

# Sabaragamu Dance Tradition in Sri Lanka

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## Abstract

There are three types of traditional dances in Sri Lanka, namely Kandyan Dance, Low country Dance and Sabaragamu Dance. Among these our special attention is paid to "the Sabaragamu Dance Tradition". The main reason for this is that it was not subjected to international attention. Sabaragamu Dance was born in Rattnapura District. This area had been known as the ancient Sabaragamuwa. It is one of the main provinces and it is famous for gems. This area has also been known as "Saparaggrama" in Pali Language since a very long time. Therefore it is known as the Sabaragamu Dance in this area's particular dance system. This dance style is very dainty and peaceful. In other words it is a flexible dance style. The main percussion instrument used in this dance performance is the "Daula". This instrument has been used for communication. It was the most popular, oldest and ancient communication systems in Sri Lanka. There are two significant dance styles for both male and female in this same tradition. One of them is known as "Diggei Natuma" or the dance of god in the god's temple. It was a unique female dance style performed. It cannot be seen by any others because it was a secret dance pattern in ancient god's temple. This dance style had begun with ancient god temples in Sri Lanka. This style had been performed only by women. It was the specialty in this feature. Besides males have been holding more ritualistic dance forms, in the same tradition too. This dance tradition is based on four fields and it was born through those mentioned below. The first field is a ritual of "Yakum Piduma". It began during the pre-Buddhist period in Sri Lanka. The Second field has been established based on "Jayashrimaha Bodhi" The third one is based on the custom of "Sabaragamu maha saman dewalaya" along with the other healing rituals of Sabaragamu Dance has become a significant performing art. I would like to present a deep overview about these studies.

Keywords: Sabaragamuwa, Sabaragamuwa Dance, Saparaggrama, Daula, Diggei Natuma, Yakum Piduma

## Introduction

According to ancient traditional Sabaragamu dancers and based on past dancing backgrounds, the Sabaragamu dance consists of a combination of singing verses, chanting, drumming, dramatical events and dancing. This dance style is also very dainty and peaceful. As well as it is a flexible dancing style. "Dowla" is the main percussion instrument, which has been using by accompanists. A special systematical drumming system has been included in this tradition. We are expecting to investigate and to present this dance system and it's

origin through this study. This tradition was born in Sabaragamuwa province, which situated in the middle of Sri Lanka above the southern province in the Sri Lankan map. It is one of the nine provinces in the Island. This province has combined both Rathnapura and Kegalle districts in the year 1833 by former governor H.W. Kodrington.

Before this combination, Sabaragamuwa was a separated area of ancient Sri Lanka. Old Sabaragamuwa was separated from the area of Kegalle. Many historians have confirmed that only Rathnapura area was ancient Sabaragamuwa in pre-historic era. Rathnapura means the city full of gems. In other words: "Rattna" means gems and "Puraya" means the city. So as it is a "city full of gems." It is called "Rathnapuraya." In addition, few parts of both Badulla and Kegalle districts had been belonged to old Sabaragamuwa. The ancient kings of Sri Lanka had divided Sri Lanka into the three parts called "Ruhunu", "Pihiti" and "Maya" according to the geographical situation. During that period, Sabaragamuwa was named such as "Saparagamdisa", "Sabaragamurata". During the above period which was included as the part of Ruhunu and Maya. In this period, above area was named such as "Saparrpurr", "Saparaggrama", "Sapargam", "Rattecha Saparee", "Saparapura"... etc. There are two legends in the past for these various names. One is called "Sabara" which means aborigines or Vadda people. According to the human sociologists and anthropologists this area was full of aborigines. This legend is highly accepted. The other legend says "sapper" means blue sapphires which is found in Rathnapura and this area was called "Grama", It means the village in English. Later "Sapperagrama" has become "Sabaragamuwa" now. In the past this area was known as Sabaragamuwa by the foreigners. Mostly Blue sapphires are found in this area and these blue sapphires are known as "Nil manik" in sinhala. Accordingly, the term sapphires and the name for the village "gama" are known together as Sabaragamuwa. The name Saparagamu, is mostly used by foreigners in the ancient time. So the dance tradition originated in the above area is called by the two names. One is the Sabaragamuwa dance and other one is called Saparagamu dance. And to the tradition of Sabaragamuwa dance has a well-organized history.

### **Origin of the Sabaragamu dance**

When looking at the opening stages of this dance, it can be studied under six stages. They are as follow,

1. The dancing of Sabaragamu, that began in the pre-historic era.
2. The Sabaragamu dance, which began in the second century B.C. (Before Christ)

3. The Sabaragamu dance, commenced at the period of king Dutugamunu.
4. The Sabaragamu dance, which began in the second century at the period of king Gajabahu.
5. The dance tradition of Sabaragamu was started in relation to the Sri paada Saman Devalaya, Maha Saman Devalaya and other more Saman devala in Sabaragamuwa in the 16th century. During the period of king Parakramabahu, the second.
6. The Sabaragamu dance, which was began with the customs of Delgamuwa Dalada temple at the period of King Seethawaka Rajasingha.

**The above topics are described as follows-**

### **1. The dancing of Sabaragamu was began in the pre-historic era**

The pre-historic era is considered as most important and the first stage of the Sabaragamu dance origin. It can be stated as follow. Of these the most oldest ritual, which is known as “Yakumpideema” that was the first healing ritual which is considered by sociologists in Sri Lanka. This “Yakumpideema” that is called as “worshipping the devils” in English. The ancient tribes of Sri Lanka conducted various “Pujas” for the Yakku or Yakkshayan (Devils), for a long time. They conducted this sort of “Pujas” For dead relatives as they believe that such activities would have brought a positive impact on their lives. The “Yaksha” Tribe assumed that by conducting these rituals the appease the dead spirit of a powerful Tribesmen who has been attributed with godly status: those who are alive can obtain many benefits as well as protection from harm. Many researchers in the field have shown that the practice of worshipping demons has its roots in these pre-historic Yaksha communities.

This Traditional rituals can be seen among the present Sri Lankan aborigines People and Sabaragamu traditional rituals. When looking at the origin of “Yakumpideema” we can find that it has began from the pre-historical worship and believe. There are many customs in relation to these activities. These are different types of believers and various types of worships. However, by this time, we have been able to identify several ancient faiths in the “Yakun Pideema” ritual of the Sabaragamu tradition. They are “Mahakalu Kiri Amma”, “Ambarapathy Kiri Amma”, “Kalukumara” and “Mangara”... etc. These invisible forces are their ancestors. Sabaragamu dance was born through this rituals and sacrifices.

## **2. The Sabaragamu dance which was began in the second century B.C.**

With the bringing of “Bo trees” from India to Sri Lanka, we can see that there is a big impact of the Sabaragamuwa dance style. “Ancient people believed that there are eight results we can obtain from the “Bodhiya”, It’s called “Ashtapala Bodhiya”. There were many saplings which were brought to Sri Lanka in the second century B.C. and there was at Sabaragamuwa. With us arrival of this sacred Bo tree, various religious offering and rituals around all over Sabaragamuwa were started. There was also a dance form with these Buddhist religious offerings. Therefore, that period can be accepted as a birth era of these dance tradition. The places like, Sandagiriya, Galtamyaya, Budhugala, Kooragala and Devagirigallena Viharaya... are considered the origin of the birth places of the people who invented the style of Sabaragamu dance tradition.

## **3. The Sabaragamu dance, which commenced at the period of king Dutugamunu.**

During the period of king Dutugamunu Sri Lankan Arts, Drumming and Dance in particular received great fillip-among the greatest figures that have made significant contributions to the development of arts of drumming in Sri Lanka. The following two men of the era occupy foremost place in Sabaragamuwa: “Pussadeeva” and “Mahasoonā”, they had been created an art of percussion. Those were Buddhist sacred arts and also extremely famous in the area this also helped a great to the advancement of Sabaragamu Dance.

## **4. The Sabaragamu dance, which began in the second century at the period of king Gajabahu.**

After bringing the “Silappadikaram” book to Sri Lanka by king Gajabahu, the rituals and customs related to the goddess of “Paththini” were started among devotees of Sri Lanka. After this background the concept of gods which there were in India, were stated in Sri Lanka also there are “Esala Perahara”, Esala Celebrations and Various ceremonies of July. When Spreading the rituals of gods like this the concept of the gods influenced and spread among the Sri Lanka Society. In Sabaragamuwa a “Yaga” was stated, and the “Paththini Adahilla” was spread in the whole Sabaragamuwa region. From this “Puja” called “Paththini Adahilla” people seek the good side of their lives and protection from the Goddess Paththini. With the beginning of this “Paththini Adahilla” a great number of “Devalas” or God’s temples are started in the Sabaragamuwa, such as Arukgoda Devalaya in Kalawana, Rock cave Devalaya in Bungiriya, Batawala Paththini Devalaya, Magurugoda Devalaya... Etc.

In relation to the rituals and customs held in these temples of Gods, the concept of dance in Sabaragamu was started.

The main Puja was identified as “Pahan Maduwa” and it is the main and the most important way of dancing which belongs to Sabaragamuwa. The people who perform this “Pahan maduwa” mostly expect this Protection from the evil spirits and to get the fertility from their agricultural crops. This Pujas were held in relation to the Sabaragamuwa dance style. So it is considered that this era is the beginning of the Sabaragamu dance.

#### **5. The dance tradition of Sabaragamu was Started in relation of the “Sri Paada Saman Devalaya”, “Maha Saman Devalaya” and other more Saman Devalaya in Sabaragamuwa.**

The Sabaragamu dance pattern is started with the beginning of above mentioned “Devalas”. The king Maha Parakramabahu started the “Sri paada saman devalaya” in 1153. The Sabaragamu dance style was started with the rituals done in the “Saman Devalaya” The king Parakramabahu the 2nd reconstructed the “Devalaya” The king was very fond of seeing the dancing performance as a hobby. At the end of the rituals held in “Devalaya” the Women performed the dance in front of the king. It is called The “Diggei Natuma”. It is a further step in the Sabaragamu dance. The performances and rituals are still carried out at the pujas in Devalaya.

#### **6. The Sabaragamu dance which was began with the custom of Delgamuwa Dalada temple at the period of king Seethawaka Rajasinha.**

The sacred tooth relic was in Kuruwita Delgamuwa Temple in Rathnapura District during 1521-1581. Later it was taken to Kandy. The king Sithawaka Mayadunne supplied the complete security to the sacred tooth relic. In the past only the Sabaragamuwa dance style was performed to do the procession (Dalada perahara). After 1922 the up country dance called Kandyan Dance was included in the Dalada Perahara. We can insist that the only dance form to do the Dalada Perahara at the first was the Sabaragamu dance style.

#### **The three social belives**

Besides to the above mentioned facts, there are three social beliefs of Sri Lanka. Which was accepted by the sociologists. Those believes can be defined as follow. Such as “Yakk Thovil”, “Deeva Thovil” and “Graha Thovil”. The meaning of the “Thovil” is healing

rituals. It is known as “Shanthikarma” in Sinhala. The “Thovil” which are dying arts in Sri Lanka. That can be studied in Sabaragamuwa tradition.

“Yakk Thovils” are performed to prevent harmful and evil acts by demons. “Deeva Thovils” are performed to invoke the blessings of the deities. “Bali Thovils” are done to adverse effects of the nine planets during the periods of misfortune.

There are special set of people who have specialized in conducting the various rituals. They are called exorcist, are known as "Gurunnanse" in Sinhala. They are considered to be the mediators between humans and gods or demons.

“Deeva Thovil”; “Deeva Shanthikarma”, which are presided over by Gods Paththini, “God Devol”, “God Vahala”, “God Saman”, “God Mangara” and additional gods Sahapirivara or Sapirivara, They are known assistants of Gods of the above main gods. Those are more general kinds of ritual that is performed to bring prosperity to a particular village or area. It is performed to prevent diseases, droughts and the destruction of harvest, nevertheless in some cases, if a person is suffering from some adverse effect of the gods that is known as “Devi dosa” in Sinhala. This ritual can be done at a more personal level in areas such as Rathnapura. Balangoda, Kalawana, Atakalannpanna. This ritual is known as “Pahanmadu”, “Gammadu”,

“Daneemadu”, “Ginimadu”. It is referred to as “panthiss Kollmura Yaga”. “Madu Mangallaya” in Kolonna area of Sabaragamuwa. All this Pujas are held using the model of Goddess Paththini’s anklet. It is known as “Paththini Salamba” in Sinhala. The types of Prayers are known as “Yathika” in Sinhala. These Pujas are held when an individuals are suffering from some misfortune caused by the gods. Beside those gods there are more gods that includes in above rituals. They are namely God Saman, God Vishnu, God Katharagama, God Natha and other Gods called sapirivara.

Next we move on to “Yakk Thovil”. These “Yakk Thovils” are performed to get blessing from various harms and discomforts brought by the devils. We can include “Kumara samayama”, “Sanniyakuma”, “Gopalu Samayama”, “Mahasohon Samayama”, “Derahewa Thovil” and” Baliyaga” of Devils known as “Yakk Baliyaga”.

The ancient tribes by the name of Yaka or Yaksha had engaged in conducting rituals or Thovil for dead Yaksha for a long time as they believe that such activities would have a positive impact on their lives. The Yaksha tribe assumed that by conducting these rituals to appease the dead spirit of a powerful tribesman who has been attributed with godly status,

those who are alive can obtain many benefits as well as protection from harm. In the past people believe the tribe Yaksha, bring misfortune and discomforts to humans. Those tribes are sometimes known as ghosts to get rid of the bad impact come from the Yakshas. People perform that above said ritual such as “Kumara Samayama”, “Sanni Yakuma”...etc. These rituals are considered as main rituals in the Sabaragamuwa Tradition.

Among these rituals, “Kumara Samayama” is one of the main rituals performed to focus on deomons and is considered as one of the most significant curative rituals of the Sabaragamu region of Sri Lanka. The main demon is considered “Wata Kumara”. In this act, there is a big story about the this demon. It is the main devil intended for women Pregnancy and childbirth in Sabaragamuwa. This feature takes place on behalf of women who have had miscarriages. It is also performed for the benefits of pregnant women for the well being of the growing fetus. In addition to this matter there are additional “Shanthikarma” or rituals in Sabaragamu tradition such as “Katina Baliya”, “Yakkshagiri Baliya”, “Reeri Baliya”, “Kalukumara Baliya” or Bali of “Black prince”, “Gharbhashanthi baliya” or “Gebasethth Baliya”... etc. Those are included under the “Yaksha Thovil Baliyaga”.

Next we move on to the planetary ritual known as “Graha Baliyaga” in Sinhala. “Graha Baliyaga” is also a traditional custom in the Sabaragamuwa province. Baliyaga is held with the intention of avoiding bad times and misfortune caused by the effects of the nine planets which in Sinhala are called: “Ravi”, “Chandra”, “Kuja”, “Budha”, “Guru”, “Sikuru”, “Shani”, “Rahu” and “Kehethu” or according to English as Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, Saturn, Eclipse, Solar eclipse, A decision will be made as to what kind of Bali is to be held according to the time of main planets and intermitten time of the inconvenient planets known as Sinhala “Maha dasava” and “Athuru dasava” of the affected person’s horoscope. Various pujas and rituals are arranged according to what misfortune is to befall the individual. All the above rituals are performed by Sabaragamu dance tradition. The starting time of these rituals are not still identified. Yet no one has identified the beginning or the center of these rituals.

### **Art of beating “Dowla”**

It is Considered that there are four initial letters in Dowla drumming. Those are ‘Tha’, ‘Ji’, ‘Tho’, ‘Naa’ in Sinhala. These initial letters are combined with another four letters and get the sound of ‘Thath’, ‘Jith’, ‘Thon’, ‘Nan’.

Before playing the initial letters the student should play the dowla giving an attractive nice rhythm. But the real melody of Dowlas can only be obtained by the dowlas made by veteran dowla makers. The Dowlas should be produced according to a real standard. The real melody cannot be heard or obtained by the Dowlas which are at schools or such educational centers. Because they are very simple as well as not produced maintaining the real standard. This situation is nicely described by a book named "The Saparagamu Dawula" published by "Suriya" Publisher Colombo 10, Maradana in Sri Lanka. We can get the correct culture and real description of playing the Dowla and music from this book.

"Saparagamu Dowla" playing was an art during the 2nd and 3rd century BC. The king called Dutugamunu had a team of very strong and abled persons. "Mahasoona" and "Pussadeeva" were two of them. This two men had started various Buddhist rituals and playing "Hevisi" in Sabaragamuwa region. Sri Lankan aborigines people consider the playing dowla as their inheritance and they use it now a days. In every parts of Sri Lanka Dowla is considered as a medium of communication. In the past the royal messages were carried out to the public by beating a Dowla. The beating (playing of Dowla) is use in communicating religious rituals as well as funeral rituals.

We paid a lot of attention and researched about the art of Saparagamu Dowla. This is completely different from the other dancing instruments in Sri Lanka. It is very difficult to compare the playing of Sabaragamuwa Dowla with other Arts of playing Dowla in Sri Lanka. There are various reason for this charge.

Basically there are two beating types of the Sabaragamu Dowla. This first one is playing the Dowla with bare fingers and palms. This type is mostly used in planetary rituals. In order to hear the meaning of singing the Dowla should be played very smoothly without much noise.

The rhythm of music of deeply shown here. When performing speedy dancing movements as well as special dancing movements the drumstick is taken to one hand. When performing the "Adawwa" the most powerful dancing method, this drumstick is used to get the real strength of the dance. Here I must mention that the Dowla is not used as an instrument when performing dances in the other categories in Sri Lanka.

Those who wish to learn to play the Dowla. There are basic 12 exercises to be learnt at first. When he mastered the 12 exercises the next step is introduced with number of lines. It will take 3 months to learn this basic theory.



Then he has to learn or follow 16 exercises which are completely different from what he has learnt. Those are called “Dvithiya Abyasa Solasa” in Sinhala. It means to sixteen exercises. It will take another three months for him to learn and practice those patterns or exercises.

Then he will face the last part of exercise. It will consist of 24 exercises. Another period of three months will be spent in learning these exercises. During this period this student (who follow the course) should attend the ‘Rituals’ – ‘Thovil’ – in Sinhala with his teacher. When participating in these rituals the student can know and learn the various aspects of the Dowla beating. The various aspects are playing the Dowla for singing only, playing the Dowla for dancing only. The student will master each and every method as well as aspects at the end.

### **The Dance of “Diggei”**

“Diggei Narthanaya” was mostly performed in devalas in ancient Sri Lanka. This was mostly found in Sabaragamu Devalas and it was an art of female dancing. In devalas there are spacious places which are very wide and long. Those places are called “diggei”. The art of dancing performed in those places are known as “Diggei dance”. The significant feature of this is that virgins did this pattern of dancing in early ages to satisfy the king and for amusement this art of dancing performed in front of him these women are known as “Manikka mahage” in Sinhala. In the past 24 virgins participated in this dance. Today 4 generations of that have been identified. They are

- Egoda Kuttame Manikka Mahage
- Hunuwala Manikka Mahage
- Hirikandeniya Manikka Mahage
- Bulathwelgoda Manikka Mahage

The Dowla beater for this women are known as “Mottukkaraya”. The person who joined them in singing was known as “Malawarannehela”

The significant factor of this tradition is that the drummer of this dance and the singer were not allowed to see the performances. They are able to do their part without looking at the dance after a prior practice. The women who perform this dance did this without costumes for the upper body. The upper part of the body is bare and resembles the “Devadasi” dance performance in ancient India. With the development of Buddhist culture this pattern has faded away.

In the past the kings have ordered that these rituals of dancing should be carried out for 'God Saman.' 'God Saman' is said to be a Buddhist follower. So the dancers wore white for the lower body and a blouse like costume is worn to the upper part of the body and they tried to perform the dance with a lot of discipline.

Still there are generations who know the rituals and the correct method of this dance. So we are lucky to get advice and correct information from them. With the guidance of these people we are able to teach and practice this tradition as a subject.

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*Playing Dowl in Yakk Thovil - Healing Ritual of Deamans*



*Yakk Thovil - Healing Ritual of Deamans*



*Playing Dowl with Stick*



*Playing Dowl with Fingers*



*An Ancient Dowla*



*Ancient Sabaragamu Dancers*



*Ancient Sabaragamu Dancer*



*Sabaragamu Dancer with Pabalu Costume*



*Sabaragamu Dancer with Malall Costume*



*Sabaragamu Devol Dancer*



*Malali Costume*



*Basic Moument of Sabaragamu Dancer*





*Playing Magul Bera with Dowla - Bali Shanthikarma Healing platuray ritual*



*Singing & Dancing with Playing Dowl - Bali Shanthikarma*



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