



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

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**Abstract:** *This review examines the technological evolution, craftsmanship, and decorative traditions associated with palanquins in Sri Lanka, situating the artefact within broader socio-cultural and political histories of mobility. The palanquin functioned not merely as a mode of elite transport but as a symbol of status, ritual authority, and aesthetic expression. While previous scholarship has primarily focused on royal processions, caste-based labor systems, and the socio-political functions of elite conveyances, detailed studies on construction technology, material selection, and decorative conventions remain limited. This review synthesizes historical chronicles, colonial-era descriptions, ethnographic observations, and material evidence preserved in museums and temple collections to provide an integrated understanding of the artefact's technological and artistic significance.*

*Key research questions guiding this review include: How did the technological construction of palanquins evolve over time in Sri Lanka? What woodworking, joinery, and metalworking traditions informed their manufacture? How did aesthetic elements such as lacquer work, carving, textiles, and metal fittings express social hierarchy and regional craftsmanship? What socio-religious conventions shaped their ceremonial uses? The study adopts a qualitative review methodology, analyzing textual sources, visual archives, and surviving specimens to reconstruct patterns of technological practice and symbolic meaning.*

*Findings indicate that palanquin design in Sri Lanka represented a confluence of local craft traditions, imported stylistic influences from South Asia, and evolving elite tastes. The integration of indigenous woods, lacquer traditions, metal embossing, and symbolic motifs reveals the palanquin as a mobile canvas of artistic expression and technical skill. By consolidating dispersed historical data, this review contributes a comprehensive account of Sri Lankan palanquin traditions and highlights their value as material heritage reflecting engineering ingenuity, artistic creativity, and social identity.*

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## Introduction

The research aims to investigate several key questions regarding Sri Lankan palanquins. First, it seeks to understand how palanquin construction technology evolved across different historical periods in Sri Lanka, tracing developments in design, structure, and functionality. Second, it examines the types of materials employed, the woodcraft techniques used by artisans, and the various joinery systems that ensured both durability and mobility. Third, the study explores how decorative traditions including carving, lacquer work, metal inlays, and textile embellishments reflected regional artistic identities and signaled elite status. Fourth, it investigates the social, political, and ritual functions that palanquins fulfilled within pre-modern Sri Lankan society, highlighting their roles in ceremonial, religious, and administrative contexts. Finally, the research considers how colonial records, visual representations, and surviving artefacts contribute to reconstructing the traditions and practices associated with palanquin production, use, and cultural significance.

This study employs a multidisciplinary research methodology to investigate Sri Lankan palanquins. It utilizes qualitative textual analysis of historical chronicles, literary descriptions, colonial travel accounts, and ethnographic documentation to understand the cultural, social, and ceremonial contexts of palanquin use. Material culture analysis is conducted on museum-held palanquins, temple treasury objects, and surviving fragments to identify construction conventions, woodcraft techniques, and decorative practices. The research also incorporates a comparative historical approach, drawing on Indian and Southeast Asian parallels to contextualize technological influences and regional interactions. Iconographic and visual analysis of engravings, paintings, and early photographs provides further insight into the form, ornamentation, and symbolic significance of palanquins. Finally, a synthesis-driven review methodology integrates these multidisciplinary sources of evidence to construct a coherent historical narrative that captures the technological, artistic, and socio-cultural dimensions of palanquins in pre-modern Sri Lanka.

## Significance of the Research

This study fills a major gap in Sri Lankan cultural history by providing the first integrated review of palanquin technology and decorative traditions. It highlights how the artefact embodies complex intersections of engineering, artistry, ritual authority, and social hierarchy. The review underscores the importance of preserving surviving palanquin specimens and documenting artisan knowledge that is rapidly disappearing. By reframing palanquins as technologically and artistically significant objects rather than merely transport devices this research contributes to heritage management, traditional craft studies, and the broader understanding of mobility cultures in South Asia.

## Introduction

The history of transport in Sri Lanka reflects a rich interplay between environment, social structure, political authority, and evolving technologies of mobility. Among the many pre-modern modes of conveyance, the palanquin occupies a distinctive place as both a practical means of travel and a potent symbol of elite identity. Known for centuries across South and Southeast Asia, the palanquin in Sri Lanka developed unique technological features and decorative conventions shaped by local

craftsmanship and cultural values. While the object appears in historical chronicles, literary texts, and colonial accounts, a comprehensive study of its construction, materials, artistic embellishment, and functional diversity has not yet been produced. This review article seeks to address this scholarly lacuna by synthesizing multidisciplinary evidence to provide a detailed understanding of palanquin traditions in Sri Lanka.

The palanquin's prominence is inseparable from the hierarchical social systems that structured pre-modern Sri Lankan society. Its association with royalty, aristocracy, high-ranking clergy, and officials placed it at the intersection of mobility and social power. The use of palanquins was tightly regulated by sumptuary laws, caste obligations, and courtly customs, reflecting the degree to which transport itself was intertwined with governance and social order. The palanquin thus becomes a lens through which broader questions of political symbolism, ceremonial practice, art history, and technological adaptation may be explored.

Technologically, palanquin construction represented a sophisticated form of wood engineering. Artisans combined knowledge of indigenous hardwoods with advanced joinery techniques mortise-and-tenon joints, pegged frameworks, curved canopies, and reinforced structural members to produce strong yet lightweight vehicles suited for human or animal bearers. The incorporation of woven cane, metal fittings, and cushioning textiles further demonstrates the complexity of the craft. Surviving examples in museum collections reveal high-quality workmanship, particularly in the shaping of curved elements and the integration of carved decorative panels.

Decoratively, Sri Lankan palanquins served as mobile platforms for artistic expression. Techniques such as lacquer work (*māṭu* or *niyapoten*), ivory or bone inlay, carved floral motifs, and repoussé metal ornaments were applied to enhance both aesthetic appeal and symbolic meaning. Many motifs lotus forms, guardians, auspicious emblems expressed Buddhist and indigenous symbolic systems, while others reflected regional or caste identities. The study of these motifs reveals connections between palanquin artisans and broader traditions of wood carving, temple decoration, and ritual object production.

Historically, palanquin use appears in numerous Sinhala literary and religious texts. Chronicles such as the *Mahāvamsa* and *Cūlavamsa* refer to royal and monastic processions featuring elaborately decorated palanquins. Kavya literature and sandēṣa poems describe noblewomen, messengers, and envoys travelling in palanquins, emphasizing comfort, prestige, and ceremonial grandeur. These textual references complement archaeological and art-historical evidence, allowing for a more nuanced reconstruction of palanquin culture across different periods.

Colonial-era records provide additional insights into the socio-political significance of palanquins. Early European observers were struck by the elaborate nature of local palanquins, noting their construction details, bearers' costumes, and role in both secular and religious ceremonies. British regulations governing palanquin use, especially during the 19th century, further illuminate the object's status in a transforming society undergoing administrative and infrastructural reforms.

Despite this wealth of references, scholarly work on Sri Lankan palanquins remains fragmentary. Studies on transport history have tended to priorities roads, carts, horses, and maritime mobility; meanwhile, research on decorative arts has addressed lacquer work, carving, and metal craft as separate fields rather than integrated components of palanquin-making. Moreover, little attention has been paid to the technological aspects of palanquin construction, including material selection, structural design, load distribution, and ergonomic considerations. This article therefore adopts a holistic review methodology to bring together textual, visual, and material sources into a unified narrative.

The significance of such an endeavor extends beyond the history of transport. Palanquins illuminate broader themes in Sri Lankan cultural studies such as the relationship between mobility and hierarchy, the interdependence of craft communities, and the symbolic language of elite display. Furthermore, because many palanquins survive today only in neglected temple storerooms or museum collections lacking detailed documentation, scholarly attention is urgently needed to preserve knowledge of their construction techniques and aesthetic traditions.

By presenting the first comprehensive historical review of palanquin technology, craftsmanship, and decorative traditions in Sri Lanka, this article aims to contribute to heritage studies, material culture research, and the comparative history of mobility in Asia. The findings demonstrate that palanquins are not merely relics of a bygone transport system but are culturally dense artefacts representing engineering sophistication, artistic creativity, and social meaning.

This article reviews the technological development, craftsmanship, and decorative traditions of palanquins in Sri Lanka. Synthesizing evidence from chronicles, colonial records, museum artefacts, and visual archives, it reconstructs the material and symbolic dimensions of this elite conveyance. The study reveals how woodcraft, joinery, lacquer work, metal ornamentation, and textile arts combined to create palanquins that embodied social hierarchy and aesthetic refinement. By examining their ceremonial roles and technological features, the review highlights the palanquin's importance within broader histories of mobility and material culture in Sri Lanka. The article contributes new insights into traditional craftsmanship and underscores the need for better heritage preservation.

## Literature Review

Scholarship on Sri Lanka's traditional modes of transport has generally remained fragmented, with only limited works addressing the palanquin as a specialized cultural and technological artefact. Existing literature spans chronicles, colonial writings, ethnographic observations, art-historical studies, and museum catalogues, but no comprehensive review has yet synthesized these materials in relation to palanquin craftsmanship and decorative traditions.

Early references to palanquins appear in the *Mahāvamsa*, *Cūlavamsa*, and several *sandēsa* poems, where the *dola* or *dolā yātrā* is associated with royal processions, monastic mobility, and the ceremonial movements of nobles. These literary clues have provided historians with preliminary evidence on the social significance of palanquins, though they offer little direct information on construction techniques or ornamentation. Sinhala classical literature, including the *Kavsilumina*, *Thūpavamsa*, and *Dalada Sirita*, also contains occasional mentions of palanquins in the context of regal or religious activity. While these references are valuable for cultural interpretation, they do not constitute technical sources.

Colonial-period writings provide a richer body of descriptive material. Portuguese chroniclers such as Queiroz and Ribeiro describe the movement of Kandyan kings and nobles using palanquins, highlighting the political symbolism of the vehicle. Dutch records, especially those relating to the administration of the Kandyan kingdom, include references to palanquin regulations, the rights of chiefs to be carried, and the obligations of villages to provide bearers. British administrators and travelers including Robert Knox, John Davy, James Cordiner, and Henry Charles Sirr provide more detailed descriptions of palanquin structure, materials, and decorative features. These works often describe the woodwork, metal fittings, canopy designs, and textiles, representing some of the earliest visual and technological accounts.

The most significant art-historical contributions come from Ananda Coomaraswamy, who analyses Sri Lankan decorative arts and crafts, including woodcarving, lacquer work (*līyavel*), and metal repoussé. Coomaraswamy's observations on the aesthetic grammar of Kandyan ornamentation

floral motifs, *liya-pata*, scroll-work, and symbolic imagery provide essential interpretive tools for understanding palanquin decoration, even though he did not produce a focused monograph on palanquins themselves. Later scholars of Sri Lankan material culture, such as Senaka Bandaranayake, Roland Silva, S. D. Saparamadu, and Ananda Guruge, have commented on traditional craftsmanship and Kandyan artistry, offering contextual insights relevant to palanquin manufacture.

Ethnographic and craft-studies literature also contributes to understanding the technological dimensions of palanquin construction. Studies on traditional carpentry, joinery techniques, indigenous engineering, and the use of hardwoods such as jak, teak, and satinwood provide clues about the structural principles underlying palanquin design. Research on *lac* decoration, *dumbara* weaving, and Kandyan metalwork further illuminates the craft traditions used in ornamenting elite mobile objects. Museum catalogues from the National Museum of Colombo, Kandy Museum, and regional temple collections also contain records and photographs of surviving palanquin specimens, although detailed technical analyses remain rare.

Comparative South Asian literature offers an additional perspective. Indian studies particularly those on Mughal, Maratha, and South Indian palanquin traditions provide useful parallels in design, ceremonial use, and symbolic functions. Works on the *palki* in North India, the *pallakku* in Tamil regions, and the *meghdūta* type ceremonial conveyances contribute valuable comparative frameworks. These sources highlight shared South Asian mobility traditions while also helping identify features distinctive to Sri Lanka.

Despite this wide-ranging body of literature, there is no integrated academic study that examines Sri Lankan palanquins from technological, artistic, and socio-historical perspectives. Most existing scholarship is either descriptive, scattered across unrelated sources, or focused on other aspects of material culture. Therefore, this review seeks to bridge that gap by synthesizing these diverse materials into a coherent understanding of palanquin technology, craftsmanship, and decorative traditions in Sri Lanka.

## Historical Background

The history of palanquins (*dōlā*) in Sri Lanka is closely intertwined with the island's socio-political hierarchy, religious practices, and ceremonial culture. Palanquins first appear in early literary sources, including the *Mahāvamsa* and *Cūlavamsa*, where they are primarily associated with kings, royal family members, and high-ranking nobles. These texts suggest that palanquins functioned as both a mode of transport and a status symbol, signifying political power and social prestige (Geiger, 1912, pp 54-55; Paranavitana, 1963, p. 112).

During the Anuradhapura period (4th century BCE–1017 CE), palanquins were used for ceremonial purposes in royal courts and for transporting sacred relics. Archaeological evidence, including stone reliefs and inscriptions, indicates that palanquins were part of processional culture, often employed in religious and state rituals. Inscriptions from sites such as Anuradhapura and Mihintale mention donations of palanquins or bearers for monastic and religious use, reflecting their integration into both secular and sacred spheres (Brockington, 1970, p.87).

The Polonnaruwa period (1055–1232 CE) saw further refinement of palanquin use. Royal chronicles describe palanquins adorned with rich textiles, gilded fittings, and ornamental canopies. Palanquins during this period not only served as a practical mode of transport but also as ceremonial vehicles that reflected the aesthetic sensibilities of the court (Codrington, 1926, pp 69, 75, 128). The materials and craftsmanship employed such as hardwood construction, lacquer finishes, and metal embellishments demonstrate an advanced understanding of both structural engineering and decorative arts.

The Kandyan period (1590–1815 CE) represents the pinnacle of palanquin sophistication in Sri Lanka. Kandyan kings and nobles used elaborately carved wooden palanquins with complex joinery, inlaid metals, and intricate lacquer work. The palanquin became a symbol of political authority, ritual performance, and aesthetic display. Colonial accounts from Portuguese, Dutch, and British travelers, including Robert Knox and John Davy, emphasize the grandeur of Kandyan palanquins, detailing their structure, ornamentation, and ceremonial usage (Knox, 1681; Davy, 1821, p. 155). Palanquins were also linked to ritual performances such as temple processions and royal weddings, underscoring their dual role as functional transport and emblem of cultural identity.

In addition to the elite, palanquins were occasionally used by religious figures, including Buddhist monks and high-ranking officials, illustrating a broader societal role. The historical evolution of palanquins reflects a combination of technological innovation, artistic expression, and social stratification, establishing them as an important subject for studies on Sri Lankan material culture and ceremonial traditions.

### 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 (Senādhpati 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, p. 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 Palanquins

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, p. 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, pp 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, p. 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, 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, p. 148). Even among elites, differences existed e.g., royal kūṇama for the king, “dōli / pallakki” for queens or nobles, “ran-sivi ge” for sacred processions (Sinhala Viśva Koṣaya, 1991, p. 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, organised 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 in religious ceremonies, temple rituals, and processions. They carried sacred relics, images of deities, offerings, and transported high-ranking monks or envoys. The decorative splendour gilt surfaces, carved motifs, ornate canopies heightened the sacred atmosphere and reinforced the holy status of the carried objects or persons. In festivals such as temple peraheras, the palanquin’s status was elevated to a ritual vehicle.
- **Funerary and Mortuary Uses:** In the funerary practices of nobles and monastic aristocracy, decorated palanquins or litters were used to carry bodies to cremation grounds. The use of richly ornamented palanquins for transporting the deceased signified respect, status even in death, and the continuing social prestige of the family or religious community. This underscores how palanquins mediated transitions not only in life (mobility) but in death and ritual passage as well.
- **Embodiment of Cultural Identity:** As vehicles used during royal processions, religious pilgrimages, temple ceremonies, festivals, and state visits, palanquins became part of the collective cultural memory. Their presence signified continuity of tradition, court culture, and ritual legitimacy. Over time they symbolised not just personal mobility but communal religious and socio-political identity a mobile stage for performance of power, piety, and 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. The bearers the ūliyakkāra functioned under the administrative structure of the kūṇam maduwa, organised into shares (pangu) under Shattambis and other officers (Sinhala Viśva Koṣaya, 1991, p. 570). Their work involved heavy labour, long journeys, and social

marginalization; they often endured harsh conditions, restrictions on dress, beard style, and social mobility, marking clear social boundaries between elite travellers and servile carriers.

- **Wage Labour and Colonial Economies:** During colonial rule, Europeans and local elites continued using palanquins. For instance, European officials reportedly spent about £200 annually for thirteen palanquin carriers, with carriers paid nine pence per fifteen miles (Hulugalla, 1965, p. 161). Yet the low wages led to labour scarcity, reflecting how colonial economic pressures and changing social dynamics disrupted traditional service communities (Munasinghe, 2000, p. 150). This shift illustrates the transformation of caste-based hereditary service into wage-labour under colonial modernity, altering the social relations and undermining old service structures tied to palanquin use.
- **Social Stratification and Labour Precarity:** The dependence on palanquin bearers also reveals the embedded inequality in mobility. The elite were carried luxuriously; the bearers bore the physical cost. Their scarcity under colonial rule points to the unsustainability of such labour-intensive customs in changing socioeconomic contexts. The decline of palanquin uses thus parallels changes in labour systems, caste dynamics, and colonial labour demands making palanquins a lens to study broader socio-economic transformations.

#### 4. Colonial Continuities and Transformations

- **Persistence and Adaptation of Tradition:** Despite the arrival of new transport technologies (horse-drawn carts, carriages, animal-riding, eventually bicycles and vehicles), palanquin travel persisted into the British colonial period. The continuance of palanquin use by European administrators and colonial officials indicates its entrenched symbolic prestige and the inertia of traditional mobility culture even under modernizing influences (Hulugalla, 1965, pp. 161–162).
- **Hybridization of Objects and Crafts:** Under colonial rule, palanquins began to reflect hybrid design influences: lighter Indian-style palanquins were imported; decorative and structural features combined traditional Sinhala craftsmanship with colonial aesthetic preferences. This hybridization highlights how material culture adapts under political change, preserving continuity while accommodating new tastes and functional demands (Munasinghe, 2000, pp. 147–150).
- **Decline and Obsolescence of Traditional Service Systems:** By the early 19th century, the scarcity of willing palanquin bearers, rising costs, and changing transportation infrastructure (roads, carts, carriages) contributed to the decline of palanquin use. As colonial governance imposed new administrative, labour, and mobility systems, the traditional palanquin and its associated social institutions lost their viability. This decline marks an important cultural shift from hereditary elite mobility to modern transport systems.

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

- **Material Heritage and Craft Tradition:** The surviving palanquins stored in museums, temples, and private collections are tangible artefacts that document formerly widespread craft traditions: woodcarving, metalwork, lacquer, textile weaving, joinery, and carriage design. Studying them offers insight into pre-modern engineering, artisanal training, and decorative techniques that may otherwise be lost.
- **Symbol of National and Cultural Identity:** In contemporary Sri Lanka, palanquins evoke a bygone era royal courts, traditional hierarchy, temple rituals, and indigenous craftsmanship. As heritage objects, they help reconstruct social narratives of mobility, power, ritual, and artistry.

Recognizing their value supports efforts in heritage preservation, cultural history scholarship, and conservation of traditional crafts.

- **Potential for Interdisciplinary Research:** Because palanquins intersect technology, art, social history, ritual practice, labour relations, and colonial transformation, they offer rich grounds for interdisciplinary research. They challenge modern assumptions about mobility (e.g., that transport is only mechanised or animal-driven), illustrating how human-powered conveyances carried complex social meanings.

## Conclusion — 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 parts of India (e.g., Rajasthan, Gujarat), palanquins (palki) were often made of teak or other local hardwoods, sometimes with iron reinforcement, for durable, ornate sedans used by nobles, temple processions, or elite transport. In Sri Lanka, based on earlier sections, palanquins made use of local hardwoods (kaluvara, kalumediya, etc.), and were sometimes reinforced with metal parts displaying adaptation to local ecological conditions and available materials.
- **Decoration and Ornamentation Styles:** Indian palkis, especially those from Rajput or princely states, often combined carved woodwork, inlay, lacquer or paint, metal fittings, and textile canopies richly ornamented to reflect elite status. The decorative traditions described for Sri Lankan palanquins carved wood panels, lacquer, gold or metal fittings, textile canopies, lotus or floral motifs, and symbolic ornamentation show a parallel impulse: to turn the palanquin into a mobile object of art and status. This suggests a shared South Asian aesthetic grammar of elite mobility, adapted to local tastes and materials.
- **Ritual and Religious Functions:** In India, palanquins were often used in temple processions, carrying deities or sacred images (e.g., during festivals), or transporting women of rank or nobles. In Sri Lanka too, palanquins played central roles in religious ceremonies, processions, funerary practices, monastic mobility, and royalty's ritual movements. The shared use of palanquins for sacred and elite transport underscores common cultural patterns across South Asia, even if the symbolism, ritual contexts, and material expressions had local inflections.
- **Caste and Labour Structures:** In many parts of India, palanquin-bearers often belonged to specific hereditary or occupational castes (e.g., Kahar, Dhimar, Siviyar, etc.), carrying the sedan for nobles, pilgrims, or officials. Similarly, in historical Sri Lanka, palanquin-bearing was linked to certain castes or servile groups, with bearers organised under hereditary or institutional frameworks (e.g., kūṇam-madūwa, as you have documented). This parallel suggests that across South Asia, human-carried mobility tended to rely on structured labour groups, often socially marginalised, highlighting how transport is intertwined with 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 there are strong parallels across South Asia, each region including Sri Lanka adapted the palanquin tradition to local crafts, religious sensibilities, ecological materials, and social structures. For example:

- The use of local hardwoods in Sri Lanka; selection of timber types suited to climate and termite resistance.
- The decorative motifs lotus, bo-leaf, Buddhist symbolic elements, which differ in resonance compared to Indian Hindu-kingdom palki ornamentation (which may favour Rajput-Mughal florals, or local Hindu iconography).
- The institutional embedding of palanquins in Sri Lankan monarchy through offices like *kūṇam-madūwa*, distinct from the Indian practice where palanquins were often privately commissioned, temple-owned, or artisan-made without a formal royal household office.
- The continuity of palanquins into late colonial times in Sri Lanka — including imported lighter palanquins from India indicating cross-regional exchange, adaptation, and cultural hybridity.
- Thus, the Sri Lankan palanquin tradition represents a **localized instantiation** of a broader South Asian cultural-material phenomenon: it is both part of a shared heritage of human-carried mobility and a distinct tradition shaped by the island’s environmental, social, and political contexts.

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

This comparative perspective highlights several important implications:

- It situates Sri Lankan palanquins within a trans-regional tradition of mobility, indicating that human-carried sedans were not isolated cultural quirks but integral parts of a shared South Asian mobility and status culture.
- It underscores the role of craft transmission, trade, and cultural exchange: the fact that palanquins in Sri Lanka sometimes used Indian-style timber or design motifs suggests artisans and elites borrowed or adapted techniques across sea or land routes.
- It reveals continuity and declines patterns: as colonialism, modern transport technology, and changing social economies transformed mobility, palanquins declined almost everywhere making their preservation, documentation, and study urgent for understanding pre-modern mobility, social hierarchy, and craft heritage.
- It provides a comparative framework for future research: scholars can examine regional variations (e.g., Lanka vs. Tamil Nadu vs. Rajasthan vs. Bengal) in palanquin design, construction, labour systems, ritual uses, and social symbolism, yielding deeper insights into the intersection of mobility, power, and material culture across South Asia.

## 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 ( <i>kūṇam-madūwa</i> )
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, Siviyaar, etc.)	Bearers organised under hereditary or institutional frameworks; bearers often from lower castes /servile groups; palanquin-bearing as royal service or duty

<i>Aspect</i>	<i>Common Across South Asia</i>	<i>Sri Lankan Specificity / Local Adaptation</i>
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:

- How regional mobility technologies adapt to local ecologies and social structures.
- The role of craft transmission, trade, and cultural interchange across maritime and overland networks.
- The interaction of technology, art, ritual, and power in the material culture of mobility.
- The transformations in social labour systems under colonial modernity, and its impact on traditional forms of transport, service, and craft.
- Contemporary heritage value: surviving palanquins are not merely antiquities, but testimonies to a shared South Asian tradition of mobility, craftsmanship, and social organisation that merits preservation, documentation, and analytical study.



## Conclusion — Cultural and Historical Significance of Sri Lankan Palanquins

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.

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