

A STUDY ON BUDDHIST CULTURAL VALUES OF CONSUMPTION AND THEIR IMPACT ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

This empirical research study is concerned with Buddhist cultural values of consumption and the social impacts of those values on the sustainable development of the country. Seen from a cultural anthropological perspective on religion and consumption, a research problem was articulated to understand any relationship between patterns of consumption and sustainable development at a micro level of family and consumption practices in a Buddhist cultural context of a selected rural society and as to how such culturally driven consumption patterns sustain economic wellbeing of those families. A random sample of 92 Buddhist families of a small village was closely studied by means of observation and focus group interviews with the primary objective of learning about Buddhist cultural values influencing the behavior of consumption and resulting impacts on the sustainability of family-economy and its development. It is on the assumption that sustainability of household economy is decisive in the assurance of sustainability of national development that this research study was designed.

Findings revealed number of social values which were active as general guidelines of responsible behavior of consuming goods and

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services. Some of them are the social values of co-operative consumption, maximum and multiple use of goods, frugal consumption, sharing with neighbors, generosity, care of all dependents, saving for the sustainability of future economic wellbeing of children, attachment to the domestic environment and cultivations and taking care of refugees. The social value of co-operative consumption impels all family members to share the available quantity of resources with each other and thereby sustain the wellbeing of all at the same time. It brings about stability of the family and community. The social value of multiple and maximum use of goods prolong the period of consumption of goods while increasing the number of consumers in the same community that results in less disposal of waste in the community. It goes against the modern social value of individual and minimum use of goods that produce irresponsible consumption and increasing disposal of waste. Multiple and maximum use helps consumers to manage with available resources. This social value provides a sustainable answer to the current issues of waste management and disposal that seriously hamper the sustainable development. The social value of being highly conscious of children's future has assured responsible consumption of family resources, environmental resources. Respondents' perception of these cultural values of responsible consumption clearly evinced that they had gained meanings of them from Buddhist teachings, practices, beliefs and traditions which have well institutionalized in the rural culture and society. They had confronted with a conflict of sustaining those social values of consumption as the second and third generations of their families are highly exposed to the modern social values of conspicuous consumerism that produce irresponsible consumption of resources. Accordingly, it is concluded that an organized reinforcement is required to transmit the Buddhist cultural values of responsible consumption and assure the sustainable development of nations.

INTRODUCTION

Achievement of the goals of sustainable development depends on number of socio-cultural factors and some of them refers to cultural factors of consumption of resource in a particular responsible manner in developing countries. Sri Lanka also aspires to lead the nation towards the standards of sustainable development addressing all the goals of sustainable development set

by the United Nations and this national endeavor requires a sound knowledge base that make the scientific knowledge available for all projects of development. Knowledge on responsible consumption of resources lies at the center of this requirement and scientific research studies are required to adopt proper policies of resource management. Recent history of development in Sri Lanka clearly reveals number of social and environmental issues that seemed to have stemmed from irresponsible consumption of resources in the name of development. As a country struggling with the limited resources for the development of living standards of the nation, Sri Lanka needs to gather indigenous cultural knowledge and values of consumption and use that knowledge and values for achieving the goals of sustainable development. The Theravada Buddhism which has evolved for over twenty-three centuries since third century B.C, giving rise to a Buddhist culture that encompasses almost all aspect of the society and social life of people, still functions as a live belief and practice in all the Buddhist communities. The institutionalization of Buddhist teachings, values, norms and practices in the Sri Lankan society seems to have historically developed a triangle of Buddhist culture, development and consumption as is evident from Buddhist communities in the country. This study is concerned with the interaction among the three components of that triangle with special reference to the consumption based on cultural values that originally derive their meaning from the Buddhist doctrine and its historical adaptation in terms of needs of people.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Seen from a cultural anthropological perspective on religion and consumption, a research problem was articulated to understand any relationship between patterns of consumption and sustainable development at a micro level of family and consumption practices in a Buddhist cultural context of a selected rural society in Sri Lanka and as to how such culturally driven consumption patterns sustain economic wellbeing of those families. Being the basic unit of Sri Lankan society, family still plays a vital role in the management of consumption of resources that ultimately influences the sustainable development of the country. Whereas patterns of consumption in urban communities have been incessantly influenced by the

modern values of conspicuous consumerism, rural communities still maintain the traditional values of responsible consumption that help them to manage with limited resources and access to resources available for them to reach the goals of sustainable development. As rural people account for over 80% of the total population and majority of them predominantly shares the Buddhist cultural values, any development effort may be successful in assuring the sustainability of development to the extent it may accommodate the dominant cultural values of responsible consumption and it is on this rational assumption this research explores the phenomenon of consumption from a cultural anthropological perspective.

OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

The central objectives of the research were to explore major social values that guide and govern the consumer behavior of the selected Buddhist community and to understand as to how those values contribute to sustainability of economic development and social well-being of people in a predominantly Buddhist cultural context.

METHODOLOGY

This research was carried out in a rural society located in the District of Badulla. A random sample of 92 Buddhist families were selected out of 510 families living in the period of the research in 2017. All the families were Buddhist and shared a traditional culture inherited from their former generations. Field observation in the village helped to gather data about real behavior of people and all questionable factors of their behavior were raised in the focus group interviews conducted in several rounds with family members. Participants were highly enthusiastic in contributing information on their patterns of responsible consumption of resources and the technique of focus group provided them with opportunities share their knowledge and experience with the researcher in a collective discussion with each other. Elderly members of families were much more active in the interviews on traditional cultural values still they manage to maintain and benefits of those social values for living in the rural communities finding collective solutions to issues of resources.

Research findings

1. THE SOCIAL VALUE OF CO-OPERATIVE CONSUMPTION

One important aspect of the responsible consumption of resources was revealed by the social value of co-operation among members of the community. Almost all family members, neighbors, members of kinship systems were genuinely co-operative in achieving goals of life. The social value of co-operative consumption impels all family members to share the available quantity of resources with each other and thereby sustain the wellbeing of all at the same time. It brings about stability of the family and community that ultimately leads to political stability of the society. The co-operative value has been so deeply inculcated in the minds of family and community members that they are always concerned with offering and sharing whatever they consume with others. Because of this social value a considerable portion of the community resources is subjected to voluntary sharing with those who willingly accept and enjoy the resources for various purposes while responding in a reciprocal manner. Significance of this factor should be understood in comparison to the impacts of exclusive individual consumption and disposal of goods as unnecessary things. The co-operative social value produces a pattern of collective consumption of a considerable portion of community resources suppressing social values of individual consumption of things belong to individuals and families. It is interesting to understand a cultural factor of undeclared collective ownership of resources belong to the individuals, families and the neighbors. For example, family members are not worried about the individual possession of family resources as they are well aware of the fact that a considerable portion of benefits of such resources is offered to them irrespective of individual ownership and such an ownership driven right to exclusive individual consumption. In this social context ownership is important as a source of motivation for the development and production of resources, conflict-free inheritance and protection of them, and means of assuring social security. Being controlled by the co-operative social value, the ownership of resources is not allowed to confine consumption of them to the owners alone. For example, jack trees in the village belong to individuals and families but jack

fruit are available for all neighbors as the owners willingly offer them to others. Consumption of rice is not exclusively confined to the cultivators or owners alone but a considerable portion of rice production is consumed by others due to the co-operative consumption based on the cultural value of co-operation which always accompanies a set of cultural values including generosity and philanthropy.

The co-operative social value shows an important contribution to the assurance of responsible consumption that can be further elaborated according to the research findings. Seasonal offering of lands for cultivation of vegetable and other crops including rice and maize seemed to have multiple positive impacts on sustainable development. Some land owners who find it difficult to cultivate their lands continually offer seasonal opportunities of cultivation to those who express their willingness to cultivate without any commercial agreement but a mutual understanding of offering something in return in terms of co-operative social life. Those land owners are happy to see their lands in cultivation that avoids the invasion of natural forestation and being fallow lands. On the other hand, temporary cultivators are also happy to assure their means of sustenance of families as well as the performance of other social functions as members of the community. As this practice turns unproductive lands into productive lands, unproductive seasons into productive seasons, unproductive labor into productive labor and generate income for the nation, such social values cannot be taken for granted.

Sharing of family resource with family members and other relatives in the kinship system to which families belong seemed to have ease the economic and social burden of families struggling with limited income. Kinship attachment and social responsibility of looking after kin and kith in difficult times has been further enriched by the co-operative social values of the community. Among the kin and kith, the “we feeling” remains strong enough to offer any thing in goods or service at any time for the day-to-day-well-being of them and thereby the family members enjoy a sense of social security and protection that cannot be replaced with modern insurance policies. The co-operative social value seemed

to have developed a perception of resources that they are available “for our use” and not for “my use alone” as was well evinced it from the behavior of the sample population. Preceding of this perception in the decision to make use of personal properties always motivate users to think of others in need of similar resource and allocate at least the minimum quantity for offering to them and have a spiritual happiness. When decide to gift something to others the people always utter a folk statement “Things gifted to others bring about fragrance whereas things eaten bring about stench ultimately”. This particular folk ideology of consumption develops a sense of others’ happiness in the use of resources for individual or family well-being.

2. THE SOCIAL VALUE OF MULTIPLE AND MAXIMUM USE OF GOODS

It is interesting to find another important social value of multiple and maximum use of resources in the community studied for this research, as it further enriches the beneficial factors of the social value of co-operation that undermines adverse social impacts of individualism and selfish competition for the appropriation and accumulation of resources at the cost of others’ development as it happens in modern capitalist societies. Any sort of accumulation or appropriation of resource seemed to have not been harmful because of the philanthropist social values of the community that always motivate them to abide by the cultural norms of co-operative and collective consumption and utilization of resources. The social value of multiple and maximum use of resource refers to various use of the same material resource at different stages. It always delays any decision to dispose resources as waste and encourage the owners and users to consider various needs for which the same resource can be used when it is not serving the prescribed needs at the beginning. For example, the rural people never dispose their cloths when they are not suitable for further wearing. There is a particular sequence of multiple and maximum utilization of cloths among the villages. New cloths are used for important opportunities and tours just after buying them and when those cloths become old and not suitable for such purposes, they tend to use for daily wearing and there after the same clothes are used for wearing in the field work. There were so many other domestic uses of old clothes that increased

the period of their use and purposes of utility. The significance of this cultural value of multiple and maximum use needs to be comprehended in comparison to the modern social values of single use and immediate disposal of goods which cannot be justified in any terms of responsible consumption of resources with the suitability for and capacity of multiple and maximum use.

The rural community members showed a particular discipline of consumption of resources with the capacity of multiple use that assures the prolonged use avoiding any careless and destructive use. A sense of secondary use, tertiary use of things by oneself or others seemed to have restrained the behavior of consumption and utilization of resources. According to the villagers “there are enough people who need the things that we need no more and things must be used in a manner that further assures the secondary use of them”. As a traditional practice the householders maintain a separate hut like place for the storage of used materials of various kinds including clothes, equipment, timber, building materials, domestic items, etc. Disposal of goods as waste is never felt with reference to things perceived of multiple use and the norm is to keep the unnecessary things in the store house. As a practice of responsible consumption this behavior prevents the immediate disposal of unnecessary materials and makes used-materials available for future use of family and community members. One can observe materials belong to several generations in such store house and they are usually open to the community to find any used item required for a particular purpose on a mutual understanding of sharing goods. It is the cultural value of multiple, multistage and maximum use of resources that produces this type of responsible consumption and there are two major social functions deriving from it. The first function is the facilitation of meeting needs of families with used materials at zero cost and the second is the sustainable management of waste as this practice produces less waste.

Responsible consumption in the selected community has a direct contribution to the management of waste as they produce less and less waste disposed to create problems. Prolonged use of resources could be observed with reference to almost all practices of consumption of variety of domestic and other goods. Even the

modern electronic devices and equipment are rarely disposed by the villages on the assumption that certain parts of them may be useful for repairs of similar items in the future. Strong consciousness of possible future use of various materials prevent immediate disposal of things as wastes and it always impel users to delay any decision to dispose as waste and consider offering unnecessary things to required members of the community. They never hesitate to communicate with others and inform them of the things available for giving for further use as required by the receivers. Irrespective of the fact whether the goods are new or old they try their best to offer the unnecessary things to another member of the community if family members need no such things. Cloths, books, magazines, costumes, kitchen wares, table wares, other domestic durables, equipment, electronic devices, food items, timber, furniture, and variety of usable things are found among the goods offered to others. The receivers are also happy to receive required things on the mutual understanding that things must be given to others then they are no more required for one's use.

Multiple and maximum use of resources helps consumers to manage with available resources and even to save funds for developing their economic conditions. This social value provides a sustainable answer to the current issues of waste management and disposal that seriously hamper the sustainable development.

3. THE SOCIAL VALUE OF ASSURING FUTURE WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN

Another aspect of responsible consumption was apparent from the research with reference to a social value of assuring future well-being of younger generations. In particular, parents and grand parents in the research area have an extraordinary commitment earn and save resources for the children's future. Even though economic co-operation is one of the universal functions of family and almost all families perform it depending on the economic capacity of family, the families in the reach area seemed to have made it the dominant role while making the other functions subordinate. In this regarding they are highly concerned with two important tasks of providing the children with higher education and accumulating financial and material wealth in the name of children. They carry

out these tasks at the cost of their own well-being as their economic capacity is not strong enough to assure consumption of sufficient amount of resources while saving for children. The economic capacity always compels them to live at a minimum cost of living and save the wealth for the education of children and their future well-being. As revealed by parents, all the families strive to provide higher education to their children sending them to good colleges in urban areas. They also purchase valuable lands, buildings for the future use of children. Even the trees grown in home gardens and other lands are preserved for the future of children and rarely consider felling a tree for timber requirement or earning some money for important purposes such a medical treatment.

An important sociological observation is that families have to be highly conscious about responsible consumption of resources and saving and preserving assets for the future well-being of children in a social environment where they are not fully confident in the government's responsibly of assuring a good future for the younger generation in the country. As the national development is not progressive at a sufficient rate of economic growth (less than 4% in 2018) and it does not assure sufficient distribution of income among people so that they can live a good life, parents have to take the responsibility of the economic prosperity of their children. Instead of depending on the state to solve economic problem of future generations the families in the research area follow a strong norm of restraining their daily consumption and saving resources for children's future. According to the respondents in the focus group interviews "No matter we suffer enough from economic and health problems at today, we are not worried about all repercussions as we have earned and saved something for the future benefit of children". Such statements clearly indicate the magnitude of the parents' commitments to the future well-being of children.

This particular social value of being highly economic in consumption in the name children's future stands against the modern social values of irresponsible consumption of resources under conspicuous consumerism that rapidly invading the traditional culture of Sri Lanka. An interesting social reaction could be observed in the research with reference to the value conflict

between the traditional Buddhist values of consumption and that of modern consumerist cultures. The people who still respect the traditional social values of consumption and save and preserve resources for future generations are critical about the behavior of people influenced by consumerist values as they tend to be indebted after spending all and saving nothing for the children's future. On the other hand, those influenced by modern consumerist culture tend to laugh at traditional consumers for not enjoying the life spending what they earn and inherited from former generations. They value the material success of modern life style and their importance as sources of happiness. Most of such people dream about children's out migration to green pastures in developed countries as solution to the problem of children's future and try to prepare them for that purpose. The researched community had no such dreams of out migration of children but shared a common dream of successful future of children through highly restrained and frugal consumption of locally available resources, they have real experience of realizing that dream.

4. DISCUSSION

Even though the research has identified number of Buddhist cultural values that lead the individual and collective behavior of people in the community under consideration, this research paper is concerned with only three values such as the social value of co-operative consumption, social value of multiple and maximum use of resources and the social value of assuring future well-being of children. All the three social values are Buddhist religious values in their origin and evolution in the history of the traditional societies in Sri Lanka as they are universally found in all Buddhist communities in the country. Buddhism has made them meaningful to the Buddhist devotees as is well evident from the way the people justify their actions. They are highly conscious about the Buddhist religious interpretation of sin and merit and retribution of their deeds in this world and the other and also about the Buddhist cultural interpretations of them and their ultimate goal of life, the Nirvana.

Accumulation of merits dominates in their decision-making processes making all the factors of secular life subordinate on the assumption that whatever they have to incur or sacrifice in social

transactions, negotiations, commitments, offering of gifts and donations, working for the benefit of others, bearing of any material loss, is spiritually compensated with enormous merits (*Pin and Kusal*) which is indispensable for the attainment of Nirvana ending the circle of *sammsa, the birth and death*. In all the three major social values identified in this research, this sense of the accumulation of merit while avoiding sinful deeds dominate and the family and community members volunteer to be co-operative in the consumption, storing and sharing of things as a part of multiple and maximum use of resources and for saving and preserving resources for the future of younger generations. Saving and preserving resources for the future is always interpreted as a fountain of merits which is usually cited as “*Growing and multiplying merits*’ as such savings and preservations save number of needs of number of generations in the future.

According to peoples’ perception even any omission of a family role and community functions also amounts to an act of sin and brings about harmful impacts in this or other world and accordingly, the people strive to do their best to perform their social roles and fulfill needs of community and family life. Even the self-esteem and dignity lie in the level of commitment to meritorious deeds in terms of the above mentioned major social values and others which were not considered in this paper. Any omission of a social duty or active participation in good deeds directly affects the self-esteem and dignity of people and it is always shameful to them to deviate from the social values of collective and co-operative social relations and transactions, multiple and maximum use of resources and saving and working for the future prosperity of younger generations. Accordingly, shame, as a social control mechanism, is also established in terms of those major social values and to the extent they fail to abide by them without socially acceptable justification. The Buddhist religious meaning of the major social values reinforced by the Buddhist monks residing in the village temple through their religious sermons delivered at religious functions. Even the Mass media make valuable contribution to the reinforcement of those values in the minds of people through variety of religious program.

5. CONCLUSION

Sustainable development In Sri Lanka could be assured by means of productive Buddhist cultural values still dominating in traditional communities. The research study brought to light three major such cultural values such as co-operative consumption of resources, multiple and maximum use of available resources and saving and preserving of resources and working for the future well-being of younger generations at all cost to the parents' generation. Strong commitment to these social values assures a responsible consumption of available resources making an immense contribution to the achievement of goals of sustainable development in the country. In dealing with the issues stemming from the scarcity of resources in developing countries those Buddhist cultural values have a great capacity of leading people toward responsible consumption of resources. Such a pattern of consumption of resources on a cultural basis is long lasting compared to formal, legal and bureaucratic means of assuring responsible consumption. Therefor it is concluded the social value base of the sustainable development and responsible consumption in Sri Lanka need to be enriched with the Buddhist cultural values found in this research. Respondents' perception of these cultural values of responsible consumption clearly evinced that they had gained meanings of them from Buddhist teachings, practices, beliefs and traditions which have well institutionalized in the rural culture and society. They had confronted with a conflict of sustaining those social values of consumption as the second and third generations of their families are highly exposed to the modern social values of conspicuous consumerism that produce irresponsible consumption of resources. Accordingly, it is concluded that an organized reinforcement is required to transmit the Buddhist cultural values of responsible consumption and assure the sustainable development of nations.

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