

SECULARISING BUDDHISM: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF ROADSIDE BUDDHIST SHRINE WORSHIPING IN THE CITY OF COLOMBO

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Anton Piyarathne has been working at Open University of Sri Lanka since 2001; he has been Professor in Anthropology and Sociology in the Department of Social Studies since 2019. He served as the Sri Lanka Chair in the South Asia Institute of the Heidelberg University, Germany in the summer semester, from April to end of September, 2018. He earned his PhD in Anthropology from Macquarie University, Sydney in 2014. Professor Anton Piyarathne has recently published a book titled "Constructing Common-grounds: Everyday Lifeworlds Beyond Politicised Ethnicities in Sri Lanka" (2018) which explains the everyday strategies of negotiating politicised ethnicities and constructing social spaces in which members of conflicting ethnonational backgrounds can collaborate. He has also published other books: one explains the changing livelihood patterns among the plantation youth (2005) and the other is on how the housing intervention can alter the stigmatised social identity of the marginalised Tamil community which lives in tea and rubber plantations in Sri Lanka (2008). Some of his key research interests are identity construction and negotiations, ethnicity, nationalism, democracy, social change and everyday social lifeworld, rituals and religion, pilgrimage, religious movements, subjectivity, inter-subjectivity and objectivity, and existential social realities.

ABSTRACT

The construction of roadside shrine rooms in Colombo, Sri Lanka has been a recent phenomenon, a trend which started after the 1970s. These roadside shrines are constructed and maintained by Buddhists, Catholics and Hindus and are a testimony to the increase of religious influence on the everyday social lives of people. Against this backdrop, an ethnographic research was conducted in 2009 and 2019 by the author aiming to explain why and how city folk construct roadside shrines in Colombo and worship at these shrines, and also to identify alternative and emerging religious practices. The paper based on the ethnographic data collected in relation to the Buddhist shrines suggests that roadside shrine worshipping has a lot of functions for the everyday social life which is identified as secularising Buddhism in the sense of Durkheim's definition. This paper is based on a functionalist approach to discuss those urban religious practices which play a very significant role in explaining how people in the city negotiate their goals, the aspirations of their lives and the means to achieve them. In general, most people visit these shrines to obtain the blessings of the Buddhist pantheon and cosmology to minimize vulnerabilities and get the maximum benefit from the liberal economic trends and globalisation patterns. Moreover, these mini-shrines which give easy and quick access to a people friendly religious place pay more attention to this worldly life than that of considering other worldly benefits, which seems to be the priority of the urban dwellers.

Keywords: urban religious beliefs and practices, roadside shrines, urbanisation, Sinhala Buddhism, secularism, Colombo

INTRODUCTION

Anyone who travels around Sri Lanka in general would surely observe the increasing number of small Buddhist, Catholic and Hindu shrines in public places along the main roads, junctions, close to railway stations, parks, hospitals, schools, government offices and various other places. The city of Colombo is no exception to this trend of constructing mini-shrines affiliated with various religious beliefs. These mini-shrines consist of idols of the Lord Buddha, Gods or statues of Saints of the Catholics. While observing these shrine rooms in 2009 some of the questions that arose in the author's mind were: Do these shrines exist in isolation? Why do people construct and maintain roadside shrines? Why do they appear so? What are the benefits people get out of them? Who are the people behind these shrines? And what is the process of shrine development? These questions were very useful in order to understand the religious behaviour of the city folk and the socio-cultural and economic conditions. Based on this background the current research was conducted by the author aiming to explain why and how city folk construct and worship roadside shrines in Colombo, and also to identify the alternative and emerging religious practices. The ethnographic data collection happened in the year of 2009 and exactly 10 years later in 2019. Initially, basic socio-economic data were collected from the respondents via a small questionnaire. Following that, in-depth interviews with individuals and group discussions were conducted to get more details on the nature of the worship pattern and the reasons for worshipping at roadside shrines. Moreover, the research team took part in the various community activities and religious activities organised by the respective committees to obtain more participatory analysis of the processes. In addition, the research team members observed the way in which various parties take part in the rituals at the roadside shrines in order to grasp worshipping patterns, nature of the devotees etc. The detailed interviews and narratives were analysed which enabled for common themes to be collected to describe the religious behaviour of the devotees at the small shrine rooms. Mostly the same shrine rooms were visited and observed on both occasions.

This paper concentrates on why and how city folk construct roadside shrines in Colombo and worship at these shrines, and also identify alternative and emerging religious practices. The paper

begins with a brief introduction to the multicultural nature of Colombo. The next section gives a description of mini-shrines that facilitate anyone to grasp the urban religious traditions. The following section is linked to the critical discussion on the role of Bō trees in the development process of mini-shrines. Then the paper pays attention to the theoretical background connected to the city, religion, and human struggles in the city. Finally, the paper shows why and how people worship these mini-shrines from the vantage of a theoretical point of view of functionalists.

MULTI-CULTURAL NATURE OF COLOMBO

The city of Colombo, identified as කොළඹ [Kolamba] in Sinhala (hereafter S:), and கொழும்பு [Kolumbu] in Tamil (hereafter T:), has a long colonial heritage and has been the home of an average of one million people composed of numerous ethnic, religious, cultural and social groups. The Colombo Municipal Council (CMC hereafter) spread on 37.5 square kilometres and composed of 35 Grama Niladhari (hereafter GN) divisions falling under the Thimbirigasyaya Divisional Secretariat office (hereafter DS office) and 20 GN divisions belonging to the Colombo DS office, is home to 561,314 persons representing diverse ethnoreligious backgrounds according to the “Census of Population and Housing 2012 – Final Report.” Moreover, the city of Colombo receives more than 500,000 daily commuters with diverse ethnoreligious backgrounds. Colombo is home to a multi-religious group of people. According to a census done in 2012, 1,632,225 (70.2%) Buddhists, 186,454 (8.0%) Hindus, 274,087 (11.8%) Muslims, 162,314 (7.0%) Roman Catholics, 66,994 (2.9%) Christians and 2,275 (0.1%) other religious followers live in the Colombo district. As reported in the official website of the CMC, it has an annual budget of Rs. 16.9 billion with 106,068 of residential properties, 35,604 of commercial properties and 10,158 of government properties included in the 155,501 of total number of properties. The Colombo city dwellers mainly use Tamil and Sinhala in everyday communication. English is also an official language of the country. Sri Lankans are not always confined to one religion and are mostly practitioners of religious syncretism. They tend to worship or visit religious sites of other religions to seek support from the cosmological forces of those religions depending on the demands of the circumstances and the situations. For example, most of the Buddhists visit Hindu kovils [T: “koils” or temples] invoking the blessings of those gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. The

St. Anthony's Church in Kochchikade, Colombo, one of the three churches which was a target of a well-coordinated attack launched by the so-called Islamic State on Easter Sunday in 2019, is a place of worship visited by Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus and other religious believers considering the Saint's popularity for fulfilling the desires of devotees to achieve prosperity and wellbeing. Compared with the census done in 2001 an increase of non-Buddhist religious groups can be observed. Many reasons have contributed to create Colombo as the most crowded city. Among those reasons, the nearly three-decade long war, economic pressure of the estate sector and rural areas, education, and economic prosperity of the Colombo city compared to similar areas in the peripheries can be considered as very important factors. This demographic change raises the question – "Is what we observe religious pluralism or is it something else?".

CHARACTERISTICS OF MINI-SHRINES

Even though these shrines are called mini-shrines, they have their own unique sizes. Some of these shrines are very small; for example, it can be a concrete pillar which is nearly 3-6 feet high on which a Buddha statue is kept in a small box made from glass which is 2x2 feet in size. Examples of the largest shrines are those located in Pettah (Colombo Fort), Punchi Borella, Narahenpita and Borella junctions. Furthermore, most of these small shrines are constructed overnight which appears to be a very common phenomenon. The rationale behind this behaviour was that once the shrines are constructed, no officials of the respective administration bodies such as the Road Development Authority, Urban Development Authority or some other body would attempt to remove them as it was considered a sinful activity by the society. Moreover, attempts to remove them will lead to community agitations despite the legality of their construction. This was well evident in the effort of the government to remove the Punchi Borella shrine during the tenure of President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga. The study observed a sample of 16 shrines, of which 10 shrines were built after the year 2001. One situated opposite a famous public school was constructed in 1998. The other three were constructed between 1980 and 1983. Among those shrines, the Pettah, Punchi Borella and Narahenpita are the oldest and have a long history. The shrine in Pettah had successfully started alms giving shed [S: Dansala] in 1958, which means it has a long history. Considering the socio-economic changes that took place during this period, it can be speculated that the

increase in shrine construction is linked in some way to these changes. These shrines show attempts of using new technology such as architecture, lighting system and sound systems which vary from one shrine to another as mentioned by Berkwitz (2003, 70); the impact of new technology shaping religious practices in a much wider sense.

Development of these shrines can be considered as a process. They are established by various people in different epochs based on diverse reasons. It appeared that the new shrines and old shrines are developed in two contexts. The new ones are constructed as community work of three-wheel associations. It is a common phenomenon that the three-wheel drivers have established their vehicle parking places [S: "Park Eka"] by the side of the main roads as well as almost all the junctions in the city of Colombo as well as in faraway places. On the one hand, the construction of mini-shrines closer to three-wheel parks or the sponsorship of three-wheel drivers in establishing shrines can be interpreted as a peaceful attempt of securing their business space or a way of rationalising their existence in public places. Their construction is considered as part of their civic activities and community engagements. Most of the shrines were built as a collective effort with the help of many other people.

Most of the Buddhist shrines were constructed through contributions from the newly developed bourgeoisie of the city of Colombo. The study of the development of these shrines will be useful in analysing the social evolution and change of the city of Colombo. The old ones located in Narahenpita, Borella, Punchi Borella, and Rajagiriya could be linked with the Buddhist revival movement of the country. As a part of the Buddhist revival movement led by Migettuwatte Gunananada Thero, Bō-trees were planted in the city of Colombo in defiance against the support of imperialists who tried to promote Christianity in Sri Lanka. Consequently, shrines have been developed by various individuals in these sites with the support of priests and politicians. There was also support from the emerging bourgeoisie for the improvement of these older shrines. However, the shrines developed recently have more support from the petty-bourgeoisies class of the city such as three-wheel service providers. Also, the general public of the area have extended their support for the development of these shrines. The administration of the old shrines has passed from one group to another over a period of time.

The small shrines developed recently are mainly an initiation of the petty bourgeoisies of the city; especially the three-wheel drivers of the areas. As a result of the open economy, the taxi service was developed in the city of Colombo as a response to the poor public transport system. Under this, the three-wheel vehicles which were

mainly bought from India were used to provide transport to the people in the city. The authorities have allocated certain parts of the city as three-wheel parks; places where three-wheels are parked awaiting customers. Some of these drivers or the three-wheel owners are from the locality or else they are outsiders who have come to work in the area for quite a long time period. In the process of interaction most of these three-wheel drivers have formed some associations with standard positions such as president, secretary, treasurer, etc. They have also developed an acceptable mechanism to await their turn as well. Some of these three-wheel associations have collected 10 rupees from a three-wheeler per day as membership fee for the development of the association. According to the study, eight mini shrines out of sixteen have been constructed under the leadership of the three-wheel drivers associations and four of them are maintained by the three-wheel drivers associations.

ROLE OF BŌ TREES IN THE PROCESS OF SHRINE DEVELOPMENT

Some shrines have been developed purely because of a Bō tree which was already there. This situation is true for more than six such worshiping places included in the study sample. Traditionally, Buddhists and Hindus tend to worship Bō trees. There are three important objects Buddhists worship in a temple; Buddha statues, Pāgoda (Dāgoba) and Bō tree. The Buddhists identify the Bō Tree as “Bōdhēen Wahansē” (S:). There are two reasons for Buddhists to worship Bō trees. The first reason is that the Buddha achieved enlightenment under its shade. Following this, the Lord Buddha himself had shown respect to the Bō tree which sheltered him to achieve enlightenment by performing the “Animisa Lochana Pūjawa.” The second reason is that the Buddha recommended Ananda thero to plant a Bō sapling in the Devuram Vehera¹ temple premises for the benefit of the devotees visiting the temple in the absence of the Buddha because Ananada thero had observed that the devotees who visit Devuram Vehera in order to listen to the preaching of the Buddha go back with a great frustration in his absence in the temple. “Bōdhi Pūjā” ritual is a long tradition among the Buddhists. By performing “Bōdhi Pūjā”, they expect blessings of “Bōdhēen Wa-

¹ One of the ancient temples where Buddha resided in India.

hansē” to improve their secular life. For example, they may expect the blessings of “Bōdhēēn Wahansē” to cure their patients, for comfortable baby delivery, to pass examinations, to get a good job, to get rid of evil spirits and to win court cases, etc. During “Bōdhi Pūjā”, the devotees wash the roots of “Bōdhēēn Wahansē” with fragrant water or milk, garland the Bō tree, hang flags on the branches of the tree, wrap a cassock around the trunk of the tree, light oil lamps, and offer flowers. This has been a well-established tradition among not only the urban Buddhists irrespective of their social status as Seneviratne (1980) highlighted but also the rural. When we trace back the history of “Bōdhi Pūjā”, we find that King Ashōka had started it when he ruled India. Furthermore, worshiping large trees located by the side of roads has been a practice for many years. Perhaps it is this practice that has influenced the developing of shrines centred to Bō trees as a part of indigenisation of Buddhism brought to Sri Lanka from India. Some of the shrines are newly established and even in most of these newly established places Bō trees are planted.

CITY, RELIGION, AND HUMAN STRUGGLE

The study shows that the city folks show a great deal of interest in living in an increasing religious space in the city of Colombo in the backdrop of developed cities in the western world where a city is a secular space which is determined by well planned, centrally monitored systems such as basic infrastructure maintenance to more complex financial activities. The Colombo city dwellers are competing to collect resources to improve their material life and they take a lot of risks and have very high vulnerability, since there is a lack of systems with high predictability. Mallikarachchi (1998) who studied the everyday religious rituals performed by the Sinhala-Buddhist traders in the city of Kandy (a city in the hill-country Sri Lanka) highlights the close link between religious and economic activities and illustrates symbiosis between trading and religious rituals. The nature of the country in general is shaped by the mismatch between the aspirations or desires and the means compared with the systematically developed countries which make most of the people vulnerable. With the education system, media, globalisation and the fact of living at the gate to the globe, the people living in Colombo have a lot of aspirations. However, the means are not clear. In such a context people tend to go behind *whoever* preach *whatever* from *whichever* religious groups or follow *whatever* religious practice

which has more “hāskam” irrespective of *whatever* religion they belong to at birth. This shaped the religious syncretism of Colombo. This paper discusses how Buddhists and Sinhalas use their religious practices to meet this worldly aspiration.

Religion is what we see rather than what is explained in definitions as it is a part of a lived human experience. Anthropological approach is much interested to see “how religions are actually practiced and used by real people in their real socially structured lives” (Eller 2007, 28). Religion is part of lived human existence. Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) describes two functions of religion which are sacred and profane (or secular, S: “laukika”) in his book “The Elementary Forms of Religious Life” published in 1915. According to Durkheim, religion is something highly social and this acknowledgement suggests it as a basis of social solidarity. Religion also represents collective social reality. Religion gives a meaning to people’s life which is a critical segment of the social system. It shapes the nature of social cohesion, purpose of life, social space of communication, interaction and gathering, and reaffirms social norms. Even though the above indicated Durkheim’s theory is very simple, other anthropologists starting from Radcliffe-Brown to Mary Douglas had used it in their studies on religion (Eller 2007, 148). In general, Buddhism gives much emphasis to sacred lives but increasingly in today’s urban context people tend to have more focus on secular benefits than sacred needs, which persuaded me to use it in the title. This shows the replacement of religion’s spiritual or “other worldly” concerns with “this worldly” concerns, which is known as secularization of religion (Henslin 2004, 366–380). The two aspects of sacred and profane are defined by Durkheim (1915) as “the sacred is the special, powerful, set-apart realm – the one that we dare not touch or approach carelessly, if at all. The profane is the ordinary, the mundane, the everyday realm – the one that we dwell in most of the time but that would disrespect or corrupt the sacred by contact” (Eller 2007, 21). The local researcher Desmond Mallikarachchi used these two concepts in Sri Lanka in this study on local traders in the city of Kandy, the hill capital in Sri Lanka, “The incense rite, on the other hand, directly links money with the sacred while the rite of lighting the lamp is connected with the idea of prosperity” (1998, 149). In this he suggests the association between the trading (livelihood/mundane activities) and religion or rituals (supramundane).

Obeyesekere (1970) discussed the transformation of doctrinal or theological religion considering the pressure of human needs or motives or through the operation of social, structural and economic

variables. The transformation of Theravada Buddhism to fulfil the various needs of devotees also has happened as a response to the changing needs of the people who live in the rapidly changing socio-economic context today. Max Weber has discussed the change of doctrinal Buddhism. Obeyesekere (1970) in his article "Religious Symbolism and Political Change in Ceylon," discusses the changes which occurred in Buddhism as a result of the massive social changes, especially the political changes. He mainly contextualises his discussion into the urban context. During 1956, the political power of the Christian middle class had disappeared and the power transferred to the Sinhala speaking Buddhist population. His discussion is based on the renaming of some of the Colombo roads and exhibition of some doctrinal Buddhist ethics in the roundabouts of the city of Colombo. It is considered as a result of the transition of political power into the hands of Sinhala Buddhists after 1956. Obeyesekere (1970) discussed the process of bringing Buddha into the hub of the vents due to three reasons such as: 1) to project Sri Lanka as a Buddhist nation, 2) the emergence of Buddhist monks as a political force, 3) due to psychological reasons such as to show it as a nativistic movement. Obeyesekere pointed out that the movement of Buddhist statues to the market place in the urban areas indicate the involvement of Buddhism with the rest of the world and the acquisition of political power by the Buddhists while the construction of shrines in homes indicate the nature of attitudinal change which occurred among the urban Buddhists. Finally, he concludes that the appearance of Buddhist symbols in the city indicated some changes. These changes were the spatial shift showing the entry of Buddhism into the "world"; provision of a symbol of a new order; the role shifts of the religion towards these world matters directing political and social goals; and finally, rationalisation of the religious life. The analytical framework has been developed considering the functions of the mini-shrines. Mostly the functional analysis discussed by Emile Durkheim, Bronislaw Malinowski, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, were used to describe the phenomenon of shrine construction.

The narratives collected on the shrines suggest the involvement of two groups in the city, patrons and clients, connected to the construction and maintenance of these shrine rooms. The patrons are the chief or key organisers of the activities of these shrines. They may be categorized as some societies [S: popularly known as "Sameethiya"] of the area. These "sameethiya" are connected to three-wheel associations of the junctions or the area mostly composed of the residents of the area. A significant percentage of the

key organisers are drawn from the large-scale businessmen of the town as well as small-scale entrepreneurs such as those who run small shops such as eateries and small outlets where they sell daily essentials. In addition, the residents who have been living for a long period in the area also serve as key figures that looked after, maintained, and performed rituals. These patrons are the key people who lead various activities in the shrine rooms with the support and generous contribution of the neighbours and the visitors to the respective areas. The clients or the worshippers of the shrine rooms are composed of many groups. Some of them are the residents of the neighbourhood, some are residents of various suburbs from Colombo and the others are daily visitors to the city. There are more than five hundred thousand people commuting to Colombo daily for various purposes. Among these daily commuters the state and private sector employees claim a significant portion. Most of the main offices of the state and private sectors including the various ministries, best private and public hospitals, public and private schools, airport and the harbour, and big business establishments selling large machineries as well as daily essentials to the houses are located in Colombo and people visit these places to meet their needs. Those who run small-scale businesses such as daily sweep tickets or lottery sellers and those running small shops also become the patrons of these shrines. The ordinary residents of the area too become worshippers at these shrines. However, it is the neighbours who serve as patrons who are the significant worshippers with utmost devotion. More interestingly, even people who live in other suburban areas of Colombo may specially come to the various shrine rooms considering their popularity in “hāskam” [S: miracles or miraculous power] of the Bō trees to perform “Bōdhi Pūjā” as explained above. To become a patron in these free religious spaces where there are no monks or other persons as gatekeepers, the stigmatised ethnicity or religion is immaterial as well-illustrated in the narratives.

The process of secularising or using of religion for mundane affairs of the city people, which is the main focus of this paper will be discussed with reference to three broader fields such as: 1) security or the protection, 2) wellbeing, and 3) building identity in people. These three aspects that illustrate the process of secularisation of Buddhism will be discussed separately below.

ROLE OF SMALL SHRINES TO ASSURE SECURITY OR THE PROTECTION OF PEOPLE

At this point the concept of security is considered more broadly in order to include the threats from human beings as well as the invisible evil spirits for the individuals, their family members and connected groups. Furthermore, at this point the author focuses on the evil effects a person could have as a result of planetary movements. In general, most of the shrines have Bō trees and devotees were used to performing Bōdhi Pōōjā there. People perform these rituals to get rid of their “Navagraha Dōsa”, flaws in the positioning of the planets in the horoscopes of the individuals that result in bad and malefic effects on an individual’s life. The “Navagraha Dōsa” is connected to the movements of nine planets such as the Sun, Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Rahu and Ketu. When people have “apala kālaya” [S: bad time] they themselves or the relatives perform Bōdhi Pōōjā rites to prevent the respective person becoming vulnerable to meeting with accidents, loss of livelihoods or any other harmful situations on the individual as well as any other family member due to the planetary movements. People with “apala kālaya” due to the influence of “Navagraha Dōsa” tend to perform these with the advice of the astrologer who reads their horoscopes and predicts about the evils that can harm the people and recommend possible preventive measures. They give specific poems named “Seth Kavi” [S: protective discourse poem chanting for blessings] to recite at the “Bōdhi Pōōjā” function. It was observed that people perform rituals in these shrines expecting protection for their sons, daughters and other relatives who are suffering from severe illnesses/other chronic diseases, court cases, or any other forms of threats in the society. On the other hand, people expect wellbeing as well through the same “Bōdhi Pōōjā”. Those who live in faraway places which are more than 20–30 kilometres away also visit these shrines considering its popularity to address certain problems of the people. Some of the shrines situated in Borella, Punchi Borella, Rajagiriya and Narahenpita are very popular among the devotees. The “Kapu Mahattayā” [S: lay clergyman] of the Punchi Borella shrine was very popular for reciting “Seth Kavi” in a more influential manner. These acts give protection from enemies and accidents and also cure from chronic illnesses such as cancer etc. Kusumawathie, a 55-year-old lady, one of the clients of Punchi Borella explained that most of the patients who go to the general hospital, especially to the cardiology unit, perform “Bōdhi Pōōjā” in the shrine expecting better health after medical treatment. People

from faraway places come to the Rajagiriya Bōdhiya (Bō Tree) as it is believed to have supernatural powers to heal diseases. The research team could see the small flags hung on the branches of the Bō tree to make vows expecting better health for certain family members who did “Bōdhi Pōōjā.”

It was observed that these shrines have pantheon of gods along with the Buddha statue. Leach (1962) established a relationship between Lord Buddha and Pilleyar, who is one of the gods in Hindu pantheon when discussing Sinhala-Buddhist worship of this God in the North Central Province of Sri Lanka. The Gana deiyō and his brother Aiyanar are the “feudal dependents of the Lord Buddha, and the Lord Buddha is the supreme ascetic” (Leach 1962, 83), which suggest the syncretic nature of Sinhala Buddhism. Among this pantheon of gods there are guardian deities who protect the rights of the good people from bad people and also the gods who bless people to achieve prosperity by helping them to pass examinations, find better jobs or a life partner, etc. In general, people believe that there are a lot of injustices taking place against the poor, decent people and they cannot expect justice as they have to deal with most corrupt institutions. In that context they seek justice with the help of these gods. The Punchi Borella shrine had Lord Buddha’s large statue in the centre and small statues of the pantheon of gods and goddesses placed by the side of the shrine. Among these were the Goddess Pattini, Kāli, Sriya Kanthāwa, and Saraswathie, and Gods such as Nātha, Vibhishana, Thadimunda, Kataragama, Vishnu, Gana [T: Pillayar], Saman, and Sōōniyam. Kusumawathie explained that the *Kapu Mahattayā* of Punchi Borella performs the “dewa pōōjā” [S: offerings to gods] very professionally and has the power to get the attention of the gods towards the issue of the client.

The clients of the shrines believe that it contributes to reduce road accidents, traffic jams and other criminal activities. This was highlighted in a discussion with three-wheeler drivers at Pitakōtte junction, Ananda Balika Mawatha, Narahenpita junction and the shrine constructed in front of Ananda College. According to the respondents, there was a time when a lot of road accidents had taken place in Narahenpita junction and they were reduced after constructing the shrine. There were serious accidents taking place at the junction where the shrine is constructed in front of Ananda College, Maradana which had caused many deaths but after the shrine was put up these accidents have reduced significantly.

During national crisis situations too, the Buddhists perform various rituals in temples as well as at these small shrines to bless the leaders of the country and the armed forces. During the internal war, people

have performed various rituals in the shrines at Narahenpita, Borella and Rajagiriya asking for protection for their family members who are in the battlefield as well as praying for the cure of wounded soldiers. There were banners exhibited at these shrines blessing the soldiers who were fighting against the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) in the northern and eastern areas of the country. It was observed that the organisers at the Wijerama Junction have exhibited a banner blessing the soldiers of the Sri Lankan military forces. This has shown the thought and commitment of the organisers of these shrines towards national security aspects as well.

People coming into the city as strangers just worship at these shrines or put money into the tills because of various reasons. For them this could be a way of seeking protection during their stay in the city of Colombo and safe return to their houses.

The Three-wheel Associations expect protection at most of the shrines put up by them by performing various rituals. One of the respondents at Mati Park junction said in 2009:

“As we run on three-wheels there is a high risk always. Anything can happen during our career. We worship at the shrine in the morning before starting our daily routine expecting our protection as well as the protection of the passengers. Even the Roman Catholics worship at the shrine before starting their day’s work. Who knows whether the passenger is a suicide bomber or a criminal? Even recently the police arrested a LTTE suicide member with a grenade while he was travelling in a three-wheel at Pēliyagoda.” (male, 50, urban)

Similar stories were gathered during the interviews conducted with the three-wheel drivers who parked their vehicles next to mini-shrines. Another three-wheel driver narrated his experience connected to a narrow escape from a road accident:

“Whenever we accept a hire we just pray for the security as we start the journey from this place. I met with accidents several times, but I escaped sustaining only minor injuries. I have all the reasons to believe that this shrine has protected me.” (male, 45, urban)

More similarly, the worshippers of the Catholic mini-shrines in Colombo also highlighted the significant contribution of worshiping in their shrines in reducing road accidents. According to them some of these shrines have reduced not only road accidents but also train accidents. Martin (67) and George (47), committee members of the Wattala Catholic Association who looked after the Statue of Sacred Heart (Jesus Christ) shrine in Alwis Town in Wattala mentioned that there was a drastic reduction of road accidents in the area after establishing their shrine. The statue is situated in a junction where

there is a road crossing the Colombo-Negombo main road. The mini-shrine dedicated to St. James located in Galawala junction also has similar benefits. The establishment of mini-shrine rooms dedicated to St. Anthony and Mother Mary in Borella 'B' "watta" [S: mostly urban slum and shanty communities living in Colombo are identified by this name], has reduced the number of train accidents in the area. According to Bond, a 47-year-old Tamil Catholic, they have ensured the protection of the members living in Borella 'B' "watta" from train accidents by establishing the shrine room with statues of St. Anthony and Mother Mary. Furthermore, these people believed that those who died due to train accidents became evil spirits or avatars, and that people who have seen these avatars walking along the railway track in the night have developed various psychological diseases.

CONTRIBUTION OF SHRINES IN ASSURING WELLBEING OF PEOPLE

As Berkwitz predicted, "We can also expect that the effects of economic and cultural globalization will continue to have a substantial impact upon the shape of contemporary Sri Lankan Buddhism" (Berkwitz 2003, 70). The current research shows that the existing economic pressure and global mass consumerism have changed the Buddhist religious practices. Discussion under wellbeing could be considered as personal, extended family, family friends, community and the entire people of the country. People perform "Bōdhi Pūjā" expecting improvements in the lives of children, development of their business, passing examinations, successful married life, etc. The size of the Bō trees that are grown is used as an indicator whether the shrine in general and Bō tree in particular has the power to help in various problems of the people.

It was noted that the maintenance of the shrine at Wattegedara Junction has been done by a company in the area called Orange. They colour wash the shrine once a year and renovate it. During the field visit we observed that two employees of the company in their uniforms were renovating the shrine. Perhaps it was a belief in the blessings of the gods or some other supernatural power that led the senior management of the company or the leadership of the company to continue to do this renovation every year. Kusumawathie, the 55-year-old lady who frequently visited the Punchi Borella shrine mentioned that a lot of people going to their offices or work places put some money into the till when they passed the

shrine or just worshiped expecting the best in whatever the work they were going to do. Sirisoma, a 50-year-old influential businessman said that the relatives of the resident patients at the National Hospital Colombo as well as pregnant mothers visit the Punci Borella Bōdhiya.

In general, the people who worship at these shrines believe they have a “pihitak” [S: help/care/bless] from the shrines (or from the supernatural powers believed to be hanging around the shrines) through the rituals they perform at these small shrines established in public places. Those who were interviewed at almost all the shrines have revealed that they have a “pihitak” from the shrine, but they were reluctant to reveal further. This reluctance seems to have arisen due to many reasons but in general there is a belief that the relationship with the supernatural forces should not be revealed or publicly discussed as they are unique connections. According to Sumanarathne who played a leading role in establishing the Rattanapitiya shrine, one of the persons who performed various rituals at the shrine won a lottery of one million rupees. After constructing the shrine, this person has been in charge of switching on and off the lights of the shrine continuously. People of the area believe he got this reward for the good work he did for the place.

In almost all the shrines where the three-wheel driver associations were involved, the majority of the drivers worshipped at the small shrines in the morning before they began their duty, offering flowers or lighting oil lamps or by performing some other rituals expecting their personal development, safety and protection. The members of the Mati Park shrine also perform various rituals individually. Kumara, who initiated building a small shrine at the junction of Rubberwatte Road, spoke about the blessings he had received:

“I am a father of six children. We have limited income here. I wanted to build a shrine here and I did it. After building it I was able to buy two three-wheels and I am satisfied with the income I get. I have all the reasons to believe that I am blessed by this.” (male, 40, urban)

Gunasekara, a 65-year-old lady, who has been worshipping at the Rajagiriya shrine, mentioned that her family has been blessed by this shrine. She had brought up her two sons and a daughter on her own after the death of her husband in 1986. Now one of her sons lives in Japan while the other lives in London. Her only daughter lives in Rajagiriya and serves as a United National Party (UNP) organiser in Rajagiriya. She had all the reasons to believe that she was blessed by the Bō Tree of the shrine since she started worshipping it in 1970. Furthermore, she reported that there are a lot of people

visiting the shrine every day indicating the rising popularity and the power of the shrine in Rajagiriya. She further explained the way the shrine helped her in coping with the political problems:

“We as UNP supporters happened to suffer a lot from the very beginning. There was no one to discuss or share the threats we had. We have been crying continuously then. There were situations when I had been crying for hours and hours at the Bōdhiya and praying for help from the supernatural forces to get rid of political threats and intimidations. Today most of the people who harassed us are not alive; they are punished as I had prayed a lot at the shrine.” (female, 40, urban)

According to Jeewananda, the Chairman of the Bōdhi Protection Society of Rajagiriya, people visit the shrine before accepting appointments; when submitting an application to contest in the elections; and before going for interviews, etc. He referred to a situation where a mayor of the Kōtte Municipal Council worshipped at the shrine before submitting his nominations to contest in the election. Kusumawathie explained how her expectations were fulfilled by the vow she made at the Punchi Borella shrine. Her son and daughter too were blessed:

“Earlier I used to visit this shrine everyday but now I can’t do so as I am not physically well. But whenever I come to the clinic at the General Hospital every month, I visit this shrine. I made three vows here and all have come true. My son got a job and my daughter had two babies and we were able to sell our vehicle after making vows here. Therefore, I believe we have a lot of pihita [S: blessings] from this shrine.” (female, 55, urban)

They had struggled a lot to sell their vehicle but once they had made a vow at the shrine, they were able to sell the vehicle for a good price. According to her, there were some drug addicts also who had given up their habit of using drugs once they made a vow at the shrines. She had made vows for their children to get through their examinations which came true because of the blessings received at the shrine. These first-hand experiences of the people cannot be discarded simply and it suggests the highly complex nature of the wants and needs of the people for which they seek blessings at the shrines.

When we pay our attention to the various clients visiting these shrines, we could identify several groups. Young people who came from villages to the city to work in the garment factories or in other institutions also visit them expecting protection and wellbeing. Householders in the vicinity who pass these shrines daily on their way to office or work places make a vow, put money into the tills or

just say silent prayers without stopping at these public places seeking wellbeing and protection for themselves during their stay in the city.

These mini-shrines have united the people in the area and those who perform similar activities. For example, even the Catholic three-wheel drivers at Mati Park Junction worship at the Buddhist shrine before they start their work. Almost all the three-wheel drivers whoever they are find the time to clean the shrine and light the oil lamp without waiting for someone else to perform these rituals. Sometimes the statues have been put up with the intention to create a better, peace loving, atmosphere removing evils such as drug addiction, alcoholism, etc. Therefore, the organisers wanted to put up statues everywhere expecting to change the young people who are prone to engage in socially unaccepted behaviours.

With regard to the wellbeing of the community we could discuss many programmes done at the Buddhist shrines from time to time. Some of the common activities organised by the groups who look after the shrines are, conducting “dansal” [S: alms giving sheds] during Wesak² and Poson³ festivals, arranging pandals and decorating the shrine rooms and the vicinity with colour bulbs and flags during the Buddhist festivals, and organising “bana” [S: Lord Buddha’s doctrine] preaching (Dhamma sermon) by a monk every Poya day (monthly full moon holiday when Buddhists engage in religious activities). Shrines which have been there for a longer period have better financial capacity to do community work as a lot of money has been collected from devotees who attended the shrines for various reasons. Sirisoma, a member of the committee looking after the Punchi Borella statue revealed that during his time in 2009 as a committee member they started a programme to give 500/- rupees per month to 20 students from poor families as well as giving the same amount to another 20 elderly persons out of the money collected in the till of the shrine. People around the Wanatha shrine got together to organise blood donation camps, particularly when there was a national need for blood for soldiers injured in the battlefield and when the hospitals had to be kept ready to treat civil casualties during terrorist attacks in various forms including bomb explosions in 2009.

² *Wesak* is a religious festival of Buddhists to celebrate the birth, the enlightenment, and the demise (*the Parinibbana*) of the Lord Buddha.

³ *Poson* is a religious festival of Buddhist to celebrate to receiving Buddhism from India to Sri Lanka by a team of priests including the venerable Mahinda Thero.

The Narahenpita shrine based Bōdhi Raja Sameethiya organise medical clinics, distribute spectacles, and conduct campaigns against alcohol consumption and smoking. Extending their service, the organisers have taken steps every year to release cows from the butchers at the slaughterhouse. These cows are handed over to the farmers of the area which improve the income of some of these families. The organisers conduct various public lectures on different topics. One of the lectures conducted on "Medical Science and Buddhism" was attended by around 70 persons. They also award scholarships to the needy children who also show significant educational achievements, i.e., passing grade five scholarship examination. The Bōdhi Raja Sameethiya is trying to have a close link with the Mahabōdhi Samagama of India to improve their service. Furthermore, they distribute the Buddhist newspaper, "Sinhala Bauddhaya" [S: The Buddhist] among their members. The secretary of the association mentioned that they sponsor religious activities organised by the schools as well.

In the same way even the organising committees of the Catholic shrines and patrons too, engage in lot of social services and welfare activities. St. Anthony's society in Weluwana Road consisting of 50 members did a lot of community work while looking after the matters related to the St. Anthony's shrine. Among the community work, helping to renovate houses of the Christians with financial problems; giving help for the funerals of Christians; giving alms at the shrine; blood donation; and helping the homes for elders are very significant. Similar welfare activities were done by the organising committee of the Elakande shrine as well. The Wattala Catholic Association built the Statue of Sacred Heart (Jesus Christ) and donates school uniforms for around 200 students representing poor families at a function which is held at the shrine on February 13 every year.

SHRINE BUILDING AS PART OF THE PROCESS OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

On the whole, the entire process of shrine construction could be considered as an effort of identity construction. This identity has basically two forms: 1) personal or individual identity and 2) group or community identity (religious, ethnic, moral, etc.). First, I will explain about individual identity. In the discussion of individual identity, the people who take the leadership to construct the shrine or perform various rituals try to project themselves as "good human beings" to the outside world. They have a need to exhibit their "good

moral behaviour” to the public. This identity projection creates a social niche which is very beneficial to them. The view of a group of three-wheel drivers on such a patron who established a shrine was a testimony for such a situation. According to them, the businessman who took the initiative of constructing the shrine and its maintenance is really a liar who misuses the money collected in the till. He always dealt with the political party in power and was really a corrupt person. They found it difficult to draw a parallel between his illicit brewery selling and engagement in this sort of religious affairs. They assume that the businessman was engaging in “good” things to cover up the illicit arrack selling business and his corrupt nature.

Under the group identity there are many forms as indicated at the beginning. Most of these shrine constructions can be considered as a part of establishing or confirming the religious identity of the area. This was evident at the very early stages of the establishment of the Punchi Borella and Borella shrines too. There was a religious revival led by Soma Thero and the political movement for the uplift of Buddhists through the Jāthika Hela Urumaya party [S: National Heritage Party] who after the death of Soma Thero has played a major role in building the religious identity of Buddhists against the acts of religious conversions of Buddhists into Christians as well as the Muslims. Soma Thero’s arguments against the concept of god were a threat to the Christians and Muslims when he was alive, and his sudden demise created a lot of suspicions in the minds of the Buddhists of the country. This situation also has contributed to the building of Buddhist shrines in the city of Colombo as a way of establishing their identity. The organisers of the Wijerama Junction shrine have taken action to celebrate the death anniversary of Soma Thero by organising an alms’ giving to the “Sanga” [S: Buddhist monks] annually.

The effort to project the three-wheel drivers as a “good group” is also one of the aspects of this identity construction. Today people have lost trust in the three-wheel drivers as they believe that they possess unworthy qualities such as being cunning, crafty, liars and indecent in general and they are seen as risky drivers in particular. Therefore, this situation created a demand for decent drivers and people who were able to get more customers than the others. This led to the three-wheel drivers trying to project themselves as “decent human beings” who respect the human rights of others through this shrine construction.

Every year, the Narahenpita shrine based Bōdhi Raja Sameethiya organise an event to commemorate Anagarika Dharmapala, a Buddhist

revivalist who fought for the freedom of the country from the British Raj with the intention of popularising the thinking of Dharmapala. The organisers have erected a statue of Dharmapala just in front of the shrine widening the physical space belonging to the shrine. The statue was opened at a function with state sponsorship with Sarath N. Silva, then Chief Justice as the Chief Guest. The construction of the shrine could be considered as a process of establishing the country's Buddhist identity. Mallikarachchi (1998) also explained the persistence of nationalist feeling among the Sinhala-Buddhist traders in Kandy. Sirisoma, an influential businessman of the area, expressed his views as follows:

"We are a Buddhist country; it is a precious stone. There is no harm in constructing shrines in public places, but we have a responsibility to continue looking after it. We cannot get rid of it. If you want to establish a shrine, do so, but performing rituals in it must not be neglected." (male, 60, urban)

All those who acted as key persons in developing shrines in almost all the places held this view. They believed that as this is a Buddhist country, it was our duty to protect and maintain it. The organisers as well as the clients of the shrines hold the right based approach. Contrastingly, the other section of the same research on Christian, Hindu shrines suggest a slight challenge or contestation for the above supposed claim when analysing the ethnonational / ethnoreligious party-based politics. However, there is an emerging trend in establishing Christian hegemony as well by constructing shrine rooms of various Saints, the Cross and Jesus Christ in the catholic areas. Moreover, the Hindus too create mini-shrines dedicated to various gods and goddesses in the Hindu pantheon in their respective communities in Colombo.

CONCLUSION

Finally, this could be interpreted as "living the Buddhist way": an everyday struggle to live amidst the changing socio, political-economic space in the city in line with Lord Buddha's teaching while staying connected and living in a morally justifiable manner [S: dhārmika] to him/herself and to the society. In a city where people have gathered to achieve various material prospects and a comfortable life in a very competitive world which is shaped by means and achievements that are not clear, the people tend to get more benefit from their own religions. This background has created an increasing demand for living in a religious space for all religious groups in general,

while this article highlighted the shape of the struggle of Buddhists in Colombo. The discussion in this article suggested why and how Buddhist shrine worshipping witness the use of Theravada Buddhist ideology as a means to worldly benefits (secular) rather than achieving those of other worldly (profane) objectives, which is identified as secularisation of Buddhism. This seems to be an increasing pattern when comparing the ethnographic data collected in 2009 and 2019. There is no clear indication of this pattern changing in the foreseeable future. Therefore, it would be really interesting to explore more on novel religious trends, subjective experience of individuals and groups and explanations of the cosmological forces and religion and their impacts on their social life world.

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