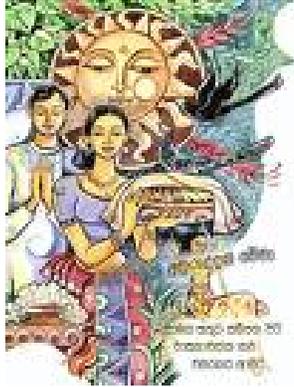


Festival of New beginnings: Sri Lankan New Year.

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According to traditional astrological belief, the sun completes its movement across the twelve segments of the Zodiac in the course of a year taking one month to travel each constellation. New Year marks the passing of the sun from the Zodiac Pisces to the Zodiac of Aries. This event, the time when the Sun enters the Aries Zodiac is a solar festival that inaugurates the coming of the New Year. In Sri Lanka it is celebrated in the month of 'Bak' (April) usually on the thirteenth or the fourteenth day of that month depending on when the auspicious times occur.



The Sinhala and Hindu New Year, is celebrated by both Sinhalese and the Tamils in Sri Lanka. The word "Bak" (meaning fortunate), coincides with the coming of the paddy harvest, the season for fresh fruits especially mangoes, the fresh blossoms of spring, blue skies, and the song of the *koha*,

all associated with prosperity and abundance. It is a fun and a festive time, symbolizing new beginnings, possibility and hope. A time to look forward to what the future has in store instead of looking back on the hurt and pain of the past. It is the time to heal, a time to forgive, and a time to make a fresh beginning.



Sri Lankans attach great importance to New Year customs and traditions. Important activities associated with the New Year are performed according to auspicious times. Traditionally, astrologers determine what the auspicious times are for various festivities which vary from year to year. The Sinhala *Auvurudu* or the National New Year does not begin at midnight but at the time determined by astrologers. There is also an interesting period of a few hours between the beginning of the New Year and the conclusion of the old year, called *nonagathe* (neutral period), meaning the absence of *nakatha* (auspicious time), period for doing nothing until the sun moves to its new astrological position.



Nonagathe is an inauspicious time. It is considered best to abstain from any type of work, because as it is believed that any activity, other than religious activity conducted during this period will be fruitless. Buddhists however engage in religious activities

during *nonagathe*, visiting the temple dressed in white. Because of the mystic nature of the transition period (*nonagathe*), many Buddhists feel a need to fortify themselves, spiritually and make a success of their activities in the coming year. Before coming of the *nonagathe*, fireplaces are cleaned and the old ashes are removed and everything is made clean and ready for a new beginning and the New Year.



When the *nanagathe* is over, the temple bells ring to announce the coming of the New Year. This marks the beginning of festive time when special food is cooked, offerings are made, and firecrackers are lit. It is also the time to cook the traditional *kiribath* (milkrice). *Kiribath* is made from new rice with milk in a new clay pot. A pot of milk is also boiled at the auspicious time and the boiling milk is allowed to pour over on all sides to signify prosperity and plenty in the coming year. The villagers are good at forecasting the prospects of the New Year, by watching the direction of the overflowing of the boiling milk- the predictions they make are rarely pessimistic. Onlookers wish that their prosperity may overflow as the boiling milk overflows. Traditionally, families get together at the auspicious time to eat the first meal of the New Year wherein the *tour deforce* is of course, *Kiribath*.



Sri Lankans also make special offerings. It is customary to offer betel leaves (*Bulath*) to elders. Betel is given first to parents and then to other elders. It symbolizes the asking of pardon for any misunderstandings or wrongdoings during the past year and the desire to make peace with the dawn of the New Year, wife will offer betel leaves to a husband.



Gifts and money are exchanged at the onset of the New Year, a practice referred to as *ganudenu*, or the act of receiving and giving. *Ganudenu* takes different forms. For example, elders give money to the young, employers to workers, the rich to the poor and so on. Coins received during this exchange are preserved till the next New Year. Relatives exchange money among themselves at the auspicious time in the New Year, for good luck. It is auspicious to receive money from someone who is wealthy and has a good reputation. The dawn of the New Year is believed to be the most auspicious of times and whatever is initiated during this time will yield the highest results. Farmers may plant trees, or work in the field briefly and children are made to study.



The New Year is also considered a time to heal and to make amends. One should appease a relative alienated by some misunderstanding. Above all it is the time for families to reaffirm faith in one another. Children, regardless of their age go down on their knees to touch the feet of their mother and father in reverence, offering leaves of betel as a gesture of deference and respect.



Above all, the New Year is a time of fun and rejoicing. New Year' celebrations culminate with the ritual anointing of oil, the *thelgana avurudda* followed by bathing. Special oil is prepared for anointing done by the head of the household. Although the *avurudda* is not strictly a religious ceremony, Buddhist monks in the temple play a supportive role by preparing oils according to ancient formulae and make it available to all and sundry. In applying the oil, the head of the household would stand on the pile of specially selected leaves as appropriate for that particular year by the astrologers. Many people go the temple for an oil anointing ceremony. While performing the oil anointing ceremony, the monks recite the following *gatha* or stanza of benediction.

May all blessings be upon you
May all the gods protect you
By the power of the Buddhas
May you always be well.

Bhavatu Sabba mangalam
Rakkhantu sabba devata
Sabba Buddhanubavena
Sada sotthi bavantu te !

Traditional Sinhala Buddhist society clearly influenced by Buddhist ethics consistently seek to mend what is broken rather than to create new forms. Oil so much a factor in New Year celebrations to sooth and calm the troubled human spirit.

As the New Year fades and it is the morning after, nostalgia grows and lingers on. There will be another New Year and yet another. The New Year wish is “May you live one hundred and twenty years and another hundred”.

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