

Role of Religion in the Rehabilitation of Offenders

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Introduction

As crime prevention and control of the re-imprisonment of offenders is a serious problem in Sri Lanka. In analyzing the number of convicted and un-convicted prisoners through the statistics of the Prison Department, Sri Lanka those show that there are different tendency patterns. Majority come from urban areas and relationship between education and criminal behavior. The following table shows the number of prison inmates from 2002 to 2010.

Table 1: The number of convicted and un-convicted Prisoners¹

Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Convicted	25023	27681	26898	33034	28732	31306	33566	37872	32128
Unconvicted	82187	88535	87456	96007	89190	99513	102245	108868	100491
Total	107210	116216	114354	129041	117922	130819	135811	146740	132619

There is an intolerable congestion in Sri Lankan Prisons due to the large number of convicted and un-convicted male and female prisoners are held together. This fact itself creates a lot of problems as they are to socialize back after the judgment is served. Some have to serve the sentence in short period whereas the rest have longer durations. Especially when selecting the convicted prisoners for rehabilitation the prison authorities have to face a lot of problems. Imprisonment has not been an effective way of controlling or preventing crimes.

To rehabilitate the offenders there are numerous programs. The researchers found out that the religious rehabilitation proved to be very effective than the vocational rehabilitation. Even though the rehabilitation programs are conducted, the prison authorities revealed that there is a tendency of fifty percent [50%] of inmates getting re-imprisoned.² It is an indication that the effectiveness of the rehabilitation programs is very low.

This study was organized and conducted to have a scientific understanding of religion based rehabilitation of prisoners in a selected prison in Sri Lanka. Bogambara prison located in Kandy, Sri Lanka was selected prison in and the annual meditation program conducted to sort term convicted prisoners and long term convicted prisoners. It has supported to rehabilitation of prison jailed or capital punishment and other serious crimes. Vipasshana Bahavana was annually practiced for ten days and over 100 inmates

¹ Department of Prison Statistics, 2007, p.13- 45; www.prisons.gov.lk.09.10 2011

² Kodippili P.W, 12.09.2011

were participated it. This study mainly concerned ten days meditation programs and other religious activities inside and outside of the prison. These programs were really supported their behavioral changes of inmates.

Methodology of the Study

The research area is a closed, main prison at Bogambara, Kandy, Sri Lanka. Convicted prisoners higher than the un-convicted prisoners in the Bogambara prison. There are more than 2000 convicted prisoners and 700 un-convicted prisoners in Bogambara prison. Purposive Sample 40 inmates were selected for data gathering in section of “G” ward. G ward was selected for the sample most of inmates representative ten days meditation program. The tools of in-depth interview and observation methods were applied to gather data for this study. Data gathered through those techniques were properly processed and analyzed to understanding the nature of the role the religion in rehabilitation of offenders.

Limitation of the Research

Limitations of the research were that only the offenders were selected because only they are selected for the rehabilitation program. Those who are serving death penalty were also selected. The collection of data from all prisoners was difficult but it was understood that there is a tendency for the religious rehabilitation program by those prisoners who serve long-term sentences and death penalty. Since the others are selected for many other rehabilitation programs they were not considered.

Personal Information of the Respondents

In this research there were both married and unmarried respondents. Out of the forty respondents thirty seven [37] were married and the rest were unmarried.

Table 2: Marital Status of the Respondents

No. of inmates	Married	%	Unmarried	%
	37	92.5	03	7.5

Those who are married are the head of the households in their families. As they get imprisoned there is certain negative effects work on their families. Therefore, it is of great importance that they should be rehabilitated soon before they get back to the society. The age group of the majority of the offenders was between 41-50 [52.50%]. There were 27.50% who are between the ages 30 to 40 years of age. Another 20% was those who are over 50 years of age. Within this group there are many who were convicted for grave crimes of rape and murder.

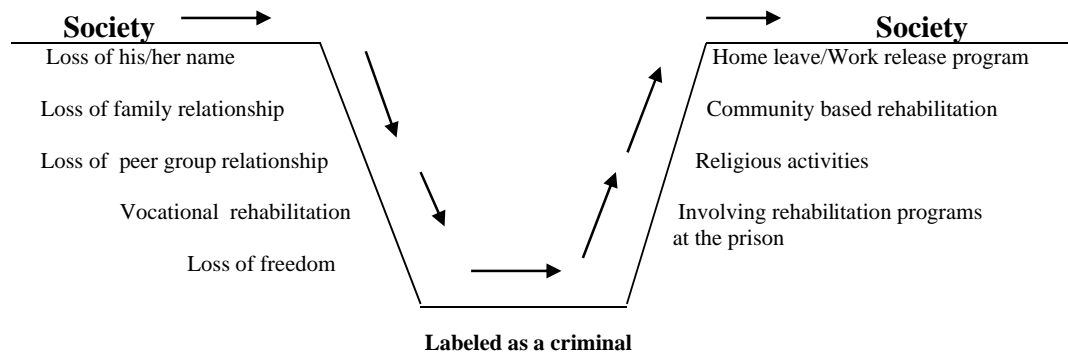
The level of education was also an important element in evaluating the anti-social behavior of the offenders and planning the rehabilitation programs. There were thirteen [32.50%] inmates who did not have the literacy capability at all. There are another twenty three [57.50%] who had studied up to GCE O/L and they had some literacy capabilities. Those who did not have literacy got the religious knowledge from those who have the literacy and there were certain attempts to get the younger inmates into these religious programs with the support of the leaders who represent the older generation. All the respondents were Sinhalese Buddhists and the observations and interviews aimed at the Buddhist religious rehabilitation programs.

The Need for Rehabilitation

Since inception the Prison authorities have understood the value and the importance of a correction process for both minor and major offenders. Rehabilitation has been conducted in various ways within the prison system and the religious aspect of rehabilitation is given a priority. Vocational rehabilitation helps the inmate to have a better future economic security by learning a specific skill that he or she can utilize in the world of work as the inmate is released. The religious rehabilitation conditions the mind of the inmate by achieving self-control in many ways. The change of behavior in general inmates and the conditioning of the mindset of the inmates who have received a death sentence are the basic objectives of religious rehabilitation.

When an individual gets imprisoned he loses his identity, in many ways. First, he loses his name instead he is given a number in the prison. Second, he loses his intimate relationships with family members, kith and kin. Further to a great extent he loses most of his basic human rights like freedom. In a social setting he or she has to face labeling and social stigmatization which could have greater effects even after his release as a convict or innocent non-convict. During the time the inmate stays at prison the prison authorities try to counter all these negative effects that could affect the character of the prisoner.

Figure 1: Model of Rehabilitation



It is believed that in any rehabilitation process there should be a process that helps the individual to develop his self-confidence back and the increase of social recognition. Further it should be able to inculcate new set of values top the inmate and develop the ability to foster social relationships. The main objective behind the rehabilitation process in the prison is to integrate the individual back into the society as he or she was before. It should not make him feel that he is an unwanted or a different individual even after this rehabilitation process³.

The religious programs conducted in the prison aimed at convincing the inmate the wrong act he or she has committed and to rebuild his or her life by understanding the failure or failures in his decision making process that led to the imprisonment. In the research it was understood that the religious programs facilitated in developing the personality of the inmates. Through the initial interviews the researcher could find out that the inmates have developed anger against the society at the initial phase of conviction. All inmates in the sample revealed that they were suffering from a psychological trauma. To counter all these psychological conditions the religious

³ Karunathilake k, 1991,131

programs were of immense help to the inmates. During the data collection process the researchers received a firsthand experience of the value of the religious program conducted at the Bogambara prison in inculcating self-control to improve self-discipline.

Religious Programs on Rehabilitation:

Vipassana Meditation Program

Meditation is a system of mind cultivation or mental training literally meanings mental development. It is mental activity and eradicating woe and sorrowful situation. Another benefit of meditation is not getting perturbed in the day today life, resulting overcome mental problems and reduce the risk of developing some physical illness such as heart attack, blood pressure. Direct approach to the path leading to the liberation and correct understanding mind and body. According to Buddhism there are three basic principles of Meditation namely Seclusion (Viveka):

- Kaya Viveka (Liberation of the body feeling)
- Citta Viveka (Liberation of the mind from negative situation)
- Upadhi Viveka (complete liberation of the mind from normal activities the mind experience)⁴

Vipassana means to see things as they really are, not only as they seem to be. The technique of Vipassana is based on the Sathipatthana Sutha. Sathipatthana means the establishing of mindfulness.⁵ According to the psychologists the proper practice and application of meditation enables one to solve many problems. Vipassana mediation. It is treatment for physical and mental ailments it is similar to using a certain medicine for a particular disease.

Vipassana is an art of living. It is technique of self – observation, truth observation and self-exploration by oneself only. Vipassna frees the individual from all the negativities of Mind such as anger, greed, and ignorance. It leads happiness, liberation and full enlightenment.⁶ Therefore a Vipassana meditation directs to change behavior of the prisoners.

Vipassana meditation program is an annual program conducted formally at the Bogambara prison in Kandy, Sri Lanka. The ten day Vipassana Bhavana [meditation] program is conducted by the Dhammakuta Meditation Center at Hindagala, Peradeniya and the first three days are reserved for the Anapanasati Bhavana.⁷

Anapanasati is a very important practice to all, in order to develop concentration. Anapanasati meditation supports cultivation of the mind in order to acquire peace and happiness during all times of the day.⁸ It is very important to buildup peaceful environment in the prison. All those who have joined this program said that during these three days they found it very difficult and it was both physical and mental training. Further they told that the initial uncomfortable nature began to reduce regularly from the fourth day onwards. From fourth day onwards they have to practice Vipassana Bhavana and the last day is reserved for Maithree bhavana. That is the day of Metta. During the first nine days the participants cannot talk to each other and the last day they are allowed to do so. On the last day they are allowed to spend the day with their family members

⁴Gammanpila M, 2008,p.69

⁵Ahir D.C,1999,p.09

⁶Shah S,1999,p.101

⁷www.dhamma.org,06.10.2011

⁸Wijetillake D.G.,2004,p.60

also. The environment for the entire program was arranged by the prison authorities themselves. There is a specific diet selected for the entire ten days. Twelve instructors from the Dhammakuta Meditation Center at Hindagala, Peradeniya, Sri Lanka arrived at the prison and the inmates can get the help from them. All the participant inmates are allowed to talk to them only. The meditation program commenced each day at 4.30 am and concludes at 9.30 pm. Every hour ten minutes break was given and during that time all the problems or inconveniences of the participants can be informed to the conductors of the meditation program. It was aimed at changing the behavior of the participants by following a regular pattern during the entire time period.

The inmates who participated in this program confessed that it gave them effective results in getting their behavior changed. Rather than being a part of any other rehabilitation program this specific Vipassana Bhavana program gives a better mental and moral training to the participants.

Out of the sample 31 inmates [77.50%] were directly engaged in this program. The rest [22.50%] did not have the opportunity to join the same due to the demand it has but they are following the same under the guidance of those who are privileged to participate in it. The Senior Welfare officer of the Bogambara prison in Kandy, Sri Lanka explained the researchers that a large number of inmates apply for the program but due to the limited space and the resources it has the authorities have to limit the intake to one hundred participants. During data collection it was found out that all the respondents too have applied for the program.

According to the responses of the inmates the researcher could formulate an idea of the nature of the program. Out of 31 respondents [26%] said that they have taken part in the same four times. Eight respondents 08 [26%] of inmates have participated in either two or three times. Only fifteen inmates [48%] have participated in it once. According to the responses the researchers could understand that there is a tendency to participate the program repeatedly. Further it was found out that there has been a behavioral change of those who have taken part in that. The respondent 'I' who had the opportunity to participate in the program mentioned that:

*"I have done something evil knowingly or unknowingly. I corrected myself and got to know where I have gone wrong. Religion helped me a lot in that. At the initial days at prison I was totally helpless"*⁹

The response given by the inmate 'III' too is vital in understanding the changes taken place in behavior.

*'I was very angry as I was imprisoned. I did not do anything wrong. I envied the lawyers. But a good friend met at the prison changed everything. He introduced me into meditation and meditation has changed my life a lot now'*¹⁰

He has served as a police officer and convicted for death penalty charging the murders of a Professor of a higher educational institute and his wife. When he was on leave at home he had heard these two murders and has gone to report it. Allegations have been leveled against him for being in the place where the murders have committed. It was informed to the researchers by the prison authorities that he has changed his unruly behavior shown at the beginning to a highly disciplined form of life at prison now. The inmate 'III' too was in the opinion that the meditation process has a significant influence

⁹ Indepth Interviews, 2010

¹⁰ Indepth Interviews, 2010

on his life in general and behavior in particular. The inmate 'IV' summarized in a few words the effect of the program.

'I got maximum use out of what the prison gave me, that was the Vipassana bhavana, means meditation'.¹¹

Majority of respondents who have followed the Vipassana meditation program had been doing well and were extremely helping the day-to-day activities of the prison.

Those who serve the death penalty have come to the conclusion that they have no opportunity to get back into the mainstream society again. Therefore, to reduce the psychological trauma generated out of that condition religion is the only alternative mean. Religion helps to rebuild his lost mentality and understand the reality of life. So it is proved that the religious rehabilitation programs would bring remarkably effective results on those who are convicted. Those who have got the opportunity to participate in this Vipassana Bhavana program had added that into their daily routine.

The number of inmates [29] who practice meditation within the cell is [72.50%]. The rest conduct many other religious activities even though they do not practice meditation. Other than the main shrine room there is a separate shrine room in each and every building.

Reading Dhamma Texts

Out of the total number of inmates at Bogambara prison in Kandy, Sri Lanka the majority is Buddhists. How they are rehabilitated through religion or how religious programs cater to their rehabilitation process was the main objective behind this study. All the respondents [40] who participated in the in-depth interviews claimed that they have understood the real nature of religion after they enter the prison. Most of them were literate and they have cultivated the same during their stay at prison. Most of those who have received death sentence got used to utilize the library to a great extent because they are not made a part of any other rehabilitation process. So they have used their time to read books. During the time in the library they have read the books written on *Tipitaka*, *Abhidhamma* and meditation practices by Sri Lankan Buddhist monks and due to this their knowledge on religion has got improved remarkably. Since they have got the basic background knowledge needed for meditation practices the rehabilitation programs conducted were very much facilitated from the part of the inmates. All 40 [100%] respondents acknowledged that their self-control was mainly achieved through the knowledge they received from these Buddhist books.

Chanting Pirith at the Cells

The number of inmates who chant *pirith* within their own cell is 15 [37.50%]. In Sri Lankan society there are lay groups who chant *pirith* other than Buddhist monks and those who chant *pirith* in the prison act as a lay *pirith* chanting group. They help the prison authorities in specific occasions when their services are needed. For example, during the times of the heightened ethno-national conflict this group has engaged in chanting *pirith* in honor of the soldiers who have been sacrificing their lives for the integrity of the motherland.

Sila Program

Buddhists believe that observing Sila helps one to discipline one's behavior to a great extent. Sila controls the mind, body and the word. The researchers understood that

¹¹ Indepth Interview, 2010

the Sila program is another successful religious activity conducted at the Bogambara prison to correct the behavior of the inmates. Out of those who have received the death sentence there are thirty six [90%] who join the Sila program. Generally sort term convicted prisoners, the remanded prisoners to join the program. The prison authorities supply all the facilities needed to make this a success. All poya day programs commence at 6.30 am and a Buddhist priest from a neighboring temple is invited to deliver the sermon. All the inmates get together to participate in this program and they listen to and watch the religious programs broadcast on radio channels and telecast on television channels.

The main Buddhist religious festivals like Vesak and Poson are celebrated with a lot of glamour and Sila programs are successfully conducted during these days. Each Vesak poya day the President grants freedom to a large number of inmates who serve terms for minor offences. So the inmates consider this also as they stay within the prison. Some who have received short-term sentences earn for this forgiveness granted each year. The Welfare Unit of the prison informed that between two hundred to three hundred inmates take part in this.

Dhamma School on Sundays

In analyzing the prison statistics of those who get imprisoned, it was learnt that there is a high tendency to get those who have not attended a school at all and those who have attended only up to grade six.¹² Simultaneously it was revealed that these inmates have not attended the dhamma schools. Therefore, to change the behavior pattern of these inmates there are specific programs are conducted in Bogambara Prison in Kandy, Sri Lanka.

It was learnt that most of the inmates who constituted the sample had not attended the Dhamma School. A very few respondents like six [15%] had connections with the temple from childhood but the rest were not socialized through the temple. But there is a group of nine young inmates who are really interested in the Dhamma School and the percentage is [22.50%]. One of them sat the Final Examination of the Dhamma School. The Buddhist priests in the neighboring temples and the lay people reside in the area help the prison authorities to continue the Dhamma School.

Bodhi Pooja Program

This is one of the programs that the inmates take part regularly. It helps to console the mind of the inmate. Out of the sample 28 [70%] participate in this activity. The morning session is attended by many inmates rather than the evening session. The cleaning of the area is also done by the inmates themselves before they commence the Bodhi pooja. After the Bodhi pooja the inmates engage in their regular day-to-day routines.

Dhamma Sermon on Sundays

There are some inmates in the sample who have made it a habit to listen to the sermon broadcast on radio channels on each Sunday and this number is thirty four [85%]. They commented that it helps them immensely to formulate their behavior better. Few of them cited as examples the *Jataka* stories that helped them to understand how to behave in critical situations countering the mistakes they tend to commit. So it was revealed that the religious programs were of paramount importance in shaping personalities of the inmates by bringing in positive changes. Since they were not inculcated with the

¹² Prison Statistics of Sri Lanka, 2007

differences between good and evil and merit and sin during childhood, this kind of exposure had been extremely good to change the attitudes, norms, mores and values. As they learn these things and internalize the training and the knowledge they receive, those would help them as they get back into the mass society.

Given up Bad Habits

A majority of the respondents [22] in the sample were vegetarians [55%]. Most of them have to abstain from smoking and liquor as they have to spend a life in relation to religiosity. But it was understood that some inmates use certain illegal means to have drugs within the premises for their own consumption. Even though some inmates were unable to move away from the deviant behaviors that they have got used to before they were convicted, the prison authorities take a great interest in curbing the reach of drugs to the prison premises. The prison authorities believe that at the initial stage the inmates too find it difficult to get adjusted to the new situation but as time goes on other than a very few most of the adhere to the rules and regulations pertaining to the prison life.

Rituals conducted at the Temple of the Tooth

The Bogambara prison inmates have the opportunity to engage in the religious activities take place at the Temple of the Tooth. The Temple of the Tooth is in a close proximity to the prison. People from time immemorial consider that serving the Temple of the Tooth is a meritorious act. The prison authorities give an opportunity for the inmates to join the annual August procession of the Temple of the Tooth. From one hundred and fifty to two hundred inmates serve the initial preparation workload of the Kandy *Esala Perahara*. This is a good opportunity for the inmates because they are hoping to get back to the mass society. As the general prisoners encounter with the other people from time to time they are having an opportunity to mix and work with the others. The participation of the ritualistic activities at the four *devalas* allows the inmates to get their mental stress, anxiety and complications reduced.

Other Religious Activities

The role religion plays in converting the individual to a better social status can be accepted without doubt. The inmates in the prison belong to different religions and the prison authorities have arranged various religious activities allowing all inmates to take part in the religious programs of each and every inmate's specific religion. For the eighty [80] Christian inmates in the prison there are specific religious programs on Saturdays and Sundays and they are allowed to celebrate Christmas with all the glory and the grandeur.

There are hundred and twenty [120] Hindu inmates and they take part in their respective religious activities every day. For them there is a specific Dhamma school also conducted at the prison and the arrangements are made by the Welfare Unit of the prison to have the services of external visiting teachers who are excelled in the knowledge of Hindu religion.

Around two hundred [200] Islam inmates too have the opportunity to take part in their particular religious activities mainly on Sundays and the other days too. The prison authorities have arranged the visit of a religious leader from the main Mosque in Kandy on Fridays to conduct special religious praying. Other than that the Islamic inmates are provided with the opportunities to celebrate their main religious festivals like Ramalan, Id-UI-Fitr, and Milad-Un Nabi, The Holy Koran has given to them for their religious praying. In this study the main focus is laid on the Buddhist inmates at Bogambara prison in Kandy, Sri Lanka

Conclusion and Recommendation

It was found out that the religious rehabilitation programs conducted at the prison had a tremendous influence in changing the characters and the behaviors of the inmates. The Vipassana Bhavana, which is the main religious event in the religious rehabilitation program had greater effects on the personality formation of the inmates. Meditation has given them a sense of training for self-control and it has helped them to realize the nature or reality of life. Further these religious programs have minimized inter-personal conflicts that could arise at the prison life. All forms of sentences; short-term, long-term or even those who have received death penalty too get a kind of a consolation from these programs. The steps should be taken to have a formal and systematic evaluation of each and every inmate those who get back into the society to verify whether they continue the training or the discipline they have received during prison life.

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