



---

## Exploring the Role of the Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā in Sri Lankan Religious, Social, and Political Contexts

Rathanasara K.\* and Gamage G.C.L.

Department of History and Archeology, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,  
University of Ruhuna.

---

### ABSTRACT

*The Gaṃgārohaṇa is an ancient Buddhist religious festival originated in India and was later celebrated in Sri Lanka. The festival is believed to have been introduced to Sri Lanka in the early 19th century, with the earliest recorded celebrations taking place in the southern coastal town of Matara. The research problem is to determine the historical significance of the Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā in understanding contemporary conditions. The data for this study were collected using two methods: literature surveys and field surveys. Literature surveys were conducted using both secondary and primary sources, with most primary sources dating back to the 19th century. Field investigations were conducted in selected places that have a close association with the Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā, such as the Hiththetiya Rajamaha Viharaya, Godapitiya Jethavanaramaya, and Saram Mudali's walauwa. In-depth interviews were also conducted with selected key informants. The collected historical data were analyzed using the content analysis method. The research findings reveal that the Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā cannot merely be described as a religious offering as it was organized based on the political, social, and cultural needs of the time. This research highlights the importance of understanding the historical context and significance of religious festivals in order to assess their role and impact on the contemporary society.*

**Keywords:** Gaṃgārohaṇa, Matara, Nilvala River, Religious Revival, Saram Mudali

## 1. Introduction

The roots of Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā can be traced to Lord Budhha's period in India. However, this research is focused on recent Gaṃgārohaṇa festivals which occurred in the first decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Matara. Those *Gaṃgārohaṇa* Pūjā festivals were organized based on the Nilvala River in Matara. The main sponsor of these Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā festivals was an aristocrat named Saram Mudali. Although he was known as Saram Mudali, his real name was David de Seram Wijayasekara Jayatilakaratne. The Book on meritorious deeds written by Saram Mudali states that he organized five such festivals/ Pūjā s (Saram Mudalithumage Pin Pota 2008, 13-17).

The Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā in Matara, which cannot be described as a mere religious festival, reflects the socio-cultural, political, and economic conditions of the era. Through this research, it is also attempted to deeply examine the historical significance of one of the rare cultural events that historians have not observed previously. Therefore, this research would provide new details to historical data collection regarding *Gaṃgārohaṇa* Pūjā.

## 2. Materials and Methods

This qualitative research mainly incorporates a literature survey and field investigations. Field investigations were conducted in Hiththetiya Raja Maha Viharaya, Godapitiya Jethavanaramaya,

and the walauwa of Saram Mudali. Those places are directly associated with the Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā. In-depth interviews were conducted with selected key informants. All of them were elderly persons and some of them were eye-witnesses of this Pūjā. The data were analyzed along the content analysis method.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1. Verbal Meaning of Gaṃgārohaṇa

It is essential to consider the verbal meaning of Gaṃgārohaṇa. Gaṃgārohaṇa seems to be derived from the two 'Gaṃgā + Arohaṇa' connections. Then Gaṃgārohaṇa means going up the river. Some argue that it must be a 'Gaṃgā + Orohaṇa' because there is no rising but descending into the river. Therefore, some point out that the disjoint of the word is 'Gaṃgā + Orohaṇa' and that it is a word used in Pali for Sanskrit Awarohana (Gaṃgā Rohaṇa Varṇanāva 1997, 11).

### 3.2. Historical Background of Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā

Dhammapadatthakatha (The Commentaries on the Dhammapada) contains accounts of the visit paid by the Buddha to Vesali to drive out the fears of famine and pestilence from there. There the Buddha returned to RajagahaNuwara along the Gaṃgā River and the celebrations alongside are described in detail. This journey is called Gaṃgārohaṇa (Dhammapadaattakatha. iii 1912, 436).

Furthermore, The Khuddakapata has described this incident (The Minor Readings Vol. 1. 1960, 162). Dampiya Atuwa Gatapadaya, Buthsarana, Pūjā valiya, Saddharmaratnavaliya, Sarartha Sangraha, etc. are some of the books that bring details about the Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā. The story of the Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā is the subject of the Buduguna Alankaraya too.

The report's summary is as follows. In the Lichchavi kingdom, there was a great and prosperous city called Visala (*Vesali, Vaishali*). There was no rain during a certain period, the crops got destroyed, and a famine situation occurred. The city's most impoverished people were the first to die of starvation. When their corpses were rotting all over the city, inhuman demons came to eat them.

Thereafter many more people became victims of the illness, and the number of deaths gradually increased. The kings started to discuss as to what should be done to get rid of this catastrophe. The first suggestion was to bring in the six masters to remedy this. However, some said that the Gautama Buddha should be invited as he has come to the world by then. The kings agreed. They heard that the Buddha was preparing to complete the Vassana Kala or the rainy season vacation in Rajagaha, situated on the other side of the river Gaṃgā, ruled by King Bimbisara. The Lichchavi kings sent a group of people with offerings to persuade King Bimbisara to bring the Buddha to Visala. King

Bimbisara has told them to ask the Buddha themselves. The Buddha agreed to visit Visala. Knowing this, King Bimbisara prepared the road from Rajagaha to the Gaṃgā River and escorted the Buddha and five hundred monks for five days. The King built a ferry with two ships, seated the Buddha and the monks on board, and facilitated their journey across the river. Gods, Brahmans, and Nagas performed significant rituals. The Lichchavi kings accepted the Buddha by giving him double the adornment that King Bimbisara did, to avoid being second to him. (Pujawaliya 1997, ch. 21).

When the Buddha and his entourage arrived in Visala within three days, they were greeted by the main deity, Sakra, at the city entrance. The Buddha addressed the Ananda Thero and preached the Rathana Sutta, asking him to walk around the city preaching these sutras. Ananda Thero preached the Rathana Sutta and sprayed water of the Buddha's bowl. Suddenly the sky thundered, lightning struck, and heavy rain began to fall. It is said that the floodwaters washed away all the corpses scattered in the city and washed them into the river. It removed the fear of disease in the city and healed the people (Pujawaliya 1997, ch. 21).

The three fears of Vesali were dispelled by preaching the Rathana Sutta under the guidance of the Supreme Buddha. A beautiful ceremony was held in honor of the Buddha. The two boats of the river were

joined together, and a pavilion was built on it. The Buddha proceeded to the city of Rajagaha along the river in the pavilion of the two boats, and the journey also was called 'Gaṃgārohaṇa,' and the festival was called 'Gaṃgārohaṇa' (Returning through the Ganges) (The Minor Readings Vol. 1. 1960, 204-205; Catubhanavaraattakatha 97). Pujavaliya contains long descriptions of a Pūjā performed by groups of gods, Nagas and Brahmas called Gaṃgārohaṇa (Pujavaliya 1997, ch. 21).

The Mahvamsa (Great Chronicle) refers to a sutta related to Gaṃgā Rohana (Mahavamsa 1838, ch. 37. s.191). During ancient times in Sri Lanka, a ceremony referred to as the "Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā " was conducted with the intended purpose of mitigating the perceived risks posed by malevolent supernatural entities, as well as addressing issues of food scarcity and drought. The underlying objective of this religious ritual was to generate positive outcomes for the well-being of the nation. There is evidence that King Upatissa I (362 - 409 C.E.), the son of King Buddhadasa, performed this ritual for the first time on the island. During the reign of this King, there was a serious drought. There was also the fear of disease and the fear of inhumanity. The King asked the monks as to what needs to be done in such a situation. The monks also informed the King how the Rathana Sutta was preached to eliminate the three fears in Visala Mahanuvara and how the three fears were removed after

sprinkling Pirith Pan, the holy water (blessing water) (Rathanasara Thero 2021, 30). Accordingly, the King made a golden Buddha statue, placed a bowl full of water on the statue's hands, placed it in a chariot, and drove it around the city. The monks followed the chariot chanting Pirith. Blessed water was sprinkled all over the city. Once all the dangers were removed, it started to rain. The King told them to act the same way if a similar famine situation occurs in the future (Mahavamsa 1838, ch. 37. ss. 189 - 198). In India, offerings are made to a stone bowl of the Supreme Buddha which, also known as the Pattha Maha (Rahula Himi 2009, 289).

The King Sena II also performed a similar ceremony just like King Upatissa I, but it is not referred to as Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā. It is said that the King Sena II had pirith pan (blessed water) sprinkled throughout the city during a plague outbreak which occurred during his reign. When an epidemic hit the island, the monks marched around the city preaching Pirith, and a vehicle with a statue of Ananda Thera went in front of it. It can be considered as a symbol of the sprinkling of Pirith Pan (blessing water) by Ananda Thera during the three fears of Vesali (Mahavamsa 1838, ch. 51. ss. 80 - 81). It is also mentioned that King wrote the Rathana Sutta on gold plates.

The Mahavamsa informs that these types of 'Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā s' were performed during the reigns of king

Kasyapa V and king Agbo IV (Rathanasara Thero 2021, 30-31).

### **3.3. Nilwala River**

Nilwala is one of the major rivers in the Southern Province of Sri Lanka and it originates from Sinharaja Forest Reserve and drains to the sea in Matara. This river is 72 km long (Environment Foundation). There is no consensus on how this river got its name. It is believed that the river got its name because, in the past, the river's water was very pure blue and flowed like a blue cloud. The Nilwala River was mentioned as Neelavahini and Neelawalanadi River in ancient sources. The most straightforward meaning is 'blue bearer,' 'Blue River.' Dhammika Hewage thinks the word 'blue' is used to refer to black in the epitaphs, meaning that there was black water and that the name might have been used because of the dark nature of the water resulted by the shade of the large trees on either side of the river (Hewage 2011, 11).

### **3.4. Saram Mudali**

Saram Mudali is the son of Dumingo de Seram Wijesekera Abhayaratne Gardige Muhandiram, a descendant of the Thamankadu Government Agent. David de Seram Wijayasekera Jayatillekeratne, Mudali of Matara Gaṃgābadapattu and Batgam, was a Mudali since 1760. In 1760, the Dutch gave him a post in charge of the Matara area. Saram Mudali was the Mudali of Gaṃgābada Pattu for about fifty years. Mudali (Mudaliyar) was one of the colonial

titles in Sri Lanka that had been a part of the native headman system. The Portuguese colonials created the Mudaliyar class by enlisting natives of different castes, especially from coastal areas (Ekanayaka 1876, 302.). The post of Mudali was created by adding more privileges to the position of Mudali-Muhandiramrala, which existed during the Kandyan Kingdom. The Dutch also continued the practice of the Portuguese. Although Mudali-Muhandiram held the post of Government Agent during the native ruling period, it was second only to the position of the Governor during the Dutch rule. This position was based on genealogy. Still, the British re-established a Mudaliar class, with appointments to the positions of Mudali, which ceased to exist in the 1930s when the British government closed the Home Department in Ceylon. (Patrick, 1995, 256). The Governor made all official appointments of the Mudaliyars of the island during this period. Positions for natives could not be transferred from wealthy and influential families loyal to the British Crown and they were generally hereditary (Silva 1988, 367). The position of Mudali was also the highest aristocratic position available to the bourgeoisie without any genetic heritage (Demala Sinhala Shabda Koshaya, 2000, 39). These Mudaliars became the link between the colonial Governor and the indigenous people. Therefore, they had great socio-political and economic privileges.

Saram Mudali lived as a lay aristocrat with civilian power among the ordinary people oppressed by the Western nations. His walauwa was constructed in a grandiose style that was fashionable during that era. He was married to the daughter of Don Abraham Illangakoon Mudali of the Illangakoon Walauwa in Matara.

According to his book on meritorious deeds (Pin Potha), Saram Mudali was a Buddhist who had performed great meritorious deeds since 1780. Lord Anepindu, a significant contributor to the time of the Buddha, dedicated the Jetavanaramaya in Savathnuwara to the Buddha and the Maha Sangha (Cullavagga Pali 2013, 168). Saram Mudali also built a three-storied walauwa at the Godapitiya Jethavanarama Temple as a replica of it. First, Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā was performed to bring the relic to this temple. Saram Mudali placed the offerings in the three-storied Dharma Mansion built at the Godapitiya Raja Maha Viharaya on the model of Jetavanaramaya in Savathnuwara.

The bronze Buddha statue of walking posture in Godapitiya Jethavanarama Raja Maha Viharaya is particularly important. This Buddha statue is the most significant offering made by Saram Mudali. This is the first time a Buddha statue of walking posture has been found in Sri Lanka. The right foot of this statue which was carved according to the Kandyan art tradition, shows a walking posture. This Buddha statue was housed in

a small wooden hut. Four statues of deities surround it. The model of the Jethawana Vihara decorated with ivory doors can also be seen among the offerings of the temple. Among his donations is a six-foot-tall silver bodhi tree. A Dolosmahe Pahana (twelve-month lamp) can be seen here with hundred wicks. A giant Piruvana book has also been offered but is not to be seen today. This can only be seen in the container box. Saram Mudali has arranged his hair as a Musna (broom) and offered it to the temple. Such ceremonies were performed during the Kandyan period by King Keerthi Sri Rajasinghe too (1747 - 782). Among the artifacts in the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy is the Musna made of the King's hair. At the Jethawana Viharaya, a 6-foot-long cloth necklace and a comb used by Saram Mudali can be seen. There are also hundreds of tiny rings.

Ven. Agalakada Ratanapala, The Chief Incumbent of the Godapitiya Jethawanarama Rajamaha Viharaya, said that it was a custom for the procession to wear the ring. [Key informant interviews on 20.10.2021] The famous walauwa where Mr. Saram Mudali lived was handed over to Rahula College, Matara. Mr. Odiris Silva donated them in 1939. The college sports ground is preserved as an archaeological heritage. The 8364 sq. ft. walauwa is built in the shape of the letter O of the English alphabet. As per the Merit Book written by Saram Mudali, in addition to the Gaṃgā Rohana Pūjā, he has also

performed many other meritorious activities. Maha Kanaha Jataka has been composed by himself. He was the one who carried the sand on his shoulders to build the Buddha statue and the pagoda of the Hitthetiya Raja Maha Viharaya. The Nadugala Dam was completed in one day, according to his Merit Book which is kept in the Department of National Archives. He passed away in 1815 (Key informant interviews on 20.10.2021).

### **3.5. Gaṃgā Rohana Pūjā in Nilvala River**

Saram Mudali has conducted five magnificent Gaṃgā Rohana Pūjās (*Saram Mudalithumage Pin Pota 2008*, 13-17; Vanaratana himi 1994, 237). We don't find any other evidence of such a beautiful procession which was held along a river in Sri Lanka.

#### **3.5.1. The first Pūjā from Athuraliya to Godapitiya**

The first Pūjā was performed from Athuraliya to Godapitiya. According to Saram Mudali's merit book, the river bank was first cleared of rubbish and decorated on both sides. There are seven Dhamma halls (*Dhamshabhamandapa*) built on both sides of the river. It is reported in the Merit

book that they too were decorated colorfully.<sup>1</sup>

Two large vessels were decorated for this purpose. Valuable sacred objects were placed on the first vessel. The second vessel was reserved for monks preaching Pirith. Hundreds of boats had been cruising the river for seven days preaching the Pirith.

Necessary arrangements were made to conduct all-night sermons at the Banamadu mentioned above. Decorated boats, as well as the river, were adorned with various lamps and candles. Fireworks were lit on both sides of the river to celebrate the same occasion. The procession started its journey at night and reached the Athuraliya Temple at dawn the next day. As hundreds of boats approached the river, people on both sides went to Athuraliya on foot. Afterward, for about an hour, Aloka Pūjā was held at the Athuraliya Temple Ferry near the three-storied Dharma Mandiraya. Relic offerings were also held afterward. The relics, the monks who preached the Pirith, also visited the Athuraliya Temple and performed various rituals to mark the conclusion of the ceremony.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "තවද අතුරුලියේ විහාරස්ථානයේ පටන් ගොඩපිටියේ විහාරස්ථානය දක්වා ගඟ දෙපස මුල් උගුලුවා සමකර කැලිකසල හරවා උසස් කුඩා ධජ වලින් පහන් ඇඟෑ බඳවා දෙගොඩ බණ මඩු සතක් තන්වා විසිතුරු සැරසිලි කොට නැවත ලොකු පාදයක් ගෙන එහි මැද ඊයන් කඩදාසි තැල යනාදියෙන් ද..." "tavada aturaliye vihārasthānaya paṭan gōḍapiṭiye vihārasthānaya dakvā gaṅga dēpasa ruk mul uguḷuvā samakara kæ,skasaḷa haravā usas kuḍa dhaja valin pahan ægæ baṅḍavā dēgōḍa baṇa maḍu satak tanvā visituru sērasili kōṭa nāvata lōku pādayak gēna ēhi mæda īyan kaḍadāsi tæla yanādiyēnda..." (Saram Mudalithumage Pin Pota 2008, 13 -14)

<sup>2</sup> "මේ ආදී මහා පූජෝත්සවයෙන් ගොඩ පිටියේ විහාරාසන්න තොටුපලෙන් පිටත්ව ධාතු පුද කෙරෙමින් ක්‍රමයෙන් යට ගං බලා ගොස් හිරු උදාවන වේලාවට අතුරුලියේ විහාරස්ථාන තොටුපලේ සරසා තිබූ දෙමහල්

### 3.5.2. Gaṃgā Rohana Pūjā in Nilvala River in 1806

The Gaṃgārohaṇa Varnana describes a Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā done in 1806. According to Siri Thilakasiri, it is the first Pūjā mentioned in the Merit book. There is a contradiction here. No similarity can be seen between this Pūjā and the Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā mentioned in Saram Mudali's merit book. According to the Gaṃgā Rohana Varnana, the Gaṃgā Rohana Pūjā performed in 1806 is the greatest one. However, in the merit book, it is said that the fifth one was performed most gloriously. According to Ven. Kamburupitiye Vanaratana Thero, the festival described in the Gaṃgārohaṇa Varnana and the fifth Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā mentioned in Saram Mudali's merit book are the same. It is difficult to comprehend the contradictions in the description of the

Gaṃgārohaṇa Varnana and the merit book of Saram Mudali. It is essential to inquire why the merit book is silent on the arrival of relics at the Godapitiya Temple and the 32 Yugasana Sermons.

Based on the above, The Pūjā performed in 1806 was described in the Gaṃgā Rohana Varnanava. It is challenging to conclude which of the Gaṃgā Rohana Pūjā s was mentioned in Saram Mudali's merit book. However, it is also not easy to understand the failure to record his glorious devotion in his book. However, in addition to the five Pūjā s, the Gaṃgā Rohana Pūjā mentioned in the merit book is considered as an additional Pūjā , which is described in the Gaṃgā Rohana Varnana, This magnificent Gaṃgā Rohana Pūjā was first performed on November 8, 1806 (Atavaka) on two crescent days.<sup>3</sup>

---

ධර්ම මන්දිරය සමීපයට පැමිණි කල්හි දෙගොඩින් නානාභිකාදිය පවත්වමින් ගිය මහජන සමූහයාට ධාතු වැඩමවා ගෙන ගිය පාදයද පිරිත් වදාරමින් සංඝයා සිටි පාදයට වෙනත් බොහෝ ඔරු අඟුල් පාරු ද එතැන්හි නවත්වා පාන් වූ දෙපැයක් වාගේ වෙනතුරු ගිනිමල් පූජාව පවත්වා නැවත ද රණ මල් සුවද මල් ආදියෙන් ධාතු පූජා කොට දෙවනු එතැන් පටන් පූර්වෝක්ත පූජා පෙරහැරින් ධාතුන් වහන්සේලා හා පිරිත් වදාළ සංඝයා වහන්සේලා විහාරයට වැඩමවා සුගන්ධ පුෂ්පෝපහාර ආදියෙන් උදාරතර පූජෝත්සව පවත්වා ගංගාරෝහන පූජා කොට නිමවූ...” “me ādī mahā pūjotsavayēn gōḍapīṭiye viharāāsanna tōṭupalēn piṭatva dhātu puda kērēmin kramayēn yaṭa gam balā gōs hiru udāvēvēvelāvaṭa aturaliye viharasthāna tōṭupale sarasā tibū tēmahal dharma mandiraya samīpayāṭa pēmiṇi kalhi dēgōḍin nṛtyagītādiya pavatvamin giya mahajana samūhayāṭa dhātu vāḍamavā gēna giya pādayada pirit vadāramin samghayā siṭi pādayāṭa vēnat bōho ōru agul pāru da ētānhi navatvā pān vū dēpāyak vāge vēnatura gini mal pūjāva pavatvā nāvata da raṇ mal suvaṇḍa mal ādiyēn dhātupūjākōṭa dēvanu ētān paṭan pūrvokta pūjā pērahāerin dhātūn vahanselā hā pirit vadāla samghayā vahanselā viharayāṭa vāḍamavā sugandha puṣpopahārādiyēn udāratara pūjotsava pavatvā gaṃgārohana pūjā kōṭa nimavū” (Saram Mudalitumage Pin Pota 2008, 15)

<sup>3</sup> “පවර සක වසින් එක්වාදහස් සත්සියක් යුත් විසි අටිනි’ද වස් මස්හි නැකත් වත් මොහොත් ලත්



In 1806, an 18 km Gaṃgārohaṇa procession passed along the Nilwala River from Matara to Godapitiya. This has been mentioned in Gaṃgā Rohana Pūjā Varṇanāva.<sup>4</sup> The journey commenced near the confluence of the Nilwala River with the ocean, specifically at the present location of the Matara Co-operative Hospital, adjacent to the Illangakoon walauwa. The journey followed the course of the Nilwala River. During this Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā ritual, people sailed from the river's bottom to the top, performing ceremonies. This Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā procession has started from Matara and continued up to Godapitiya. It has ended at the Jetavana Rajamaha Viharaya in Godapitiya, Akuressa. Nilwala Gaṃgā may have been used for the procession by Saram Mudali, as there was no public highway to travel from Matara to Akuressa.

A three-storied pavilion was also built on boats to carry the relics of the Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā. The reliquary was placed on the third floor (Gaṃgā Rohaṇa

Varṇanāva, 2000, v. 12). The Maha Sangha preached Pirith from a pirith pavilion set up in the second pavilion (Gaṃgā Rohaṇa Varṇanāva, 2000, v. 20). A dance troupe was dancing on the first floor. There was also a pharmacy. In addition, hundreds of other boats were beautifully decorated. Some of them also had paintings. There were fairs on both sides of the river, and they had plenty of items, including food and drink.

When one such procession traveled from Matara, another procession arrived from Godapitiya. The two processions met together at Balakavala. The two processions then proceeded back to Godapitiya as one. The journey began after an all-night Pirith chanting at the venue. Mr. Abhaya Hewawasam's doctoral dissertation on Matara Literary Scholars and Literary Essays describes how the ordinary people were associated with the

---

පසඬ මසටවක් පෝදා පටන් සව් සතන් සින්  
සතුටුකර නිතින් බන් පැන් දෙමින් ඒ සිතුසේ”  
“pavara saka vasin ěkvādahas sat siyak yut  
visi aṭaniṇḍu vap mashi nækæt vat mōhōt lat  
pasaṇḍa masaṭavak podā paṭan sav satan sit  
satuṭukara nītin bat pæn dēmin e situse” (Gaṃgā Rohaṇa Varṇanāva, 2000, v. 10)

<sup>4</sup> “ගොඩපිටිය පටන් දෙවිලෝ සිරින් සව් සැපැන් යුත්  
මහතොට පුර දක්වා දැ තුරේ මේ නොවී සිස්”

"Godapitiya patan devlo sirin sav sepat yut  
Mahatota pura dakva de ture me novi sis" (Gaṃgā Rohaṇa Varṇanāva, 2000, v. 11 )

Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā.<sup>5</sup> The Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā was held for ten days, and twenty-two Yugasana sermons were preached.<sup>6</sup>

The monks who attended the sermons were great preachers such as Ven. Karathota Dhammarama Thero and Ven. Bowala Dhammananda Thero. The first of the 22 Yugasana Dhamma Sermons were delivered at the Dhamma Hall (Bana Maduwa) in the Illangakoon Maha Walawwa with the participation of Ven. Karathota Dhammarama Thera and Ven. Bowala Dhammananda Thero (Gamage 1980, 112). During that sermon, a Sanskrit

stanza is said to have been composed and chanted by Ven. Karathota Dhammarama Thero at the invitation of Illangakoon Maha Mudali.

“maṃtrījayādīlakādirilamgakōnyuk  
śrī vardhanōbhaya itīśrætavaiśyakētuḥ  
puṇyōtsavē tadanugītatayatirmudā dau  
vacmīha sampratisudarśanasūtradharmam”  
(Gaṃgā Rohaṇa Varṇanāva, 2000, v. 29)

Although exaggerated, it contains information about the people involved in the Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> “සුදනන් නිවැසි, තල් පොල් වතු හා කුඹුරු වලින් ගොඩ ගොඩපිටිය නම් සුන්දර ගමකි. දෙවිලොව මෙන් සවි සිරින් පිරි මාතර නම් සමෘද්ධිමත් නගරයෙකි. මේ වෙදැතුරේ පස් පියුමින් සැදී නිල්වලා ගඟ දියේ දෙමහල් තුන්මහල් දහම් මඩු සාදා රන් තොරණ රඹු තොරණ හා රන්රසු දැල් ආදියෙන් අලංකාර කොට, ඒ එක් එක් මඩුවට සඟුන් දෙනම බැගින් වැඩමවා, තුන්යම් රැයෙහි පිරිත් දෙසුමක් අස්වන ලදී. මේ බණ මඩු සහිත ජලයානයන් මැද, ඒ හැමටම වඩා අලංකාර පඩවුවෙක දෙවි විමනක් වැනි තුන් මහල් ගෙයක් වී. එහි බුදුන් වහන්සේගේ ධාතුන් වැඩමවා, හි රැඟුම්, වැටුප් මල් ආදී නා නා දැයින් දහස් ගණන් ජනයා පුජාවට පටන් ගනිති. ඒ ආරංචිය අසන අසන තැනැත්තා සිත් සේ හැද පැලඳ ධාතු වන්දනාව පිණිස ගඟට පැමිණෙයි.” “sudanan nivāsi talpōl vatu hā kumburuvalin yut gōḍapīṭiya nam sundara gamēki. dēvlōva mēn savsirin piri māṭōṭa nam samṛdhiṃat nagarayēki. vēdāture pas piyumin sēdi nilvalā gaṅga diye dēmahal, tunmahal daham maḍu sādā ran tōraṇa, raṃba tōraṇa hā ranrasudael ādiyēn alamkāra kōṭa, e ēk ēk maḍuvaṭa saṅgun dēnama bāgin vāḍamavā tun yam rāyēhi pirit dēsumak asvana laḍī. me baṇa maḍu sahita jala yānayak māda e hāmaṭama vaḍā alamkāra paḍavuvēka dēvmanak vāni tunmahal gēyagē vī, ēhi budun vahansege dhātūn vāḍamavā gī rāṅgum, vāṭupmal ādī nānā dēyin dahas gaṇan janayā pūjāvāṭa paṭan ganiti. e āramciya asana asana tānēttā sit se hāṅda pālaṅda dhātu vandanāva piṇisa gaṅgaṭa pāmiṇēyi” (Hewawasam 1966, 306)

<sup>6</sup> “දස දිනෙක දවස් රැ ඒ ගඟේ මේ පුදෙන් සවි සුතුරු විසි දෙකක් නෙන් රැ බණක් දෙස්වමිනි”  
“Dasa dinēka dāvas rā e gaṅge me pudēn sav suturu visidēkak nēt rā baṅak dēsvavamni” (Gaṃgā Rohaṇa Varṇanāva, 2000, 69)

<sup>7</sup> “නෙන් කල් තොරන් තිර වියන් කුසුමින් සරාලා හම්බම් පඩවි ඔරු නැගී මැතිදුන් මිණන් නෙක් සිත්කල් කතුන් දැසි දසුන් ඉඟිදත් නැණින් යුත් කවි හි දනන් පිරිවරා එහිපත් වුනෝ ගොස්”  
“nētkal tōran tira viyan kusumin sarālā

### **3.5.3. The second Pūjā Athuraliya to Godapitiya**

The second Pūjā was also performed in this way from Athuraliya to Godapitiya. Bana and Pirith were recited for a week in two pavilions built on the other side of the river. After preaching in two other pavilions at night for a week, sermons were preached all night in all seven pavilions, and at the end of the eighth day, the relics were brought in. It is said that this time the vessel carrying the relics and the vessel where the monks preached Pirith were more beautiful than ever before. It is said that during the Gaṃgārohaṇa ceremony, robes were offered to one hundred and two monks who preached Dhamma and Pirith. Food was generously served to all who came to see the sacrifice.<sup>8</sup>

### **3.5.4. The third Pūjā Navimana to Bandattara**

The third Pūjā was held in the Navimana ferry from Matara to Bandattara. For some reason, the ceremony was made only one day. The sources do not go into much detail about the third Gaṃgā Rohana Pūjā. Both sides of the river were reported to have been lavishly decorated. It is also stated that the two Dharma halls were built on both sides. The description also states that more boatloads were involved than the first and second Pūjā s.<sup>9</sup>

### **3.5.5. The fourth Pūjā Navimana to Bandattara**

Saram Mudali's Merit Book does not go into more detail about the Fourth Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā. According to it, three sermons were preached all night long and made a significant donation with robes, and the ceremony was concluded. According to Saram Mudali's Merit Book, the Pūjā was

---

hambam paḍav ōru nāgī mætidun miṇan nēk  
sit kal katun dæsi dasun iṅgidat nænin yut  
kavgiṭ danan pirivarā ēhipat vuno gōs” (Gaṃgā Rohaṇa Varṇanāva, 2000, v. 24)

<sup>8</sup> “දෙවන ගංගාරෝහණ පූජාව නිමා කළ ඉක්බිති බණ පිරිත් දෙක වදාළ පණස් නමක් පමණ සංඝයානට ද සර්ව රාත්‍රී බණ වදාළ පණස් දෙනමක් පමණ සංඝයාට යන එකසිය දෙනමකට සිවුරු පිරිකර පුද කළාය...” “dēvana gaṃgārohaṇa pūjāva nimā kaḷa ikbiti baṇa pirit dēka vadāḷa paṇas namak pamaṇa saṃghayā haṭa da sāravat le baṇa vadāḷa paṇas dēnamak pamaṇa saṃghayāṭa yana ēkasiya dēnamakaṭa sivuru pirikara puda kaḷāya.” (Saram Mudalitumage Pin Pota 2008, 16)

<sup>9</sup> “නවද වෙහෙරගම්පිට විහාරස්ථානයෙහි පටන් නායිමන තොටපල දක්වා මග දෙපස පහන් වැට බැඳ එම තොටුපළ දෙගොඩ ධර්ම මන්දිරයක් නංවා නානාප්‍රකාර විසිතුරු සැරසිලි කොට පළමු ගංගාරෝහණ පින්කම් දෙකට වඩා ඔරු පාරු ආදිය රැස්කොට” “tavada vēhēragampīṭa vihārasthānayēhi paṭan nāyimana tōṭapala dakvā maga dēpasa pahan vāṭa bāṇḍa ēma tōṭupala dēgōḍa dharma mandirayak naṃvā nānā prakāra visituru sērasili kōṭa paḷamu gaṃgārohaṇa pinkam dēkaṭa vadā ōru pāru ādiya ræs kōṭa” (Saram Mudalitumage Pin Pota 2008, 16)

performed from Navimana to Bandattara, but according to Ven. Kamburugamuwe Vanarathana, the fourth Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā was performed from Thalgaḥagoda to Attudawa (Vanaratana Himi 1994, 237). Nine boats were tied up, and a three-story pavilion was built. Upstairs were the relics casket and on the second floor were the monks preaching Pirith. Dance choirs were on the first floor.

### 3.5.6. The Fifth Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā

The fifth Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā mentioned in the Merit Book was the one that went uphill from Attuda to Thalgaḥagoda Oya. The Gaṃgā Rohana Pūjā performed in 1807 was the greatest Pūjā. The Merit Book states that the fifth ceremony was performed most gloriously. During this Pūjā, nine boats were tied together to form a three-storied Mandapa. Upstairs was the relics casket, on the second floor were the monks preaching Pirith, and on the first floor were the dance and choir groups. A medicine boat consisting of two people was also on hand to provide free medication.<sup>10</sup>

The fifth Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā is described in the book Gaṃgārupuda Kaw.

According to it, several vessels joined the procession. In addition to the boat in which the relics were deposited, there were vessels in which the monks preached Pirith. There was a vessel with various confectionery and a vessel with a pharmacy to treat accidents and illnesses. A vessel loaded with ammunition for the fireworks sailed next. Among the boats involved in the sacrifice was a vessel with Hindu priests and a vessel adorned with leaves of trees. The boat, which consisted of Kolam dance, sailed the next. Foreigners also came to watch this festival. Gaṃgā Puda Kaw states that European women were also involved in the fifth Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā. The book records how they were delighted to utter the Portuguese words 'Oten Bon Muyutu Premusu Alagriya' with the idea that 'it brings me great pleasure' (Gangrupuda Kaw 2016, vs. 150, 151). The book states that several did not participate and instead, criticized just as many people who attended the ceremony.

### 3.6. Importance of Gaṃgārohaṇa Ceremonies

Although the Gaṃgā Rohana ceremony took on a religious face, it is not

---

<sup>10</sup> "යම් යම් ආබාධයෙක් වී නම් ඊට ප්‍රතිකාර කරනු පිණිස ගුලි බෙහෙත් වූර්ණ කල්ක හා නොයෙක් තෙල වර්ග වලින් ද වෙනත් අමිකානු භාවසම්පන්න නානා විධ ඖෂධ ද්‍රව්‍යයන් ද සම්පූර්ණ කර වෛද්‍යවරු දෙදෙනෙක් සහිත නොයෙක් අතවැසි දනන් ඇති බෙහෙත් මුල්, කොළ, එල, පුෂ්ප වර්ගාදියෙන් සරසන ලද මහ අගුලක් ද..." "yam yam ābādhayēk vī nam īṭa pratikāra karaṇu piṇisa guli bēhēt cūrṇa kalka hā nōyēk taila varga valin da vēnat amitānubhāva sampanna nānā vidha auśadha dravyayan da sampūrṇa kara vaidyavaru dēdēnēk sahita atavāsi danan aeti bēhēt mul, kōḷa, phala, puṣpa varga ādiyēn sarasana lada maha agulak da" (Saram Mudalitumage Pin Pota 2008, 18)

only the Buddhists who attended it.<sup>11</sup> It is reported that Gentiles and non-believers participated in this as it contained many cultural elements. Furthermore, it is said that a Tamil king and queen with an entourage also participated in this Pūjā.<sup>12</sup> That reference is extraordinary. Who is that King? Where did he come from for this sacrifice? What was the purpose for which he was involved? There is not enough contribution from the sources to investigate. It is possible that a king belonging to the Nayakkara dynasty, the rulers of the Kandy kingdom may have come in this manner, but this is only a conjecture. It can be said that the Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā may have helped to establish Sinhala-Tamil-Buddhist-Hindu relations in the coastal region at a time when colonial power was on the rise.

The Gaṃgāru Puda Kaw also mentions the arrival of a foreign king to

attend the Gaṃgā Rohana Pūjā.<sup>13</sup> Siri Thilakasiri's idea is that this may be about a Thai king. It should also be noted that several kings who were contemporaries of the same name were rulers of Thailand.

It is clear from the Gaṃgāru Puda Kaw that this was not a local Tamil king. This king had boarded a ship and landed at Colombo. He came with his queen. She is also known as Somavadani. It is possible that Chandrawathi was translated like this into poetry.

Considering these similarities, it can be inferred that the Pūjā described in the book 'Gaṃgāru Puda Kaw' is the fifth Pūjā mentioned in Saram Mudali's merit book.

Sources reveal that the Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā was an occasion to show contemporary cultural fusion. During the Gaṃgārohaṇa festival, there were

<sup>11</sup> "ආගමට නැතත් මිතුරු බැව් සඳහා අවුත් විශේෂ, රවිකිඤ්ඤ, මද්දල ආදිය නාද කරමින් සජන සංගීත ස්වරාන්විත කවි සින්දු කියමින් ධාතු බල බලා සිටින සේවක ජනයාගෙන් හා දුවිඩ ජනයාගෙන් පිරුණු" "āgamata nētat mituru bāv saṇḍahā avut viyola, ravikiñña, maddala ādiya nāda karamin sapta svarānviṭa kavi sindu kiyamin dhātu bala balā siṭina sevaka janayan hā draviḍa janayāgḅen piruṇu" (Saram Mudalitumage Pin Pota 2008, 19)

<sup>12</sup> "ධාතු පූජාවට සපිරිවර රජ කෙනෙකු සහ බිසව කෙනෙකු එමින් සිටි සුදු පිළි සහිත නාඩගම් අඟලක් ද" "*dhātu pūjāvaṭa sapirivara dēmaḷa raja kēnaṅaku saha bisava kēnaṅaku ēmin siṭi sudu piḷi sahita nāḍagam agulakda*" (Saram Mudalitumage Pin Pota 2008, 19).

<sup>13</sup> "දඹදිව විදුරු දෙස

රම් රදකුමා ගුණ රූස

මෙපුදට එන විලස

කියමි කවියෙන් අසව් සහතොස"

"daṃbadiva viduru dēsa

ram radatumā guṇa rēsa

mēpudaṭa ēna vilasa

kiyami kaviyēn asav sahatōsa"

(Gangrupuda Kaw 2016, v. 161)

occasions that displayed the features of Hindu culture and European culture. This is evident from the focus on the musical instruments that are said to have been played by those involved in the river-climbing ceremony and how the vessels and the surrounding environment were adorned. Among the instruments played were violins and *Ravikinjas*. These musical instruments were incorporated into the Sri Lankan culture under the influence of the Portuguese. There is a particular interest in devil worship and pacification in the lowlands. It is revealed that the Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā also had cultural elements associated with it.<sup>14</sup>

Gaṃgārohaṇa Varnana reported that the people representing different classes of society were involved in this. The various measures taken during the Portuguese and Dutch rule and in the early days of the English rule had posed a threat to the local culture and the religious features in the coastal region. In such a background, this Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā might have been a great help in uniting the indigenous people. This might further have given rise to some sense of local identity among the natives.

The various groups mentioned above, travelling in different vessels, joined

the Pūjā. "pahuru ōru agul hambam paḍavu pāruvēn gōs

ēgaṅga turu nōvī rāsvī visū e puā dā" (Gaṃgā Rohaṇa Varṇanāva 2000, v. 33)

These details indicate that many ferries were moving along the Nilwala River.

The relics brought in procession from Matara to Godapitiya Jethavanaramaya along the river are kept at the Godapitiya Rajamaha Viharaya. The Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā ended after that. The three-storied walauwas built by Saram Mudali at Godapitiya Jethavanaramaya have been demolished about 65 years ago with the connivance of Ven. Welihene Indasara due to its dilapidated condition.

Portuguese and the Dutch did not give high-ranking administrative positions such as Muladani to anyone who did not embrace Christianity. The result was that the natives became pseudo-Christians to gain and maintain high positions. Realizing this, the English sought to get the support of the natives by allowing the natives to practice their faith instead of seeking the help of the pseudo-Christians; (Vanaratana Himi 1994, 31). Under these circumstances, the Buddhists were able to

---

<sup>14</sup> "දැනට මෙරට අතර විශවහාර ව තිබෙන සමයන්, රට යකුන් ගිනි යකුන්, ගරවුන් යනාදිය ක්‍රීඩා පිණිස නටවමින්" "dānaṭa mēraṭa vyavahāra tibēna samayan, raṭayakun, giniyakun, garavun yanādiya krīḍā piṇisa naṭavamin" (Saram Mudalitumage Pin Pota 2008, 19)

establish significant authority in Matara, and the power of the British was established making use of the said power gained by the Buddhists.

The Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā, organized by Saram Mudali and others, was a reason for the Buddhist revival in the southern part of the island. However, the Buddhist revival created in Matara by Saram Mudali, Illangakoon Mahamudali, and others created worries to the leaders of the British colonial rule in the country. The letter sent in 1807 by Thomas Metland, and then Governor, to the Agent in Matara (Vanaratana Himi 1994, 85), bears evidence for this. The letter explains the rise of the powers of Saram Mudali and Ven. Karathota Dhammarama Thero, and the Ven. Bowala Dhammananda Thero and that this must be subtly reduced as they could threaten the English rule. Moreover, The Governor could not tolerate the unity of the two as Illangakoon Mahamudali, who was married to a daughter of Saram Mudali, was the Chief Mudali of the Matara Disawe at that time.

The Governor believed that the British government should always show respect for Buddhism, wish for Buddhist's betterment, and win the favor of the monks and the Buddhists. The Governor

emphasized that Ven. Bowala Dhammananda Thero and Saram Mudali were very close friends, and that their government could benefit by splitting the two. With foresight, the Governor understood that these groups could pose a severe threat to his power. The Governor has observed the probable rivalry that could be created between Ven. Karathota Thera and Saram Mudali. Therefore, Thomas Maitland's recommendation was to divide the Buddhist power in the area by giving a leadership position to the Karathota Thera to break the power of Saram Mudali (Vanaratana Himi 1994, 85).

Gaṃgā Rohaṇa Varṇanāva is a book written contemporaneously with the event in praise of the Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā . A word quoted in the book led to the emergence of a well-known scholarly discourse called Sawsatdamism (Sawsatdamvadaya). It is not a secret that Sawsatdamism arose because Ven. Mihiripenne Dhammaratana's pointed out that Saram Mudali, who contributed to this Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā, was mentioned in the book 'Gaṃgārohaṇa Varnanawa' as 'Saradam' Mudali. The following is the poem that influenced the emerging debate.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> “සසර සරණ සච්ඡන් දම් අමාවෙන් සතොස්වා  
සග පවග සැපත් දුන් දම්රදුන් දම් සඟුන් සෙවි  
පෙර මැදගවනින් මේ තුන් ගෙණේ මුල් කෙමෙන් නම්  
පහළ මැතිසඳෙක් වී මේ පුරේකින් දෙදෙක් වන්”  
“sasara saraṇā savsatdam amāvēn satōsvā

This debate greatly influenced the resurgence of Sinhala language and literature which was on the verge of decline. Accordingly, the Gaṃgā Rohana Pūjā has influenced the modern development of the Sinhala language and literature.

In the early years of the 21st century, Pūjā of the same name was performed, renewing the memory of the Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā held in the early 19th century. The Pūjā was performed grandly on the Nilwala River for seven days from August 3 to 10, 2000. It is said that Mangala Samaraweera, the then Hon. Minister of Posts, Telecommunications, and Mass Media contributed to this (Nootana Gaṃgārohaṇa Varnanava Kavyaya 2000, v. 5).

#### 4. Conclusion

The Gaṃgārohaṇa festivals organized by Saram Mudali had significantly contributed to the religious and cultural revival of the city of Matara and its environs when colonial policies hampered the perpetuation of Buddhism. Only a handful of aristocrats have taken positions from the Western imperialists and made an outstanding contribution to the revival of Buddhism. There was hardly any other Mudali who worked so hard to bring about

a popular Buddhist revival. The Gaṃgā Rohana Pūjā also laid the foundation for the revival of Sinhala language and literature. Therefore, the Gaṃgārohaṇa Pūjā could not be described as a mere religious offering. The Pūjā s were organized based on political, social, and cultural needs of the contemporary period.

#### 5. References

##### Primary Sources

*Cullavagga Pali* 2013, Dharmachakra Lama Padanama, Bandaragama.

*Dhammapadatthakathā III* 1912, The Pali Text Society, London.

*Gaṃgā Rohaṇa Varṇanāva* 1997, (ed) Siri Tilakasiri, Ratna pot Prakashkayo, Colombo.

*Gaṃgārohaṇa varnana vivaranaya* 1934, (ed) M. Cumararatunge, M. D. Gunasena, Colombo.

*Gaṃgārupuda Kaw* 2016, (ed) Siri Tilakasiri, S Godage and Brothers, Colombo.

Martin Jayavardhana, K 2000, *Nootana Gaṃgārohaṇa Varnanava Kavyaya*, An author publication.

*Pujawaliya*, 1997, (ed) Ven. Kirielle Gíwimala, M.D. Gunasena, Colombo.

---

sagapa vēga sēpat dun dam radun dam saṅgun sēv  
pēra mæda gavanin me tun gēṇe mul kēmēn nam  
pataḷa mæti saṅḍek vī me pure kit dēḍek vat” (Gaṃgā Rohaṇa Varṇanāva 2000, v. 01)



Sankha 2001, *Gaṃgārohaṇa Varnanaava Saha Savsatdamvadaya*, January-June, Education Publication Department.

Saram Mudalithumage Pin Pota 2008, (ed) H.A.P. Abhayavaradana, Department of Cultural Affairs, Colombo.

*The Mahavamsa* 1838 (ed. and trans.), G. Turner, Colombo.

*The minor readings*, vol. I "The illustrator of ultimate meaning," its commentary, (tr.) Nanamoli 1960, Pali Text Society, Bristol.

### **Secondary Sources**

"Mitigating the Human-Crocodile Conflict in the Nilwala River - Environment Foundation (Guarantee) Limited." Environment Foundation (Guarantee) Limited. Retrieved 2021-07-21. Available from; <https://efl.lk/portfolio/mitigating-the-human-crocodile-conflict-in-the-nilwala-river/>

Ekanayaka, A de Silva 1876, 'On the Form of Government under the Native,' *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland*. Vol. 8. pp. 297 – 304.

Gamage, NJ 1980, *Karatota Na Himi, Matara Velendo*, Matara.

Hevaavasam, Pa.Ba.Ji. 1966, *Maatara Yugaye Saahityadharayan Haa Saahitya Nibandhana*, Samskrutika Katayutu Amaatyamshaya, Colombo.

Hewage, D 2011, *Nilwala Gaṃgā Asritha Janashruthi*, Fast Printery, Colombo.

Jayasooriya KB & Abhayavardhana HAB (ed) 1965, *Maatara Saahitya Dhaara*, Maatara Velendo, Matara.

Peebles, P 1995, *Social change in nineteenth-century Ceylon*, Lake House Bookshop, Colombo.

Peries, KND and others (ed) 2000, *Demala Sinhala Shabda Koshaya*, Kotte.

Rahula Himi, W 2009, *Lakdiwa Budu Samaye Ithihasaya* S. Godage and Brothers, Colombo.

Rathanasara Thero, Kaudagammana 2021, *Baminitiya Maha Sagataya*, S. Godage and Brothers, Colombo.

Silva, Rajpal Kumar De & Beumer, W.G.M. 1988, *Illustrations and Views of Dutch Ceylon 1602–1796: A Comprehensive Work of Pictorial Reference With Selected Eye-Witness Accounts*, Serandib Books, London.

Vanaratana Himi, K 1994, *Matara Puravidyatmaka Ithihasaya*, Sri Rohana Sangha sabha Mulasthanaya, Tihagoda

Vimalakeerti Himi, M 1953, *Matara Sahitya Yugaya*, Bauddha Poth Samagama.

### **Names of key informants**

Gunasekara, H.M.G. (67) Totamuna, Matara.

Manike, S.G. (76), Nupe, Matara.

Rambanda, H.M. (64), Godapitiya, Matara.

Ratnayaka, S.P. (72), Nupe, Matara.

Seelawati, H. (72) Hittetiya, Matara.

Sirisena, H.G. (62), Kotuwegoda, Matara.

Ven. Chulalankara, Godagama. Chief  
Incumbent, Hittetiya Raja Maha Viharaya,  
Matara.