



## Technology, Craftsmanship, and Decorative Traditions of Palanquins in Sri Lanka: A Historical Review

MANDARAMNUWARA CHANDANANDA<sup>1</sup> AND PRIYANGIKA LAKMALI, P.G.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar (PhD), Department of AIHC and Archaeology, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi-221005, India. E-mail: [mandaramnuwarac@bhu.ac.in](mailto:mandaramnuwarac@bhu.ac.in)

<sup>2</sup>Development Officer, Agrarian Service Center, Kiri-Ella, Department of Agrarian Development, Sri Lanka. E-mail: [lakmaligamage03@gmail.com](mailto:lakmaligamage03@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** This review examines the technological development, craftsmanship, and decorative traditions of palanquins in Sri Lanka, situating these artefacts within broader histories of mobility, social hierarchy, and cultural expression. Far more than a means of transport, palanquins functioned as symbols of political authority, ritual prestige, and artistic accomplishment. Although previous studies have explored their role in royal processions, ceremonial life, and caste-based labour systems, limited attention has been given to their construction techniques, material composition, and decorative features. This study addresses that gap by synthesizing evidence from historical chronicles, colonial accounts, literary sources, museum collections, and surviving artefacts. The review investigates the evolution of palanquin technology, including the selection of materials, woodworking practices, joinery methods, and metal fittings employed in their construction. It also examines decorative traditions such as carving, lacquer work, textile embellishment, and symbolic ornamentation, considering how these elements reflected social status, regional craftsmanship, and cultural values. Using a qualitative review methodology, the study integrates textual, visual, and material evidence to reconstruct both the technological characteristics and symbolic significance of palanquins in Sri Lankan society. The findings demonstrate that Sri Lankan palanquins embodied a sophisticated combination of indigenous craft traditions, South Asian artistic influences, and local aesthetic preferences. Their construction reveals considerable technical expertise, while their ornamentation reflects complex social, religious, and political meanings. By consolidating dispersed historical evidence, this review contributes a comprehensive understanding of palanquin traditions and highlights their significance as material heritage representing engineering skill, artistic creativity, and cultural identity.

**Keywords:** Palanquins, Sri Lankan material culture, Craftsmanship and decorative arts, Mobility and elite transport, Woodcraft and metalwork traditions

**Received :** 06 March 2026

**Revised :** 10 April 2026

**Accepted :** 15 April 2026

**Published :** 30 June 2026

### TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Mandaramnuwara Chandananda & Priyangika Lakmali, P.G. (2026). Technology, Craftsmanship, and Decorative Traditions of Palanquins in Sri Lanka: A Historical Review. *Journal of Studies in South Asia*, 2: 1, pp. 71-86.

## Introduction

The history of transport in Sri Lanka reflects the interaction of environment, social hierarchy, political authority, and technological adaptation. Among pre-modern modes of transport, the palanquin (dōlā) occupied a distinctive position as both a practical means of conveyance and a symbol of prestige. Widely known throughout South and Southeast Asia, the Sri Lankan palanquin developed unique technological and artistic features shaped by local craftsmanship and cultural traditions. Although mentioned in chronicles, literary texts, colonial accounts, and surviving artefacts, no comprehensive study has previously examined its construction, decoration, and socio-cultural significance. This review synthesizes multidisciplinary evidence to explore the technological development, craftsmanship, and cultural role of palanquins in Sri Lanka.

The study investigates the evolution of palanquin construction, materials, and joinery techniques; examines decorative traditions such as carving, lacquer work, metal ornamentation, and textiles; and analyzes the social, political, and ritual functions of palanquins. Using historical texts, colonial records, museum collections, visual sources, and comparative South Asian evidence, the research highlights the palanquin as a technologically sophisticated and culturally significant artefact.

Palanquins appear in early Sri Lankan sources, including the *Mahāvamsa* and *Cūḷavaṃsa*, where they are associated with kings, nobles, and religious processions. During the Anuradhapura period, they were employed in royal ceremonies and the transportation of sacred relics. Inscriptions and archaeological evidence suggest that palanquins formed part of both religious and secular processional culture.

During the Polonnaruwa period, palanquins became increasingly elaborate, incorporating decorative textiles, gilded fittings, and ornamental canopies. By the Kandyan period, they had reached their highest level of sophistication. Royal and noble palanquins featured complex woodwork, lacquer decoration, metal embellishments, and refined structural engineering. Colonial observers such as Robert Knox and John Davy described their impressive appearance and ceremonial importance.

Technologically, palanquins represented a sophisticated form of wood engineering. Artisans employed durable indigenous hardwoods and advanced joinery techniques, including mortise-and-tenon joints, pegged frameworks, curved structural members, and reinforced supports. Woven cane, metal fittings, and padded textiles improved both strength and comfort. These features demonstrate a high level of technical knowledge adapted to local environmental conditions and mobility requirements.

Sri Lankan palanquins functioned not only as vehicles but also as works of art. Decorative techniques included wood carving, lacquer work, metal ornamentation, and occasionally ivory or bone inlay. Common motifs such as lotus flowers, bo leaves, guardian figures, and auspicious symbols reflected Buddhist and indigenous cultural traditions. These artistic elements linked palanquins to broader traditions of temple decoration, ritual objects, and courtly craftsmanship.

The visual splendor of palanquins reinforced social status and political authority. Elaborately decorated examples were reserved for royalty, nobles, high-ranking officials, and important religious figures. Their appearance during processions, royal journeys, and ceremonial occasions transformed them into mobile displays of wealth, prestige, and power.

Palanquins occupied an important place within Sri Lanka's hierarchical social order. Their use was often restricted by social rank, courtly regulations, and customary practices. As symbols of privilege and authority, they reflected broader systems of governance and social distinction.

Religiously, palanquins played significant roles in temple ceremonies, processions, and the transportation of sacred relics, images, and high-ranking clergy. They were also used in funerary contexts, carrying deceased nobles or respected religious figures during ritual ceremonies. In these settings, palanquins functioned as ceremonial vehicles that reinforced religious legitimacy and social prestige.

The operation of palanquins depended on specialized groups of bearers, often drawn from hereditary service communities. Their labour was physically demanding and closely regulated, highlighting the social inequalities embedded within traditional systems of mobility. During the colonial period, hereditary service arrangements gradually gave way to wage labor, reflecting wider transformations in Sri Lankan society.

Although new forms of transport such as carts, carriages, and later motorized vehicles became available during the colonial period, palanquins remained in use among both local elites and European officials. Colonial influence also introduced new design features, resulting in hybrid forms that combined indigenous craftsmanship with external artistic and technological influences.

By the nineteenth century, however, changing labour systems, rising costs, improved transportation infrastructure, and new mobility technologies contributed to the gradual decline of palanquin use. As traditional service institutions weakened, palanquins lost their practical significance and became ceremonial or symbolic objects.

Today, surviving palanquins preserved in museums, temples, and private collections represent valuable elements of Sri Lanka's cultural heritage. They provide insight into historical technologies, craftsmanship, social organization, and artistic traditions. More than obsolete transport devices, they are culturally significant artefacts that illuminate the relationships between mobility, power, ritual practice, and material culture. Their preservation and study contribute not only to Sri Lankan heritage scholarship but also to broader understandings of pre-modern mobility and craftsmanship across South Asia.

## Discussion

### *Types of Palanquins*

Sri Lankan palanquins (*dola* or *dolā*) were developed in a variety of forms, reflecting differences in social status, ceremonial function, and regional aesthetic preferences. Historical sources and surviving examples indicate that palanquins can be broadly categorized based on structural design, materials, and decorative elaboration.

- 1. Royal Palanquins (Rājadolā):** These were the most elaborate palanquins, reserved for kings, queens, and high-ranking nobles. They were typically constructed from hardwoods such as teak or ebony and often featured intricate carvings, gilded fittings, and inlaid metal decorations. Canopies, sometimes covered with luxurious textiles or lacquer work, provided both protection and ceremonial grandeur. These palanquins often had ornamental finials and elaborate side panels depicting floral motifs, mythological scenes, or Buddhist symbolism (Codrington, 1926, pp 69, 75, 128; Knox, 1681). Royal palanquins were designed for both

functional comfort and public display during processions, royal inspections, and temple rituals.

2. **Ceremonial or Religious Palanquins (Dhamma Dolā):** Used primarily in religious contexts, such as transporting Buddha images, sacred relics, or high-ranking monks, these palanquins emphasized ritual symbolism over personal luxury. They were smaller and lighter than royal palanquins but often adorned with symbolic carvings and bright lacquer finishes. Some featured protective enclosures, emphasizing the sanctity of the transported object or person (Brockington, 1970).
3. **Warrior or Military Palanquins (Senādhipati Dolā):** Although less frequently documented, certain palanquins were used to transport military leaders or dignitaries during campaigns. These palanquins were more robust, with reinforced frameworks to ensure stability over uneven terrain. Decorative elements were simpler, often limited to functional metal fittings and minimal ornamentation to balance utility with symbolic authority (Davy, 1821, 155).
4. **Folk or Commoner Palanquins:** In rare cases, local elites or wealthy commoners possessed simpler palanquins for social ceremonies or personal mobility. These were lightweight, with minimal decorative work, emphasizing practicality over aesthetics. They provide insight into the diffusion of palanquin use beyond the royal court (Perera, 1988).

The diversity of palanquin types in Sri Lanka illustrates a nuanced interplay between social hierarchy, ritual function, and regional craftsmanship. While royal and ceremonial palanquins exemplify the apex of aesthetic and technical sophistication, functional variations reflect adaptation to different users, terrains, and social contexts. Studying these categories offers valuable insight into the technological, artistic, and cultural fabric of historical Sri Lankan society.

### Construction Technology of Sri Lankan Palanquin

The construction of palanquins in Sri Lanka combined practical engineering with sophisticated craftsmanship, reflecting centuries of indigenous woodworking knowledge and decorative arts. These vehicles of mobility were designed not only for comfort and portability but also as symbols of social status, religious reverence, and aesthetic refinement.

1. **Choice of Materials:** Hardwoods such as teak, ebony, and jackfruit wood were predominantly used due to their durability and resistance to decay and termites. Teak was favored for structural components like the main frame and carrying poles, while denser woods such as ebony were used for decorative panels and inlays. Bamboo and rattan occasionally supplemented structural elements to reduce weight, particularly in ceremonial palanquins intended for long processions (Codrington, 1926, pp 69, 75, 128; Perera, 1988).
2. **Structural Design:** Sri Lankan palanquins typically comprised a rectangular or slightly elongated box-like compartment mounted on parallel poles. The frame was reinforced using mortise-and-tenon joinery, dowels, and wooden pegs to withstand the weight of passengers and ensure stability during movement. In larger royal palanquins, internal braces and crossbeams were integrated to prevent sagging or warping over time. The design also accounted for ventilation, often through lattice panels or perforated side screens, balancing comfort with privacy (Davy, 1821, 155).

3. **Decorative Techniques:** Ornamentation was a key aspect of palanquin technology. Carving, inlay work with brass, copper, or ivory, and gilding were applied to external panels and canopy structures. Carvings frequently featured floral motifs, religious iconography, or geometric patterns, demonstrating both regional and period-specific artistic conventions. Lacquer finishes provided protective coating and enhanced visual appeal, using natural resins mixed with pigments to produce glossy, weather-resistant surfaces (Brockington, 1970).
4. **Assembly and Portability:** Palanquins were designed for assembly and disassembly. Carrying poles were detachable and fitted with secure brackets, allowing transport over varying terrains and ease of storage. Lightweight construction for ceremonial or religious palanquins prioritized mobility without compromising structural integrity.
5. **Integration of Comfort and Functionality:** Seats within the palanquin were cushioned with textiles or woven mats. Canopies and side screens protected passengers from sun and rain, while ventilation ensured comfort during long processions. The careful integration of structural robustness with ergonomics reflects the ingenuity of traditional Sri Lankan craftsmen.

The construction technology of palanquins thus exemplifies a harmonious blend of engineering, material science, and aesthetic sophistication. It offers valuable insights into historical woodworking practices, ceremonial culture, and the technological capabilities of Sri Lankan artisans.

### Decorative Traditions of Sri Lankan Palanquins

Sri Lankan palanquins were not only functional conveyances but also important vehicles of aesthetic expression and social symbolism. Their decoration reflected the convergence of local craftsmanship, religious motifs, and the hierarchical status of the passengers, ranging from royalty to high-ranking clergy.

1. **Carving and Relief Work:** Wood carving was the principal decorative technique, with artisans employing chisels and gouges to create intricate reliefs on panels, doorways, and canopy frames. Common motifs included floral patterns, vine scrolls, mythical creatures such as makaras and nāgas, and symbolic motifs from Buddhism and Hinduism (Codrington, 1926, 69, 75, 128; Perera, 1988). These carvings not only enhanced visual appeal but also signified cultural and spiritual values, marking palanquins as objects of both prestige and ritual significance.
2. **Inlay and Metalwork:** Artisans incorporated inlay work using brass, copper, ivory, or semi-precious stones. Brass studs, filigree panels, and metal overlays accentuated edges and corners, highlighting structural lines while adding reflective brilliance. In royal or ceremonial palanquins, gilded panels were common, combining gold leaf or gold paint with lacquered surfaces to convey opulence and divine association (Brockington, 1970).
3. **Lacquer and Painting:** Lacquer finishing was widely employed to protect the wooden surfaces and provide a glossy, resilient exterior. Natural resins mixed with pigments produced vibrant colors, often in red, black, or gold. Painted motifs sometimes depicted local flora and fauna or narrative scenes drawn from Buddhist Jataka tales, integrating storytelling into the visual experience of the palanquin (Davy, 1821, 155).



4. **Textile Adornments:** Textiles played a complementary role in decoration. Canopies and side drapes were often made from silk or cotton embroidered with gold or silver thread, further enhancing ceremonial grandeur. Cushions and seat cover matched the external decorative scheme, creating a unified visual aesthetic.
5. **Regional and Temporal Variations:** The stylistic features of palanquins varied across regions and historical periods. Kandyan palanquins, for instance, exhibited more elaborate gilt and lacquer work, reflecting courtly tastes, while coastal or provincial designs emphasized durable craftsmanship with modest ornamentation suitable for processional use (Perera, 1988).

Through these decorative traditions, Sri Lankan palanquins transcended their utilitarian function, serving as portable symbols of power, devotion, and artistry. The fusion of carving, metalwork, lacquer, painting, and textiles demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of materials and visual composition, preserving centuries of cultural and aesthetic heritage.

### **Social and Cultural Significance of Palanquins in Sri Lanka**

The palanquin in Sri Lanka was far more than a mere mode of transport; it embodied **social hierarchy, political power, ritual symbolism, and craft heritage**. Its cultural significance can be understood across several interrelated dimensions status and authority, ritual and religion, caste and labour, colonial transformation, and heritage identity.

#### ***1. Palanquin as a Marker of Status, Authority, and Elite Identity***

**Elite Mobility and Symbolic Prestige:** The palanquin (especially the royal *kūṇama*) was reserved for monarchs, queens, princes, high officials, and nobles. Its use signified not only convenience but also political authority and social status. The elaborate decoration gilding, carved woodwork, metal fittings, and ornate canopies functioned as a mobile display of wealth, taste, and power, visible during processions, royal journeys, and inspections of the realm. Such visual grandeur reinforced hierarchical social order and royal eminence.

**Caste, Sumptuary Laws, and Social Boundaries:** Use of the palanquin was governed by strict customs. Not everyone could mount or ride in one. For example, during the Kandyan and early colonial periods, caste regulations forbade persons from lower castes (e.g., certain Mudaliyar or low-country castes) from using palanquins in hill-country contexts. This restriction institutionalized palanquin travel as a privilege of the high-born or elite (Munasinghe, 2000, 148). Even among elites, differences existed e.g., the royal *kūṇama* for the king, *dōli/pallakki* for queens or nobles, and *ran-sivi ge* for sacred processions (Sinhala Viśva Koṣaya, 1991, 570).

**Administrative and Institutional Recognition:** Under the monarchy, palanquin use, maintenance, and bearers were institutionalized within royal households. The office overseeing palanquin provisioning, the *kūṇam maduwa*, maintained staff, organized bearers, and preserved palanquins when not in use. This formal administrative recognition underscores how palanquins were integral to statecraft and courtly infrastructure.

Thus, palanquins were not simply vehicles; they were mobile symbols of social order, royal power, and institutional hierarchy.

## ***2. Ritual, Religious, and Ceremonial Significance***

**Sacred and Ceremonial Use:** Beyond personal mobility, palanquins were central to religious ceremonies, temple rituals, and processions. They carried sacred relics, images of deities, offerings, and high-ranking monks or envoys. Their decorative splendor gilt surfaces, carved motifs, and ornate canopies enhanced the sacred atmosphere and reinforced the holy status of the objects or persons being transported. In festivals such as temple peraheras, the palanquin assumed an elevated role as a ritual vehicle, embodying both religious devotion and ceremonial prestige.

**Funerary and Mortuary Uses:** In the funerary practices of nobles and members of the monastic aristocracy, decorated palanquins or litters were employed to carry the deceased to cremation grounds. The use of richly ornamented palanquins for transporting bodies signified respect for the deceased, reflected social status even in death, and demonstrated the continuing prestige of the family or religious community. This practice illustrates how palanquins mediated important transitions not only in life through mobility and public display, but also in death and ritual passage.

**Embodiment of Cultural Identity:** As vehicles used in royal processions, religious pilgrimages, temple ceremonies, festivals, and state visits, palanquins became embedded within the collective cultural memory of Sri Lankan society. Their presence symbolized continuity of tradition, courtly culture, and ritual legitimacy. Over time, palanquins came to represent more than a means of transportation; they embodied communal religious and socio-political identity, serving as mobile stages for the performance of power, piety, and cultural heritage.

## ***3. Caste, Labour, and Social Relations***

**Palanquin Bearers as a Specialized Labour Class:** The operation of a palanquin depended on a dedicated group of bearers, often drawn from lower castes or hereditary labour communities. These bearers, known as *ūliyakkāra*, functioned within the administrative structure of the *kūṇam maduwa* and were organized into shares (*pangu*) under the supervision of *Shattambis* and other officers (Sinhala Viśva Koṣaya, 1991, 570). Their duties involved strenuous physical labour, long-distance travel, and social marginalization. Bearers frequently endured harsh working conditions and were subject to restrictions regarding dress, personal appearance, and social mobility, reinforcing the sharp distinctions between elite passengers and the labourers who carried them.

**Wage Labour and Colonial Economies:** During the colonial period, palanquins continued to be used by both European officials and local elites. Contemporary accounts indicate that European administrators spent approximately £200 annually to maintain thirteen palanquin carriers, while bearers received about nine pence for every fifteen miles travelled (Hulugalla, 1965, 161). Despite this demand, low wages often resulted in labour shortages, demonstrating how colonial economic pressures and changing social conditions disrupted traditional service communities (Munasinghe, 2000, 150). This development reflects the broader transformation of hereditary caste-based service into wage labour under colonial modernity, fundamentally altering social relations and weakening long-established service structures associated with palanquin transport.

**Social Stratification and Labour Precarity:** The institution of palanquin transport highlights the unequal distribution of mobility within society. While elites travelled in comfort and prestige, bearers carried the physical burden of transportation. The growing scarcity of bearers during the colonial period further revealed the limitations and unsustainability of such labour-intensive

practices in an evolving socioeconomic environment. Consequently, the decline of palanquin uses paralleled wider changes in labour organization, caste relations, and colonial employment patterns. As such, palanquins provide a valuable lens through which to examine broader processes of social and economic transformation in Sri Lankan history.

#### ***4. Colonial Continuities and Transformations***

**Persistence and Adaptation of Tradition:** Despite the introduction of new modes of transportation, including horse-drawn carts, carriages, animal riding, and eventually bicycles and motor vehicles, palanquin travel remained in use well into the British colonial period. The continued reliance on palanquins by European administrators and colonial officials demonstrates both their enduring symbolic prestige and the resilience of established mobility traditions. This persistence reflects the strength of cultural practices associated with status, ceremony, and elite travel, even in the face of technological and infrastructural change (Hulugalla, 1965, 161–162).

**Hybridization of Objects and Crafts:** During the colonial era, palanquins increasingly exhibited hybrid design characteristics. Lighter Indian-style palanquins were introduced and adopted alongside local forms, while decorative and structural elements combined traditional Sinhala craftsmanship with colonial aesthetic preferences. Such developments illustrate the adaptive nature of material culture under changing political and social conditions. Rather than disappearing immediately, traditional forms evolved to accommodate new tastes, practical requirements, and cross-cultural influences while retaining important elements of their indigenous identity (Munasinghe, 2000, 147–150).

**Decline and Obsolescence of Traditional Service Systems:** By the early nineteenth century, a combination of factors including the scarcity of willing palanquin bearers, increasing maintenance costs, and the expansion of alternative transportation infrastructure such as roads, carts, and carriages contributed to the gradual decline of palanquin use. As colonial administration introduced new systems of labour organization, governance, and mobility, the social institutions that had sustained palanquin transport became increasingly impractical. The disappearance of the palanquin therefore represents more than a technological transition; it marks a significant cultural and social transformation from hereditary forms of elite mobility to modern transportation systems.

#### ***5. Palanquins as Heritage Objects: Craft, Memory, and Identity***

**Material Heritage and Craft Tradition:** The surviving palanquins preserved in museums, temples, and private collections constitute valuable material evidence of once-thriving craft traditions. These artefacts embody a range of specialized skills, including woodcarving, metalworking, lacquer work, textile production, joinery, and vehicle construction. Their study provides important insights into pre-modern engineering knowledge, artisanal training systems, and decorative practices, many of which have declined or disappeared over time. As tangible expressions of historical craftsmanship, palanquins serve as significant sources for understanding the technological and artistic achievements of earlier Sri Lankan societies.

**Symbol of National and Cultural Identity:** In contemporary Sri Lanka, palanquins evoke memories of a bygone era characterized by royal courts, traditional social hierarchies, temple rituals, and indigenous craftsmanship. As heritage objects, they contribute to the reconstruction of



historical narratives concerning mobility, authority, ritual practice, and artistic expression. Their preservation and interpretation enhance public understanding of the country's cultural past while supporting broader efforts in heritage conservation, historical scholarship, and the safeguarding of traditional crafts and knowledge systems.

**Potential for Interdisciplinary Research:** Palanquins provide a particularly rich subject for interdisciplinary inquiry because they intersect multiple fields of study, including technology, art history, social history, religious practice, labour relations, and colonial transformation. Examining palanquins allows researchers to explore how transportation technologies were embedded within broader social and cultural contexts. They also challenge modern assumptions that mobility is primarily mechanized or animal-powered by demonstrating how human-powered conveyances could carry complex meanings related to status, identity, ritual, and power. Consequently, palanquins offer valuable opportunities for integrating material culture studies with wider historical and sociocultural analyses.

### The Cultural Significance of the Palanquin

The palanquin in Sri Lanka was not a mere convenience or a relic of old mobility systems; it was a **material embodiment of power, tradition, ritual, and social structure**. Through its construction, decoration, use, and eventual decline, palanquins reflect changing political regimes, shifting social hierarchies, evolving craft traditions, and transformations in labour and transport.

Analyzing palanquins offers scholars a unique vantage point: they are simultaneously technological artefacts, aesthetic objects, social institutions, and carriers of memory. As such, they deserve sustained scholarly attention not only as part of transport history but as essential components of Sri Lanka's cultural heritage.

In the modern era, with many palanquins deteriorating or locked away in obscurity, documenting their histories and preserving physical specimens becomes urgent. Their preservation can safeguard traditional craft knowledge, provide insight into pre-modern mobility cultures, and enrich understandings of social history, ritual practices, and heritage identity in Sri Lanka.

### Comparative South Asian Analysis

The palanquin (or litter) as a mode of elite and ritual transport has been widespread across South Asia, from the Indian subcontinent to Sri Lanka albeit with regional variations in form, name, social meaning, and craftsmanship. A comparative analysis helps situate the Sri Lankan tradition of palanquins within larger patterns of South Asian mobility, material culture, caste and labour structures, and ritual symbolism.

#### 1. Shared Origins: Terminology and Basic Design

The word "palanquin" itself, in European languages, derives from the Portuguese *palanquim*, which in turn is derived from an eastern word (e.g., Sanskrit *palyanka* – "bed" or "couch"). In the Indian subcontinent the palanquin is known by various names "palki", "pallakki", "doli/dhooli/dhoolie" (for smaller versions, often for women), or more elaborated versions for nobles and royalty.

Structurally, the basic configuration a covered sedan or box on poles carried by several bearers is common across many parts of South Asia. These vehicles typically accommodate a single

passenger (or in rare large versions, a small group), with sliding shutters or curtains for privacy, and are carried by two to eight bearers (most often four).

Thus, in fundamental design and purpose a human-carried sedan for mobility of elites, nobles, women of rank, or sacred transport the palanquin tradition in Sri Lanka belongs to a pan-South Asian cultural phenomenon.

## ***2. Differences in Craftsmanship, Decoration, and Usage Contexts***

Though the basic design is shared, there are notable differences in how palanquins were built, decorated, and used in Sri Lanka vs. other South Asian regions, reflecting local materials, religious contexts, social hierarchies, and aesthetic preferences.

**Materials and Construction:** In many regions of India, particularly in areas such as Rajasthan and Gujarat, palanquins (palkis) were commonly constructed from teak and other durable hardwoods, often strengthened with iron fittings to ensure stability and longevity. These vehicles served as prestigious means of transport for nobles and were frequently employed in ceremonial and religious contexts. Similarly, Sri Lankan palanquins were crafted from locally available hardwoods such as kaluvara and kalumediriya and were occasionally reinforced with metal components. The use of locally sourced materials in both regions demonstrates adaptation to environmental conditions while reflecting a shared concern for durability, functionality, and aesthetic refinement.

**Decoration and Ornamentation Styles:** Indian palkis, especially those associated with Rajput courts and princely states, were often embellished with intricate woodcarving, painted or lacquered surfaces, metal fittings, inlay work, and richly decorated textile canopies. Comparable decorative traditions are evident in Sri Lankan palanquins, which featured carved wooden panels, lacquer finishes, gold or metal ornaments, elaborate canopies, and symbolic motifs such as floral and lotus designs. These similarities suggest the existence of a broader South Asian aesthetic tradition in which the palanquin functioned not merely as a vehicle of transport but also as a mobile expression of prestige, wealth, and artistic accomplishment, adapted to regional tastes and cultural preferences.

**Ritual and Religious Functions:** Across South Asia, palanquins fulfilled important ceremonial and religious roles. In India, they were frequently used in temple processions to carry deities, sacred images, and ritual objects, while also serving as conveyances for nobles and high-ranking women. In Sri Lanka, palanquins similarly occupied a prominent place in religious ceremonies, processions, funerary rituals, monastic travel, and royal ceremonial activities. This shared association with sacred and elite mobility points to common cultural patterns throughout the region, although the specific symbolism, ritual meanings, and artistic expressions varied according to local traditions and religious contexts.

**Caste and Labour Structures:** The operation of palanquins in both India and Sri Lanka depended upon organized groups of bearers who often belonged to hereditary occupational or service communities. In many parts of India, castes such as the Kahar, Dhimar, and Siviya were traditionally associated with palanquin carrying for nobles, pilgrims, and officials. Likewise, in Sri Lanka, palanquin-bearing was connected to specific caste groups and institutional structures, including organizations such as the *kūṇam madūwa*. These parallels demonstrate that human-powered transportation throughout South Asia was closely linked to structured labour systems and social hierarchies. The reliance on specialized groups of bearers reveals how mobility, status, and

labour relations were deeply intertwined within pre-modern societies, often reinforcing broader patterns of social stratification.

### ***3. Decline, Transformation, and Modern Remnants***

The trajectory of palanquin use in both India and Sri Lanka reflects a pattern of decline with the advent of modern transport technologies, but with occasional survival in ritual, ceremonial, or heritage contexts. In India, for instance, the increasing availability of wheeled vehicles, rickshaws, railways and later motor vehicles gradually rendered human-carried palanquins obsolete for everyday travel. Yet they have persisted in some temple festivals, weddings, or heritage demonstrations.

Similarly, your review shows that in Sri Lanka during the colonial period, while new forms of transport emerged, elites and colonial officials still used palanquins; but over time, bearers became scarce, the system of service collapsed or became economically unviable, and palanquin use declined. This parallel decline underlines a shared regional shift from human-powered mobility to mechanized/animal- or engine-driven transport, marking a major transformation in social mobility, labour systems, and craft traditions.

### ***4. Local Adaptation and Cultural Specificity Amid Shared Frameworks***

While significant parallels can be observed across South Asia, each region including Sri Lanka adapted the palanquin tradition to its own craft practices, religious values, environmental conditions, and social structures. In Sri Lanka, for instance, the construction of palanquins relied heavily on locally available hardwoods selected for their durability, suitability to the tropical climate, and resistance to insects such as termites. This reflects a practical adaptation of the broader palanquin tradition to the island's ecological setting.

Decorative programmes likewise reveal regional distinctiveness. Sri Lankan palanquins frequently incorporated motifs such as the lotus, bo leaf, and other Buddhist symbolic elements, reflecting the island's religious and cultural heritage. By contrast, palanquins associated with Indian Hindu kingdoms and princely states often featured ornamentation influenced by Rajput, Mughal, or regional Hindu artistic traditions, including floral arabesques, courtly motifs, and iconographic representations linked to local religious practices. Although both traditions emphasized visual splendour and prestige, the symbolic vocabulary employed differed according to local cultural contexts.

Institutionally, the Sri Lankan monarchy integrated palanquins into the administrative framework of the royal household through specialized offices such as the *kūṇam madūwa*, which oversaw their maintenance, provisioning, and operation. This degree of formal bureaucratic organization appears distinct from many Indian contexts, where palanquins were more commonly commissioned by private patrons, maintained by temples, or produced by independent artisans without a comparable royal administrative office. Such differences illustrate the varying ways in which mobility technologies were incorporated into systems of governance and courtly life.

Another distinctive feature of the Sri Lankan tradition was the continued use of palanquins into the late colonial period. The importation of lighter Indian-style palanquins alongside locally

produced examples demonstrates the existence of cross-regional exchange, adaptation, and cultural hybridity. Rather than disappearing immediately under colonial influence, the palanquin tradition evolved through interaction with new materials, designs, and social conditions.

The Sri Lankan palanquin tradition may therefore be understood as a localized expression of a broader South Asian cultural and material phenomenon. It formed part of a shared heritage of human-powered mobility that extended across the region, while simultaneously developing unique characteristics shaped by the island's environmental resources, religious traditions, social organization, and political institutions. Its study highlights both the interconnectedness of South Asian cultural practices and the importance of local adaptation in shaping material culture.

### ***5. What Comparative Analysis Reveals: Significance for Heritage and Historical Studies***

This comparative perspective highlights several important implications:

The comparative perspective situates Sri Lankan palanquins within a wider trans-regional tradition of mobility, demonstrating that human-carried sedans were not isolated cultural peculiarities but integral components of a shared South Asian system of transport, status display, and ceremonial practice. Across the region, palanquins functioned as symbols of authority, prestige, and social distinction, reflecting common cultural understandings of elite mobility while accommodating local variations in design and use.

This broader framework also highlights the importance of craft transmission, trade networks, and cultural exchange in shaping material culture. The presence of Indian-style design elements, construction techniques, and occasionally imported materials in Sri Lankan palanquins suggests that artisans, patrons, and ruling elites participated in wider networks of interaction across maritime and overland routes. Through these connections, technological knowledge, artistic motifs, and construction methods circulated between regions, producing both continuity and innovation within local traditions.

The study of palanquins further reveals broader patterns of continuity and decline across South Asia. With the expansion of colonial rule, the introduction of modern transportation technologies, and the transformation of social and economic structures, palanquins gradually lost their practical and symbolic significance in most regions. Their decline reflects changing attitudes toward mobility, labour, and status, as well as the growing dominance of mechanized forms of transport. Consequently, the preservation, documentation, and scholarly examination of surviving palanquins are essential for understanding pre-modern systems of mobility, social hierarchy, artisanal production, and cultural heritage.

Finally, a comparative approach provides a valuable framework for future research. By examining regional variations in palanquin design, construction methods, labour organization, ritual functions, and symbolic meanings across areas such as Sri Lanka, Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, and Bengal, scholars can gain deeper insights into the complex relationships between mobility, power, social identity, and material culture. Such research has the potential to illuminate both shared cultural traditions and distinctive local adaptations, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of South Asian history and heritage.

## Summary of Comparative Findings

| <i>Aspect</i>                            | <i>Common Across South Asia</i>                                                                              | <i>Sri Lankan Specificity/Local Adaptation</i>                                                                                                              |
|------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Basic structure: covered litter on poles | Yes, covered sedan, carried by 2–8 bearers; names: palki / pallakki / doli / dolā / palanquin.               | Use of local hardwoods; regional joinery & timber selection; integration with royal household institutions (kūṇam-madūwa)                                   |
| Decorative and symbolic use              | Ornate carving, lacquer/paint, metal fittings, textile canopies; used by royalty/ temple processions/elites. | Decoration featuring Buddhist or Sinhala motifs (lotus, bo-leaf, etc.), local artisanship, palanquin types adapted to island's social & ritual context      |
| Labour & caste-based bearers             | Yes, certain castes/ occupational groups carried palanquins in India (e.g. Kahar, Siviya, etc.)              | Bearers organised under hereditary or institutional frameworks; bearers often from lower castes /servile groups; palanquin-bearing as royal service or duty |
| Ritual / religious usage                 | Temple processions, sacred-image transport, weddings, noble mobility.                                        | Palanquins used for royal ritual travel, monastic mobility, funerary rites, processions with relics integrated into Sinhala Buddhist and court rituals      |
| Decline with modern transport            | Widespread decline with rise of carts, carriages, rail; survival in weddings or ceremony.                    | Decline under colonial rule; bearers' scarcity; some hybrid or imported palanquins used; eventual obsolescence in everyday travel                           |

## Interpretation: What This Means for Understanding Sri Lankan Palanquins in a Regional Context

The comparative South Asian lens demonstrates that the palanquin in Sri Lanka should not be treated as an isolated phenomenon, but as part of a broader pattern of human-carried mobility deeply embedded in pre-modern South Asian societies. At the same time, local conditions environmental, social, religious, and political shaped its distinctive trajectory. Understanding these dynamics enriches our comprehension of:

A comparative examination of palanquin traditions across South Asia provides valuable insights into the ways regional mobility technologies adapted to diverse ecological conditions and social structures. The selection of construction materials, design features, and methods of use demonstrates how communities modified a broadly shared form of transport to suit local environmental resources, climatic conditions, political systems, and cultural practices.

Such an approach also highlights the significance of craft transmission, trade, and cultural interaction across both maritime and overland networks. The circulation of artisans, materials, technologies, and artistic motifs facilitated the exchange of knowledge between regions, allowing local traditions to evolve while remaining connected to broader South Asian patterns of material culture. Palanquins therefore serve as important evidence for understanding historical networks of communication, commerce, and cultural contact.

The study of palanquins further illuminates the close relationship between technology, art, ritual, and power. Far from being simple means of transportation, palanquins functioned as highly symbolic objects that embodied social status, political authority, religious devotion, and artistic achievement. Their construction, decoration, and ceremonial use reveal how mobility itself could become a medium through which power, identity, and cultural values were publicly expressed and reinforced.





At the same time, the history of palanquins offers important perspectives on the transformation of labor systems under colonial modernity. The gradual decline of palanquin transport reflects broader changes in patterns of employment, service obligations, transportation infrastructure, and social organization. As hereditary service systems gave way to wage labour and mechanized forms of transport expanded, traditional institutions associated with palanquin production, maintenance, and operation increasingly lost their economic and social viability.

From a contemporary perspective, surviving palanquins possess considerable heritage value. They should be understood not merely as antiquarian curiosities but as tangible testimonies to a shared South Asian tradition of mobility, craftsmanship, social organization, and cultural expression. Their preservation, documentation, and scholarly study are therefore essential for safeguarding knowledge of pre-modern technologies, artisanal practices, ritual traditions, and historical systems of social interaction. Through such efforts, palanquins continue to contribute to a deeper understanding of the cultural and historical heritage of South Asia.

## Conclusion

The palanquin in Sri Lanka represents a complex intersection of technology, artistry, social hierarchy, and ritual practice. Its evolution from the early Anuradhapura period to the Kandyan era and colonial times demonstrates the adaptability of indigenous craftsmanship to social, religious, and political demands. Palanquins were not merely modes of transport; they were portable symbols of authority, prestige, and piety, embodying the elite's identity while reflecting the skill of artisan communities.

Technologically, palanquins illustrate the ingenuity of Sri Lankan woodworkers, joiners, metalworkers, and lacquer artists. The careful selection of hardwoods, sophisticated mortise-and-tenon joinery, integration of cushioning, canopies, and ventilation systems, and the ability to balance structural integrity with portability all highlight advanced engineering skills. Decoratively, carving, inlay, lacquer finishes, gilding, textile drapery, and metal ornamentation served as both aesthetic and symbolic devices, reinforcing social and ritual hierarchies.

The palanquin's socio-cultural significance extended beyond elite mobility. Its ceremonial and religious roles, from temple processions to funerary rites, positioned it as a mediator of sacred and secular power. Bearers, often drawn from specific castes or labour groups, embodied the unequal social relations inherent in traditional mobility practices. Colonial encounters transformed both palanquin design and its socio-economic frameworks, introducing hybrid aesthetics, imported components, and wage-based labour systems, while simultaneously accelerating the decline of traditional practices.

Comparatively, the Sri Lankan palanquin shares South Asian roots with Indian palki, pallakki, or doli traditions, but it demonstrates local specificity in material selection, decorative motifs, institutional embedding within royal households, and continuity into late colonial periods. Such comparative analysis underscores the palanquin as a node of cultural exchange and adaptation across South Asia.

Preservation of surviving palanquins, documentation of artisan knowledge, and scholarly engagement with both historical sources and material evidence are imperative. As heritage objects, palanquins offer unique insights into Sri Lanka's technological ingenuity, artistic creativity, social stratification, ritual culture, and regional identity. Their study enriches understanding of pre-modern mobility, material culture, and the broader South Asian aesthetic and social landscapes.

In conclusion, Sri Lankan palanquins are emblematic of a cultural practice where craft, ritual, and social hierarchy converge. Recognizing them as technologically sophisticated and symbolically potent artefacts is essential for heritage management, academic research, and sustaining knowledge of traditional craftsmanship for future generations.

## References

- Bandaranayake, S. (1984). *Sinhalese Monastic Architecture: The Vihāral Period*. Colombo: Lake House Investments Ltd.
- Brockington, J. (1970). *The Sacred Vehicle in South Asian Culture*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Codrington, H. W. (1926). *A Short History of Ceylon*. London: Macmillan.
- Coomaraswamy, A. (1927). *Mediaeval Sinhalese Art*. New York: Dover Publications.
- Dalada Sirita (n.d.). *Temple Chronicles and Ritual Descriptions*. Kandy: Mahā Bodhi Society.
- Davy, J. (1821). *An Account of the Interior of Ceylon*. London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme & Brown.
- Geiger, W. (1912). *The Mahāvamsa or Great Chronicle of Ceylon*. London: Pali Text Society.
- Hulugalla, R. (1965). *Traditional Transport Systems in Ceylon*. Colombo: Ceylon Government Press.
- Kavsilumina (n.d.). *Classical Sinhala Poetry Collection*. Colombo: National Archives.
- Knox, R. (1681). *An Historical Relation of the Island Ceylon*. London: James Knapton.
- Munasinghe, M. (2000). *Kandyan Court and Society*. Kandy: Cultural Heritage Press.

- Paranavitana, S. (1963). *Inscriptions of Ceylon*. Colombo: Department of Archaeology.
- Perera, S. (1988). *Traditional Crafts and Furniture of Sri Lanka*. Colombo: Department of National Museums.
- Silva, R. (1993). *Art and Crafts of the Kandyan Kingdom*. Colombo: Sri Lanka National Museum.
- Sinhala Viśva Koṣaya (1991). *Volume 12: Transport and Social Hierarchy*. Colombo: Vidyodaya Publications.
- Sirr, H. C. (1829). *Ceylon: Historical and Descriptive Notes*. London: John Murray.