

Exploring the Role of Buddhist Temples in Sri Lanka as Centres for Social Services by Assessing their Contributions and Addressing Challenges

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විහාරස්ථානවල කාර්යභාරය, දායකත්වය සහ අභියෝග පිළිබඳ
අධ්‍යයනයක්

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මෙම අධ්‍යයනය මගින් සමාජ සේවා මධ්‍යස්ථාන ලෙස ශ්‍රී ලංකාවේ බෞද්ධ විහාරස්ථානවල බහුවිධ භූමිකාව පිළිබඳව සොයා බැලීම, ඒවායෙහි දායකත්වය අනාවරණය කිරීම සහ මෙම වැදගත් කාර්යය ඉටු කිරීමේදී එම ආයතන මුහුණ දෙන අභියෝග සාකච්ඡා කිරීම ප්‍රමුඛ වී ඇත. ශ්‍රී ලංකාවේ බෞද්ධ විහාරස්ථාන ඓතිහාසික වශයෙන් අධ්‍යාත්මික පූජනීය ස්ථාන ලෙස පමණක් නොව විවිධ සමාජ හා ප්‍රජා මූලික ක්‍රියාකාරකම් සඳහා කේන්ද්‍රස්ථානයක් ලෙස ද ප්‍රධාන කාර්යභාරයක් ඉටු කරනු ලබයි. අධ්‍යාපනය, සෞඛ්‍ය, දරිද්‍රතාවය පිටුදැකීම, ආපදා සහන ඇතුළු සමාජ සේවා රැසක් ලබාදීමට මෙම විහාරස්ථාන මූලික වී ඇත. ශ්‍රී ලංකාවේ බෞද්ධ විහාරස්ථාන තම ප්‍රජාවගේ සුබසාධනය සඳහා කරනු ලබන දායකත්වය අවධාරණය කිරීමත්, සමාජයට එම විහාරස්ථාන මගින් සිදු කර ඇති ධනාත්මක බලපෑම් ඉස්මතු කිරීමත් මෙහිදී අධ්‍යයනය කරයි. ශ්‍රී ලංකාවේ බෞද්ධ විහාරස්ථාන සමාජ සහජීවනය ආරක්ෂා කිරීම, සංස්කෘතික සංරක්ෂණය ප්‍රවර්ධනය කිරීම සහ විවිධ ප්‍රදේශ තුළ ආර්ථික සවිබල ගැන්වීම් සඳහා පහසුකම් සැලසීමේ යාන්ත්‍රණයන් සිදුකළ අයුරු ඓතිහාසික තොරතුරු මගින් අනාවරණය වේ. කෙසේ වෙතත්, මෙම අධ්‍යයනයෙන් බෞද්ධ විහාරස්ථාන මගින් සමාජ සේවාවන් ක්‍රියාත්මක කිරීමේදී මුහුණ දෙන අභියෝග ද හඳුනා ගනී. මෙහිදී සම්පත් සීමා කිරීම්, පරිපාලන බාධක සම්බන්ධ ගැටළු සහ සංස්කෘතික සීමාවන් ඇතුළත් වේ. තවද, මෙම අධ්‍යයනය මගින් සාම්ප්‍රදායික

ආගමික ක්‍රියාකාරකම්වලින් ඔබ්බට විහාරස්ථාන සිය භූමිකාවන් පුළුල් කරන විට ඇතිවිය හැකි ගැටුම් සහ සදාචාරාත්මක කරුණු ද විමර්ශනය කරයි. ශ්‍රී ලාංකීය සන්දර්භය තුළ ආගම, සමාජ සේවා සහ ප්‍රජා සංවර්ධනය අතර ඇති සංකීර්ණ අන්තර් ක්‍රියාකාරිත්වය සමාජ යහපැවැත්ම සහ තිරසාර සංවර්ධනය පෝෂණය කිරීම සඳහා අද වන විට බෙහෙවින් අත්‍යවශ්‍ය වී තිබේ. සමාජ සේවා මධ්‍යස්ථාන ලෙස ශ්‍රී ලංකාවේ බෞද්ධ විහාරස්ථාන මුහුණ දෙන සාර්ථකත්වයන් සහ අභියෝග පිළිබඳව මෙන්ම ආගමික ආයතන සහ රාජ්‍ය ආයතන අතර සහයෝගීතාව වර්ධනය කිරීමට දායක විය හැකි ප්‍රාමාණික දැනුමක් සැපයීම මෙම පර්යේෂණය මගින් සිදුකරනු ලබයි.

යතුරු පද: බෞද්ධ විහාරස්ථාන, ප්‍රජා සේවය, ප්‍රජා සංවර්ධනය, අභියෝග

Introduction

Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka have long been regarded as more than just places of religious worship; they have served as vibrant centres for social services deeply intertwined with the fabric of the nation's society (Halverson, 1978: 221). These temples, often referred to as "viharas" or "pagodas," hold a special place in the hearts of Sri Lankans and have played a significant role in shaping the cultural, social, and economic landscape of the country. Beyond their spiritual significance, these institutions have taken on the noble task of addressing the pressing socio-economic challenges faced by their communities. The intersection of religion and social services within the context of Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka is a subject of paramount importance and scholarly interest. This exploration seeks to unravel the intricate web of contributions made by these temples to the betterment of society while also addressing the unique challenges they encounter in fulfilling this role.

Historically, Buddhist temples have been more than places of worship; they have been sanctuaries of learning,

centres of healing, and pillars of support for the marginalized and needy. These temples have provided education to the young, medical care to the sick, shelter to the homeless, and sustenance to the hungry. In times of natural disasters or crises, they have been among the first responders, offering aid and solace to affected communities. This multifaceted role has endeared these temples to the hearts of the Sri Lankan people and has earned them a reputation as beacons of compassion and community service. This study investigates how Buddhist temples and social services connect in Sri Lanka. It aims to assess the invaluable contributions made by these temples to the welfare of their communities while also shedding light on the challenges that impede their endeavors. By doing so, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of religious institutions in social development and community well-being and to provide insights that can inform policy decisions, foster collaboration, and promote harmony within Sri Lankan society. In essence, it seeks to unveil the rich tapestry of the role of Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka as centres for social services, acknowledging both their remarkable contributions and the obstacles they face in their quest to serve their communities.

Literature Review

Historical Significance of Buddhist Temples in Sri Lanka:

The historical significance of Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka is deeply rooted in the country's cultural and religious heritage, spanning over two thousand years. These temples have been central hubs for both spiritual and societal activities, playing multifaceted roles as centres of learning, culture, and community support. They have been instrumental in preserving Sri Lanka's rich cultural legacy while also serving as crucial institutions for

social services. References such as Gunawardana's exploration of the economic interests intertwined with monastic life in early historic Sri Lanka (Gunawardana, 1979) and Bechert's comparative analysis of Buddhist monks' engagement in social service further underscore the enduring importance of these temples in the socio-historical context of Sri Lanka (Bechert, 1966).

Social Services Offered by Buddhist Temples

Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka have a rich tradition of offering a wide range of social services to their communities, which includes educational initiatives, healthcare facilities, poverty alleviation programs, and disaster relief efforts. These temples have established schools, medical clinics, orphanages, and shelters, thereby making substantial contributions to the well-being of local residents. To comprehend the full extent and significance of these social services, it is crucial to consider references like Obeyesekere's examination of the impact of the Buddhist civilizing mission on Sinhala culture (Obeyesekere, G., 1966) and Tennakoon's study on the pivotal role played by Buddhist temples in providing social services in Sri Lanka (Tennakoon, H. A. D. A., 2016).

Challenges Faced by Buddhist Temples

Buddhist temples in their pursuit of social service activities encounter a set of formidable challenges, including but not limited to, financial constraints, bureaucratic obstacles, and the evolving demands of a modern society. These limitations can hinder their ability to provide effective and sustainable social services. For a deeper understanding of these challenges, it is insightful to refer to studies such as Gamage's case study on the difficulties faced by Buddhist temples in Rajagiriya, Sri Lanka (Gamage, S., 2014), and Bechert's exploration of the problems

associated with Buddhist monasteries as resources for social welfare (Bechert, H., 1992). Addressing these challenges is vital for temples to continue their valuable contributions to their communities and society at large.

The Evolving Role of Buddhist Temples in a Modern Society

In the evolving landscape of Sri Lankan society, Buddhist temples are undergoing a significant transformation to adapt to contemporary needs, resulting in a dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity. As outlined in Rev Deegalle's examination of socially engaged Buddhism in Sri Lanka (Deegalle, M., 2003) and Tambiah's comprehensive study on the Buddhist saints of the forest, this shift presents both ethical and cultural challenges (Tambiah, S. J., 1984). Temples are redefining their roles to address the multifaceted demands of modern society, balancing their traditional spiritual functions with the increasing importance of social services and engagement. Understanding this evolving role is essential for comprehending the complex interplay between Buddhism, tradition, and the evolving needs of a changing society.

Interfaith Relations and Cultural Diversity

In a religiously diverse nation such as Sri Lanka, the interactions between Buddhist temples and other religious communities play a pivotal role in shaping social dynamics. This section of the literature review investigates into the complexities of interfaith relations and the associated challenges and opportunities within the context of social services provided by temples. Referencing works like Samarasinghe's exploration of interfaith relations from a Buddhist perspective (Samarasinghe, S., 1999) and Jayawardena's examination of inter-religious encounters in Sri Lanka, (Jayawardena, K., 2010) it becomes evident that understanding and fostering positive interactions among different religious groups are essential for promoting

cultural diversity, social harmony, and the effective delivery of social services in this diverse society.

Government Policies and Collaborative Initiatives:

Government policies have played a significant role in shaping the engagement of Buddhist temples in social services within Sri Lanka. Throughout history, governments have recognized the valuable contributions of these temples, at times offering support and establishing regulations to govern their activities. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the operating context for temple-based social services, it is crucial to explore the impact of government policies and collaborative initiatives with temples. Notable references such as Wijenayake's overview (Wijenayake, W. M., 2015) of the role of government policy in developing Buddhist temples as social service centres in Sri Lanka and De Silva's study on the relationship between church and state in Ceylon from 1815 to 1915 shed light on the intricate interplay between government influence and temple-based social service efforts (De Silva, K. M., 1973).

This comprehensive literature review provides a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted role of Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka as centres for social services. It covers their historical significance, the services they offer, challenges they face, adaptation to modernity, interfaith relations, government involvement, impact assessment, ethical considerations, and future sustainability. These insights form the foundation for further research and policy considerations regarding the vital role that Buddhist temples play in fostering social well-being and community development in Sri Lanka.

Research Problem Statement

The research problem at the heart of this study is to comprehensively understand and address the intricate role of

Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka as centres for social services. This multifaceted role encompasses contributions to education, healthcare, poverty alleviation, and disaster relief, and it is deeply embedded in the country's historical and cultural context. However, the dual nature of these temples as spiritual sanctuaries and providers of social services raises significant questions and challenges, including the assessment of their precise contributions, the identification of primary obstacles and regional variations, their adaptation to changing societal dynamics while preserving traditional values, interfaith relations and government policy dynamics, ethical dilemmas in balancing roles, and strategies for ensuring sustainability and future development. By addressing these research questions, this study aims to shed light on the pivotal role played by Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka's socio-cultural landscape, recognizing both their contributions and the challenges they face in their mission to serve their communities.

Research Aims

The primary aim of this research is to assess and document the precise contributions of Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka to the social, cultural, and economic well-being of their communities. Another key aim is to identify and analyze the primary challenges and obstacles encountered by Buddhist temples in their efforts to provide social services. This research also aims to investigate how Buddhist temples have adapted to changing societal dynamics, including urbanization, globalization, and technological advancements, while simultaneously upholding traditional values and cultural preservation. It seeks to understand the strategies employed by these temples to remain relevant and effective in a modern context and also aims to examine the dynamics of interfaith relations and collaboration between Buddhist temples and other religious communities in Sri Lanka.

It seeks to understand how these interactions influence the provision of social services and foster religious and cultural harmony.

Research Methodology

The research methodology for this study adopts a qualitative research approach, grounded in practical discussions and scholarly articles. Qualitative research methods, such as interviews, focus groups, and participant observation, will be employed to gather firsthand insights from stakeholders within and outside Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka. These qualitative data collection techniques will be complemented by a comprehensive review of scholarly articles, research reports, and relevant literature, enabling the synthesis of existing knowledge and the exploration of nuanced dimensions of the research problem. Practical discussions with temple administrators, monks, beneficiaries, and representatives from other religious communities will facilitate a deeper understanding of the contributions, challenges, and adaptation strategies employed by Buddhist temples in the provision of social services.

The importance of this research

The study will provide a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted role of Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka as centres for social services. This understanding will not only enrich academic scholarship but also deepen societal appreciation of the contributions of these institutions. By shedding light on the contributions and challenges faced by Buddhist temples, the research can inform policymakers and government agencies in Sri Lanka about the role of religious institutions in social development. This knowledge can lead to more informed and effective policies for supporting and collaborating with these temples. Understanding the dynamics of interfaith relations and

collaboration between temples and other religious communities can promote religious and cultural harmony in Sri Lanka. It can encourage collaborative efforts in addressing common societal challenges. The research can highlight how Buddhist temples balance tradition with modernity, preserving cultural and religious values while providing contemporary social services. This preservation is essential in maintaining Sri Lanka's rich cultural heritage.

Discussion

Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka hold deep historical and cultural significance, with roots dating back over two millennia (Strathern, 2009: 815). Beyond serving as places of religious devotion, these temples serve as vibrant repositories of the nation's cultural and historical legacy, shaping Sri Lanka's very identity. Their role in preserving culture and history underscores their vital importance to the country. Indeed, the social service activities carried out by Buddhist temples are an expression of Buddhism's core teachings, notably the principle of alleviating suffering (Kuah, 2014: 27-42). These activities encompass education, healthcare, poverty alleviation, and disaster relief, reflecting Buddhist values and demonstrating a tangible commitment to compassion and service to humanity.

In the realm of education, Buddhist temples have historically taken a leading role by establishing and maintaining schools and educational institutions (Gamage, D.T., 2010: 389-402). This commitment to education has provided countless generations of students, particularly in rural areas where access to formal education may be limited, with opportunities to acquire knowledge and skills, contributing to the country's intellectual and social development. As well as, Buddhist temples have made significant contributions to healthcare services in Sri Lanka

(Chandradasa et al., 2019: 1471) Many temples operate clinics and hospitals, often serving as crucial healthcare providers for underserved populations, especially those in remote and disadvantaged regions. These medical facilities have played an indispensable role in improving the health and well-being of the local communities they serve, further highlighting the holistic approach to social service deeply embedded in Buddhist temple activities. Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka have been actively involved in poverty alleviation programs, extending a helping hand to impoverished individuals and families through initiatives that encompass the provision of essential resources like food, shelter, and financial assistance (Seneviratne, & Rajapaksa:113-124). Additionally, these temples play a crucial role in disaster relief efforts, serving as shelters and coordination centres during natural disasters and crises, where they organize relief activities and offer aid to affected communities.

However, despite their commendable efforts, Buddhist temples encounter several challenges, including limited financial resources, bureaucratic hurdles, and the need to adapt to changing societal dynamics such as urbanization and globalization. These challenges underline the necessity for temples to evolve and find innovative ways to continue their vital social service roles.

As well as, Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka face a range of challenges in their mission to provide social services and preserve their cultural heritage. Financial constraints often limit the scale and scope of their social service initiatives, as funding for education, healthcare, and poverty alleviation may be inadequate. Bureaucratic hurdles, including complex administrative processes and regulatory compliance, can impede the efficient operation of temple-based services (Narada, P., 2020: 6). Adapting to changing societal dynamics such as urbanization, globalization, and technological advancements

while maintaining traditional values and cultural heritage presents a significant challenge. Negotiating interfaith relations in a religiously diverse country with historical tensions can be complex, requiring delicate navigation to promote collaboration and harmony. Engaging in social services also poses ethical dilemmas for temples, as they must balance their traditional religious roles with modern-day responsibilities while upholding Buddhist principles and cultural values (Jayasinghe et al., 2009: 997-1028). Government policies and regulations can either support or hinder temple activities, depending on their nature. Understanding these contributions and challenges is crucial for recognizing the vital role played by Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka's social fabric and for addressing the complex issues they encounter in their mission to serve their communities and preserve their cultural heritage.

Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka have made significant contributions across various domains, highlighting their multifaceted role in society. In the realm of education, these temples have a long-standing history of establishing and maintaining schools, educational institutions, and libraries, thus offering access to knowledge and academic opportunities, particularly in rural areas with limited formal education infrastructure (Gamage, D.T., 2010: 389-402). This commitment to education aligns with the Buddhist principle of enlightenment through knowledge. In healthcare, many temples operate clinics, hospitals, and dispensaries, providing crucial medical services to local communities, especially in remote regions where healthcare access is limited. Collaboration with medical professionals further enhances their impact. In the context of poverty alleviation, temples actively engage in programs that offer direct assistance to impoverished individuals and families, distributing essential resources like food, clothing, and financial aid, and some even provide vocational training to empower

individuals with valuable skills. During natural disasters, temples play a pivotal role in disaster relief efforts, serving as shelters for displaced individuals, coordinating relief activities, and ensuring the distribution of critical supplies such as food, clean water, and medical assistance (Sangasumana, 2011: p.6). Their extensive networks and community ties make them effective hubs for disaster response. Additionally, Buddhist temples serve as custodians of Sri Lanka's cultural heritage, preserving ancient artifacts, manuscripts, and architectural treasures, contributing significantly to the conservation of the nation's rich cultural identity. Furthermore, temples actively promote traditional arts, music, and dance, further underscoring their role in cultural preservation and promotion.

Conclusion

The exploration of the role of Buddhist temples in Sri Lanka as centres for social services reveals a multifaceted and deeply ingrained aspect of the country's cultural and social fabric. These temples, while primarily places of religious worship, have evolved into essential hubs for addressing the welfare and well-being of their communities. The extensive literature on this topic underscores the historical significance of Buddhist temples in preserving cultural heritage and disseminating knowledge. Buddhist temples have made significant contributions to education, healthcare, poverty alleviation, disaster relief, and cultural preservation. They have been instrumental in extending access to education, providing healthcare services, alleviating poverty, and responding to crises. Their role as custodians of cultural heritage and promoters of interfaith harmony is also noteworthy. However, the challenges faced by these temples are equally prominent. Financial constraints, bureaucratic hurdles, ethical dilemmas, and the need to adapt to changing societal dynamics present complex obstacles. The effective navigation

of these challenges is critical to sustaining their social service endeavors. Ultimately, the continued exploration of this topic is vital not only for academic scholarship but also for informing policy decisions, fostering interfaith collaboration, and promoting cultural preservation and social harmony within Sri Lankan society.

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