

Bali Shanthikarma in Sri Lanka: A Brief Introduction

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Since centuries, Sri Lankans conduct rituals expecting fortune and good health. Among all those rituals, “Bali Shanthikarma” holds a special place in Sri Lankan culture. The common meaning of the word “Bali” is a humble donation that people do for the gods. The word Bali derives from Pāli and Sanskrit languages in the Pre-Buddhist era through Vedic culture. Bali Shanthikarma has spread as various traditions in different areas of Sri Lanka namely Udarata Bali, Pahatharata Bali, Nuwarakalawiye Bali, and Uva Bali. Moreover, it is an ensemble of music, dance movements, sculpture and painting. Bali Shanthikarma is specially held to reduce the negative effect of the solar system on human beings.

The origin of Bali Shanthikarma

The origin of Bali Shanthikarma may be found during the Vedic period in India. Among the four Vedas (i.e. Rig, Yajur, Sāma, and Atharva), an annotation about Bali Shanthikarma was made in the Sāma Veda. According to the Sāma Veda, Bali Shanthikarma was created by Mahā Brahma. But the purview of many scholars is that the Mahā Brahma does refer to the people who had paranormal cognition.

According to the “Maha Bali Nidhanaya”, which is a chant about the origin of Bali Shanthikarma, there are four notions about the origin of Bali Shanthikarma as follows.

1. The origin of Bali Shanthikarma occurred during the time of king Mahāsammatha.
2. A Bali Shanthikarma was held in Vishālā city of India to stop the outbreak of Thunbiya. [I.e. influence of demons, diseases, and famine]
3. A Bali Shanthikarma was held to reduce the effect of the “Divi Dosa” of king Panduwasdew.
4. In ancient times, a king’s son had seen a viper in a dream. A Bali Shanthikarma had been held to cure his fear.

According to Mahā Bali Nidhānaya, there were people in India, who were called Muni, Isi, and Rishi. They had paranormal cognitive skills and tried to study the solar system [nine planets], the sun, and the stars. They suggested the effects of them on the human beings and created their astrology. Consequently, people began to believe about evils that could affect on them. According to Mahā Bali Nidhāna, people can understand their karma and reduce its effect. As a redress to karma, they have created Bali Shanthikarma. 4400 Balis were created as inner cell Balis and another 4400 Balis were created as outer cell Balis totalling 8800 Balis. (Sumanaweera, 2017)

Bali Shanthikarma in Sri Lanka

The influx of Bali Shanthikarma to Sri Lanka occurred in the Kotte era. During this period, all the 8800 of Balis were consolidated into 35 Balis. They were called “Panthis Bali”. There are thousands of Balis under each of 35 Balis.

Vishmakarma Bali, Mahā Nilagarāksha, and Dasa Poda Rāksha are only a few of these panthis Bali. It is said that this classification was done by Weedagama Maithri Thero.

Sumanaweera (2017) mentions that the Brahmins who came to Sri Lanka in ancient times performed Bali Shanthikarma for the people in Sri Lanka. In the Indian manner of performing Bali Shanthikarma, the priority has been given to the gods called Brahma, Vishnu, and Maheshwara and to the nine planets. However, Weedagama Maithri Thero, Thotagamuwe Shri Rahula Thero, and the king Prakramabahu VI in Sri Lanka were disagreed with prioritizing Brahma, Vishnu, and Maheshwara. Instead, they predominated the triple gem (i.e. Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha) and reconstructed the Bali Shanthikarma while keeping its inherent essence. However, Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara are considered as pivotal characters in Bali Shanthikarma even today.

There is a descriptive detail in the Vijaya Raja story of Kohombakankariya about the way how Bali Shanthikarma was performed. Nevertheless, there is no citation in the Vijaya Raja story about drum renderings in Bali Shanthikarma.

“Lāgana wam atha ī gasa randunū

Nāga e mundāsana banda namunū

Mēgha lesin vira itha sitha themunū

Yāga karath saranath wanda samano”

Above stanza briefs how to get on with a Bali Shanthikarma. In India, Bali Shanthikarma was held showing the Abhaya sign from one hand and holding an ē plant in the other hand. In Sri Lanka, a torch is used as replacement of the ē plant. The movements of holding a torch with one hand

and dancing to the rhythm of the hand bell were introduced in Sri Lanka as well. All these features were added to the Bali Shanthikarma without differentiating aspects such as sthothra and shloka which were used in Indian Bali Shanthikarma.

There are three main traditions of Bali Shanthikarma in Sri Lanka. They are called Udarata, Pahatharata, and Sabaragamu Bali traditions. Chinthāmanī shān̄thi, Ashtaka, Sthothra, and Shlokas are written in Sanskrit language. The exorcist of Bali Shanthikarma should have a normative knowledge of languages, especially in Sanskrit. Not only in Sanskrit but also in Pali and various dialects of Sinhala.

There are two main methods of Balis: Roopa Bali and Ambum Bali. In Ambum Bali, the statue is moulded by the exorcist. There are recitals called Ambum Kavi [recitals about how to create the statue] which are to be observed in Sri Lanka.

“ Sindooram pancha vathram dasa buja sahitham

*Posthakan lekikhaggam kathwāham bīja pooram mrutha
kalasam*

*Runtikām akshamālām nāgappāsā mahastham varada
baya haram*

*Sarpayāgnē pravēnī vignānam Gnānoththim sudassanawā
vishmakarma namāmi”*

This Sanskrit Shloka which is written in India mentions the features of god Vishmakarma. It describes lord Vishmakarma as a person who applies sindoor colour on five heads and ten arms. He holds a book, a stylus and a sabre in one hand and showing the Abhaya sign with the other hand. The meaning of the last line of the text is that the Vishmakarma who holds serpents and understands the knowledge should be

worshipped. (Dissanayake, 1990) In Sri Lanka, Weedagama Maitri Thero and Totagamuwe Shri Rahula Thero created Ambum Kavi [recitals about moulding the Bali statue] based on these Sthothras. It is called Vishmakarma Bali.

The quantity of the soil to mould the Bali statue, necessary colours, about hands and legs, the height of the statue and many other details which are essential for moulding the statue are mentioned in these recitals. These ambum kavi are sung at the end of the Bali Shanthikarma.

There are also many stanzas describing the exorcist of Bali Shanthikarma.

*“ Samunu kulata ran huya lā muthu pota
Amunu pūna nūlak lā ura pita
Damunu abhaya hasthaya dipa digukota
Samunu yāga karadei naranindu hata ”*

Bali Sthothras have been written according to Vruthās.

*“Japā kusuma sankāsam
Kāshyapēham mahathruthim
Thāmoram sarva pāpa ganam
Pranathosmim divākaram ”*

In Sri Lanka, recitals of Bali Shanthikarma were written according to Virita. Thousands of recitals were written in Sinhala language for each Bali Sthothra. Each recital was written to a specific Virita in a stunning way.

Bali Shanthikarma is performed to reduce the bad effects not only from the nine planets but also from the demons and goblins who were sent from the nine planets. This includes the demons such as Reeri Yakā and Mahasonā who are considered as very powerful demons. (Sedaraman, 1964)

*“Drutha rāshta, virūda, virūpāksha, vaishrawana
kiyannā wū*

*satharawaram dēva rājoththamayānan wahansēlāgen
waram gath*

*yakshayintada, bhūthayintada, pisāchayintada, prētha
kumbhāndayintada*

*thawada ravi Chandra kuja buda guru shukra shani
rāhu kēthu kiyanna wu*

nawagrahayingen arangath waramgath

yaksha pretha pisācha bhūtha kumbhāndayintada

*thawada mema bhūmasthalaye bhūmiyē wadawesenna
wū*

*anantha apramāna wū yaksha prētha pisācha bhūtha
kumbhāndayintada*

sarasā dena mē bali bath mālāwa”

According to the paraphrase, the exorcist calls to the demons and goblins to accept the food that is offered by the exorcist.

Some Aesthetic Aspects

In Sri Lanka, Bali Shanthikarma developed in a typical way. All the drum renderings and dancing elements were added to the Bali Shanthikarma in Sri Lanka. Music and dance elements are well used in Bali Shanthikarma. For example, Kandyan dance [up-country traditional dance] is used in up-country Bali Shanthikarma. Though Kandyan dance originates from Kohombākankāriya, the dancing movements have some differences when it is used in Bali Shanthikarma. The dancing movements of up-country

Bali Shanthikarma are more dramatic than the movements of traditional Kandyan dance.

*“Brahma pathrayak surathata Gini pandama gena
dakunata*

*Isuru dunna miniya wamata Brahma thāla gamanin
yana*

*Shuddha polowa mihikathatath Nodana pathula
thabā gamana*

Shuddha me bali yāga karaw Adurani piliwela danagena”

This stanza shows how the dancing movements should be done by the exorcist.

In up-country Bali Shanthikarma, the Geta Beraya is used as the main musical instrument and Udekki is also used. Nuwara Kalaviye Bali is a sub category of up-country Bali Shanthikarma. The Udekki drum is used as the main musical instrument in Nuwara Kalaviye Bali Shanthikarma. Different traditions have different tunes, different rhythms, and different words. The reason for this differentiation is their various dialects and their customs. When Bali Shanthikarma started to prevail in the Sabaragamu area, Sabaragamu regional musical instruments and dancing movements were added. The Dawula, the traditional Sabaragamu drum which is played on one head by hand and on the other head by a stick, is used as the main musical instrument in Sabaragamu Bali Shanthikarma. When it comes to the Pahatharata (Low country) region, they adapted Pahatharata dancing movements and Pahatharata traditional musical instruments to it. “Yak Beraya” is used as the main musical instrument in Pahatharata Bali Shanthikarma. (Sedaraman, 1967).

Order of Bali Oblation

1. Bali Pireema

The commencing of Bali Shanthikarma is called Bali Pireema. First of all, the exorcist and the the attending people observe five precepts. Many stanzas which praise Lord Buddha are sung in “BaliPireema”. (Kaariyawasam, 1986) “

2. Pirith Huye Keema

Pirith Huye Keema means performing about a strand which is empowered by sacred chanting. The first Pirith [sacred chanting] Huya [strand] King Vijaya immigrated to Sri Lanka. This story is bound by the god called Upulvan. This Pirith Huya was empowered by Lord Buddha. In these stanzas the reason of binding the string to the king Vijaya are sung and the exorcist blesses the valetudinarian to heal by the power of Pirith Huya.

3. Kadathurāvē Kavi

Till the time of singing Kadathurāvē Kavi the valetudinarian is covered by a curtain. Kadathurāvē Kavi are sung to remove the curtain and uncover the valetudinarian. The praises of Lord Buddha are sung in Kadathurāvē Kavi. During singing of Kadathurāvē Kavi Pandame Kavi [stanzas of the torch] and Athminiye Kavi [stanzas of hand bell] are also sung. There are hundreds of Kadathurāvē Kavis. During the singing of Kadathurāvē Kavi two powerful mantras are sung which are only used in Bali Shanthikarma. They are called Kshithi Samhāra and Nawa Punda Rāksha. After reciting Kadathurāvē Kavi the prey is showed to the valetudinarian.

4. Atamagala

Atamagala is also called Sodasa Magala. “Ata” means eight and “Magala” means auspicious. The eight auspicious are called “Atamagala.

A carpet is dropped on the ground and a white cloth is dropped on the carpet. Then rice is put on the white cloth and a picture is drawn from the rice. This picture is called “Bhuwanādhipathi Yantra” The exorcist should draw a drum, steer, cobra, vijinipathra, lion, dragon, and banderol and should put a lamp in the eight corners. There are objects in the Atamagala called “Mangala Sookhaka Vasthu”. A head of a leopard, a pestle, heerassa and a leaf of a king coconut are some of them. Then Jaya Mangala, Ashtaka and especially Chinthāmanī Shānthi are sung. There are hundred Ashtakas in Chinthāmanī Shānthi written in Sanskrit by Veedagama Maithri Thero.

5. Dedicating “Bali bhojana” [dedicating viands]

6. Bali Uthpatti

The story of the birth of the Bali is narrated in Bali Uthpatti. This is also called “Graha Ārādhanā”. The stanzas are sung describing the birth of Bali Shanthikarma.

7. Graha Pankthi

There are many types of Graha Pankthi.

- Aradhanā Graha Pankthi
- Pāda Graha Pankthi
- Namaskāra Graha Pankthi
- Jaya Mangala Graha Pankthi

8. Singing of “Hing Pankthi”

There are 4 Hings that affect to the man kind additionally to the nine planets. They are Yama, Kāla, Vāyu, and Mruthu. The stanzas about 4 Hings are called Hing Pankthi.

9. Singing of “Horā pankthi”

Horā pankthi describes about the horās of the day. There are seven horās according to astrology.

10. Singing of “Thithi Pankthi”

There are 15 thithis. This is squarely connected to astrology.

11. The Dasā Pankthi Recital

This aspect is essential in Bali Shanthikarma. This is also squarely connected to astrology. The features of Dasā are written in Sanskrit language.

12. Singing of “Ambum Kavi”

The ambum kavi recital is very long. The stanzas are sung which are about the moulded prey. In this “Ath Bali upatha” and “Mal Bali upatha” are also sung.

13. Singing of “Sirasa Pāda Kavi”

14. “Seth Kavi” recital

The recitals of blessings are called seth kavi.

15. Singing of “Sath Dina Kavi”

The stanzas about seven days are sung.

16. Reciting “Dolos Māsa Kavi”

The stanzas about 12 months are called dolos māsa kavi.

17. “Bali Hamāraya” [end of the Bali Shanthikarma]

Many aspects such as “Bali Masawilla” are included in Bali Hamāraya.

*“Thun this payak mati aragena ambālā
Thawa tis payak gena sithiyam karālā
Yannē kohoma mē rankanda damālā”*

This is called “Bali Masawilla”.

*“Dīlā keli puda yaku hata braai
Kavi kī apa sema devinduta braai
Āthura jīwitha sīmā vārai
Dan kala yāgaya onna hamārai”*

The Bali Shanthikarma is ended after singing this stanza. After that the prey is destroyed and driven out of the house to a place where people can see it clearly.

Though the origin of Bali Shanthikarma is India there is no evidence of performing Bali Shanthikarma in India. Nowadays, Bali Shanthikarma is becoming an obsolete cultural aspect even in Sri Lanka. (Sumanaweera, 2017)

References

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