life can be lived. One should appreciate the silent service rendered by these works of art to divert the people of Sri Lanka to a simple life pattern with greater spiritual progress.

Buddhism is not a religion that can be confined or limited to an ethnic group or a region. The social and cultural advancement based on Buddhism evolved in Sri Lanka over thousands of years to giving distinctive features. It can be said that the philosophy and the values following from the teachings of the Buddha had succeeded in establishing a strong Buddhist cultural foundation and in sustaining it for a period exceeding 2300 years. The Sri Lankan culture continues its evolution by accommodating both the positive and negative influences resulting from foreign interactions during various periods of her history.

Language

Hela or Sinhala is the original language of Sri Lanka. Some ancient historical sources discovered in China show that Sri Lanka had been known as 'Sihala deepa' or 'Sihala desa', Until about the 5th century CE, the language used in Sri Lanka was known as *Hela*. Local historical sources show that religious texts (including the Tripitaka) had been written in the language of *Hela*,

which had also given rise to a literature. A Buddhist scholar (Ven. Buddhaghosa Thera) who came to Sri Lanka from India in the 5th century CE had translated religious texts that existed in *Hela* to the Pali Language. Thereafter Pali came to be used for religious education in Sri Lanka. As a result, some elements from Pali were absorbed into the Sinhala Language. At the present time, Sri Lanka is the only country where both Sinhala and Pali languages are used.

Sri Lanka has a distinctive literature in which both Sinhala and Pali figure. The content of the Sigiri graffiti, when deciphered revealed numerous verses and other entries, which illustrate features of the Hela language. The Five hundred and fifty Birth stories (*Pansiya Panas Jaathaka Poth Vahanse*), which were published in the book form during the Dambadeniya period of the country's history has contributed to nourish values among the Sri Lankan people and is recognized as a guide to a pattern of life based on morals. Parts of this instructive book have been translated into several foreign languages. Many works have been published in the Sinhala language with a high literary value, which at the same time contributing to wholesome thought in the readers.

Several literary works in prose and verse that were instructional in nature were published in Tamil language during the Kotte period, such as *Thirukkural*, *Naladiyar*, *Nageri*, *Purathanuru*, *Ayaththisidu*, *Condari* and *Wenthen* have had a very constructive impact in promoting morally acceptable conduct among people without any racial or linguistic difference or bias.

Another distinguishing feature of the Poson commemoration is the erection of colorful pandols, which depict themes such as the arrival of Arhat Mahinda Thero and the arrival of Arhat Sangamitta Theri with a Bo-sapling from the original Bo-tree under which, the Buddha attained enlightenment. Among the religious and cultural festivals carried out in connection with Poson are the display of creations showing meeting of Arhat Mahinda Thero and King Devanampiyatissa, the intelligent test, sermons based on some of the sutras.

The stable foundation for the emergence of several cultural activities of a national character, in which all Sri Lankans can engage, irrespective of religious and language difference to commemorate Poson, is based on the visit of Arhat Mahinda Thero to this Country.

Model Activities

- A. Carry out creations depicting the Poson Festival as an open activity with the participation of students who represent other faiths.**

Methodology:

1. Create awareness among the community of students and teachers about the national significance of the Poson festival in selecting themes
2. Form groups in such a way that students from parallel classes are mixed
3. Select themes for creations that are to be done as a group
4. Identify criteria for the presentation and evaluation of creations
5. Invite the religious leaders and prominent persons in the area to view the creations

Additional points:

The creations can be made in a school selected by the students of different faiths. Non - Buddhist students can make their creations on the Poson day and it would be proper for students from Buddhist schools to be invited to view the exhibits.

B. A presentation of devotional songs

It would be appropriate to organize the event jointly by students from schools of Buddhist and non-Buddhist schools. Students should be encouraged to compose songs in all media, Sinhala, Tamil and English.

Methodology:

1. Invite teachers, students, and persons with experience to compose songs, centred on the themes of peace, reconciliation and co-existence
2. Select creations and undergoing a training
3. Organize the presentation of devotional songs
4. Evaluate those who participated in the event

Additional points:

In schools where there is a strong presence of Buddhist community, the students from other religions may be invited to participate.

C. Production of Poson drawings collectively

This can be organized in schools with the participation of both Buddhist and non-Buddhist children.

Methodology:

1. Make the participating students aware of all aspects of the Poson festival
2. Provide them guidance to design drawings on the theme of religious co-existence
3. Provide framed canvas cloth with appropriate width and suitable paint
4. Invite students to view drawings
5. Select criteria for evaluation based on the relevance of the theme
6. Invite representation from all the religions for the evaluation of the creations

Additional points:

Make use of the selected drawings so as to promote peace, understanding and co-existence.

D. Lectures, discussions and oratorical contests on the Poson Festival

These activities would be held in a school with Buddhist children with the participation of students of other faiths.

Methodology:

1. Collect material on the national significance of the Poson festival
2. Conduct research on the sources of information
3. Facilitate a discussion on the benefits associated with the Poson day and disadvantages, if any
4. Obtain instructions from those well versed in the subject

E. Educational tour to Mihintale

A visit would be made to observe Mihintale with the participation of students selected from the different religions.

Methodology:

1. Follow the procedure stipulated when organizing an educational tour of the school
2. Explain the events occurred at the arrival of Arhat Mahinda Thero, during the tour

F. Offering meals (daana) to those who have observed Sil in a nearby temple

This can be organized with the participation of students who follow different faiths to get experience of the rituals and practices associated in the offering of daana to devotees who have observed Sil.

Methodology:

1. Obtain permission from the Chief monk of the relevant temple
2. Gain an understanding of the customs surrounding the preparation of food, and the offering of them on a Poya day
3. Familiarize with the policy of offering non-meat food and understand the rationale of it

G. Implementing 'shramadana' (voluntary work)

In carrying out *shramadana* activities on account of the Poson Festival, attention should be paid to give priority to following: clean up the environment surrounded by temples, hospitals, public roads, community centres, play grounds etc.

Methodology:

1. Identify the places where *shramadana* would be held.
2. Inform parents and obtain the permission
3. Invite a Buddhist monk to explain the importance of Poson day and the associated social services
4. Make students aware of the importance of collective activities for the upkeep of environment for healthy living and maintain neighbourhood peace and harmony.

H. Organizing a Poson Perahara (procession)

This is an activity that can be carried out in a school with Buddhist children.

Methodology:

1. Organize a Perahara to highlight the message of the Poson festival
2. Make the Perahara to proceed to a school where non - Buddhist children study
3. Confine to using the school playground to conduct the procession
4. Direct the students to think creatively in organizing the Perahara to convince the importance of harmony and co-existence among the people and communities.

The Ramadan Festival (Eid-ul-Fithr)



Introduction

Ramadan Festival is a religious observance that binds all the Muslims without any differences. Especially, during this glorious month of Ramadan, the affluent Muslims share their God given wealth with the poor and the needy. Ramadan urges Muslims to be sensitive to the feelings of their brethren while being just and kind to all. Fasting during Ramadan enables the promotion of brotherhood, equality and unity. It also helps us to detach one from worldly cravings. Islam asserts that the psychological and spiritual progression attained by the observance of fasting during Ramadan should be put in to the entire life.

Every Muslim resolve to preserve the veneration they feel towards the Almighty that they attain during Ramadan. They also determine to maintain the spiritual enrichment they gain as an effect of the compulsory fasting during this holy month. Moreover, forbearance and self-control achieved by Muslims during Ramadan and self-honesty cultivated through being truthful to others is invested to strengthen societal and cultural bonds in order to create an upright society.

Ramadan is the ninth month in the Islamic lunar calendar. The day of Ramadan Festival differs with the solar calendar. The revelation of the Holy Qur'an to Prophet Muhammad too commenced in this glorious month and as a consequence, Ramadan is nurtured by Muslims as holy. It is said that the first verses of the Holy Qur'an were sent forth during the latter part of Ramadan in which there is a special night called *Lailathul Qadr* (Night of Might).

Fasting is called 'Sawm' or 'Siyam' in Arabic, which means 'giving up'. Accordingly, Muslims are expected to give up their vices and turn towards the Almighty during this glorious month and live by the teachings of the Holy Qur'an in the pursuance of truth and ultimate victory. Man consists of a mortal body as well as soul that drives it and is naturally drawn towards earthly lusts and comforts. When man pursues worldly enjoyments beyond a certain limit, he loses human values. Desires overshadow wisdom and he becomes incapable of understanding the divine truth. Ramadan, if observed in its truest senses, would enable man to empower his soul.

Ramadan is an assemblage of several other religious observances apart from fasting. It includes extended observations such as *Qiyamullail*, *Zakathul Fithr*, *I'thikaf*, *Thilwah* and so on. The latter nights of Ramalan contains in it a special night called *Lailathul Qadr* in which Muslims

prolong their prayers, supplications and charitable acts. Eating and drinking should be stopped during the day time from dawn to dusk while refraining even from minute sins. Every Muslim should have a clear purpose for his or her fasting without just making it a merely refraining from food and beverages.

Ramalan has various religious, scientific, philosophical and practical values. Fasting during Ramadan is the fourth pillar of the five, the Islam stands on. The five pillars are namely Proclamation of Faith, Salah, Zakath, Fasting and Hajj. Each male and female Muslim should fast the entire month of Ramadan bar a few exceptions such as children, the sick, travellers, breast feeding mothers and the very old. Fasting is observed from dawn to dusk, which is about 14 hours in most countries in the world.

Ramadan helps us understand the hunger pangs and other sufferings of the poor. Fasting also helps spiritual advancement while forsaking worldly desires and helps one to become more generous. Muslims are expected to continue to nurture the noble qualities they attained through the month long spiritual discipline of Ramadan in their entire life.

How to Fast

1. Eating and drinking should be stopped at the commencement of the dawn and fasting should be ended at the sun set.
2. If no food could be found at the sunset it should be intended that fasting is terminated.
3. If one fails to wake up just prior to dawn to eat some food to start the fast, one should commence the fasting nevertheless.
4. The person fasting should increase his observances and should completely refrain from shameful acts such as lying, gossiping, back biting, cheating and earning from unlawful (Haram) means.
5. We should expedite our observances and charitable acts especially during the last ten days of Ramadan, which could grant us the *Lailathul Qadr* that is virtuous.
6. It is compulsory to give away *Sadakathul Fithr* before the Eid Prayer.

The objective of fasting is to distance ourselves from physical matters in order to gain moral advancement. Fasting also urges us to help the needy with things or money. Since fasting is a command of Allah its spiritual value is extremely high. It helps to control thoughts and actions. The end of Ramadan is celebrated with a festival called *Eid-ul-Fithr*. On this day Muslims gather in Masjids in large crowds, greet and embrace each other and help the needy with food, clothes, money and even with medicine.

Lailathul Qadr

An entire chapter in Holy Quran explains the nobility of this night which is better than a thousand months. Rituals done in this night is equal to deeds of one thousand months. Those who observe this night and those who perform good deeds are forgiven their wrongs and enter into the Paradise.

Model Activities

A. Donations to the needy people.

The Donations could be collected and given to an orphanage, elders' home or a under privileged school regardless of the religious orientation of the beneficiaries.

Methodology:

1. Make an appointment to visit an orphanage, elders 'home or school.
2. Spend the day with the children/elders.
3. Organize a lecture delivered by a religious teacher or scholar on the virtues of Ramadan

B. Organizing an Ifthar

An Ifthar can be organized by the Non-Muslim students for Muslim students who are fasting.

Methodology:

1. Conduct a speech or a programme to explain the virtues of Ramadan and fasting with Muslim religious scholars as resource persons.
2. Collect food items from students as contributions.
3. Facilitate Muslim students to perform Salah after the Ifthar.
4. Obtain necessary guidance from Muslim religious scholars.

C. Charity programme to mark the Ramadan Festival

This is an activity that can be organized by Muslim school children to help a school that lacks amenities such as drinking water, toilet facilities etc., and provide equipment needed.

Methodology:

1. Explain students that money saved during the month of Ramadan is to be spent for this cause.
2. Organize a charity event and explain about Islam and fasting in Ramadan.
3. Invite religious leaders belonging to all faiths along with school staff and parents.

D. Distribution of the Ramadan greeting cards

This could be conducted as an open skill demonstrating activity for students and the Ramadan greeting cards should be given to those students.

Methodology:

1. Invite students of other Muslim schools to partake in the activity of creating Ramadan greeting cards.
2. Conduct a workshop for the students who have expressed willingness to participate in the activity and brief about the message that the greetings should express along with basic skills in creating greeting cards. Show specimens to inspire them.
3. Display creations of students in the school Notice Board or in an appropriate place of good visibility.
4. Arrange to give the greeting cards created by non-Muslim students to Muslim students.

Additional Points:

An activity could be organized to send greeting cards to every student in Muslim schools. All other schools where non-Muslim students study could join creating the greeting cards.

The Hajj Festival (Eid-ul-Azh'ha)



Introduction

The word 'Hajj' literally means 'seeking' or 'marching forward'. The Hajj Festival is one of the two festivals that Islam urges every Muslim to celebrate. This festival is also called Eid-ul-Azh'ha, which means 'Festival of Sacrifice'. The Hajj pilgrimage is the last of the five compulsory obligations Muslims must observe. For this purpose, Muslims need to visit the Holy City of Mecca where the epicentre is the Kaaba, House of Allah.

Basic tenets in Islam

The word 'Islam' literally means peace, obedience and bondage. *Thowheed*, Monotheism is the pivotal principle of Islam. Islam asserts that there is no God worthy of worship other than Allah and He is the source for the universe and everything else. And the second most important requisite is believing Muhammad, the final messenger of Allah in a string of messengers Allah sent to this world since the ascension of Prophet Adam who originated mankind in this planet. Third requisite is believing all the four Scriptures Allah sent from time to time to be concluded with the Qur'an, which is the Final Revelation. The fourth requisite is believing all the messengers Allah sent, followed by believing in the Day of Judgment.

Finally, it is obligatory for every Muslim to believe in the destiny of Allah, which is the accepting of the good or bad whatever happens to us it is decreed by Allah and no one else. Allah commands in the Qur'an that every Muslim who is physically and financially able should perform Hajj once in a life time. Allah adds that He would not lose anything if man refuses to do so as He is *As Samad* (Absolute).

The Hajj and rituals related to it are based on the acts of Prophet Ibrahim and his son Prophet Ismail who demonstrated impeccable obedience to Allah, which does not have a parallel or comparison in human history. Muslims are urged to display obedience in the remembrance of Prophets Ibrahim and Ismail by spending their money and time and strife during Hajj. Muslims indicate this submission by setting forth towards the Holy City of Mecca attired only in two pieces of un-tailored white cloths and males with shaven heads as a sign of the detachment from mortal desires.

In order to fulfil Hajj, a person should be:

- A Muslim
- Attained manhood

- Sensible
- An independent person (not a slave)
- Able to finance his/her pilgrimage and support his dependants whom he/she leaves behind
- Assurance of safety and physical ability that could stand the voyage and ensuing tedious rites.
- Ascertaining that there is enough time to reach the Holy City in time.

Millions of Muslims who come to Mecca from every nook and corner of the world gather with brotherhood and unity attired in a simple attire of unstitched pieces of white cloths. They turn towards the House of Allah in unison to submit themselves shedding tribal, societal, lingual, and geographical along with every other difference as a single universal nation. And they perform and observe rituals reflecting the devotions and sacrifices of Prophets Ibrahim and Ismail who are repeatedly commended by Allah in the Holy Quran.

Prophet Ibrahim was born in the region presently called Iraq. At the time a cruel king called Namroodh ruled the region who urged his subjects to accept him and worship him as God. Prophet Ibrahim stood up against him and asserted that Allah only is worthy of worship. After a string of such disobedience, the king lost his temper and ordered that Prophet Ibrahim is tossed into a gigantic roaring furnace. Angels led by Archangel Jibreel offered to help Prophet Ibrahim by sending forth rain and wind to douse the fire. However, Prophet Ibrahim maintained that if Allah is aware of his plight, He would help him in His own way. Consistent with Prophet Ibrahim's unshakable faith Allah saved his submissive servant in a spectacular and unimaginable way by stripping the fire of its heat while it roared to the naked eyes of onlookers. The command Allah gave to the fire 'to be comfortable to his servant' is preserved in the Quran *viz.*, the chapter 21 verse 69.

Prophet Ibrahim pleaded to God to give him a child when he was 87 years of age and subsequently his wife Hajar conceived Ismail. When Ismail still was a baby, Allah commanded Prophet Ibrahim to leave Hajar and Ismail in an uninhabited region in the boiling desert that was far away from their original dwelling, where there was no means of sustenance or survival whatsoever.

Hajar too submitted herself to the trial when she came to know that this is a command of Allah and after the passage of time and experiencing severe hardships, she raised her hands to Allah to help her and her baby. Subsequently, a fountain gushed forth at the tiny feet of Ismail, and Hajar had to shout *Zam Zam* (stop, stop) to contain the fountain from flooding the area. After a few years, settlements started to appear around the miraculous fountain, which by now had been built into a well. This astounding and never drying well that is now in the Holy City of Mecca, is a sign of God. It still gushes forth succulent water that quenches the thirst of millions of pilgrims a day for centuries not to mention the billions it has already provided water to Kaaba, which is situated near the well is the first ever House of Allah on earth. It is chronicled that Prophet Ibrahim and his son Prophet Ismail rebuilt the Kaaba together.

Today, Mecca the home of Kaaba has become the most visited place of worship under the sun with millions remaining at any given day of the year while the crowd swells many fold during Hajj season and in the Month of Ramadan. This phenomenon could be indisputably attributed

to the sacrifice of Prophet Ibrahim, his son and his wife. Allah assures His compassion and clemency to every guest who comes to His House.

Every Muslim celebrates Hajj Festival wearing new clothes and by going to the Masjid to offer special observances. At the end they embrace, shake hands and greet each other passionately. During the day Muslims visit their relatives and visit the graves of the departed loved ones and seek forgiveness for them.

Hajj is the only place on the planet that effectively eliminates the worldly differences and stereotype man pompously maintains in the outer world. Here the king and subject, employee and the employer, the rich and the ordinary, learned and the unlettered and even men and women all are made to shed their specific identities and to become common servants of Allah and ordinary human beings void of any mortal attributes.

Model Activities

A. Helping an orphanage or an elders' home

This activity can be organized by collecting contributions from students of schools of any faith on the Hajj festival day and donating it to an orphanage or an elders' home.

Methodology:

1. Make an appointment with the selected orphanage or the elders' home.
2. Spend the entire day with orphans or elders and cheering them with appropriate activities.
3. Arrange a speech by a Muslim religious scholar about Hajj and the events on which Hajj is based upon.

B. Charitable programs to mark the Hajj Festival

This is an activity for Muslim school children. By selecting a school (Buddhist/Christian/Hindu) that lacks facilities such as water tank could be eliminated or renovation work required could be done or some equipment needed could be provided.

Methodology:

1. Inform the selected school about the charitable programme and prepare the needs.
2. Explain students of the selected school about the lessons Hajj conveys to us.
3. Invite religious heads, school staff, parents and prominent figures in the region for the event.

The Deepavali Festival



Introduction

Deepavali or the Festival of Light commemorates the victory of benevolence over evil; of light over darkness. This Festival contributes to two things; to offer devotion and gratitude to the deities for enabling the faithful to acquire knowledge and understanding to overcome defeatism born out of ignorance; to realize the spiritual light to proceed in the pursuit of the joyfulness of human life.

The Deepavali Festival, which places in bold relief the noble spiritual essence, the core of the Hindu religion is suffered with the living quality of faith, which gratitude bestows and provides an occasion to manifest the determination to retain in the mind the highest spirituality and to stand in defense of benevolence and justice. Deepavali is a joyful festival reflecting religious faith alongside aesthetic splendour. This historical festival is commemorated by the Hindus in Sri Lanka and the world over and by many people of other faiths as well.

There are several views on this Festival. One view holds that the Festival has its origins as a “harvest festival” that centred on the reaping of the last harvest before the onset of the cold season. In the non- Aryan society of the Indus Valley, the custom of worshipping the mother goddess existed. She was hailed as the goddess presiding over prosperity and as such, was the object of reverence and worship. With Aryan invasions of later years, the place of the mother goddess was taken by the goddess Lakshmi. During this festival, the goddess Lakshmi who is regarded as the source of wealth and prosperity, was offered thanks and was worshipped to get her blessings for a fruitful year ahead.

North Indians commemorate Deepavali to mark the return of the King Rama to Ayodya after a period of 14 years in the wilderness. Deepavali normally falls on a day in October or November. Like in our country, both in India and in Nepal, Deepavali is celebrated as a national festival.

Myths and legends associated with Deepavali

A literature made up of myths and legends related to Deepavali can be found in the Hindu culture. According to a legend, which features in the 'Maha Bharatha', Deepavali celebrates the return of Rama to his Kingdom at Ayodya with his wife Sita and her brother Lakshman after killing Rawana, the Raksha King in battle. It is stated that the people of Ayodya, in order to welcome King Rama and his companions lighted oil lamps in a chain or row, right round the capital of Ayodya, on either side of the road they took.

Accordingly, Deepavali arises from oil lamps (deepa) and chain (wali). Deepavali is sometimes shortened as 'Deevali'. As Rama had come to his kingdom Ayodya in the North after spending a day in the South, it appears that Deepavali is celebrated in the South of India one day earlier than in the North. North Indians have the Deepavali festival on the last day of their 'wickram' calendar. Their new year begins on the following day.

According to a legend linked to the Deepavali Festival referred to in the Bagwath Purana and the Mahabaratha, there was once a harsh and brutal member of the Asura Clan named Narakasura, who controlled the entire floor of the earth. Narakasura who was mad with the power, teamed up with another of the same clan and caused much harassment to people. When a complaint about this harassment was made to God Krishna, he was killed. As he approached death, he made a request to his mother that colourful oil - lamps should be lit to commemorate his death. People believe that it is the day of Narakasura's death, the evil and cruelty was defeated. Lamps are lit to symbolize this day and occasion. In addition, there is also a legend that God Krishna chased away the devil Bali to another world.

According to the "Skanda Puranaya", the life of a hermit that the goddess Shakthi lived is linked to the Deepavali festival. There is also a legend, which links Deepavali Festival to the defeat of God Indra by God Krishna. Besides, the non - Hindus also celebrate Deepavali for various reasons. Followers of Jainism celebrate Deepavali as the Birthday of Mahaweera. Those of the Sikh faith commemorate Deepavali as the day on which the ruler Haracobind Guru was freed from jail. The Newar Buddhists of Nepal are among other groups that commemorate Deepavali.

Even though the background to the Deepavali Festival mentioned in the diverse legends and myths differs, a common thread that runs through all these stories, is the defeat of evil and cruelty by benevolence that is the illumination of the inner light, the understanding the reality of everything.

Hindu Philosophy and the Deepavali Festival

A basic tenet of the Hindu religion is that there is something called 'soul' or 'athma' that is not captured by the body or the mind, and is of the supreme purity and limitless. It is eternal. Even as we commemorate our physical birth, Deepavali commemorates the internal luminousness. The reason for the popularity that Deepavali has attained as a festival of light is the understanding of internal light as a spiritually important feature. When this spiritual luminousness is properly understood, one's internal darkness is removed and in its place, there results a dawn of light. While all hindrances within one are removed, so also is ignorance driven out. With the understanding of what the soul is, the understanding of the invisibility of everything in the cosmos – sympathy and love included gets closer. He becomes omniscient. In this way the individual attains a state of inner happiness.

The Commemoration of the Deepavali Festival

By tradition, the Deepavali Festival is celebrated for six days. According to the lunar system the six days commence from the twelfth day. The first day is devoted to ‘wayu’ – the cow. The cow is believed to symbolize God ‘Gana’. Deepavali begins with devotion being paid to the cow and calf. The second day pays attention to wealth, to riches ‘dhana’. It is believed that when ‘suras’ and ‘asuras’ stirred the ocean, the god “dhanwanthi” emerged. This day is regarded as being auspicious for the purpose of household utensils and goods and also gold ornaments. The third day ‘Narakachathurdasi’ is the day on which the Asura “Narakasuru” was killed. It is taken as a victory of the good over the bad, of light against darkness and is celebrated as such.

In South India and Sri Lanka, Deepavali is celebrated with much fanfare. Hindus believe that bathing when stars appear on the sky is equivalent to bathing in the holy river ‘Ganga’. Hence, they get up before dawn, bathe in fragrant water and attire themselves in new dresses. Oil lamps are lit around the house and the immediate vicinity is decorated with masks and gold coloured ribbons. As this is the day on which God Shri Krishna saved the world from the brutal ‘Narakasura’ there is a special offering to pay homage to God Shri Krishna. Breakfast and Lunch for which special good items are prepared are enjoyed in the company of friends and relatives. There is another oil lamp lighting in the evening of this moonless day. There is a tradition of making offerings – “Tharpana” which consists of sesame and water – to ancestors.

Offerings made to Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth assume a great significance in the Deepavali Festival. The farmers who mark the end of the harvesting season with Deepavali offer their thankfulness for what they received in the passing year and express their hopes of a bountiful harvest ahead in this the last major festival before the onset of the cold season. The Goddess Lakshmi who symbolizes wealth and prosperity receive the pride of place in these celebrations. Several legends featuring goddess Lakshmi are found in the Hindu Literature. In addition, the Hindus believe that goddess Lakshmi belongs to the highly acclaimed exclusive spiritual group “Panchayathan” thus the obligations attached to divine power are performed by this goddess. Homage is also paid to God Ganesh who is in the minds of people when they venture on good deeds, on Deepavali day. Finally, oil lamps are lit in the streets and in homes wishing for prosperity and good health.

Model Activities

A. Lighting of the Deepavali Lamps

This is an activity that can be organized in a school where students following the Hindu faith receive their education with students following other religions.

It is an activity that offers opportunities to get the participation of non-Hindu students.

Methodology:

1. Provide the participating students an exposure on Deepavali, the lighting of oil-lamps, its significance and objectives on a day prior to the celebrations of Deepavali.
2. Organize groups in such a way that students of Hindu and students following other religions are mixed and allow the different groups to organize the lighting of oil lamps.
3. Invite a Hindu religious dignitary to perform offering invoking blessings.
4. Handle fire with suitable prior preparations, in view of the possibility of harm, (this activity can be conducted in a school or playground)
5. Invite religious leaders and prominent persons from the neighbourhood to observe the lamp lighting ceremony.

B. Holding the Deepavali Festival in an Elders' or Children's Home

The Deepavali Festival can be held in an Elders' Home or a Children's Home by a Hindu school or with the participation of students from other faiths.

Methodology:

1. Spend a chosen day in the relevant Institution while engaging in the Deepavali customs and activities with the elders or children.
2. Stage a Deepavali festival in school.

C. Celebrating Deepavali with the participation of students of different religions.

Methodology:

1. Conduct discussions to have a basic understanding of the Deepavali customs and practices.
2. Treat all participating students and others with traditional food items.

D. Organizing a show in relation to Deepavali

A celebration of this nature could be organized in a school with Hindu Students.

Methodology:

1. Prepare items suitable for the purpose, using students who are talented in dancing, singing and handling musical instruments.
2. Use stories and legends related to the Deepavali Festival as the basis for organizing these presentations.
3. Extend invitations to schools attended by non-Hindu students.
4. Offer traditional food items to treat the visitors.

Additional Points:

This can be organized as a collective cultural event by presenting items of cultural significance too there religions, with the participation of non-Hindu students. It would be appropriate to arrange a talk on Deepavali by a resource person.

E. Preparation of Greeting Cards

This is an activity that can be carried out by students in non-Hindu schools and send the greeting cards to students in a Hindu School on the occasion of the Deepavali Festival.

Methodology:

1. Send an open invitation to students who wish to prepare greeting cards voluntarily to commemorate the Deepavali Festival.
2. Organize a workshop on the preparation of greeting cards for the benefit of students who have volunteered.
3. Exhibit the greeting cards prepared by students, in the schools
4. Send the greeting cards prepared by non-Hindu students, to the students in Hindu Schools.

Additional Points:

Greeting Cards can be addressed to the names of students who profess the Hindu religion. This activity can be organized by students who follow religions other than Hinduism.

The Christmas Festival



Introduction

Christians do not have any other social and cultural festival equal to the Christmas. Since the independence and the peace are every man's wish, commemorating Christmas means an invitation to peace. Having had the birth in a shed of cattle, Jesus Christ who helped the entire human community by bringing the message of love and care to all equally and fairly, rendered an immense service to the human kind. Christmas serves a great service in rallying all the families and human groups to enjoy in unity and harmony.

The Birth of Jesus Christ

The story of Christmas is based on the sermons of the editors of the Bible, Luke and Mathew. According to the popular view Jesus Christ, known by the name of Messaih or the selected person, was believed by the Christian followers to have been borne by the maiden in the name of Mary.

There is yet another story in the same sermons to say that Jesus Christ was born by Mary in Bethlehem out of the protective father, José. The Emperor Augustus had summoned all citizens to the city in order to take a count of the people. There was such a large conglomeration of people that Joseph and Mary found it difficult to get a suitable place to stay and hence were compelled to stay in a sheep shed. Mary, the mother ultimately delivered the baby, Jesus Christ, in the sheep shed.

Although it is believed to be a sheep shed, records have shown that it was cattle shed or a stable. Still, it had been established later that it was neither cattle shed but a cattle manger nor a boat. It is believed to be available to be seen even today in Bethlehem city below the Church.

The Messengers of the God had informed the Shepherds who were staying there close by, about the birth of Jesus. Christians firmly believe that the birth of Jesus had taken place in the very same manner it was predicted several hundreds of years prior to his birth.

Commemoration of Christmas

In the early Christianity there had been no commemoration of Christmas since the Christians had given greater significance to the Easter, which commemorated his sufferings, death and resurrection.

In the same way since in Rome there was the multi-divine belief system that the Roman authorities would not have any sympathy for single deity belief system of the Christians. This too may have been a cause for the lesser attention paid to the Christmas. However, with the proclamation of 313 by the Emperor Constantine, Christians were given the freedom to engage in their own rites and rituals.

Naming the Christmas day

As to why the 25th December had related to the birth of Jesus is still an unresolved issue. Neither the New Testament of the Bible mentions about an exact date. As far back as the 4th century, the Holy Church had declared the date of December 25th as the day of commemoration of Christmas but, there are divergent opinions about the date. While one opinion holds that honouring of Gods in Rome had started from this date, another opinion has a different explanation. Accordingly, for the worship of the God of prosperity of Rome, the God Saturn had been going on from December 17th to 24th and hence the 25th of December was allocated for the Commemoration of Christmas.

Yet, another view is that the festival of Sun God Emesa with a Syrian origin is celebrated on the December 25th and since Christ is bringing in an eternal light, this day of December 25th had been used as the day for the festival. At the same time according to the Judas Almanach, their festival of Hanukka too is held on the 25th December, on the day known as Kislev. Since Christianity too has a Judas background, the Christmas festival had been fixed for the same day of 25th December.

Christmas in Sri Lanka

The term 'birth' in Latin language is known as NATUS while in Portuguese it is NATAL. Thus, Sri Lanka happens to use '*Natthala*' owing to the impact of Portuguese language. In the year 1505, Portuguese came to Sri Lanka and along with them, the religion of Christianity. Therefore, Christmas too undoubtedly was introduced by them. In the same year it is reported that a Catholic Bishop by the name of Jeanses had held the first Christmas service inside a small praying room in Colombo.

Christmas Festival

Christians attend the midnight service on the night of December 24th with great enthusiasm and much faith to commemorate the birth of Jesus Christ. On this day the entire world communities of Christians are, as a single family, meeting in their own churches to commemorate the birth of Jesus Christ. Christian devotees from all parts of the world attend this service in the birth place of the Christ in Bethlehem in Central Palestine. The Christian Council stay engaged in various religious activities until the dawn of the time, the baby Jesus Christ was born, which is known as the Period of Preparation.

There are several important customs and practices that take place during this period of Christmas. These customs and practices are followed with a purpose. With the deep devotion

to Jesus Christ, they follow these as a symbol of their appreciation of the greatness of the God, offering of the love towards the God, and to share the peace message brought by the God. Also important is the treating of the parents and the elders by the children; exchange of gifts and good wishes with the kinsmen; giving away the gifts and needs to the poor and the needy; meeting and improving friendships with the neighbours and friends; and pardoning for the wrongs committed and numerous other things that may result in close friendships, unity and harmony.

The involvement of both young and old in the activities such as dramas and musical shows is also important in the theme of Christmas, especially the Christmas carols, dramas on the life and activities of Jesus Christ etc. Further, the activities like the construction of cattle shed where Christ was born and his numerous other activities assume importance.

Cultural features associated with the Christmas

Natthal Seeya (*Grandfather of Christmas*)

Philanthropy, peace and love are the main principles of Christmas festival. In this regard one who stand out as a visitor without any distinction of high or low is the grandfather Christmas. Considering the history of the *Natthal Seeya*, it is revealed that a rich person by the name of Nicholas who lived in the city of Patara in Meera in Turkey had been distributing his wealth he had inherited from his father among the poor and lived a just and pure life and he happens to be known as the *Natthal Seeya*. Later, he was elevated to the position of a Saint and was called 'Saint Nicholas'. He had, during the Christmas period, bought gifts with his personal wealth and distributed among the children in the poor families in the sly. Mode of operation was to creep into the houses through the chimneys (fume exhausts) and leave the gifts in the houses. Owing to the philanthropy and the charm and love of Nicholas, he was forever very popular among the people there and grew a whole heap of folklore around him. Even his cemetery caught the attention and the veneration of the people very much. Thus, in Italy in a province called Barri, there is a church dedicated in his name called Church of Saint Nicholas. Also, he had been declared by the Holy Church as the Saint of Protection of Greece and Russia.

He is known in Dutch language as Sinter Klaas and afterwards, he was popularly known as 'Santa Claus'. In Sri Lanka, Saint Nicholas owing to his philanthropy came to be known as *Natthal Seeya*. The picture of the *Natthal Seeya* that is portrayed today, as we see him, is based on the great piece of artwork by the artist Thomas Nasst (1840-1902). A character that has won the hearts of limitless number of children throughout the world has got a long white beard and appear in the attire of red coat, and a red hat. According to the folklore, the *Natthal Seeya* is supposed to have a children's games shop where it is said that the sales assistants are all beggars. The reindeer that drags the cart full of gifts is drawn by the red coloured reindeer called Randolph.

Additional Information

In Italy, a person called Bebo Natale had once appeared as the *Natthal Seeya*. Another popular character in the Italian folklore is a lady named La Befana who had been carrying gifts of toys in the evenings and occasionally taking the toys to the baby Jesus she had got lost. Now the belief is that she is in the habit of distributing gifts to the entire child community.

Various cultures had introduced into this folklore a set of dwarf assistants to the *Natthal Seeya* who are called 'Kurumitta' and they are believed to be making the toys. Yet according to some other cultures in the countries of Latin America, the *Natthal Seeya* is considered to be making the toys, which he hands over to the child Jesus who then distributes them among the children.

The Christmas Tree

The Christmas tree symbolizes the life of Jesus Christ. Through this, Jesus is believed to be living in person among the people. Prior to the beginning of formal Christmas festivals, the tree was called the Tree of Jesus. Later, with the changes towards the formal Christmas festival, it became the Christmas tree. The philanthropy and the light that were to be found in the life of Christ are symbolized in the Christmas tree. The gifts that are hung in the Christmas tree as well as those kept at the foot of the tree are being distributed among the poor and it helps to highlight the philanthropy of the Christ. The preparation of the Christmas tree with the participation of all in the family displays the unity and harmony in the family.

The modern tradition of the Christmas tree is believed to have started in Germany. Yet some argue that it was started by Martin Luther King, a Baptist Minister and social activist in America. It is believed to have been introduced from Germany to England by Queen Charlotte and at the same period the German migrants had introduced it to United States of America. From about the 19th century, the trees called poinsettia, holly, mistletoe, red amaryllis and Christmas Cactus are being used as Christmas trees.

There are variety of opinions about the use of the Christmas tree. One such opinion is that in the ancient times, evergreen trees and branches had been used for veneration. The Evergreen tree, which remains green and unchanged from season to season while all other trees change their colours with the change of the season. This nature of unchanged colour had been a cause of veneration and glorification, which is symbolic of the life.

The first information about a gaily decorated Christmas tree comes in 1605 from Strasberg of Germany. This Christmas tree had been decorated with the artificial paper roses, apples, and different kinds of sweets. In the olden days, in order to show the blinking of stars in the forests, there was a habit of using candles while the same objective is achieved in the present time by using electric bulbs.

With time, the decoration of the Christmas tree too had been changed. The Christmas tree is now decorated with multiple handicrafts, gift parcels, decorative stars, small pearls, decorative glasses etc. Although the changes had taken place in different ways from country to country, the Christmas tree has a timeless value. Ever since it was designed, it has evolved through these changes mostly subjected to commercialization in the present time and often subjected to sale in different shapes and appearances.

The Christmas Carols

It is recorded that at the place where Christ was born, there had been singing of songs in jubilation. The oldest carols are found in the 4th century and in the 12th century. Francis of Assisi had been composing songs to be sung at offerings to the Gods. The term 'Carol' in French means presenting dances by staying in a circle.

The earliest copy of English carol had been composed by Ritson in 1410. Many carol songs

are composed by the inmates of the abodes of the mendicants. Most of the carols had been composed on the themes found in the Bible. Even in the present time, the Bible happens to be the main source of inspiration. In 1634, the first ever production of the drama based on the suffering was staged in Germany. George Nodrick Handle who is credited with the best contribution to the Christmas carols also produced the Messiah, the promised deliverer of the Jewish nation prophesied in the Hebrew Bible. In addition to this, an Austrian Priest named Joshep Morre composed a song called “Silent Night, Holy Night” to which the music was added by Father Sewar Greebarth at has the recorded translations into 180 languages in the world. “Gingle Bells”, composed by James Thayerpont is yet another carol song, which has a record breaking popularity.

Comet

Among the Christmas decorations, the most indispensable was the tail star. It signifies the finding of the birth place of Christ by his followers with the help of a comet. It is said that a comet was found giving out light right above the cattle shed. It is to commemorate this incident that a comet is placed on the top of religious buildings and on the top of a Christmas tree.

The Messengers of the God

There is often the connection between the Christianity and the messengers of the Gods. During Christmas, the pictures of the messengers of the God are used liberally in decorating the Christmas tree and the cattle shed. On the top of the cattle shed, an insignia can be seen fixed. Furthermore, little children dressed like messengers of the God are taking part in the processions singing carol songs. A figure of a messenger will be usually made with a pleasant face of a little child wearing a long white costume with large wings of a bird, to stand as a messenger from the God.

Model Activities

A. Sending Christmas greeting cards

This is an activity that can be undertaken by the students of non-Christian schools. They can send greeting cards to students of Christian schools with wishes for Christmas.

Methodology:

1. Make an open invitation (through notice, poster, or letter) to the students of non-Christian schools to express their willingness to design and send Christmas greeting cards to the students of Christian schools.
2. Organize a workshop on ‘designing and the preparation of greeting cards’ for the benefit of students who expressed the willingness. At such workshop followings can be achieved.
3. Provide a fundamental understanding of the Christmas Festival and the possibilities of designing the greeting cards through a workshop.

B. Providing publicity to design cards

Methodology:

1. Exhibit the designed cards in the school
2. Send the designed cards to the Christian students
3. Hand over greeting cards personally by going to the relevant schools.

Additional Points

This can be organized as a joint activity as well. The Greeting cards need not necessarily be sent by post. They can be handed over through friendly visits made to the neighbouring schools. Further, these can even be exhibited on the notice boards.

C. Organizing a Christmas Carol Festival

This is an activity that can be organized in collaboration with all the schools in the neighbourhood.

Methodology:

1. Invite the teachers and students having capability of singing and playing musical instruments, to participate
2. Provide the opportunity for teachers and students to compose carol songs
3. Compose songs highlighting religious unity, peace and harmony.
4. Organize the carol festival
5. Make a brief presentation about Christmas at the carol festival

Additional Points:

If the carol festival is organized and meant for the students of a school where only Christians are studying, the students of other schools may be invited to watch it. In collaborating with other schools, seek the prior permission of the authorities and the parents.

If it is a festival organized by a group of schools, it can be arranged to hold the festival in the schools participated.

Permit the use of both languages of Sinhala and Tamil in the presentation of the items. Discuss with relevant authorities to hold the event in schools that did not participate. Invite the other religious leaders to watch the carol festival

D. Collective designing of paintings

This activity, which is suitable for students above the Grade 9, can be organized by the participation of students from other schools. It is necessary to advise the participants to do the paintings on an agreed theme under the topic of Christmas.

Methodology:

1. Make the students participating in the event knowledgeable about the Christmas festival and the religious co-existence
2. Use canvas cloth for the designating of the paintings with suitable colours
3. Exhibit the paintings in a suitable place and invite the school children to watch it.
4. Appreciate the collective efforts towards inclination of co-existence by recognizing the paintings
5. Including the religious leaders as well in the appreciation of the designs.

Additional Points:

When an activity of painting exhibition is undertaken, it can relate to the Christmas festival. The exhibition can be held in other schools that took part in the related activities.

E. Visiting a Christian religious centre to watch a Christmas service

If the visit to the religious centre is made only by the Buddhist students, other religious groups of students can be invited to watch it. Arrangements can also be made to stage

the Christmas Service in the non-Buddhist schools, if the event is sponsored by the Buddhist students. When inviting children of other religious groups, it is preferable to obtain advice from the elders.

Methodology:

1. Obtain permission from the religious leader of the chosen place of visit
2. Explain the manner the rituals are performed inside the religious place
3. Seek for the assistance of the religious leader for the purpose
4. Seek for an opportunity to discuss about the Christmas festival

Additional Points:

In behaving inside the religious place, seeking the guidance from the religious leaders in charge of the place is necessary for making students conscious of the need to comply with the relevant rules and regulations.

F. Conducting *Shramadana* programmes

On account of Christmas, a *Shramadana* campaign at a chosen place can be conducted with the participation of students of different schools belonging to different religions as a programme conducted through the cooperative efforts of all. Under this programme, several activities could be chosen such as cleaning of hospitals, roads, playgrounds and many other public utility places as well as the religious centres.

Methodology:

1. Obtain prior approval of the authorities, after selecting a suitable place for the *Shramadana*
2. Obtain the support of the school community in meeting with the various needs.
3. Invite a Priest to conduct a sermon on the significance of Christmas
4. Encourage participation of the parents

G. Taking Christmas collection to a Home for Elders or Home for the Children

A school having students belonging to any religious group by itself or with the participation of other schools can organize this event. A collection of aids for Christmas can be made and handed them over to a Home of Elders or Home for Children, by making a visit.

Methodology:

1. Reserve a date for the visit by contacting the Elders' Home or Children's Home.
2. Spend the whole day with the inmates engaging in pastimes
3. Invite a Priest to deliver a lecture on the Christmas.

Additional Points:

Items like *Christmas Seeya* (Grandfather of Christmas), Messengers of God etc., can be added to the visit.

H. Participating in the Night Service of Mass

The non - Christian school children can participate as observers in the Mass held at any Christian religious place. Christian children are better to be participants in the Mass of Service.

Methodology:

1. Obtain prior permission from the Priest In-Charge.
2. Obtain permission from the parents of the participating students and it is better if the students of the higher grades participate.
3. Make the students aware about the need to behave in an un - obstructive manner during the proceedings.
4. Request the Priest in-Charge to explain about the Christmas and the Mass of Service

I. Exchange of gifts and food stuffs with the neighbouring Schools

This is an activity that can be organized by the students of Christian Schools. Gifts and food stuffs can be given to a School where children of other faiths study.

Methodology:

1. Request the school children to offer gift parcels and food stuff
2. Select an under privileged school nearby and obtain permission from the authorities of the selected school
3. Deliver a lecture on Christmas and a Festival of Christmas Hymns in the selected school
4. Allow the selected school to organize the event where the ceremony will be held
5. Donate the gift parcels and food stuff to the selected school

Additional Points:

An activity like this can also be organized by a Christian School. By organizing such occasion within an area of hardships will enable the students of less favoured to get benefited from it.

Annexure 1

Project Management Surveillance List

Use of a surveillance list will be of much use when planning and organizing a project or activity. Surveillance list will be helpful to avoid any lapses and ensure smooth implementation and achieve the expected results. Following is a guide to prepare a Surveillance Plan:

1. Preparatory planning

- Identification of the objectives
- Identification of the participants
- Preparation of the budget
- Deciding on the dates
- Reserving the venue

2. Inviting the participants and resource persons

- Prior notification to the invitees and resource persons
- Sending out letters
- Printing the invitation cards
- Ascertaining the participation

3. Scheduling of work plan

- Preparation of the Themes of the work plan
- Contacting resource persons
- Supply of equipment
- Explaining work plan to all those who would be involved
- Preparation of the receiving and treating the guests
- Provision of transport facilities
- Provision of accommodation facilities.
- Preparation of certificates and souvenirs

4. Provision of facilities

- Allocation of reserving seats and planning the order of seating
- Provision of food and preparation for same
- Provision of sanitary facilities
- Preparation of vehicle parks
- Preparation of direction boards

5. Supply of the equipment

- Construction of a podium
- Public address system
- Provision of mikes and other instruments
- Recording machines
- Supply of computers and DVD machines
- Supply of other facilities
- Any other requirements

6. Publicity

- Printing and displaying of posters
- Coordination with the Media
- Preparation and distribution of handbills
- Preparation of the Press Release and issuing them

7. Photography and Video recordings

- Employ a cameraman
- Making aware of the requirements

8. Supply of food

- Preparation of the menu
- Coordination with the suppliers of food
- Provision of means for receiving them

9. Registration

- Preparation of the registration forms
- Preparation of the place for registration

10. Transport

- Transport of equipment
- Reservation of vehicle parks
- Conducting of special guests
- Transportation of the participants

11. Decorations

- Design according to the theme
- Preparation of a Pandol at the entrance
- Prepare the stage and decorate it
- Decoration of the podium
- Preparation of the Head Table
- Preparation of the oil lamp

12. Extra points deserving attention

- Possible bad weather conditions
- Security requirements
- Preparation for any emergency
- Ambulances and first aid medical services
- Electricity failures and alternative provisions
- Supply of drinking water
- Coordination with the Police stations

Annexure 2

Institutions that could be Contacted

- **The Buddha Sasana Ministry**
Srimath Anagarika Dharmapala Mawatha, Colombo 7.
Telephone 011 2307674

- **Department of Hindu Religious & Cultural Affairs**
No. 248 1/1, Galle Road, Colombo 4.
Telephone 011 2552641

- **Ministry of Muslim Religious Affairs**
Postal Head Office, D. R. Wijayawardena Mawatha, Colombo 2.
Telephone 011 2422591

- **Ministry of Christian Religious Affairs**
6th Floor, Insurance Building, No. 21, Vauxhall Street, Colombo 2.
Telephone 011 2321222/011 2436672

- **Ministry of National Integration & Reconciliation**
No. 34, Narahenpita Road, Nawala.
Telephone 011 2334123

- **Ministry of National Co - Existence Dialogue and Official Languages**
No. 40, Buthgamuwa Road, Rajagiriya.
Telephone 011 2883926

- **Peace Education & Reconciliation Unit**
Ministry of Education, Isurupaya, Pelawatte.
Telephone 011 2785141

- **Department of Buddhist Affairs**
“Dahampaya”, No.135, Srimath Anagarika Dharmapala Mawatha, Colombo 7.
Telephone 011 2337315

- **National Institute of Education**
High Level Road, Maharagama
Telephone 011 7601601

- **Religious Affairs Officers**
attached to all Divisional Secretary Offices;
Social Service Officers; Cultural Officers

- **Office for National Unity & Reconciliation**
No. 21, 6th Floor, Janadhipathi Mawatha, Colombo 01.
Telephone 011 2343501 / 011 2325009

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