



Temple Hierarchy, Conflicts among Temples over Power and the Emerging Faith in Deities of Disadvantaged Devotees

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**Temple Hierarchy, Conflicts among Temples over Power
and the Emerging Faith in Deities of Disadvantaged
Devotees**

Nilusha Patabendi and S. Pathmanesan

Abstract

This paper illustrates how contemporary Buddhist practices encounter power conflicts and the supremacy of prominent, upper-level temples over smaller, lower-level ones in Nelugama village in Sri Lanka. The conflict is not only between two temples of the two administrative Districts over the village temple ownership, but also conflicts between villagers and temples. This long-term ethnographic study reveals that there are multiple factors impacting temple hierarchy and supremacy of the prominent temple, other than the caste-based hierarchical temple structure. On the one hand, the government administration system and ethnic representation, which is unique to the proclaimed geographic demarcations and competition among temples for supremacy are the primary causes of the ownership dispute. On the other hand, this conflict has resulted from a tense situation among the original and resettled families of the village and created room for believing in supernatural gods and disconnecting the village temple. Eventually, the spiritual and religious vacuum created in the villagers' lives may have caused them to become emotionally attached to Pulleyar deity worship.

Keywords: buddhism, conflicts, power struggle, temple hierarchy

Introduction

Nelugama, is a traditional village located in the *Anuradhapura* district, organized around kinship ties and isolated for many years. It is a village located along the *Colombo Pulmude* road in the *Anuradhapura* district. It is a hot, dry village consisting of 202 families. *Nelugama* comprises 3 sub-villages named *Nelugama*, *Olukada*, and *Nawawewa*. The original inhabitants of the village claim that they arrived in 1950. This village, bordering the *Trincomalee* district, went through several upheavals during the war, namely, LTTE attacks, and displacement. Therefore, the village remained somewhat isolated and cut off from the rest of the district.

The inhabitants of the village experienced an influx of farmer families who had lost land due to the Yan Oya irrigation project. These families were resettled in *Nelugama*. The village temple is located outside of the 300-meter radius of the village and is administratively a part of the Tamil-majority *Trincomalee* district. After the construction of the village temple, a delineation was established between the two districts. This set the stage for rivalry and disputes between the two temples in the *Trincomalee* and *Anuradhapura* Districts over who the rightful proprietor of the temple at *Nelugama* was. While the temple in the *Trincomalee* district is referred to as the 6th milepost temple, the temple in the *Anuradhapura* district is known as the 8th milepost temple. These temples are positioned at the upper level of the temple hierarchy. The chief monks of the temple in the *Trincomalee* district made ownership claims over the *Nelugama* village temple. This competition among temples has become more visible and complex with the arrival of the resettled families in *Nelugama*. The chief monk of the *Trincomalee* temple made some attempts to persuade the original families of *Nelugama* to accept the administrative authority of the

Trincomalee temple. However, these original families were very cautious in maintaining their objectivity and neutrality.

The temple in the village and the other two temples belong to the *Siam Nikaya*, an order which is confined to the *Radala*¹ and *Govigama*² castes. In rural social systems, temple hierarchies are deeply ingrained and covert. The temple structure in Sri Lanka is hierarchal and divided into temples belonging to the three main *Nikayas*,³ and these divisions are caste-based. The larger temples, which are more substantial in structure and more powerful, control smaller temples in villages within the same area, and the same *Nikaya* is positioned at an upper level of the hierarchy.

Since caste, class, and other forms of discrimination are rejected by doctrinal Buddhism, arguably, the existence of monastic orders is a deviation from what is prescribed in the Buddhist canon. However, caste factors in ordination are a longstanding practice that is rarely criticized; even Buddhist rituals are founded on theology. However, caste-based discrimination and influence remained at a minimum level in the study village in this power struggle, since all temples belonged to the same caste.

Though the majority of villagers followed Buddhism as a religion, they adopted other beliefs and practices related to locally revered and idolized deities to seek relief from mundane troubles. The original villagers believed in and worshiped a local deity called *Pulleyar*. This *Pulleyar* God is regarded by the Nelugama villagers as a "supernatural" deity with the

¹ *Radala* refers to a small minority caste in the [Kandyan Kingdom](#) of [Sri Lanka](#) and positioned in the uppermost level of the social hierarchy. They were the [Chiefs](#) of the [Kingdom of Kandy](#)

² *Govigama* is a *Sinhalese* [caste](#) found in [Sri Lanka](#), representing the majority of the *Sinhalese* population and are traditionally involved in [agriculture](#).

³ Buddhist monastic order. There are three main Sri Lankan orthodox Buddhist orders, named *Siam Nikaya*, *Amarapura Nikaya*, and *Ramanna Nikaya*.

ability to provide favors or safety if properly revered and propitiated. Observations and research on the customs of worshipping local deities while practicing Buddhism, which does not encourage belief in invisible deities, are used to support another argument. Even though the focus of many religions is on a god or gods, Buddhism as a philosophy has demonstrated how to lead a good life and achieve spiritual enlightenment by following the doctrine of the Buddha alone. On the other hand, lay Buddhist people in Sri Lanka request the blessings of certain deities on significant occasions (Iddagoda, 2017).

At the time of the study, the village temple was controlled by the 8th milepost⁴ *Purana Raja Maha Viharaya* which belongs to the Anuradhapura district, even though the 6th milepost temple, which belongs to the Trincomalee, had also fought for supremacy. The temple in the village was known as the village temple, while the other temples were labelled by the number engraved on the mile posts located close to the temple. These posts are positioned alongside highways by the Road Development Authority to indicate the length of roads. The relationship between the chief monks of the 6th and 8th milepost temples and the villagers affects how the village temple functions, as none of the chief monks of the village temple have lived in the village temple for a long period. The objectives of this study are to study the dynamics of temple hierarchy and to understand how social changes and administrative boundaries in the village influence temple supremacy and its consequences and also how it impacts local beliefs and practices.

Buddhism, Caste, Hierarchy and Conflicts.

⁴ The mile is a British imperial unit and United States customary unit of length.

Sri Lanka is a nation that places a high value on religion. Every village, as stated by Iddagoda (2017), has a religious shrine that represents the village's religious character. Along with roadside shrines, there are many other religious symbols, most notably Buddha statues. Likewise, there were several Buddha statues, ruins such as stone pillars, and stone flower tablets in *Nelugama* which symbolize the lengthy prevalence of Buddhism in the village, but the temple hierarchy is invisible and deep-rooted in this community.

Although Buddhism itself condemns caste-based prejudice and advocates equality, the Sri Lankan Buddhist order is known for having a caste system and a hierarchical temple structure based on caste. The caste system is typically thought of as a distinct, historically situated ideology (Yalman, 1989). Jayasooriya (2018) has studied attitudes and perceptions of monks and laypersons on prevailing caste-related practices compared to Buddha's doctrine. The results of this study revealed that the divisions of the *Nikaya* or monastic order/fraternity in Sri Lankan Buddhism are formed primarily due to and continue to exist based on caste differences. It has been observed by local scholars that many Buddhist monks have deviated from Buddhist doctrine by following caste-based practices. According to Malalgoda (1976), granting higher ordination was refused to those of non-*Govigama* social origins, a refusal legitimized by a royal decree attributed to King *Keerthi Sri Rajasinha* during the Kandyan period⁵.

This demonstrates the complicated history of caste among the Buddhist clergy. Malalgoda (1976) noted that a distinct fraternity (monastic

⁵ The kingdom of Kandy prevailed in Sri Lanka from the year 1597 to 1815, and that period was known as the Kandyan period.

order) was founded as a result of low-caste protests. The temple narrative in *Nelugama* demonstrates that the persistence of other external and internal factors and power struggles among monks are the other reasons, in addition to caste, for the existence of the temple hierarchy. Furthermore, in this study, the nature of conflicts between villagers and monks is discussed and the manner in which it impacted the religiosity of people is analyzed in depth. Although some academics have written about caste-based temple hierarchy in Buddhism, there is still a knowledge gap on the other factors influencing power struggles to maintain temple hierarchy and authority.

According to Malalgoda (1976), monks' original motivations and purposes are individual salvation from the world of suffering and bondage. Gomrich (1988) also made a similar claim that monks are people who have left society to look for salvation, and that their duties include preaching and preserving the Buddha's teachings. Buddhism is known for its prioritizing equality, harmony, the middle path (the noble eightfold path), and the four noble truths. The Buddha rejected discrimination based on caste, color, status, wealth, and other distinctions, and taught his followers to do the same.

As a result of the different interpretations of Buddha's teachings adopted by different cultural groups, social hierarchies also differ among different Buddhist cultural groups. According to Ledgerwood (2012), the social hierarchy in Buddhism is founded on the 'order of disciplines and referred to as the '*Sanghas*'. "*Sanghas*" are collections of monks residing in monasteries, who play the role of instructors (Zhe, 2013) and are part of the Buddhist social hierarchy. They convey the message of the Buddha to their students, who then go out and spread this message all over the world. The Buddhist religious hierarchy also influenced the social hierarchy

prevalent in the societies where Buddhism was introduced. As highlighted above, Buddhism is founded on order, respect for hierarchy, and adherence to specific rules, with the individual tasked with seeking fulfillment from within in a way that would help them realize a “higher calling” and do so with other people in mind. Ledgerwood (2012) notes that in present-day Buddhist practice, as was in the past, the hierarchy in Buddhist belief is founded on seniority. The implication, in this case, is that the longer an individual has been a monk, the more senior they are. This element of Buddhism influences social hierarchy in Buddhist practice in that individuals who are older in society are more senior and are thus accorded more respect and consideration.

Freedom of action and controlling powers in Buddhism have been theoretically scrutinized by Rahula Thero in his book on “What the Buddha Taught”. In the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, the Buddha has mentioned that he never thought of controlling the *Sangha* (Order of Monks) so that they would be dependent on him. He said that there was no esoteric doctrine in his teaching. The freedom of thought allowed by the Buddha is unheard of elsewhere in the history of religions. As mentioned by Rahula Thero (1959), this freedom is necessary because, according to the Buddha, man's emancipation depends on his realization of truth and not on the benevolent grace of God or any other external power as a reward for his good and obedient behavior. The term *thanha* has been described as thirst in Buddhism. It is this “thirst”, desire, greed, craving, manifesting itself in various ways, that gives rise to all forms of suffering and continuity of beings (Walpola, 1959). Even though those principles have been philosophically crafted in Buddhism, many followers of the Buddha in the present day act in contradictory ways.

This paper wishes to explore how those current practices and trends lead to rebellion, power struggles and conflicts. As mentioned by Omvedt (2003), there is no single entity occupying the permanent position of power and this is evidenced by the symbiotic nature of the relationship between the laity and the *Sangha*. Further, according to Omvedt (2003), the *Sangha* in Buddhism is dependent on the laity for material support, while the laity depends on the *Sangha* for religious instruction. However, in practice, Buddhist religious symbols do impact and shape social hierarchies leading to the creation, reinforcement, or subversion of social relations of power.

Landscape, religion, and the monarchy

Yi et al (2022) have mentioned that since the Western Jin period, Buddhism has confronted bureaucratic power within the architectural landscape. Confucian officials proposed that Buddhist monks must bow their heads or kneel to emperors (Orbodoeva and Yangutov 2019). From these officials' perspectives, there were two reasons for this confrontation: to retain the current state administrative system characterized by the divine right to rule founded on the Mandate of Heaven and to accept a political system in parallel with Buddhism. As per the view of Yi et al (2022), in such contexts, temples may express both Buddhist spirit and monarchical ideas in their architecture and landscape forms. This reveals that monarchical power, embodied in the temple, can persist continuously in a specific historical period, geographical location, and environment. However, the relevance of the landscape where a temple is located to monarchical power has not been sufficiently explained.

The relationship between landscape, religion, and the monarchy was explored by Cosgrove (1998) in his study on the prominent role of the Italian monastic landscape in urban, state, and social formations (pp. 76–

77). 'The landscape is a vehicle for cultural production in social formations stretched between city and country, feudalism and capitalism, but the modalities of its use and the theoretical predilections that underlie it relate to the specific historical circumstances in which it was employed' (Cosgrove 1998, p. 222). This evidences that social formations, hierarchical arrangements of religious institutions, power, and landscape interact with each other, and that the nature of those interactions are dynamic and complicated.

Most writings on current Buddhist practices have explained concisely the different traditions and customs in Buddhism and Buddhist religious institutions. Caste-based practices in popular Buddhism have been discussed by many scholars (Gombrich, 1971; Malalgoda, 1976; Silva et al., 2009; Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988; Silva, 2017). However, local research has not examined non-caste-based factors that are important to temple hierarchy. Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the views of *Sinhala* Buddhist laypeople, as well as monks/nuns, about factors influencing power, authority and hierarchy in Buddhism in Sri Lanka. The study was undertaken because there is a severe lack of relevant local literature and evidence on power struggles among temples belonging to the same caste.

Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere's book "Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka" explores how Buddhism has changed and evolved in response to the country's shifting social, political, and economic circumstances. Through a thorough examination of historical and modern practices, it identifies a number of variables impacting religious change, such as regional cultural dynamics and political influences. But other specific factors, such as the administration system, ethnic representation and competition among temples for supremacy have

not been examined in depth. Gombrich and Obeyesekere claim that there are some significant omissions in Buddhism-related local studies, such as critical discussions of the civil war between the Tamils and the Sinhalese and its impact on Buddhism. The writers contend that Buddhism, rather than being a static, is a dynamic tradition that has continuously changed to address societal demands and difficulties. The purpose of the current study, then, is to determine the elements that affect temple administration and hierarchy at the temple level and how they affect Buddhists who had close relations to the temples concerned.

Methodology

This paper utilizes data gathered through intensive ethnographic research conducted in “*Nelugama*” in the *Padaviya* Divisional Secretariat Area of the Anuradhapura District. The conflict between two temples in two administrative districts over the ownership of the village temple was influential in choosing this location. Hence, the study was carried out to understand the nature, dynamics, and root causes of power struggles among powerful temples for control over less powerful village temples, and how those conflicts impact the villagers. The two temples that competed for the ownership of the village temple were known as the 6th milepost temple and the 8th milepost temple. The village temple referred to in this paper is the temple in *Nelugama*. The 8th milepost temple belongs to the Anuradhapura district, while the 6th milepost temple belongs to the Trincomalee district. The sampling method for selecting informants was purposive, and the sample comprised a mixture of men and women belonging to both original and resettled families as well as Buddhist monks. Data collection tools used for the study were semi-structured interviews, mapping, focus group discussions (FGDs), observation, and transect walks..

Dispute over the ownership of the village temple

Social changes and administrative boundaries in the village influenced temple supremacy and its consequent impact on the disputes between monks in the 6th milepost temple and the 8th milepost temple. Social ties between the original village families and the resettled families are severely harmed by the conflict between the two temples over control of the village temple. Under the results section, factors other than caste which influenced these power dynamics and how they triggered the conflict between the two temples over the ownership of the village temple, are described.

Nehugama village has undergone socio-economic changes due to the sudden influx of migrant families from *Yan Oya* due to the resettlement process that took place in the *Yan Oya* mega irrigation project. Simultaneously, disputes between the two temples, the 6th milepost temple and the 8th milepost temple that belong to the two administrative districts of Trincomalee and Anuradhapura, over the ownership of the village temple is another social issue that has existed since the origin of the village. In addition to placing resettled families at the center of the conflict, this circumstance has given the resettled families an ideal opportunity to divide themselves into parties or groups according to their own biases and points of view.

The primary causes of conflict and discontent among the original families were the unclear administrative borders, the hierarchical structure of the village temple system, and rivalries between other temples for control of the village temple. The district borders between the *Anuradhapura* and *Trincomalee* districts are placed on a 300 m wide terrain that is isolated from the main road and goes through the village. The temple in the Trincomalee district is known as the 6th milepost temple while the

temple in Anuradhapura district is identified as the 8th milepost temple. A milepost is a small, roughly one-meter-tall cement pillar placed along a highway to signify distance in miles. To show distances, mileposts are placed on the opposite sides of major roadways. Two markers are separated by a mile, or roughly, 1.6 kilometers. Due to their physical proximity to the 8th and 6th-mileposts, these names were given to the aforementioned temples. In Sri Lanka, this is a typical and traditional method of nomenclature.

Most people residing in these two districts are members of two distinct ethnic and religious groups, which exacerbates the problems with administrative boundaries. Administratively, the village temple and the 6th milepost temple are part of the Trincomalee district, which is primarily populated by Tamil people. According to Cosgrove (1998), the landscape serves as a medium for the production of culture in social forms that are situated between capitalism and feudalism as well as between city and country. Moreover, cultural defense explains the problem of administrative boundaries⁶ as well. Here, minorities turn to religion as a means of protection from the animosity of the majority population. The 8th milepost temple monks who live in the Anuradhapura district, where the majority of the population is Sinhala, felt that it was inappropriate to build a Buddhist temple in an area where people of other religions predominate, and the village temple needed to be positioned under their authority. This reveals how cultural defense can influence the thinking of majority and minority populations in a community.

⁶ <https://www.tutor2u.net/sociology/reference/sociology-ethnicity-and-religious-belief>

This argument can be further strengthened by Sivén (n.d.), who examined selected “cultural conflicts” that can be said to exist in majority/minority relations within the context of Western liberal democratic societies. A central argument in her study is that acceptance of cultural variation is crucial in every society with the ambition to call itself liberal. It is also evident in the study that sometimes, when it comes to cultural dilemmas in the West, the concept of “Western values” has been inaccurately equated with the values of liberalism. She has conducted a normative analysis of when it is justified for a minority to claim certain rights concerning culture. The ban on religious symbols in public schools in France (the Muslim headscarf being the specific symbol discussed) is exemplified on this basis. Koopmans et al. (2005) highlighted that strict separation between the state and religion makes publicly visible association with religion to appear problematic because it is viewed as a challenge to the principle of *laïcité*⁷. Siven argued in her study that the principle of tolerance is as important in society as the principle of freedom, and that the two cannot exist separately. Thus, tolerance of cultural variation is crucial in liberal societies.

Connecting to the Resettled Families

The temple in *Nelugama* functioned at a very basic level since it did not have a functioning Sunday school⁸ for the children of the village and

⁷ **Laïcité is the constitutional principle of secularism in France. Article 1 of the French Constitution is commonly interpreted as the separation of civil society and religious society. It discourages religious involvement in government affairs, especially in the determination of state policies as well as the recognition of a state religion.**

⁸ **Sunday school is a teaching day assigned on Sundays every week by the government to the religious institutes and it is institutionalized and governed under the Ministry of the relevant religious affairs.**

performed only regular religious events. However, throughout the Katina⁹ Period, the *Dayaka Sabhawa* of the temple operated intermittently and occasionally performed a *Bodhi Pooja*. Since the offering of a Katina robe is believed to contribute to the accumulation of solid good karma, the word "katina" literally means "firm" or "solid." The Katina Ceremony dates back more than 2,500 years. Because it provides a unique opportunity to gain merit once a year, Buddhists worldwide have upheld this monastic ritual.

The *Dayaka Sabhawa* is a village committee made up of the village's devoted Buddhists. The committee is in charge of organizing village events on behalf of the temple and overseeing the welfare and development of the community. The temple in the village possesses certain basic features such as the *Bo Tree*¹⁰, *Dhana Shalawa*¹¹, and *Vihara Gewal*¹². *Vihara Gewal* are small huts, and monks live in these located in the forest area. Therefore the village temple was called a *vanavaci* temple, meaning a 'forest-dwelling' temple. While another category of monks lives in temples in close proximity to villages and maintain closer ties and interactions with people, the *vanavaci* is a category of monks that lives in caves in the jungle or in wooded regions, mostly for the purpose of meditation.

The chief monks of the 6th milepost and the 8th milepost temples in the Trincomalee and Anuradhapura districts, made ownership claims on the village temple and launched attempts to influence original and resettled

⁹ **Katina refers to the offering of the special robe (Katina civara) prepared and presented to monks who have completed the three months of retreat during the rainy season.**

¹⁰ **The Bo tree, is large and scared and according to Buddhist tradition, the specific sacred tree, (Ficus religiosa) under which the Buddha sat when he attained Enlightenment at Bodh Gaya in Bihar, India**

¹¹ **A place where the meal was served to monks by devotees who prepare and bring it to the temple.**

families to take their side. The original families, however, were very cautious in maintaining their neutrality throughout. In contrast, the resettled families who had migrated from *Yan Oya* were influenced by the chief monk of the 6th milepost temple. This monk had made some overtures to these families such as allowing their children to attend Sunday School and providing *Danaya* slots to resettled families. The chief monk also attended cultural and traditional events organized by these resettled families. Due to such interactions, quite understandably, the resettled families maintained close relationships with the chief monk of the 6th milepost temple rather than with the monks of the village temple or the monks of the 8th milepost temple

Intermittently, the village temple was occupied by student monks sent by the chief monk of the 6th milepost temple. This was because both original and resettled villagers were not able to maintain solid, long-term relationships with the monks residing in the village temple due to their high turnover. Regardless of those challenges and certain unfavorable conditions, the original villagers maintained some links with the village temple and supported its development whenever needed. It was observed that the relationship between the village temple monks and the villagers was rather fragile and determined by the behaviours and attitudes of the monks sent by the chief monk of the 6th milepost temple, who occupied the temple from time to time.

According to Glazier et al. (2020), places of worship have significant responsibilities to play as anchor institutions that encourage community engagement. Moreover, the communities are frequently centered around important, permanent institutions where people congregate, interact, and form bonds. Given that it serves to unite people to strengthen social networks and interactions, the village temple might be

thought of as an anchor institution. Anchor institutions are seen as essential components of the community and are significant players in civic affairs. "Locally embedded institutions, typically nongovernmental public sector, cultural, or other civic organizations, that are of significant importance to the economy and wider community life of the cities in which they are located" is how Goddard et al. (2014) characterize these anchor institutions. The absence of community-sponsored religious activities in the village temple and the regular turnover of chief monks pose a threat to the *Nelugama* temple's social role as an anchor institution. Due to this circumstance, other religious organizations and groups with distinct subcultures are now able to exert influence over the ownership of the temple. The lack of an anchoring function in the village temple of *Nelugama* has allowed for tensions between the original and resettled families and other powerful temples over ownership. As Clopton & Finch (2011) explain, places of worship are "social anchors" in the community, fostering bonding and bridging social capital and acting as access points for connecting members across racial, economic, and gender lines. According to Blachard (2007), segregated churches are associated with segregated neighborhoods in every region of the United States. This segregation was visible to some extent in *Nelugama* as well due to the close bonds that had developed between the resettled families and the 8th milepost temple.

Disputes over ethnicity, majority vs. minority, and local administration

The majority of original villagers agreed that the temple should be owned by the 8th milepost *Purana Raja Maha Viharaya* in the *Anuradhapura* district, even though it belonged administratively to the

Trincomalee district. The majority of the population living in the *Trincomalee* district are Tamil, and during the ethnic civil war, the temples in the *Trincomalee* district were constantly under threat and frequently attacked. These reasons, together with the overbearing influence of the chief monk of the 6th milepost temple, have influenced the preferences and opinions of the original villagers. While the original villagers preferred to be governed by the 8th milepost *Purana Raja Maha Viharaya*, the resettled families continued to maintain close links with the 6th milepost temple, creating tensions between the two groups of villagers.

Since the existing *Nelugama* village temple is located in the *Trincomalee* district, where the majority of the population is Tamil, the resettled villagers are opposed to developing it. *Siripala*, a resettled farmer, explained the reasons for his reluctance and maintained that a new temple should be constructed only for the resettled families.

The project has assigned this fund for the development in Anuradhpura District if we develop the village temple then that funds would be invested in Trincomalee district losing the objective of the project. Since we believe that this fund belongs to the resettled families and the project authorities need to build up a new temple for us in the new village consisting of the resettled families.

None of the resident monks of the *Nelugama* temple ever spent a long period of time living in the village temple, for a variety of reasons. One reason is that these monks had been transferred by the chief monk of the 6th post temple to other temples, even after they forged close ties with the local villagers and the temple had grown to a certain extent and begun organizing traditional ceremonies. The discussions with the monk living in the village temple revealed that a new monk needs time to establish relationships with the locals, which is based on his or her social and

communication abilities. The practice of transferring monks from the village temple at short intervals made the original settler families of *Nelugama* displeased with the chief monk of the 6th milepost temple. These circumstances led to increased suspicion and dissatisfaction over the actions of the chief monk of the 6th milepost temple.

It was observed through these incidents that when community empowerment and resistance are insufficient to offset poor decision-making, this decision-making is susceptible to manipulation. This left the entire community feeling let down and gave rise to spurious tales that monks were leaving the temple frequently due to ghosts in the village temple. Another incident that fed dissatisfaction was the looting of historical ruins located in the village temple. The chief monk of the 6th post temple appropriated the rocky tab used as a *Mal Asanaya*¹³ (Flower Tab) without informing the villagers. It was a precious and historical property owned by the village temple. However, after vehement protests by the villagers, it was placed once more in the village temple premises.

Due to the actions of chief monk of the 6th milepost temple, the relationship between the villagers and temples has become strained. As a result, the original families of *Urawa* and *Omarakada* stopped going to the village temple.. Each sub-village shows a different level of support for the village temple and has different interactions with it. The *Urawa* sub-village worked closely with the temple and supported it in building the new *Budu Madura*¹⁴, *Vihara Geya*¹⁵ and two *Kutira*¹⁶. However, there were

¹³ The tab is made from natural rock and built in front of the Buddha Statue for offering flowers

¹⁴ It is a room where Buddha Statues are placed and used for worshipping and offering flowers to those Buddha Statues

¹⁵ *Vihara* is the [Sanskrit](#) and [Pali](#) term for a [Buddhist monastery](#). *Vihara Geya* is a designated shrine place where monks live.

¹⁶ Small cells built in the temple for meditation.

differences in how the temple hierarchy was regarded by the sub-villages, particularly by those in *Nawa Gammanaya*, where many families had been resettled.

The resettled families were highly influenced by the chief monk in the 6th post temple since they were unfamiliar with the village culture and lacked knowledge of the history and customs of the other temple. By allowing their children to attend the Sunday school or *Daham Pasala*, accepting *danaya* from them, and paying visits to the homes of the new villagers for various purposes, the 6th post-mile temple attempted to wrest control of the village temple, at least to a certain extent. While the community has a duty to look after the monks, the monks are required to take care of the community's spiritual requirements in exchange for food and other essentials. In this sense, possessing a reserved slot for *Danaya* is both a privilege and a duty for villagers.

Another contradictory incident was the plan to construct another new temple in *Nawa Gammanaya* (new village) where many resettled families lived. A distinct land allotment was designated for the new temple in the *Yan Oya* resettlement master plan, and the project contained a separate budget for its construction. The ownership of the new temple, according to the preexisting hierarchical structure of the temple system, is, of course, the main source of contention. Although the 8th milepost temple was in better circumstances to assume the administration of the new temple, the chief monk of the 6th milepost temple sought relentlessly to take this new temple under his wing as well.

his circumstance has given rise to a dispute between the two temples (6th milepost and 8th mile post) regarding ownership of the current temple in *Nelugama*, and the temple that is planned for in the master plan. The 8th milepost temple and 6th milepost temple were both placed above the temple

in *Nelugama* in the temple hierarchy but were at the same level as each other. Even though the temple hierarchy was created to make temple management easier, it has compounded several problems related to ethnicity, resource distribution, ownership, power, and leadership. Since the existing village temple in *Nelugama* is in the Trincomalee district, where the majority of the population is Tamil, the resettled families are opposed to developing it.

The actions of the chief monk of the 6th post temple were sometimes not accepted even by the resettled families due to excessive pressure and authoritarian decision-making. For example, the resettled families received a community centre as part of their resettlement plan. Even before the community centre was officially opened, the chief monk of the 6th milepost temple sent a young monk to live at the new facility. This was an unusual occurrence in a rural village, and the resettled families were upset by the chief monk's conduct. It was considered a forceful attempt to seize the new temple, with the chief monk occupying the center by proxy without being invited. . Everyone in the village holds the chief monk of the 6th milepost temple responsible for inciting disputes and becoming involved in unnecessary temple politics. Even a village-level election has been requested by this chief monk to demonstrate that most people prefer the 6th milepost temple.

The resettled families preferred to establish a new temple for the new village in order to rid themselves of the influence of the chief monk of the 6th milepost temple. The resettled families have expressed interest in the new temple and reported the details of the conflict to the Divisional Secretariat (DS), the most senior unit of administration in the region. The resettled families gradually stopped giving *Danaya* (main meals provided to monks), making gifts for development, and enrolling their children in

Sunday school as a result of the conflict with the 6th milepost temple. Villagers believed that the 8th milepost temple should have jurisdiction over the proposed new temple because it is located in the *Padaviya Pradeshiya Sabha* neighborhood.

Appuhami, a farmer in *Nelugama* who has close relations with the village temple had this to say:

‘Hamuduruwo is very greedy for power and is planning to take both temples under the jurisdiction of the 6th milepost temple. We heard that Hamuduruwo has written to a higher authority on this and has influenced local politicians to convince the higher authority to make those decisions.

There is a well-known story of a chief monk attempting to steal the stone flower tab from the village, a property that has historical value. *Appuhami* mentioned,

‘Hamuduruwo stole the stone flower tab from the shrine area near the Ormarakada irrigation tank and that location is a preserved archeological site. Then, the villagers acted directly against Hamuduruwo, and took it back and located it at the original site’.

The actions and attitudes of the chief monk of the 6th milepost temple in these circumstances disappointed both the new and the original families. The primary requirement of both communities was for a fully operational temple that fosters spirituality, religious activities, traditions, culture, and values. This case demonstrated how, despite Buddhism's emphasis on the opposite, temple hierarchy has allowed chief monks to compete for control and power in order to achieve enhanced authority.

While the situation of the village temple was chaotic, the original families of *Nawagasgamuwa* used to attend the *Sandagiri Viharaya* and maintained good relations with that temple. This temple is located at the 8th milepost. Since the temple typically follows the *Sandagala* tradition

and *Rahatun (Wada Siti Nisa)* have lived there, it was thought that the name *Sandagiri* was given to the building.

The original families had dire need of a well-functioning village temple to establish a positive life culture and spirituality in their lives. When a monk of the village temple had had good relations with the original families, the villagers had contributed towards renovating the temple, building a new *Vihara Kuti*¹⁷ and conducting *Bodhi Pooja*¹⁸ held every Wednesday. *Theravada* Buddhist monks who have gone forth from 'home life' to 'homelessness practice collecting alms-food. However, rarely have *Aranyavaci* monks from the *Arasimale* temple come on *Pindapathaya*¹⁹ to *Nelugama*.

In accordance with the community's conviction that they must look after their monks, the monks are required to take care of the community's spiritual requirements in exchange for food and other essentials. The issue of temple ownership clearly surfaced in *Nelugama* as a result of blurred administrative boundaries, the unstable and changing nature of the village's composition, and the effect of the power struggle of nearby temples related to its ownership. Other incidental problems arose as a result, including functional instability, strained interpersonal ties between the community and the temple, and a split in the community over ownership.

¹⁷ Separate space designed and built for individual monks in the temple premises for the purposes of meditation.

¹⁸ Chanting of stanza written with the purposes of relieving human being from suffering, where chanting is done normally opposite a Bo Tree.

¹⁹ It is a practice of monks who live in the jungle to engage in meditation. . Occasionally they come to villages and go from house to house with a bowl and collect cooked food. Serving food to such monks is considered to be a rare opportunity imbued with much spiritual value.

Belief in Deities

Pulleyar is a locally idolized and worshipped deity. The villagers of *Nelugama* and *Orlukada* are devotees of the *Pulleyar* deity. They believe that *Pulleyar* lives in the *Bo* tree which is located near the *Ormarakada* tank. The villagers offer alms to *Pulleyar*, meaning that they prepare a meal with different kinds of curries and rice and keep the first portion of each type for *Pulleyar*. Then, after a day or even a few hours, the food is given to animals or dumped as waste. This food offered to the god is not considered fit for human consumption.

Earlier, people believed that the *Pulleyar* deity lived invisibly in the village, guarding villagers from all kinds of misfortunes, including the evil eye. Looters and criminals who cause damage to the ruins, especially the Buddha statue, to steal precious stones are some of the largest hazards to ancient archaeological sites. When temples were constructed and sculpted, it was thought that precious stones were stored hidden in statues, especially Buddha statues and other ancient ruins. But once those historically significant statues were damaged, in most cases, nothing was discovered.

In some situations, looters even stole the statues and sold them to antique collectors. Similarly, the Buddha statue in the village was desecrated during the period of civil conflict. It was believed that the crime was committed by looters and not by LTTE troops. These monuments and ruins were transferred securely, with safety measures in place, during resettlement in 2000. The villagers believed that the entire village was shielded by the divine force of the *Pulleyar*, who was worshipped in those ancient places. The archaeological site bordering the *Ormarakada* tank was considered to be the village's shrine, and some residents habitually lit oil lamps and presented flowers to the *Pulleyar* deity in the morning and

evening so that he will always watch constantly over the village community. Villagers perform *Baraweem* and *Oppukireem* there as well.

Some people perceive these deities as influencing occurrences in the world, including their personal experiences. Researchers have explored the beliefs and experiences related to God (or gods) from social, motivational, and cognitive perspectives. One such example is the research conducted by Joshua *et al.* (2023) on social, motivational, and cognitive frameworks used to predict beliefs and experiences involving supernatural entities. Their research on “Beliefs and Experiences Involving God, the Devil, Spirits, and Fate: Social, Motivational, and Cognitive Predictors”, concluded that perceived interactions with supernatural beings were highly correlated with belief in them. With a focus on social, cognitive, and motivational variables, these findings describe the pattern of relationships between comparatively stable predictors of supernatural attributions and offer some logical explanations for how such experiences and beliefs might arise.

To comprehend how the lives of the original villagers were connected with the ideology of the *Pulleyar*, one must grasp what ideology is. Ideology is a person's or a group's doctrine, philosophy, body of views, or guiding principles. Many facets of the lives of the original villagers were tied to the idea of the *Pulleyar*, including prevention, religiosity, spirituality, and protection. The vacuum existing in the spiritual and religious aspects of the villagers' lives may have led them to become emotionally attached to the *Pulleyar* deity. This demonstrates how important it is for people to live a disciplined and organized life, full of meaning. Despite lacking a functioning temple in the village, the *Nelugama* villagers' strong inclination towards embracing a religiously

oriented lifestyle was clearly reflected in their behaviors, attitudes, and practices.

Conclusion

The ownership of the new temple in *Nawa Gammanaya*, according to the preexisting hierarchical structure of the temple system, is one of the main sources of contention that is under scrutiny in this paper. Multiple tensions have arisen as a result of numerous battles between two temples—the 8th milepost and 6th milepost temples - and between those temples and the village people, in attempting to increase the former's influence over the village temple. This power struggle has situated both the original and the resettled families in an awkward predicament. The *Yan Oya* resettlement plan included a new temple in *Nawa Gammanaya* (New Village). The desire for power and control over the hierarchical temple structure as well as the government administration system, which is based on proclaimed geographic demarcations, are the primary causes of the ownership dispute. The disagreement was exacerbated by the tensions and criticisms within the village communities regarding the conduct and attitudes of the chief monk of the 6th milepost temple. .

The interconnectedness of religion and culture has had a significant impact on how people live today as well as how they did so in the past. For the families in *Nelugama*, losing the opportunity to follow their own religion's traditional and cultural practices became a great loss because it forced them to adopt other beliefs and practices related to locally revered deities in order to find spiritual solace. These results underlined how crucial it is for most people to follow a religion and/or belief to have full and orderly lives. This research study examined how disputes among temples regarding temporalities and authority and tensions between temples and

local villagers heightened the dissatisfaction of villagers, causing them to engage in the worship of local deities for protection and material favors.

Villagers' worship of local deities while practicing Buddhism, which does not encourage belief in invisible deities, is used to support another argument. Lay Buddhists of Sri Lanka, in general, seek the blessings of various deities on significant occasions (Iddagoda, 2017). The rural villagers of *Nelugama* also regard gods as supernatural beings who can grant blessings like good health or riches, and, therefore, they believe in the existence of these gods. The *Nelugama* villagers believe that the *Pulleyar* deity is a "supernatural" being who, when properly propitiated, can grant protection or blessings. The findings emphasize that the spiritual void created by temple conflict reinforced the spiritual connections to and faith of villagers in their local, supernatural deities.

In observing rites and participating in religious and cultural events, the resettled villagers were more organized. In contrast to the original settlers, the relocated peasants did not practice any distinctive cultural celebrations or rituals. The farmers who were relocated were more devout Buddhists than the original inhabitants. They seem to be a group of people who have a modest level of religious belief. Since their level of religious activity was quite low, they were desirous of establishing new relationships with the operating temple (8th milepost temple) that they used to attend on days of religious significance.

While the original villagers were rather lethargic when it came to maintaining relationships with the 8th milepost temple, which was operating well compared to the village temple, they did send their children to the Sunday schools run by the 8th milepost temple and gave alms to that temple as well. Low religiosity has been defined by Iddagoda (2017) as having characteristics such as lower-level participation in religious

activities, sporadic trips to religious locations, and irregular attendance at religious ceremonies.

It has been possible to maintain temple hierarchies and so establish power and authority among temples thanks to the historical foundation laid for temple hierarchies. When devotees or followers of a religion do not receive the results they anticipate from religious authorities and institutional structures, they lose faith in these structures and authorities, and this atmosphere fosters tendencies to choose alternative routes or sources of worship.

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