

Role of Buddhism in the Adaptation to the Widowhood caused by the Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka

*Ms. E. A. D. Anusha Edirisinghe
University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka*

*Mr. W. M. Dhanapala Wijesinghe
University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka*

Introduction:

The military conflict in the Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka came to an end in 2008, after nearly thirty years since its first killing in 1978 (Munasinghe, 2000:96). Over one hundred people of all the security forces and rival military groups were killed in the battle field and places where explosion of bombs and shooting took place. A number of Tamil military groups, such as the PLOT, EPRLF, LTTE resorted to violent strategy, with the prime objective of having self-determination for the Tamils living in the two provinces mentioned (Bullion, 1995: 90-92). They fought with the government security forces while eliminating all the rivals without any concern about their nationality and democratic rights. This military conflict and the consequent killing of people produced a new social problem of “war-widows” in Sri Lanka. Still the exact number of war-widows is not known as there was no census. However, it is said: over twenty-thousand women had been left as widows by the military conflict.

Present study is concerned with the ways and means the widows of government security forces had adopted - to adapt their personalities to widowhood. As an all encompassing study is impossible, the study was limited to the religious means of adaptation. As the religion of majority of the war-widows is Buddhism, the role of Buddhism in the adaptation process was studied in depth. This paper brings to light the central role of Buddhist cultural rites and rituals along with the practice of Buddhism, as it played in the adaptation process of widows.

Methodology of the Study:

This study was conducted in the Kurunegala District of Sri Lanka. Kurunegala is one of the main administrative districts of Sri Lanka, with a population of: 1,510,473. Buddhists account for 89% of the population. (Department of Population and Census: 2008). A sample of 250 war-widows living in Kurunegala district was selected on the basis of random sampling method (Bernard, 2008: 149-151). Only the Buddhist families were included in the sampling frame as the study concentrates on the role of Buddhism and Buddhist culture.

The tools of interview and questionnaire were applied to gather data for this study. Data gathered through those techniques were properly processed and analyzed for understanding the nature of the role the Buddhist religion and culture had played.

The Problem of being a Widow:

The death of husbands and the consequent widowhood had a serious impact on both of the psychological equilibrium of individuals and the social equilibrium of families of widows. All the widows had experienced some degree of disequilibrium in

their psychological state and the functioning of the family. Even the physical well-being of widows and their family members had been hampered by the bereavement of their husbands. The period between being widowed and proper adaptation to widowhood and thereby returning to normalcy had been highly decisive for most of the young widows as they had been left with various problems to be dealt with individually.

As was evident from the study, the widows had experienced the following behavioral change and problems at the beginning of their widowhood. Psychological depression was a common experience of all the young widows as they had been strongly attached to their young husbands with dreams to be realized to enjoy their wedded life. (Stroebe and Schut 1999: 197-224). Most had felt the bereavement of husbands as a complete loss of the future with all the dreams they had shared with husbands. This feeling of 'complete loss' had been perceived by some widows as a serious failure of life. Such a perception was found among those completing with others for realizing goals of life in the modern conspicuous consumerist society. Collapse of life with all the dreams was a serious and intolerable blow to the design of future they had drawn with their husbands. Those with children had felt it much more seriously than those without kids. The feelings or sentiments, such as: 'No future without husband', 'My family is over', 'We are the unfortunate', 'We have no future', had stemmed from the very bottom of the heart of widows, and they had seriously depressed by these thoughts.

Such sentiments driven psychological state of those widows had motivated a solitary life causing a breakdown in the network of social relationship with relatives, neighbors and others in the society around them.

Over 85% of the sample expressed that they had restricted contacts with people whom they used to contact on a regular basis before being widows. Questioned as to why they had restricted social relationships, the common answer was now: 'No, I can't get on with them as I have lost everything, they look differently at me. I don't want to be sympathized upon by others even by my children.' These answers carry a serious social problem, that is: the weakening social integration of widows and their family members.

Apart from the above mentioned sentiments, which motivated solitary life and social disintegration thereby, socio-cultural attitudes towards widowhood also seemed as causal factors behind the social disintegration of widows. In Sri Lanka widowhood is not taken into account as a normal incident of the life cycle of married people. A wide-spread attitude found among people in Sri Lanka is that the unfortunate fate of the wife causes the premature death of her husband. Even the premature death of parents is also interpreted in terms of children's unfortunate fate. In a society where people tend to look at widows with such attitudes in mind or the widows share the perception that people look at them with such an attitude in mind, the inevitable outcome is social deprivation. As the widows revealed it this negative attitude is dominant in the minds of the parents of husbands compared to those of their own. Whereas the parents of widows tend to interpret the death of husbands in terms of the unfortunate fate of husbands themselves, the parents of husbands tend to find fault with widows referring to the bad and harmful fate. 'It is not because of any other factor, but because of your unfortunate fate, we lost our beloved son' was a common verbal assault posed on widows by the parents of deceased husbands. Those who strongly believed in horoscope, directly referred to the husband-destructive movements of stars in the horoscope of widows. In the case of patrilineal residence, widows had found it very difficult to cope up with social reactions based as such

attitudes as they are surrounded by the relatives of deceased husband. Being helpless, they had to tolerate such negative reactions and verbal assault for being widows, at any cost.

Until the proper adaptation to the widowhood 91% of the widows had taken for granted attitudes towards their family matters and the care of children and elders of the families. Active and progressive activities of the family, such as the construction of new houses, maintenance of housing environment, cultivation of lands, protection of cultivations, dedication to children's education, assisting close relationship, looking after the businesses and various economic activities had come to stand still in the beginning of the period of widowhood. All had stopped ceremonial activities and even all type of recreation and entertainment for enjoying the day today life. Even the traditional and modern types of food considered as ceremonial were avoided from cooking and consumption, at their own homes and outside. Just living for the sake of living without any particular interest in anything secular, was a common experience of the widows under consideration.

As stated by 62% of the sample, it was after three months of the death of husband (or knowing the death of husband whose death was uncertain for sometime) the widows had been able to stabilize their psychological equilibrium. The grief they felt over the death of their husbands at the battle field had been unbearable for some months. In some cases the widows had been uncertain about the bereavement of their husbands as they had been handed over nailed coffins with the instructions not to open as the dead body was not in a position to be exhibited. The state of uncertainty by remained for months for some widows and it prolonged the period of suffering from the grief.

Those emotional and social problems apart, the widows physical well being had also been affected at the beginning of widowhood as they had paid little attention to their health and continuous about treatment for diseases they had been suffering. This negligence had endangered the illness of some widow patients suffering from diabetics, heart diseases and wheezing, etc. Further 60% of the respondents had noticed a decrease in their body weight. The widows had no special interest in having nutritious food and even in feeding their children with such meals. Parents and other relatives of 35% of widows had taken the care of children leaving their mothers an opportunity to adapt to the widowhood.

Widows perception of these problems and behavioral change is adjusted by three main factors. The first is the legal factor that govern their behavior restricting the opportunity available for remarriage (Ministry of Defense: 2009). The former law did not allow the widows to get remarried while getting the salary of the deceased husband and it deprived the widows, who got remarried to new husband, of their deceased husband's salary. In a country where the female find limited job opportunities, the economic problem of living compelled the women to remain widows sacrificing all the benefit of remarriage. Though the law was amended later on to grant half of the salary of the deceased for the maintenance of children, still the widows hesitate to consider remarriage. This issue made it necessary for them to adapt to widowhood at any cost (Lopato, Z.H, 1973: 407-418).

The second factor refers to the cultural values and norms pertaining to the first marriage and remarriage. Remarriage is not equally treated as first marriage and the prestige and social status assigned to remarriage carries a secondary level civil status.

The cultural values and norms always encourage the widowhood without any conjugal relationship with a man and good conduct of looking after the children. Second marriages are also perceived as a threat to the children of the first marriage.

The third factor that discouraged the remarriage of widows was the strong influence of the parents and family members of deceased husbands on the wives to remain widows. Parents of deceased husbands, who had economically assisted their sons to construct houses, purchase furniture, and other properties lands did not like to see the widows enjoying those properties with the new husbands from remarriage. Therefore, they always advised the widows to remain without considering remarriages and to concentrate on children. Some had even threatened the widows to deprive them of all the possessions in case they try to start a new life of remarriage. Whereas the parents of deceased wanted them to remain widows, the parents of widows wanted to see their daughter living a new life with remarriage. This contradiction was a common experience of 91% of the widows under consideration.

These three factors discouraged the remarriage and consequently encourage the widowhood and it is because of this reason the women had to adopt to the widowhood adopting to various strategies. Among them, religious strategies dominated.

Religious Rites and Rituals as Adaptive Strategies:

Adaptation to the widowhood was indispensable for the widows if they were to overcome the problems they faced after being widows. Close observation on the adaptive strategies, those widows had adopted clearly revealed the role that the Buddhism and Buddhist Culture had played. All the widows believe in Buddhism and practice it at various levels depending on their level of understanding of Buddhism and their exposure to the Buddhist rites and rituals. A series of Buddhist rites, rituals and practices along with Buddhist teaching were identified in the study of widows in Kurunegala district.

For 70% of the widows, the adaptation to widowhood had started with the Buddhist religious funeral rites performed on the date of burying the dead body of the husband. It is on the date of funeral religious rites and rituals in the name of deceased are started Sri Lankan Buddhist culture. Buddhist monks are invited to perform religious rites at home and invoke merits to the deceased. Normally funeral rites are performed by the chief incumbent monk of the village temple. The number of participating monks are very limited; but the funeral of a war hero is a special occasion: he has died for the motherland, the Nation. Therefore, the maximum number of Buddhist monks are invited to participate in the performance of funeral rites. According to the information provided by the widows, the number of Buddhist monks participated in their husband's funeral ranged between 15 and 40 monks. The more the Buddhist monks participate, the higher the religious outlook of the last ceremony. The widows were very happy about the higher member of monks participated and it was interpreted in terms of meritorious achievement of the deceased. 'It is his fortunate which brought about such a higher number of monks to carry out his last rites', was an interpretation of many widows. Such participation itself had contributed to console the grief of widows. It was evident from the reiteration of the higher number of monks and their seniority in the monk's order.

The next factor which had been conducive to console the grief of widows was the funeral orations made by the chief Buddhist monks and other important people. The funeral orations delivered by Buddhist monks usually consisted of three components such as the Buddhist teachings of life and death or the journey of the cycle of 'samsara', good-virtues of the deceased war-hero and the importance of the family and its service rendered to the village and the country. Usually monks take one or more hour for preaching on those three themes. The first part of the oration focuses

the participants attention to Buddhist teaching of impermanence of life and all worldly affairs and thereby convince the importance of spiritual development (Gombrich, 1971). In such sermons, Buddhist teachings on death is elaborated with the intention of convincing the reality of life and there by consoling the grief of widows. All the widows accepted that their keen attention to Dhamma Sermon at the funeral occasion helped them to reduce their tension and grief.

The second important religious rite is performed on the seventh day after the death of a person. All the widows confirmed the performance of Seven-Day-Alms-Giving rite; however, in some cases the exact date of death was not known to the widows and the family members. The date officially cited by the authorities was taken as the date of death and counted the dates for religious activities. The 'Seventh Day' religious rite has two major events: the first being the Dhamma Sermon delivered at the home of the deceased in the evening, usually between 7:00pm to 8:00pm on the 6th day after the death, and the second being the rituals of alms-giving to Buddhist monks in the morning or noon on the seventh day. The family of widow was not isolated by the neighbors and villagers as they gather at the home of widows and spend the seven nights without sleeping. Therefore the doors of the house of deceased are not closed for seven nights in most cases. This traditional custom had enabled the widows to be social rather than being isolated from society.

It is a normal practice in Buddhist culture to invite a monk to deliver the seventh day Dhamma Sermon at the home of the widow (Dhammavihari, 2006). All the widows of the sample had performed this religious rite. The Seventh-Day-Dhamma Sermon is also organized for invoking merits to the deceased to have a good rebirth without suffering, while preaching about the Buddhist teaching to the participants. Neighbors and others had participated in those religious ceremonies in the hundreds with the family members. The widows were very satisfied with the number of people came to the Seventh-Day-Dhamma Sermon and they still recollect the number of participants and the tea and dinner.

Seen from a sociological point of view, such collective performance of religious rites had provided the widows with a great opportunity to engage in a meaningful act and console their grief. The practice of alms giving (dana) on the following day was also of very importance for widows to cope up with problems. 'Seventh Day-Alms-Giving is completed with the offering of the set of eight essential personal properties of a Buddhist monk. This alms-giving was a big event as it is offered to more than five monks. It is known as 'sangika-dana' to the Maha Sangha and such a ceremony of alms giving has a special meaning in Buddhist-culture. 'Sangika-dana' is costly, as it contains various types of food and other offerings for personal use of the monks. The widows of this study had spent over hundred thousand rupees (as an average) for this ceremony. Spending such an amount of money for this religious rite had added a higher meritorious meaning to the event and the feeling of happiness it brought about had appeased the widows.

The seventh-day-alms-giving is followed by the Third-Month-Alms-Giving in Buddhist culture. That is much more complex than the former and well organized event. Third-Month-Alms-Giving is also offered to the Maha Sanga as a 'sangika-dana. For this religious rite the widows had invited an average of 25 monks. The number of Buddhist monk participating to accept the alms is important for the families to perceive the magnitude of the religion rite and the meritorious outcome of the performance. All the widows were talking about the higher number of monks participated in the event third- month- alms -giving.

This religious ceremony is also organized on the date the death of husband that completes the third month. It was also followed by several religious events. The preaching of Dhamma in the evening of the previous day of the alms giving day had been organized by all the widows with their close relatives and friends. Apart from the 'sangika-dana' to monks, the widow had made some financial donations to the temples in their own village and to popular temple in remote areas. Those donations had been offered to mark the third month of the deceased with a religious meaning.

All the widows had made such donations out of the money they were granted by the Government as compensation for the deceased. Over hundred thousand rupees had been granted to each widow or the family. As was evident from the research study, the conscience of widows had not allowed them to spend the money for secular purposes. Utilization of the financial grant for religious purposes was much more meaningful to these widows as they had gained the money in the name of deceased husband.

The 'third-month-alms-giving' is followed by the 'annual-alms-giving' rite. This was also perceived by the widows as an essential religious practice in the name of deceased husbands. Annual-alms-giving is also performed by the widow and their families.

The religious rites performed on the seventh day, third month and the first death anniversary had manifest functions and latent functions. The manifest functions of these religious activities were to invoke merits to the dead husband. But latent functions of them had a positive impact on the process of adaptation to the widowhood. The religious engagement had enabled the widows overcome the problems and negative behavioral changes they experienced at the beginning of their widowhood. Here, spending of time was important for the widows and the religious rites provided them with enough task to be carried out and thereby to spend the time meaningfully. Once the funeral rites were completed, the widows had spent their time for preparing for the seventh-day-alms-giving and once it was completed they had been preparing for third month alms giving while conducting daily religious practices such as offering of flowers to Buddha. Preparation for the third-month-alms-giving required renovation of the house and the clearance of gardens. All the widows had cleaned their home garden and color-washed [*painted*] their homes. This was not with the secular intention of enjoying the life but spiritual intention of performing religious rites and rituals. However, this practice provided the widows with an attractive home environment facilitating the process of adaptation to widowhood. None criticized these activities as they were done as a part of the religious rites of the arrangement of furniture and other goods in the house from old environment to a new one. Children of the widows were also happy to see their houses cleaned and color-washed [*painted*]. Keeping an enlarged photograph of the husband in the living-room and another one at the place of worship at the home was also common in all the houses by the third month of the death. Most of the widows used to worship Buddha at the home offering flowers and lighting oil lamps in the evening and this ritual is followed by practice of worshipping the deceased with children. It had become a routine in 95% of the widow families. These rituals had blinded the widows to religious life and thereby it consoled their grief.

It is interesting to note that the religiosity of widows and their family members has increased to an advanced level compared to that of prior to the death of husbands. Higher devotion to religion has encouraged the generosity of widows. The salary of deceased and other financial gains had been lavishly spent for religious purposes by the widows. Construction of religious monuments is a part of Buddhist culture. The

widows had constructed hundred Buddha statues, twenty towers for the temple bells, thirty walls for protection of Bo-Trees, 20 stair-cases for the facilitating the peoples movements in temples. 15 Buddhist shrines, 12 shrines for gods and goddess in Buddhist places of worship, 40 flower stands for offering of flowers oil lamps. Apart from those mentioned above they had provided donations to renovate temples for the construction walls for bodhi-trees, construction of a Dhamma Hall in temples, provisions for electricity and pipe-born water for temples. Fifty widows had white-washed temples and stupas - famous among Buddhist devotees. Ninety percent of the widows reported to have regally contributed an average of four thousand rupees to annual religious procession of the temple in their village, in name of their husbands. The annual 'Katina Pinkama' - the rite of offering a new robe to the chief incumbent of the temple is perceived by the people as the highest meritorious activity and any contribution to this 'Robe Offering' ceremony brings about merits to all living and deceased. Therefore all were interested in giving donations in maximum amount economically possible for them.

Increased religious devotion among war widows had not only enriched the material culture Buddhism but also the non-material culture by means of encouraging the practice of what the Buddha taught. As revealed by the sample of the study, 71% of widows were not regular listeners to Buddhist Sermons at the temple or over Radio and Television on a regular basis in the period before being widows. They had listened to them depending on the time available. However, this behavior had undergone a complete change after being a widow for 65% of respondents. Now they used to listen Dhamma sermons delivered at the village temple and also over Television and Radio on a regular basis. The daily routine contains time for listening to Buddhist Dhamma Sermons and also to practice by meditation. The widows expressed their willingness to practice Buddhism and enjoy the spiritual happiness resulting from such practices. Meditation at various levels at different religious places had been practiced by 55% of respondent widows.

They had resorted to those religious practices with other widows or their family members. The collective participation had provided them with a means of adaptation to the widowhood. Meditating widows had a good network of social relations with other war widows and even others interested in spiritual development of mind.

The other aspect refers to the education of those widows interested in learning Buddhism in depth. Over 40% of widows had started reading religious books and articles with the intention of being familiar with the real Buddhist doctrine. They said that it was after being widows they started understanding the real Dhamma by self engagement and reading instead of just imitating religious offerings and worship. This can be cited as an advanced trend in the process of adaptation as the religious education and deep understanding of Buddhism enabled them to realize the nature of life and the death. They spent their free time reading religious books written by popular Buddhist monks for preaching the Dhamma in an attractive and meaningful manner. Some regularly observed sill (the eight precepts to be observed) on each Poya Day (full moon day) and got information useful for the practice of Buddhism.

The other aspect of their religious life is associated with the welfare of special people suffering from disabilities and the general public. Higher religiosity and the awareness of Buddhist traditional welfare activities had motivated the widows to dedicate their time and money for the welfare of the public. The most visible act of such welfare consciousness is the construction of 'bus-stops' along public roads. Forty five bus-stops have been constructed by the widows and their family members.

In some places the bus-stops had been well constructed with permanent roofing and seating facilities. Some had made even drinking water available for the passengers to quench their thirst. Construction of roads, keeping a big pot of drinking water at huts built for passengers to rest are traditionally considered as meritorious deeds. This tradition had been reinforced by the popular practice of erecting bus-stops for public use. The name of deceased soldier or the war hero is written on the wall with the statement that the particular bus-stop was constructed as a monument for the deceased. One can see even the photograph of the particular war hero stuck into the bus-stop. This widespread welfare-practice has benefited thousands of passengers while easing the government's burden of social welfare and development.

Not only bus-stops, but also facilities such as public-wells, public roads, bridges, books and equipments for schools, furniture and instruments for rural and urban hospitals, shelters for poor people, etc., had also been provided by the widows and their families. Such welfare and development activities had been carried out by them with the primary intention of invoking merits to the deceased husbands. However, the latent function of those activities was the development of social integration between widows, their families and the community. They had been able to get rid of the solitary life of widowhood and by means of continuous involvement in such activities.

This religious behavior could be attributed to the acts of giving donations to the beggars, disable and others seeking economic refuge. The widows had adopted a regular practice to feed beggars and disable people in institutions on the date of each year they commemorate the death of their husbands. Not only food but also they provide other essential things to make them satisfied. This regular practice has reinforced the Buddhist tradition of looking after the needy in the society.

The formal aspect of religious adaptation included the activities organized by the 'Authority for War Heroes' - known as: *Rana Viru Seva Adikariya*, in Sinhalese language. A branch of this government-authority is located in each provincial secretariat and the officials attached to it organize various programs to look after the disabled war-veterans and the widows of war heroes. A close look at their activities revealed the magnitude of the attention they had paid to organize Buddhist religious rites for commemorating the war heroes and thereby to console the grief of widows and family members. They were invited to participate in the religious activities organized at a central camp for security forces. The main religious function was the chanting of Pirith (selected Buddhist Sutras). Almost all the higher ranking officials of the relevant security forces, political leaders, and the relatives of the deceased war heroes collectively participate in such annual religious event. As the organization of this event takes place annually it has become a part of their process of adaptation to widowhood. They annually expect it and eagerly participate in pure white-attire. They had made of this opportunity to see the other war widows and exchange views with them. It has provided them with an opportunity to be acquainted with other widows and share problems with them. In this manner this particular annual religious event contribute to the adaptation of widows to widowhood.

Conclusions:

Adaptation to the widowhood was evident from three major aspects, such as: psychological, social and environmental adaptation aspects. The psychological adaptation is attributed to the personality adjustment to accommodate widowhood as something normal and to maintain psychological equilibrium. The above mentioned religious activities and the widows' dedication to perform them had contributed to

adjust their personalities to widowhood. Even the religious interpretation of life and death along with the practice of Buddhist rites and rituals had helped the widows to adapt to widowhood successfully and look after their children as a normal citizen of the community.

Religious involvement had directly contributed to reestablish the social integration of widows. The interest in solitary life and the behavior of evading social association had been changed positively by the increasing social relationship through religious activities.

The collective performance of religious rites and rituals had strengthened the social position of widows and their free movements in the society. The family roles played by the husband had been replaced by widows themselves with the assistance of family members - successfully. They had reached an advanced level of social adaptation to accommodate widowhood and thereby playing social roles effectively.

Adaptation to the family environment without husband was a problem for all the widows at the beginning and the religious activities explained above had immensely contributed to solve it. Religious rites had reinforced the regular gathering of relatives, neighbors and friends at the residential places of widows and such gathering of people reduced the solitary environment of the house. Even the children benefited from these religious events as they were provided with opportunities to be with their friends and relatives. In a social environment where remarriage is almost impossible and risky, the one only alternative available for the widows is the proper adaptation to widowhood and thereby live a satisfactory life. This requirement of adaptation had been effectively fulfilled by the Buddhist religious teachings, rites and rituals followed and practiced by the widows and their family.

References

Bernard Rusell, H. (2008), *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative & Quantitative Approaches*, Fourth Edition, Rawat Publication, India

Bullion, A.J. (1995), *India Sri Lanka and the Tamil Crisis 1976-1994: An International Perspective*, Printer London

Department of Census & Population, (2008), *Annual Report*, North Western Province, Sri Lanka.

Dhammavihari, (2006), *Dharma: Man, Religion, Society, Government in Buddhism*, Buddhist Culture Centre, Dehiwala, Sri Lanka

Gombrich Richard F, (1971), *Buddhist Precept and Practice*, Motilal Publication, Delhi, India.

Lopato, Z.H, (1973), *Self Identity in Marriage and Widowhood*, *The Sociological Quarterly* 14, Summer, 14(3)

M. Munasinghe, S, (2000), *A Soldiers Version: An Account of the on going conflict and origin of terrorism in Sri Lanka*, Market Information Systems (Pvt) Ltd, Colombo

Ministry of Child Development and Women Affaires, (2010), Sri Lanka

Ministry of Defense, Public Security, Law and Order, (2009), *Secular of Salaries*, Sri Lanka.

Stroebe and Schut (1999), *The dual Process Model of Coping Bereavement*, *Rationale and Description*, *Death Studies*, 23 (3)