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BUDDHIST ENGAGEMENT IN CHARITY AND PHILANTHROPY IN SRI LANKA

K. T. Silva¹, A. Fernando², T. Widger³

¹*Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya*

²*Centre for Poverty Analysis, Colombo*

³*Department of Anthropology, University of Sussex*

Theravada Buddhism is sometimes understood as a religion with limited engagement with the world. The primary objective of the salvation-seekers is to renounce secular attachments and pursue a spiritual path of salvation by taking up a monastic life. This view is increasingly challenged by emerging religious trends in Theravada societies, including politicization, secularization and increased concern with the current social and economic problems. Buddhist engagement in charity and philanthropy as a means of addressing problems of poverty, disasters and human suffering is another important practice along with the Buddhist engagement in development and social activism. This paper examines the doctrinal foundation of charity and philanthropy in the Buddhist tradition and to observe how it differs from and intersects with traditions of charity and philanthropy in other religions such as Islam, Christianity and Hinduism. It also examines the motivations that inspire charitable giving in Buddhist households and in Buddhist organizations and their possible implications on the development of social policy and social practice.

The present study results from a survey of a representative sample of 750 households in the Colombo Municipal Council area and from interviews with selected Buddhist charities in Colombo.

The preliminary results of the study reveal that the Buddhist households in the city of Colombo are heavily engaged in charitable giving and also in receiving cash, kind and time comparable to households with other religious affiliations. This kind of systematic Buddhist initiatives in social work, charity and philanthropy that happen today seems to go back to the times of the malaria epidemic of 1934 to 1935. This was followed by active engagements during tsunami of 2004 and the war which lasted from 1983 to 2009. Distinctive features in Buddhist charity include *dana* (*sangika* and otherwise), patronage for temple expansions, organ and blood donation, food supply to orphanages and elderly homes. Moreover, the establishment of *dansala* during the Wesak and Poson celebrations is particularly identified as a meritorious activity by the Buddhists. The charitable Buddhist organizations in Colombo draw funds from Buddhist and non-Buddhist philanthropists in Colombo, from volunteer helpers among the youth and the elderly, from state support and also from the contributions of overseas donors.

In conclusion, the Buddhist discourses seek to reconnect spiritual values and material prosperity by providing a meaning and a mission in life, influencing state policies and practices through social activism. Finally, this study critically examines the implications of social justice on the emerging Buddhist ethics of social and political activism.

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