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A Study on Religious Interaction among the Sinhala-Buddhists and the Muslims in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT. In Sri Lanka, the religions such as Islam, Hinduism, Christianity are practicing, although it is a predominantly Buddhist country. However, since recent past years onward, it has been proliferated the various misinterpretations about the religions among the societies by a few nationalist groups in Sri Lanka. This effort poses a suspicious situation on the religious interaction among the Sinhala-Buddhists and the Muslims, and the same situation could be observable even in Moneragala district as well. On the above backdrop, the main objective of this paper is to examine the religious interaction through measuring the religious understanding between the Sinhala-Buddhists and the Muslims in Moneragala, one of the 25 administrative districts in Sri Lanka. There are followers of two major religions, Buddhism and Islam, forming two religious communities living side by side in a few traditional villages namely Bakinigahawela, Godigamuwa, Kanulwela and Medagama which are located in Moneragala district. This is an ethno-religious study of the religious interaction among the Sinhala-Buddhists and the Muslims in said location, and the religious understanding has been selected as an indicator in order to measure the religious interaction among them. This was measured through a questionnaire survey on a total of one hundred respondents drawn from the Sinhala-Buddhists and the Muslims in selected villages. The samples together with the above mentioned indicator proved that the negative religious interaction among the Sinhala-Buddhists and the Muslims in Moneragala district, and also the lack of understanding of other religious teachings was the determinant factor to hinder their positive religious interaction.

1. INTRODUCTION

Moneragala is one of the 25 administrative districts of Sri Lanka. This district was also called as Wellassa by its ancient residents. It is located in the Uva Province in the South Eastern region of Sri Lanka. It has a terrain extension of 5639 sq KM. The geographical land space is 2nd to the largest district in Sri Lanka next to Anuradapura. In 2012 the total population was 451,058 in Moneragala. Of these people there are 97.7% rural and 2.3% estate and most of them in the estate areas are Tamil people (Census of Population and Housing, 2012). Population statistic of Moneragala district has been separately maintained since 1963. In Moneragala, the Sinhalese who profess the religion Buddhism are the predominant ethnic group, consisting 426,762 of the total population. They speak Sinhala an Indo-Aryan language. The Tamils are second major ethnic group in Moneragala, consisting 11,997 of the population including Sri Lankan Tamils and Indian Tamils (almost Hindus). The Muslims are the second largest minority of the district, consisting 9,809 (Census of Population and Housing, 2012).

The minority Muslims settled down in Moneragala or Wellassa area during the time of Portuguese rule (1505-1656) onward from Kandy and Southern province of Sri Lanka and increased their settlements gradually during the Dutch (1656-1796) and British regimes (1796-1948) (Razick, 2007). At present they are spread out in 06 of total 11 Divisional Secretariat (D.S.) divisions, namely Medagam, Bibile, Badalkumbura, Wellawaya, Buttala and Moneragala, The majority of the Muslims are living in Medagama division. In Moneragala district, there are 05 villages having Muslims in majority. But there are many villages where Muslims are living as minorities. Also there are a few hamlets where the Muslims are found as minority. Very few Muslims live in other D.S. divisions namely Katharagama, Thanamalvila, Madulla, and Siyamnbalanduwa. In Sewanagala D.S. division Muslim settlements are not to be seen (*ibid*). The Sinhalese are the majority in all of above mentioned D.S. divisions in the district.

The Sri Lanka history reveals that Moneragala (Wellassa) region was very popular in the ancient time. The arrival of Aryans (6 B.C.), visits of king Dutugemunu (B.C 161-137) (Educational Publications Department, 1992) and the activities of Veddhas (Huntsmen) (Nur Yalman, 1971) are the examples to support this view. Therefore, the history of Sinhalese in Moneragala district began with the arrival of Aryans who were the first to come to this area (Maka Wamsam, 1962). The Veddhas are the progenitors of the Sinhalese and Dutugemunu is a well known Sinhalese king in the history who visited to Wellassa in ancient time (Razick, 2007).

There are evidences that the Sinhala-Buddhists and the Muslims have been maintaining a cordial relationship in Moneragala district since historical period onward (Razick, 2007). But in recent past years in Sri Lanka, the number of religions such Islam and Christianity have been misinterpreted among the societies by a few third party nationalist religious groups (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2013). Therefore, there is a suspicious situation developed that whether this could be made the divisions among the societies, especially between the Sinhala-Buddhists and the Muslims in terms of religious interaction in Sri Lanka. Also, the Moneragala district is not exceptional from this suspicious situation. On the above backdrop, this paper attempts to examine the religious interaction through measuring the religious understanding among the Sinhala-Buddhists and the Muslims in Moneragala, one of the 22 electoral districts in Sri Lanka, with giving emphasize to the current context of Sri Lanka.

2. CONCEPTUAL NOTE ON RELIGIOUS INTERACTION

Interaction is the activity of talking to other people and understanding them. It is a reciprocal action (Adamolekun, 2012). Also, the social interaction is a basic social process represented in a mutual relationship between two or more individuals or groups. It is the process by which we act and react to those around us. In a nutshell, social interaction includes those acts people perform toward each other and the responses they give in return (Goffman, 2010). Religious interaction is the understanding between two or more religions (Adamolekun, 2012). The interaction in religious perspective, generally, is a prominent role played by all religions in order to be kind to the fellow beings (Abdullah, 1978). All religions promote peace and harmonious life. One way to achieve it is through interaction among the believers and non-believers of their specific adherence. With regards to Buddhism and Islam, both have their own perspectives of social interaction and their attitude towards other religions (Alwi and Rashid, 2011). Therefore, the major concept of this study was religious interaction.

3. METHODOLOGY

There are various elements to be indicators of measuring religious interaction. Thus, the indicator of religious interaction in this study was religious understanding among the Sinhala-Buddhists and the Muslims in Moneragala district. The data were collected from the villages namely Bakigahawela, Medagama, Kanulwela and Godigamuwa which are located in Moneragala district and two communities are living there mixed. Altogether 100 informants have been selected as participants of this study from the above villages based on the convenience sampling technique.

To measure the religious interaction among them, simple frequencies and percentages, as well as means are calculated. Based on responses of the questionnaire, 74% were Sinhalese and 26% were Muslims from those 100. The study shows that the Sinhalese male respondents were the majority with 55% followed by the Muslim males 18%, Sinhalese females 19% and lastly Muslim females constitute the smallest number, 8%. The frequency for each sex group showed males were 73% followed by the females 27%.

4. RELIGIOUS INTERACTION AMONG THE SINHALA-BUDDHISTS AND THE MUSLIMS IN MONERAGALA

Even though the Muslims differ in their religious beliefs with that of the Sinhala-Buddhists, there is no reported cases of hostile and turmoil among the two communities in Moneragala. Since long period these two communities have been maintaining a better relationship among them in the history (Razick, 2015). This is due to a possible reason that the Muslims have no communication problem in Moneragala. They are almost fluent in speaking Sinhala language (Razick, 2015). The Muslims who live in everywhere of the island are fluent in speaking Sinhala language except Eastern and Northern provinces (Hussein, 2009); and Moneragala is located in the Uva Province. By so being, they are easily accepted by the Sinhala-Buddhists and this scenario could make the process of communication smooth and effective. The detail explanation of the indicator is as follows:

4.1 Religious Understanding

Religious understanding is taken as an indicator for the evaluation of religious interaction among the both ethnic groups in this study and is going to measure the level of understanding over the respondents' belief and belief of each other religion, namely Buddhism and Islam. The measurements are important to find out the frequency of interaction among the religious and pious individuals towards other religion and identify their understandings of the other religion. In formalizing a society, religious understanding is an important factor in the human life experience (Alwi and Rashid, 2011). This is because, receiving accurate information about own religion and other religions would make life more meaningful (Micheline Milot, 2006), also could be achieved mutual understandings among the societies.

There are two sections included in the questionnaire. The first is about intra-religious understanding which is focusing on one's own religious point of views. How far it adherents understand its teachings, doctrines, and etc. Thus, in this part, the religions, mainly the Buddhism and the Islam are under study. The second part, whereas, focuses on the issue of inter-religious understanding of the communities in Moneragala. It stresses on the cross-religious understanding of the Sinhala-Buddhists and the Muslims, also how the Sinhala-Buddhists perceive of Islam and its followers as well as how the Muslims perceive of Buddhism and its adherents. These items were designed as discovering positive and negative factors influencing on ethnic group interaction in religious basis.

It is basically highlighted here that the discussion of intra-religious understanding. The distribution frequency and percentages of the respondents' opinions towards four items prepared to investigate the intra-religious understanding of the respondents. The first item was to figure out the level of respondent's understanding their own religious teachings. Most of the respondents expressed that they did know and understand their own religious teachings and principles. Specifically, 93% responded 'yes' while, 7% respondents noted that really they didn't understand about their religious doctrines. It is resulted in item two that, 70% of the respondents regularly visited their places of worship for the purpose of carrying out the prayers. Whereas, 30% did not frequently go to their worship places either temple or mosque. The Item three seeks to find out whether the respondents were dedicated in performing their sense of religious obligations. The results confirmed that 87% were committed while, 13% not committed in fulfilling their religious duties. Also the respondents were asked whether they adhered strictly their religious teachings in item four. To this, 69% gave the positive answer that they maintain

strictly their religious teachings. As opposed to, 31% gave the negative answer which noted that they were not devoted believers adhered the religious obligations sincerely. Most of the respondents did know and commonly practiced their religious duties regardless of their religions, either Buddhism or Islam. It is resulted that the both parties are committed to their religious teachings. Thus, one resident expressed that the Muslims have full freedom to practice their religion in everywhere of the island-Sri Lanka, even though they are small in number.

A Sinhala-Buddhist resident in Bakinigahawela village, who is respondent, gave his overall perceptions of his Muslim neighbours,

“In this village the Muslims are religious people and there is a special place-mosque- for them to fulfil their religious obligations. Their religious events and ceremonies do not agitate the surrounding Sinhala-Buddhists. Therefore, they do not ask the permission to carry out the religious events, we would permit them, because, there is no such religious tension arise from their ceremonial events and these ceremonies have been practiced ever since, and even in some events we - Buddhists- too have participated such as Kandhoori and Meeladun Nabi celebrations.”

Besides, the inter-religious understanding is the second part of religious understanding in this study. The first item tries to find the certain extent of the respondents knowledge on other religious teachings like Buddhism as well as Islam. It is observable in the table that, majority of the respondents noted that they did not know about other's believes and one third of them did know about other's faiths. Generally, the majority of 65% did not know while 35% knew about it. In item two, the respondents further requested to verify whether they had ever learnt about other religion (i.e. Buddhism or Islam). Almost all of the respondents, 80% of them stressed out that they never learnt about other religions; and only 20 persons in Moneragala district did learn about other religions. Out of these 20 respondents, 17% of the Muslims admitted that had learnt about Buddhism while only 3% of the Sinhalese had learnt about Islam in their whole life through the medias and friends.

The item three seeks to religious understanding of the respondents, means that the question was intended to know ones' understanding toward other religion. This is a very important aspect to measure the level of religious interaction among the respondents in respective study area. Hence, the results proved that the majority of 79% of them did not understand other religions at all. However, only 21% of the respondents did know about other religions rather well. Consequently, it could be understood that this is a critical side of the point of two groups in this area. Finally, the item four inspects that whether the respondents had ever read any readings about other religions. Unfortunately, more than two third of the respondents (71%) did not read any publication of other religions, as shown in the table; whereas, 29% reported that they did read other religious manuscripts. About 12 Muslim respondents did read some writings about the Buddhism. The overall results of inter-religious understanding, most of the respondents either the Muslims or the Sinhala-Buddhist said that they didn't have knowledge about other religions and even didn't read or learn any manuscripts. The study proves that the Muslims know better about Buddhism more than the Sinhala-Buddhists know about Islam. It is recommended that, the communities might have to read about the religions-Buddhism or Islam in order to understand the nature and attitude of each group living together.

5. CONCLUSION

There were two important things to discuss under the religious understanding. Despite both groups, whoever those the Sinhala-Buddhists or the Muslims, were having better understanding of their own religions, this in depth understanding is not a troublemaking aspect of their better interaction. However, it could be assumed that the lack of understanding of other religious teachings has been a determinant factor to hinder their positive interaction. Since there is no conflict or collision case recorded in Moneragala by the history of Sri Lanka, they are still having a good socio-religious interaction one with another. If they are alert and well versed in other religious

practices and doctrines, almost definitely, they would interact better in the religious basis. Also intimacy and close relationship among them would be achieved.

Further, the effective ways of interaction between the Sinhala-Buddhists and the Muslims in Moneragala district must be drawn and practiced by each person regardless of their religious beliefs. Lack of religious interaction might cause negative response of Buddhists towards Islam and Muslims towards Buddhism. It is sad to predict that the peaceful life enjoyed by the residents of Moneragala today, will be affected if arise misunderstandings, arguments and suspicious among them.

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