

RESPONSIBLE USE OF RELIGIOUS PROPERTIES AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE FROM SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

This research is concerned with diverse use of Buddhist religious properties in Sri Lanka and the impact of such uses on the sustainable development of the country. As a sociological study it was designed to answer the research question as to how the multiple use of Buddhist religious properties contribute to the sustainable development which is struggling with scarce resources. Accordingly, the central objective of the research was to identify the manifest and latent ways and means of multiple use of religious properties for meeting needs of resources for activities that ultimately contribute to the sustainable development. Significance and relevance of this research could be justified in terms of the role of religious institutions in the accomplishment of Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations. As is well apparent from world religious institutions, a considerable portion of various resources with a potentiality of making a decisive contribution to the sustainable development within the ideological framework of those religions, remains in the possession of them and it is also evident that those resources are used for developmental purposes at various levels. However, research studies are required to build a scientific knowledge base of the use of religious properties for sustainable development in the modern society.

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Such a knowledge base would facilitate further development of the role of religious institutions in the sustainable development in any country.

Present research study was carried out with reference to twenty-five Buddhist temples and related institutions located in the western province of Sri Lanka. And this purposive sample was selected considering the diversified used of religious properties for making a significant contribution to the development and wellbeing of people. Structured and semi-structured interviews were conducted with seventy respondents in addition to the observations made in those institutions for the purpose of gathering data for this research.

The findings revealed interesting ways and means of transforming sacred religious properties which have been offered by people for the exclusive use of Mahasangha as Sangika properties, into co-operative use for the benefit of both the Mahasangha and lay people with and without limitations. Offering of temple lands for developmental purposes such as establishment of educational institutions, welfare, social service, health, medical, community development, cultural, sports, vocational training, industrial and commercial centers, construction of building structures making spaces available for various purposes of society, operation of educational and social welfare institutions, provisions of scholarships and financial grants, facilitation of pilgrimages and housing programs were evident at different level. In addition to the religious properties and funds offered for the exclusive use of Mahasangha, an interest in finding sponsorships for such welfare and developmental purposes was also evident from the research.

As the principle of responsible consumption for the sustainable development is concerned, this research study scientifically corroborates the fact that even religious properties offered for the exclusive use of Buddhist monks can be transformed into properties of public use through the active involvement of Buddhist institutions in the social welfare and development activities. Sri Lankan Buddhist institutions are having a great potentiality of contributing to the sustainable development of the country.

1. INTRODUCTION

This research is concerned with diverse use of Buddhist religious properties in Sri Lanka and the impact of such uses on the sustainable development of the country. Sri Lankan as a member of

the United Nations has been working for the fulfillment of the goals of sustainable development exploring different ways and means of accomplishment of them within the prescribed period of time. As a developing country it is struggling with limited resources in the implementation of projects of sustainable development. Even though Sri Lanka always seeks foreign resources as development investment and consultancy, it has little concern about the development capacity of apparently non-economic social institutions, their economic capacities and capabilities of development consultancy. And even their active participation in and valuable contribution to the sustainable development seem to have not been fully recognized and assessed from a developmental perspective. Lack of scientific knowledge on such social institutions including the religious institutions deprives the nation of developmental potentialities of those social institutions. Leaving the other social institutions for future research studies, present research focuses attention to the Buddhist religious institution contributing to the sustainable development of the country. Significance and relevance of this research could be justified in terms of the role of religious institutions in the accomplishment of Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations. As is well apparent from world religious institutions, a considerable portion of various resources with a potentiality of making a decisive contribution to the sustainable development within the ideological framework of those religions, remains in the possession of them and it is also evident that those resources are used for developmental purposes at various levels. However, research studies are required to build a scientific knowledge base of the use of religious properties for sustainable development in the modern society. Such a knowledge base would facilitate further development of the role of religious institutions in the sustainable development in any country.

2. RESEARCH PROBLEM

As their counterparts in other countries, Buddhist religious institutions in Sri Lanka also perform number of social functions other than pure religious functions for the benefit of people. As a result, most of institutional properties and belongings which were originally destined and committed to the exclusive use of Maha Sangha, the Buddhist monks, have been transformed into resources

of multiple use intermingling with worldly affairs of people. This sociological study was designed to answer the research problem as to how the multiple use of Buddhist religious properties contribute to the sustainable development which is struggling with scarce resources available for developmental purposes.

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Accordingly, the central objective of the research was to identify the manifest and latent ways and means of multiple use of religious properties for meeting needs of resources for activities that ultimately contribute to the sustainable development.

4. METHODOLOGY

Present research study was carried out with reference to twenty-five Buddhist temples and related institutions located in the western province of Sri Lanka. And this purposive sample was selected considering the diversified uses of religious properties for making a significant contribution to the development and wellbeing of people. Structured and semi-structured interviews were conducted with seventy respondents in addition to the observations made in those institutions for the purpose of gathering data for this research. Those Buddhist temples and institutions include (1) Ranmuthugala Puranaviharaya in Kadawatha, (2) Gangaraya in Colombo, (3) Mahindaramaya in Ethulkotte, (4) Mahamevna Arama, (5) Jayasekeraramaya in Kuppiyawaththa, (6) Thilakarathnaramaya in Borella, (7) Sri Wijayawardanaramaya -Mampe in Piliyandala, (8) Kolamunne Prathibimbaramaya in Piliyandala, (9) Wijeramaviharaya in Wijerama, (10) SunethraDevi Piriven Viharasthanaya in Papiliyana, (11) Boudhayathanaya at Watarappala Road in Mount Lavinia, (12) Soisaramaya in Moratuwa, (13) Bodhi Bharakara Mandalaya of Kalutara, (14) Malibenaramaya, (15) Wajiraramaya in Bambalapitiya, (16) Mallikaramaya in Rathmalana, (17) Allenmathiniyaramaya in Polhengoda, (18) Sudarsanaramaya in Baththaramulla, (19) Wijayasundararamaya in Kesbawa, (20) Kindelpitiye Pansala, (21) Dharmayathanaya in Maharagama, (22) Wapikaramaya in Maharagama (23) Bellanwila rajamahaviharaya in Bellanwila, (24) Kethumathiviharaya and (25) Abayaramaya. These Buddhist

temples and related institutions and some other similar institutions have been conducting hundreds of developmental programs while providing spaces for the operation of such tasks. As the magnitude of the services offered by these institutions is concerned this research paper is not capable of reporting all the services in detail by the name of each institution and only a summery of the institutional contributions to the sustainable development is taken into account for making the important aspects evident.

5. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The findings revealed interesting ways and means of transforming sacred religious properties which have been offered by people for the exclusive use of Mahasangha as Sangika properties, into co-operative use for the benefit of both the Mahasangha and lay people with and without limitations. Offering of temple lands for developmental purposes such as establishment of educational institutions, welfare, social service, health, medical, community development, cultural, sports, vocational training, industrial and commercial centers, construction of building structures making spaces available for various purposes of society, operation of educational and social welfare institutions, provisions of scholarships and financial grants, facilitation of pilgrimages and housing programs were evident at different level. In addition to the religious properties and funds offered for the exclusive use of Mahasangha, an interest in finding sponsorships for such welfare and developmental purposes was also evident from the research.

6. EDUCATIONAL CENTERS IN BUDDHIST INSTITUTIONAL PREMISES

Use of Buddhist institutional facilities for the education of monks and lay people remains a historical practice in Sri Lanka. Before the introduction of western system of education in the colonial period, Buddhist schools known as pirivena were the only institutions of education in the country. Buddhist monks and lay people learned not only Buddhism and Buddhist cultural practices at temple schools but other subjects which were useful for various functions of the society. This historical heritage of educating people at temple premises has evolved in different directions

with the institutionalization of western educational system in Sri Lanka making some levels of education compulsory for the proper socialization of children. By today free education from grade one to university education is provided by the government at nearly ten thousand public schools and fifteen national universities respectively. This modern educational system not only educates the nation but also provides technically qualified people with a means of social mobility from lower poor classes to middle and upper social classes. At the same time, educational qualifications function as sources of prestige and social statuses in the Sri Lankan social context. This particular social change has given rise to a great competition for school education as well as higher education in the contemporary society. As a result, there developed a lucrative market for fee levying private sector tuition classes in the urban centers including the cities in the Western province. Lack of private sector infrastructure facilities and higher rent of available facilities turned private tuition teachers to hire buildings of temples at reasonable prices in Colombo and other urban centers. Soon considerable number of temples came to function as centers of fee levying education conducted by qualified teachers generating a new and lucrative source of income for the temples for raising funds for the development and maintenance of temples and other social welfare services conducted by those temples. This particular transformation of Buddhist educational service makes a great contribution to the responsible use of religious properties for the well-being of younger generations by facilitating their competition for educational qualifications in a society where poor people have no other option than higher education for climbing the social ladder. This expansion of educational infrastructure to Buddhist institutional infrastructures has solved the problem of space for meeting the increasing demand for enhancing the educational level of maximum number of people in the country. It is in this way secular use of Buddhist religious properties contribute to the sustainable development of the nation.

7. VOCATIONAL TRAINING CENTERS IN BUDDHIST INSTITUTIONAL PREMISES

Vocational training has been identified as an indispensable need

of Sri Lankan youth in all the examinations of causal factors that had been conducive to the youth unrest and consequent Sinhalese youth revolts in 1971, in 1988 and 1989, and Tamil youth military conflicts protracted for nearly three decades since 1978. According to the recommendations of those inquiries vocational training must be available for all the young people in the country in order to facilitate their early employment and becoming productive citizens. Even though vocational training for youth is an important component of sustainable development the state sector has not been able to address it in full scale. It is in response to this national issue of youth unemployment that some Buddhist temples have come forward to give their hands to the youth for a vocational training. Those Buddhist temples seemed to have embarked another step further to the mere knowledge-oriented education by opening centers of various vocational training for the youth of all communities irrespective of their race and creed. Addressing such a national need using religious institutional properties stands for another means of responsible consumption of resources belong to the Buddhist temples. This research study clearly reveals the magnitude of the Buddhist institutional contribution to the enhancement of employability of youth in Sri Lanka corroborating a fact that the Buddhist temples are capable of assuring the sustainable development of the country.

According to the research findings the vocational training courses offered in Buddhist institutional premises range from carpentry to development of soft wares for various purposes of modern information society. The most popular Buddhist institution of vocational training is located in the center of Colombo offers fifty training courses in all the fields of employment in Sri Lanka and abroad. More than 50 principle trainers work as instructors for over three thousand trainees hailing from different parts of the country. This institution alone has been functioning for nearly four decades since 1979. Originally it offered only two training courses in 1979 with the objective of developing employability skills of young people and in the course of the period of four decades it has trained thousands of youth and employed them in various capacities. As was revealed in the research, this Buddhist institution has expanded its service to the other regions of the country by opening 30 vocational

training centers in areas such as Pannipitaya, Katharagama, Mathara, Kandy, Tangalla, Ibbagamuwa, Maduwanwala and some other locations. Learning from this prominent institution of vocational training, other temples also have made various successful attempts of providing vocational training to the employable generations. It is interesting to note that all the initial efforts of providing the youth with employability skills have been made transforming the religious properties traditionally perceived as sacred properties allocated for the exclusive use of *Maha Sangha* as *Sangika* properties into resources available for the use of lay people of Buddhist and other communities. It is in that way the responsible consumption of Buddhist religious properties has been established addressing a national need of sustainable development and peaceful social order of society.

Success of such developmental efforts of Buddhist temples seemed to have brought about by the traditional religious authority of Buddhist monks, wide spread social capital of the incumbent monks of temples, patronage of Buddhist and other secular societies, organizations, companies, state sector institution, local and international donations, legal and bureaucratic assistance, community recognition and the assistance of former trainees who are in good capacities and rich in wealth.

8. HEALTH AND MEDICAL SERVICE CENTERS IN BUDDHIST INSTITUTIONAL PREMISES

Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka have a historical reputation for rendering variety of health and medical services for the well-being of people of all the races in loving kindness to all. There are Buddhist monks well known for traditional folk medical practices and Ayurvedic medical practices in different parts of the country. This particular health and healing services have transformed some immovable properties of temples into health and medical centers. Accordingly, it is a well-recognized practice of Sri Lankan Buddhist temples to utilize religious premises for conducting health and medical services by both monks and lay physicians. As was evident from the research, temple based health and medical centers serve a large number of patients hailing from poor classes. Even though health and medical services are provided free of charge as a national

policy, the capacity of health centers and medical hospitals and treatment center is yet to be enhanced and the temple base health and medical centers cater to the needs of patients who find it difficult to wait for a long period of time for enjoying the services of formal medical institutions. As a responsible use of religious properties for the benefit of patients and their poor families this practice seemed to have made an immense contribution to the sustainable development. Various regular and periodical health and medical services such as eye clinics, dental clinics, some medical checkups for poor people, health clinics for pregnant mothers, immunization programs for infants and children, health care awareness programs, distribution of food, medical aid and health information are carried out at temple premises. Infrastructure facilities of Buddhist religious institutes solve the problem of finding good and accessible locations for delivering public health and some important medical treatments and counseling programs. Even health and medical donations are also distributed at the centers established in temple premises. Some temples have established health care centers for elderly and differently able people taking the responsibility of looking after them. A center for elderly Buddhist monks was also observed in Horana in kalutara district where Buddhist monks and lay people take care of very old monks hailing from different regions in the country.

9. COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL WELFARE CENTERS IN BUDDHIST INSTITUTIONAL PREMISES

Community development centers are found in almost all the Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka and the temples observed for this research are not different. They had allocated buildings for office facilities of various community development societies and also for regular meetings of those societies without any formal charge. The chief incumbent or one of leading monks also work as advisers of some of those societies. As the significance of community development in the sustainable development of the country is considered, the role played by the Buddhist temples providing infrastructure facilities for them need to be appreciated with real understanding of the poor infrastructure of communities. Apart from the lack of such facilities, temple premises are specially

selected as centers where people can gather irrespective of personal disparities. Provision of Buddhist institutional infrastructure facilities for community development societies can be considered an important means of responsible use and consumption of Buddhist religious properties that enable the nation to achieve sustainable development goals.

One important aspect of sustainable development is the empowerment of women who have been historically marginalized and subordinated to the male dominance. In the case of Sri Lanka, Buddhist temples have played a vital role providing women with a forum to gather and discuss their issues and solutions. A number of women's societies operate from temple centers and enjoy the blessing of monks in empowering members. Compared to the men, women showed enthusiastic participation in all the religious functions conducted in the temples and that commitment of women seemed to be a visible sign of their empowerment. Organization of religious functions and other temple based secular functions, active participation in fund raising tasks of their societies, taking leadership in common activities, organization of social welfare activities, and active involvement in assisting people affected by natural disasters were clearly evident from the women empowered by the temple-based centers of community development. Empowerment of women in a male dominant society remains a big challenge of women's societies and they seemed to have overcome that challenge owing to the patronage of the temple. As the communities fully recognize the traditional authority of the Buddhist monks, men have to support the empowerment programs conducted at the temple premises.

The Buddhist temples under consideration make an immense contribution to sustainable development of the country by rendering variety of social welfare services for the refugees of disasters, refugees displaced by conflicts, differently able people, elderly people, orphans, drug addicts, patients of chronic illnesses, children displaced by broken families and victims of serious crimes against person and properties. Those categories of clients were found in hundreds in the Buddhist temples based social welfare centers enjoying the services regularly offered for the well-being of them while supporting the institutions in different capacities

depending on their personalities. Provision of the lands and physical structures for such welfare services and organization and operation of those centers at a huge cost seemed to have amounted to a great national contribution in a social environment where the similar services of the state sector institutions are not sufficient in catering to the such needs of people. Even in quality wise the welfare services offered by the temple-based welfare centers remain better than that of public facilities as revealed by the service recipients who have the experience of enjoying the services of both the state and the Buddhist temple. All the children in the welfare center in the age of having school education were observed schooling in public schools in the vicinity of those welfare centers and this facilitation of school education and the vocational education and university education after completion of it can be appreciated as a great contribution to the achievement of the educational goal of sustainable development by the Buddhist temples that commit their resources for the well-being of helpless children in the country.

In the case of able-bodied members of the community who regularly visit their temples the welfare and developmental centers conduct programs for the physical and spiritual development of people which seemed much more attractive to the participants specially in the management of psychological stress and tension of them. In particular, the Buddhist meditation which has been traditionally directed towards spiritual well-being of devotees seemed to have been extended beyond that spiritual boundaries to address current issues of physical health and medication of illnesses and psychological well-being of participants in meditation programs. This positive change of the horizons of Buddhist meditation and the new perception of the significance of it for the mental and physical well-being of all generations from children to elderly people has increased the frequency of the use of Buddhist institutional premises for the benefit of the lay devotees in adjacent communities as was observed in the research study. In some temples under consideration in this research, there are Yoga centers and Yoga programs conducted by trained yoga teachers under the patronage of chief incumbents of those Buddhist temples. Even though Yoga is familiar to Hindu community and some others in Sri Lanka, Buddhist people had taken it for granted as a practice

for the enhancement of mental and physical well-being until recent decades when leading Buddhist temples recognized it and offered temple facilities for leaning and training of Yoga without and adverse impact on the Buddhist identity based on meditation with its Buddhist interpretation and perception intact.

10. INDUSTRIAL VENTURES AND COMMERCIAL FACILITIES IN BUDDHIST INSTITUTIONAL PREMISES

Use of lands and infrastructure facilities of temple premises for various industrial purposes was also found in some of the temples observed in the research study. In urban areas in Colombo and other cities special facilities remain expensive due to scarcity of lands with commercial and industrial value in the current market economy. According to the research findings some parts of temple premises are used for the construction of cement blocks as building material, repairs of vehicles, bicycles, industrial machines, computers, watches, electronic and other domestic equipment, production of shoes, hand bags, table and kitchen wares, furniture and small scale production of various goods and these industries are predominantly carried out by people hailing from low-income families having close relationships with the residing monks of those temples. Even though some of such producers have kinship relationships with incumbent monks of the temple they make periodical payment to the temple for hiring the temple lands and structures for their industrial purposes. While creating sources of income for the temples and their various social welfare and developmental activities, Buddhist temples facilitate the productive economic functioning of low-income families in the urban social contexts where there is a market for such industries.

Making less productive community members productive citizens through the supply of temple lands and structure, which were originally destined for the exclusive use of the order of Buddhist monks, the Maha Sangha, can be identified as an important contribution to the sustainable development and responsible use of productive temple properties. The economic significance of this contribution of Buddhist temples should be comprehended in terms of the expensive market value of the geographical locations of properties belong to the Buddhist temples. In case the Buddhist

temples have a rigid adherence to the religious norms of using *Sangika properties*, that is offered for the exclusive use of Buddhist *Maha Sangha*, those conducting industrial production of goods may have no access to the urban market. But the positive change of such rigid religious norms of consuming and using temple properties has made the temples much more productive institutions that facilitate the productive participation of low-income families in the modern urban market system while preserving the traditional religious identity of Buddhist temples. As was evident in the research there are social criticisms against the secular industrial and commercial use of temple properties but the economic benefits of such use of temple properties for both of temples and low-incomed families seemed to have undermined them.

Related to the use of temple properties for industrial production is the commercial ventures found in temples lands and buildings located in urban areas. According to the research findings not only the people of low-income stratum of society but also middle class and upper-class members make use of temple properties for conducting businesses of various types such as branches of banks and financial institutions, companies, printing industries, press, mass media, sales centers, stores, parking facilities, pharmacies, private clinics and channeling centers. They have hired those properties with and without legal deeds of lease for a particular period of time. Such commercial uses of temple properties seemed to have made them much productive for the country while having special benefits for both the temples and the entrepreneurs. This transformation of less-productive lands and infrastructures of Buddhist temples into productive at various levels assure the availability of productive resources required for the sustainable development.

11. ACCOMMODATION FACILITIES IN BUDDHIST INSTITUTIONAL PREMISES

Buddhist temples perform a historical social function of providing accommodation facilities for travelers, pilgrims, tourists, temporary visitors, students, employees, patients, venders, beggars and clergies travelling from place to place. By Buddhist tradition the temples are offered for the exclusive use of all present and future order of monks and they are open for monks to have

accommodation on their tours. However, lay people also have developed a cultural tradition of finding accommodation facilities free of charge in temple premises with the patronage of residing chief incumbent monks of the temple and it has become a common practice to spend the nights when ever such a requirement arises for those on religious or secular tours. Even today, some urban temples abide by this tradition under strict rules and conations that prevent the abuse of temple accommodation service for committing crimes and indulging in vice. This traditional practice apart, as was observed in the research, temples makes a considerable contribution to the responsible consumption of resources and assurance of sustainable development thereby, by catering to the low-cost accommodation facilities temporary and regular users in the urban social context. This contribution is having multiple positive social impacts as various categories of above-mentioned people find low-cost or free accommodation for various purposes. Temple based accommodation seemed facilitating school and higher education of hundreds of poor students coming from remote areas to urban schools and colleges. Accordingly, it is a great social function that facilitates the education of children affected by the drastic inequality of the distribution of income and the consequent marginalization and alienation from the access to development opportunities in the modern capitalist social system. Addressing the issues of marginalized and socially alienated people remains a great challenge of sustainable development and proper recognition of this social function of Buddhist temples may help the nation to face it successfully.

12. CONCLUSION

As the principle of responsible consumption for the sustainable development is concerned, this research study scientifically corroborates the fact that even religious properties offered for the exclusive use of Buddhist monks can be transformed into properties of public use through the active involvement of Buddhist institutions in the social welfare and development activities. Sri Lankan Buddhist institutions are having a great potentiality of contributing to the sustainable development of the country. As is well evident from the use of temple properties facilitate number

of social functions such as the education. Vocational training, industrial production and commercial activities, community development, social welfare, accommodation that all together enhances the quality of life and well-being of the people. Therefore, it is concluded that the temples in Sri Lanka make an immense contribution to the sustainable development of the country filling various gaps left by the main process of development and addressing issues from a Buddhist perspective and making use of properties offered for the use of Monks. The national benefits of the use of Buddhist temple properties are enjoyed by the members of various categories of people suffering from myriads of problems and want of resources and access to them.

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