

Suvisi Vivarana: A Performative Buddhist Ritual Integrating Dance, Music, and Visual Arts Traditions in Sri Lanka



Piynanda Rupasinghe¹

Abstract

Suvisi Vivarana is a significant Sinhala Buddhist ritual that integrates dance, music, song, and visual arts to commemorate the Bodhisattva Siddhartha Gautama's receipt of the definitive prophecy (*Vivarana*) from twenty-four past Buddhas. This ritual has been central to preserving devotional practices and Sinhala Buddhist cultural identity over centuries. Despite its historical and cultural importance, Suvisi Vivarana has received limited scholarly attention, and its performative, visual, and ritual dimensions remain under-documented. Contemporary transformations, such as digital reproduction of the *Pethikadaya* and shortened festival durations, have altered traditional practices, raising concerns about the preservation of authentic ritual knowledge. This study aims to examine Suvisi Vivarana as a holistic ritual performance, focusing on its devotional purpose, performance structure, theatrical space, and the symbolic significance of the *Pethikadaya*, a painted cloth representing the Bodhisattva's encounters with the twenty-four Buddhas. The research employs a qualitative approach, including literature review, ethnographic observation, and semi-structured interviews with practitioners, temple authorities, and visual artists involved in Suvisi Vivarana performances. The study also analyzes historical painting traditions and contemporary adaptations of the *Pethikadaya*. By situating Suvisi Vivarana within Sri Lanka's artistic and ritual traditions, the study highlights its role in reinforcing Buddhist devotion, promoting communal participation, and preserving indigenous performance knowledge. Suvisi Vivarana embodies a comprehensive ritual art form that merges narrative, music, dance, and visual symbolism. Safeguarding its traditional practices is essential for maintaining Sri Lanka's intangible cultural heritage and ensuring the continuity of Sinhala Buddhist performance traditions.

Keywords

Buddhist Ritual Performance, Kandyan Dance, Pethikadaya, Sinhala Buddhist Culture, Suvisi Vivarana

¹ PhD Scholar, Faculty of Graduate Studies, Department of Languages Cultural Studies and Performing Arts, University of Sri Jayawardenepura, Sri Lanka, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-4292-2950>, Email:- piyananda.r@vpa.ac.lk



Introduction

Suvisi Vivarana is a devotional and lyrical ritual performance conducted through a synthesis of dance, music, drumming, and sung poetry. It commemorates the moment when the Bodhisattva received the final and definitive explanation (*Vivarana*) from twenty-four Buddhas, confirming his future enlightenment as Gautama Buddha. The ritual is centered on the cultivation of faith (*saddha*) and devotion toward the *Theruwana* (triple gems in Buddhism), the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha.

The performance involves a series of offerings, including flowers, oil lamps, medicinal herbs, incense, and symbolic objects, dedicated to the twenty-four Buddhas. These offerings are accompanied by choreographed dances, devotional songs, and rhythmic drumming. The ritual begins with homage to the Buddha and the invocation of deities, establishing a sacred atmosphere through coordinated movement and sound.

Traditionally, Suvisi Vivarana is performed during religious ceremonies over a period of two or three days, concluding with *Pindeema* (merit-giving). Dancers often perform while singing Suvisi Vivarana verses, reinforcing the narrative and devotional aspects of the ritual. The practice may be understood as a complete Buddhist performance tradition, as Buddhist values and symbolism are embedded throughout its structure, from beginning to end. Among its ritual components, the act of making offerings to the Buddha remains the most central and sacred element.

Literature Review

The study of Suvisi Vivarana requires an interdisciplinary approach that considers its performative, musical, and visual dimensions within the context of Sinhala Buddhist ritual traditions. Existing literature highlights the historical and cultural foundations of Buddhist ritual performances in Sri Lanka, drawing on literary, historical, and archaeological sources. Chronicles such as the *Mahavaṃsa*, *Dipavaṃsa*, *Thupavaṃsa*, *Chulavaṃsa*, *Bodhivaṃsa*, *Saddharmalaṅkaraya*, and *Poojavalīya*, along with palm-leaf manuscripts and archaeological evidence, provide critical insights into ritual practices, ceremonial instruments, and visual representations that inform the Suvisi Vivarana tradition.

The *Mahavaṃsa* (1959) and *Thupavaṃsa* (1958) describe musical instruments and ceremonial soundscapes, situating ritual music, including Pantheru drumming, within historical contexts.

Texts such as *Dalada Sirita* (1970) and *Pujavaliya* (1997) document narratives and rituals directly associated with Suvisi Vivarana, including the enactment of Bodhisattva prophecies. Poetic works like the *Pansiya Panas Jataka Potha* (1927) provide material for the sung and danced narratives integral to the ritual.

Modern scholarship further elaborates on these performative and artistic traditions. Studies such as *Udarata Næṭum Kalava* (1968), *Hela Gee Maga* (1962), *Kavikara Maḍuwa saha Kawyak Karayo* (2003), *Sinhala Narthana Kalava* (1993), and *Lakdiva Pærani Narthana Kalava* (2014) explore Kandyan dance, instrumental classifications, and the integration of music and poetry, providing theoretical and practical frameworks for understanding Suvisi Vivarana. Additionally, works such as *Siri Dalada Urumaya Ha Mahanuvara Sri Dalada Maligawa* (2018) and *Mahanuwara Yugaye Kawikaramaduwa Asritha Sangeethaya* (2019) investigate ritual performance structures, while *Madayakaleena Sinhala Kala* (1994) and *Eda Hela Diva* (1980) offer contextual understanding of ceremonial arts and craft traditions, including visual representations.

Despite these contributions, few studies have comprehensively analyzed Suvisi Vivarana as an integrated performative ritual that unites dance, music, and visual arts, particularly with reference to its devotional, narrative, and socio-cultural functions. This research addresses this gap by examining how Suvisi Vivarana synthesizes multiple artistic modalities to convey Buddhist teachings, reinforce communal identity, and preserve Sri Lanka's intangible cultural heritage.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine Suvisi Vivarana as a holistic ritual performance, integrating dance, music, narrative, and visual art. Data were collected through ethnographic observation of performances at temple premises, including both open-air and *Bana Maduwa* settings, documenting ritual sequences, dancer movements, audience engagement, and the use of the *Pethikadaya*. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including temple priests, dancers, musicians, visual artists, and community elders, to explore historical knowledge, artistic techniques, ritual procedures, and contemporary adaptations. In addition, historical texts, ritual manuals, and previous scholarly literature were analyzed to contextualize the performance within Sri Lanka's Buddhist and

artistic traditions, while visual materials such as archival photographs and *Pethikadaya* reproductions were examined to trace stylistic continuity.

The collected data were analyzed thematically, focusing on performative structure, visual symbolism, socio-economic functions, and contemporary transformations. This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of Suvisi Vivarana as both a devotional practice and a cultural performance, highlighting continuities, changes, and its significance in sustaining Sinhala Buddhist heritage.

Ritual Structure and Performance Context

The Suvisi Vivarana *Nruthya Poojawa* (offering-oriented ritual) traditionally begins around eleven o'clock at night, emphasizing the transition from daily life into a sacred temporal space conducive to devotional focus. The performance typically opens with a Dharma sermon delivered by a Buddhist monk, establishing the religious and ethical framework for the ritual. This sermon is followed by the enactment of individual Vivarana episodes, which are interspersed with additional sermons or reflections to reinforce doctrinal understanding. Historical records indicate that in earlier periods, Suvisi Vivarana extended over seven consecutive days, highlighting the ritual's extensive scale, community involvement, and spiritual significance (Bandara, personal communication, January 11, 2025).

The performance itself is structured around a careful interplay of dance, song, and drumming, with choreographed sequences corresponding to specific episodes from the Bodhisattva's encounters with the twenty-four Buddhas. Songs and poetic narratives not only convey the sacred stories but also sustain audience engagement throughout the night, creating an immersive spiritual and aesthetic experience. Performers and audience members participate in a cyclical exchange of energy, devotion, and attention, blurring the boundaries between spectator and participant.

Beyond its devotional function, Suvisi Vivarana serves as a vital medium for expressing Sinhala Buddhist cultural identity. The ritual facilitates the transmission of communal values, reinforces collective religious consciousness, and strengthens social cohesion, particularly in rural communities where temple-centered activities form the nucleus of cultural life. In this way, Suvisi Vivarana operates simultaneously as a performative, pedagogical, and socio-cultural practice, preserving indigenous knowledge while fostering enduring connections between spiritual narrative, artistic expression, and communal participation.

The *Pethikadaya* in Suvisi Vivarana

The *Pethikadaya* occupies a central and highly symbolic position within the Suvisi Vivarana ritual, functioning as both a visual and spiritual anchor for the performance. This painted cloth panel depicts the Bodhisattva Siddhartha Gautama receiving the definitive *Vivarana* from the twenty-four Buddhas, spanning from Dipankara Buddha to *Kassapa* Buddha. Beyond its narrative function, the *Pethikadaya* embodies a tangible representation of Buddhist cosmology and moral exemplars, visually conveying complex doctrinal concepts to devotees while reinforcing the sacredness of the ritual space.

A ceremonial seat is arranged beneath the *Pethikadaya*, serving as the locus for the *Atapirikara Pooja*, during which flowers, lamps, and other sacred items are offered in devotion. Following this, offerings such as *gilanpasa*² are presented, symbolizing respect and homage to the living Buddha. This sequence underscores the interconnection between performative action, visual representation, and devotional practice, integrating the aesthetic, spiritual, and ethical dimensions of Buddhist ritual.

In addition to its religious significance, the *Pethikadaya* ritual encompasses important socio-economic functions. The auctioning of food, sweets, and other donated items, traditionally conducted by *Virindu* singers, reflects an ancient fair-like system that facilitates community participation and generates funds for temple maintenance, ritual activities, and social welfare. Flower vases and other ceremonial items are auctioned at premium prices, often attracting enthusiastic participation from villagers. These activities are conducted in an atmosphere of communal harmony, joy, and reverence, reflecting the dual function of the Suvisi Vivarana as both a devotional practice and a socio-cultural institution.

In this way, the *Pethikadaya* transcends its role as a static visual artifact, becoming a dynamic mediator of faith, social cohesion, and cultural continuity within the Sinhala Buddhist community.

Doctrinal Foundations of Suvisi Vivarana

The concept of Suvisi Vivarana is deeply rooted in Buddhist doctrinal narratives that chronicle the Bodhisattva Siddhartha Gautama's extensive journey toward enlightenment. Central to this

² *Gilanpasa* literally means "nourishment for the sick" and refers to medicinal food or drink prepared for consumption by Buddhist monks, especially for health purposes in accordance with monastic discipline. In Sri Lankan Buddhist practice, it is also commonly offered as a form of devotion to the Buddha as well as to the monastic community during religious observances.

narrative are the practices of *Manopra Nidhanaya* (mental determination) and *Vagpra Nidhanaya* (verbal determination), through which the Bodhisattva cultivated unwavering focus and resolute intention across innumerable lifetimes. Guided by these principles, he pursued the *Buddha-Kāraka Dhamma*, the path and conditions necessary for Buddhahood, accumulating merit and wisdom through successive acts of ethical, meditative, and altruistic engagement.

Buddhist texts recount that, across vast cosmic periods (*kalpa*), the Bodhisattva encountered twenty-four Buddhas who appeared in the world and, through their teachings and blessings, confirmed his future enlightenment (Gnanawimala, 1997). The term “Suvisi Vivarana” specifically denotes this collective granting of prophetic affirmation or permission by these Buddhas, symbolizing the continuity of the Bodhisattva’s spiritual journey and the transmission of sacred authority through successive Buddhas.

Over time, this doctrinal narrative evolved into a tripartite performative art form that integrates dance, drumming, and singing. Each performance enacts specific episodes from the Bodhisattva’s encounters, conveying not only the narrative content but also the moral and spiritual virtues cultivated in each existence, such as compassion, generosity, and steadfastness.

The *Pethikadaya*, a painted cloth panel central to the ritual, visually represents these encounters. Traditionally, artists employed locally sourced pigments and watercolors, emphasizing the indigenous character and material culture of the performance. Through these visual and performative elements, Suvisi Vivarana transforms doctrinal narratives into an embodied, communal experience that simultaneously educates, inspires devotion, and preserves Sinhala Buddhist cultural heritage.

Theatrical Space of Suvisi Vivarana

Suvisi Vivarana performances are traditionally conducted within the precincts of Buddhist temples, either in open-air spaces or within *Bana Maduwa*, which are purpose-built structures for religious gatherings. The stage is typically circular or square, designed to facilitate both performer movement and audience engagement. Decorative elements, such as *gok* (areca palm) embellishments, enhance the sacred and aesthetic environment of the stage, while the *Pethikadaya* is prominently displayed at the front, serving as the focal point of both visual and ritual attention. A flower altar is usually placed before the *Pethikadaya*, where offerings are made to symbolize devotion and reverence.

During the performance, dancers orient themselves toward the *Pethikadaya*, acknowledging its spiritual authority, while the audience surrounds the stage, creating an immersive, participatory environment. This spatial configuration not only reinforces the sacred hierarchy between the ritual center and participants but also allows for dynamic interaction between performers and devotees, transforming the performance into a shared spiritual experience (Udayasiri, personal communication, January 28, 2025).

Suvisi Vivarana often coincides with *Salpila*, or temple fairs, which serve dual religious and socio-economic functions. These fairs facilitate community involvement, encourage local patronage, and generate funds for temple maintenance, construction, and renovation, thereby integrating devotional practice with communal development. The theatrical setting, combined with the ritual, musical, and visual components of the performance, enables Buddhism to be communicated in an engaging, accessible, and culturally resonant manner, reinforcing religious education, social cohesion, and the transmission of Sinhala Buddhist heritage to successive generations.

Visual Arts and the Tradition of *Pethikada* Paintings

The visual aesthetics of the *Pethikadaya* are deeply rooted in the long-standing painting traditions of Sri Lanka, reflecting both religious devotion and narrative sophistication. The origins of Buddhist painting on the island trace back to the Anuradhapura period, following the arrival of Arahant Mahinda in the 3rd century BCE, which introduced Theravada Buddhist iconography and visual storytelling to Sri Lankan culture. Early examples include the Vesgiriya frescoes, *Vahalkada* reliefs, and the murals within the Mihintale relic chamber, all of which demonstrate a keen integration of religious symbolism, spatial composition, and narrative intent.

Subsequent periods, notably Polonnaruwa and Kandy, contributed significantly to the evolution of visual art styles. Polonnaruwa-era paintings, such as those in Mahiyangana and Dambulla, reflect advancements in compositional techniques, thematic complexity, and the use of vibrant natural pigments. Kandyan-period paintings, in particular, exhibit distinctive characteristics: two-dimensional compositions, bold outlines, and limited but striking color palettes dominated by red, yellow, white, and black. These stylistic choices emphasize narrative clarity, symbolic representation, and linearity, qualities that are directly reflected in *Pethikada* paintings (Somarathna, Personal Communication, February 11, 2025).

Although murals are more extensively documented, historical sources such as the *Mahavamsa* confirm that cloth-painting techniques existed as early as the 2nd century BCE (Buddhadaththa, 1959). The *Pethikadaya*, a painted cloth panel central to Suvisi Vivarana, represents a continuation and adaptation of this artistic lineage. Its creation required mastery over both iconographic conventions and material techniques, including locally sourced pigments and watercolors. Beyond its aesthetic appeal, the *Pethikadaya* functions as a narrative device, visually conveying the Bodhisattva's encounters with twenty-four Buddhas, and serves as an essential component in integrating visual art with performance, devotion, and ritual pedagogy.

Through this synthesis of historical artistry and ritual function, the *Pethikadaya* exemplifies the enduring role of visual arts in sustaining Sri Lanka's Buddhist cultural heritage.

Contemporary Transformations

Traditionally, *Pethikada* paintings were meticulously created on raw cotton cloth, guided by astrological principles, auspicious timings, and ritualized practices that imbued the artwork with sacred significance. Each step from preparing the cloth and pigments to executing the intricate visual narratives was performed in accordance with ritual conventions, reinforcing the spiritual and communal dimensions of Suvisi Vivarana. The creation process itself was considered a devotional act, fostering a meditative connection between the artist, the Bodhisattva's narrative, and the participating community.

In contemporary practice, however, technological advancements and the availability of synthetic materials have significantly transformed the production of *Pethikada* paintings. Digital printing, artificial surfaces, and modern pigments have simplified the creation process, increased durability, and facilitated wider dissemination of these ritual artifacts. While these innovations allow for more accessible and efficient production, they have also contributed to the gradual erosion of traditional ceremonial protocols and artisanal techniques. Many ritualistic and spiritual aspects associated with the creation of *Pethikadaya*, such as timing the work according to auspicious lunar days, performing preliminary devotional rites, and engaging in collective artistic practices, are increasingly overlooked or replaced by technological expediency (Somarathna, personal communication, February 11, 2025).

This shift raises critical questions regarding the preservation of authenticity and ritual integrity. Contemporary adaptations, while enhancing practicality and visual consistency, risk diluting the symbolic and devotional resonance that was historically embedded in the creation process. Nevertheless, these transformations also demonstrate the dynamic resilience of Suvisi Vivarana

as a living tradition, capable of integrating modern methods while continuing to serve devotional, performative, and socio-cultural functions within Sinhala Buddhist communities.

Conclusion

Suvisi Vivarana represents a unique and multifaceted expression of Sinhala Buddhist ritual performance, integrating dance, music, poetic narration, and visual art into a cohesive devotional and cultural experience. Through its structured enactment of the Bodhisattva Siddhartha Gautama's encounters with twenty-four Buddhas, the ritual transmits complex doctrinal narratives in an accessible and engaging manner, reinforcing communal faith and religious identity. The *Pethikadaya*, as both a visual and symbolic centerpiece, embodies the continuity of Sri Lanka's painting traditions, linking historical artistic practices from the Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, and Kandyan periods with contemporary ritual enactments.

The performance structure, theatrical arrangement, and ritualized offerings illustrate how Suvisi Vivarana functions simultaneously as a spiritual, aesthetic, and socio-cultural institution. By situating the performance within temple spaces, often in conjunction with *Salpila* temple fairs, the ritual fosters communal participation, social cohesion, and economic support for religious activities, demonstrating the intertwined nature of devotional practice and community life.

Contemporary transformations such as the adoption of digital technologies and synthetic materials for *Pethikadaya* creation reflect both the adaptability and the challenges of maintaining ritual authenticity. While technological innovations enhance durability and accessibility, they also highlight the importance of preserving traditional practices, ceremonial protocols, and artisanal knowledge to safeguard the ritual's spiritual and cultural integrity.

In conclusion, Suvisi Vivarana exemplifies a living tradition that merges doctrinal pedagogy, performative artistry, and communal devotion. Its continued practice is vital for sustaining Sinhala Buddhist cultural heritage, ensuring intergenerational transmission of knowledge, and reinforcing the collective identity of rural and urban communities alike. Efforts to document, study, and support these practices are essential for the preservation of both ritual and visual art traditions, positioning Suvisi Vivarana as a significant component of Sri Lanka's intangible cultural heritage.

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