

Countering Old Age Loneliness at the Electronic Temple Through Dhamma Counseling

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Introduction

One common social phenomenon regularly observed among the aged individuals in urban Sri Lanka has been that the interaction they increase with the media; newspapers, radio and television. To counter some of the aspects that are associated with modern, urban life style, the aged individuals seek the comfort of media. Many sociologists such as Abercrombie (1996), Carey (1989), Fiske (1987) and Lull (1995) have studied the effect or the relationship of media with culture to find out the effect of media on individual's life. In this study it was studied that how the Sri Lankan urban Buddhists counter loneliness that is associated with their old age by using the television [electronic temple] in receiving Dhamma counseling. In conducting this study fifty males and fifty females from urban areas [Kandy and Colombo] were selected. After a preliminary literature survey, in-depth interviews were conducted to find out their world view, the type of psychological conditions that they experience, their ideas of Buddhist philosophy and what type of spiritual solace that they seek from the religious programs that are telecast in different Sri Lankan television channels. From a sociological perspective both functionalism and symbolic interaction theory and from the perspective of media the social action theory were considered.

Discussion

Ageing has been a critical issue in Sri Lanka like that of the global level. Jary and Jary (2005) define ageing as 'the chronological process of growing physically older' (p. 8). The population statistics released by the Department of Statistics, Sri Lanka has shown that the percentage of aged people increases each year.¹ World Bank and United Nations reports claim that Sri Lanka has continuously experiencing one of the fastest ageing populations in the developing world and in the South Asian region.² Siddhisena (2004, p.2) cites that 'the proportion of the population over 60 years has increased from 5.3 in 1953 to 10.8% in 2003 and it will further rise to one quarter of Sri Lanka's population by 2030'.

In demography a society is considered an ageing society when a decreasing birth rate and the increase of life expectancy proportionately contribute to the higher number of elderly people in that society. Along with this phenomenon there are novel social conditions that are on offer for the Sri Lankan social scientists to study. Jary and Jary mention that the older people tend to develop 'negative stereotyping and diminished social status' (2005, p. 9). In general usage the older people is considered a burden and dependents signifying that there are some negative economic, political, social and cultural benchmarks. Abercrombie et al (1988) cite that the mainstream sociology has neglected the general area of social ageing until the late 1960s. As the ageing population increases in modern industrial societies each year there emerged the disciplines such as 'Sociology

¹ Deput. of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka. 2004a. 'Bulletin on Official Poverty Line for Sri Lanka', Colombo.

² Report No. 43396-LK, Sri Lanka Addressing the Needs of an Aging Population, May 28, 2008, Human Development Unit, South Asia Region and United Nations, 2001, *World Population Prospects-The 2000 Revision*, New York, United Nations. - retrieved on 15 August 2011 at 9.00 am

of ageing' and 'Social gerontology' to study the consequences of the ageing scientifically. Social gerontology treats ageing in four different dimensions as follows³:

- a) a contingent process relating to the social and demographic structure of human groups
- b) as an aspect of personal status in the life cycle
- c) as the dynamic component of social stratification in terms of generational membership and
- d) as a contemporary social problem raising questions about exploitation, victimization and stigmatization.

In this specific study the second and fourth dimensions are of greater importance. It is understood that in sociological analysis the sociologists are not interested in age as a chronological category but the social and cultural values and expectations attached to it. The values changed in relation to the social changes have developed certain doubts whether the elders are more prone to be away from work, social commitments as in their youth and high degree of sociability.

The traditional Sri Lankan social structure has been in transition after it was subjected to westernization which led to both industrialization and urbanization. As the society has been in transition many elements that it comprises began changing. The family structure, gender roles, occupational patterns and the role of media were some of the elements that were under the influence of this initial social change. The nature of the family moving from an 'extended' to the 'nuclear' status was a crucial point. In social research the historical debate discusses that the changing social status of the elderly against the processes of modernization and industrialization. The loss of extended family established the elderly without the support of a large number of kin who are around them.

In the study it was found out that most of the households had three generations where the children of the older parents live with their children. Many second generation families had either one or two children. In only five instances there were three children in the family. There were two 'empty-nest' families in the sample. Even though there are three generations present, the family structures convince that the elderly people do not have inmates to foster mutual social relationships as in traditional societies. Further it was noted that all urban houses are covered with walls denying the freedom of nurturing inter-personal, informal relationships as they wish. It was noted that mostly there were formal relationships as some families have got settled in urban areas recently.

Table 1: Sample of the study

	Colombo	Kandy
Male	25	24
Female	25	26
Total	50	50

Table 2: Number of elderly parents in a family

Gender	Colombo		Kandy	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Single parent	10	10	06	08
Both parents	15	15	18	18
Total	25	25	24	26

³ (Abercrombie et al, p. 7)

Most of the urban parents who had been spending their old age after retirement find that their children and in-laws are on work and the grandchildren either schooling or perusing tertiary education in here or abroad. So till the grandchildren return after school or institution at two thirty pm or four or five pm and their own children return after work at four or five pm the parents are lonely. So the old age in an urban setting is a life of isolation. Loneliness has become the most intimate and the treasured friend of most of the retired elders in urban Sri Lanka. Tabor's Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary (2002, p. 1255) defines loneliness as 'the anxious, depressed or dysphoric mood that occurs as a result of physical or psychic isolation'.

The deterioration of the physical appearance, physical ability and the mental status may affect the life of an elderly person to a great extent as he is aged. Different males and females in the sample revealed that they had numerous psychological, cultural, social, economic, generational and educational disagreements at the domestic sphere that affected their identity. This is not a sudden development in their personality and this is the continuation of the phenomenon 'midlife crisis'. Midlife crisis is defined as 'the doubt and anxiety experienced by many people in their fifth decade' (Jary and Jary, p. 389). As the youth is now a thing of past, the middle aged individual begins to feel differently about life. So it makes anyone to look back and reflect upon the successes and failures of oneself, education, career, social position and future. In this process he or she begins to develop a form of uncertainty about the future. Children leaving family to form neo-local residences and migration are some other instances that the elderly parents undergo a transition in their personalities.

A considerable number of parents [20, 20%] in the sample were lonely during the day time, and a few others [80, 80%] were fortunate to have the company of the servants. Some have been spending the old age in a calm and quiet way enjoying the effects of loneliness [66, 66%] whereas a few could not bear the loneliness they were experiencing and incidentally all of them were single parents, means either the husband or wife is dead [34, 34%]. Grief generated out of bereavement was their main cause. While living in a life of isolation the old parents have a few alternatives to resort to. According to their own voices those are 'to relive in the sacrifices made for the children in the past, helplessness at present and the uncertain future; mainly the life after death'. Many of them are anxious of their 'salvation' and this feeling itself drives them to seek the solace of a spiritual life.

Weber explored John Calvin's (1509-1564) concept 'Salvation anxiety' in explaining how individuals feel about their fate and it is relevant to the sample studied here. The Buddhists are also afraid of what would happen to them after death. The sins committed and the merits accumulated during one's life time decide where the one will be born; heaven or hell, after death. As one gets old he or she begins to think of the merits accumulated during the past. Most of the respondents in the sample had one common idea that their lives were extremely busy committed to the family and the children so other than religious formalities they have not done anything significant. As now they are in retirement they have more time to devote for religious activities. Weber believed that religion became a driving force or a source of motivation in secularized capitalist societies. In relation to the Sri Lankan context a similar atmosphere is seen. In such a context the Buddhist religious programs telecast in the Sri Lankan television channels have been a blessing in disguise for the religious quest that these individuals need to satisfy.

Television has become the most prominent cultural artifact of the late 20th century. It is important not only as a form of entertainment but also as an information provider to its viewers. It can introduce new value systems, modify the existing attitudes and challenge the belief systems, norms and mores of the viewers. Commercialism has

changed the outlook and the rationale behind the television programs. Because of the success and the power the television began to enjoy, the television channels became the medium of transmitting and inculcating religious knowledge. Garrod and Lawson (2007) present televangelism, which was extremely popular in America, as ‘the use of television to reach a mass audience for the preaching of evangelical or fundamental Christianity’ (p. 277).

Television was introduced to Sri Lanka in 1979 and the state-owned Independent Television Network (ITN) launched its operations on 13th April. By now there are twenty three Analog Terrestrial Networks, seventeen Local television channels on Satellite or Cable Networks and Four Sri Lankan Owned, Pay Television Networks. This fact itself shows that the expansion of the electronic communication system in Sri Lanka and Hettige et al (2001) discuss the impact of television on Sri Lankan culture, its change and new identity formation. The Buddhist Channel also enjoys a prominent place among Buddhists in the country and abroad. The Sri Lankan television channels cater to the majority Buddhists as the target viewers. The more the number of viewers it has the advertisers are interested in those channels. The researcher compared the total television time against five main leading television channels in Sri Lanka against the time devoted for religious programs. It was noted that in poya days which the most important religious day is for Buddhists in each month the television channels allocate more time and it is a significant increase.

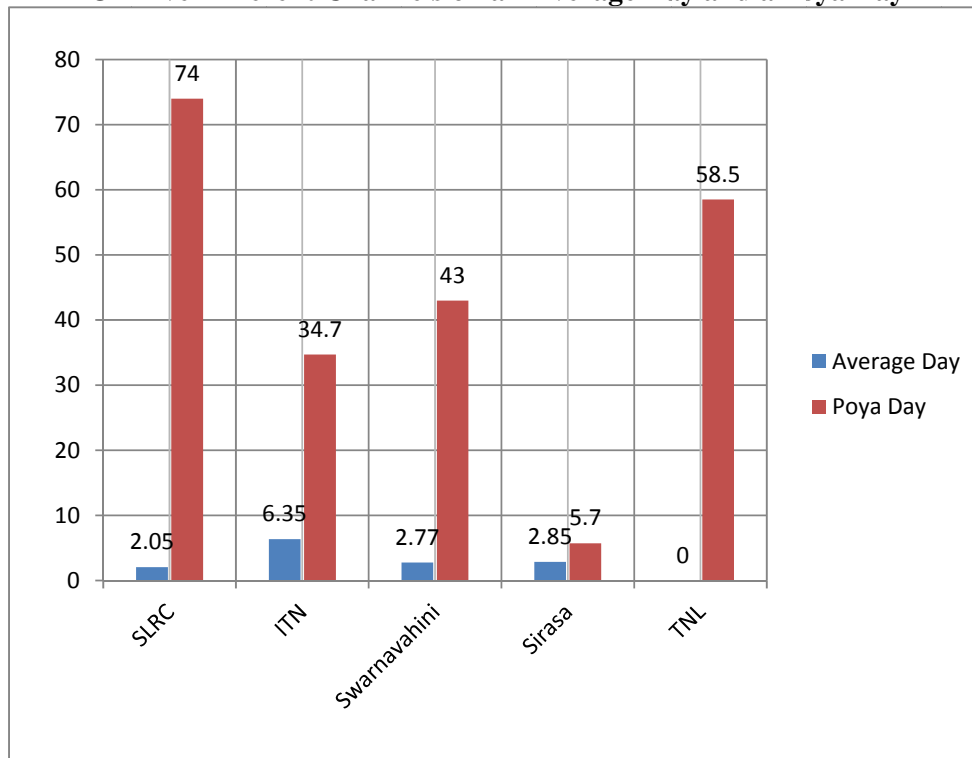
Table 3: Total Television Time against the Religious Programs on Five Different Channels on an Average Day and a Poya Day

Channel	Average or Poya Day	Total television time in minutes [a]	Total time on religious programs in minutes [b]	% of [b] against [a]
SLRC	Average Day	1215	25	2.05
	Poya Day		900	74
ITN	Average Day	1180	75	6.35
	Poya Day		410	34.7
Swarnavahini	Average Day	1080	30	2.77
	Poya Day		465	43.0
Sirasa	Average Day	1050	30	2.85
	Poya Day		60	5.70
TNL	Average Day	692	---	---
	Poya Day		405	58.5

The above Table shows the remarkable increase of time allocated for religious programs on poya days.⁴ The specific Buddhist religious days like Vesak and Poson, the television channels allocate more time telecasting live programs such as delivering sermons by eminent priests, pirith chanting, documentaries on sacred places in Sri Lanka and abroad, Jataka story or any other drama that has a moral value and Dhamma discourses. Both Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (SLRC) and ITN are state owned television channels whereas the other three are private channels. The Directors and the program producers of each channel have responded to the majority Sri Lankan Buddhists’ religious sensitivity.

⁴ Sunday Observer TV Guide, Sunday September 11, 2011, Vol. 94, No. 37., pp. 119-120.

Figure 1: Total Television Time against the Religious Programs On Five Different Channels on an Average Day and a Poya Day



During the preliminary survey the researcher understood that most of the aged parents who live in urban areas have got used to the television for religious activities. It does not mean that they never frequent to the temple for religious purposes but the life style at present in the families and their personal reasons have made their attendance to the temple limited at times. The reasons given by different parents are significant. A mother from Colombo said that:

'My son works in a private firm, so even on Poya days he has to work. He does not like my going to the temple which is two kilometers away since I suffer from arthritis. When he comes home it is too late to go to the temple. So I am used to the television to watch a lot of things and I learn a lot'.

A father from Colombo also expressed the same idea.

'I am very old now and I have many ailments. So if I go to the temple it is a trouble for me and others. So I prefer to stay at home because there are many religious programs on different television channels'.

Many old parents from Colombo and Kandy said that they are unable to attend the temple due to various reasons so they are restricted to residences. The sufferings from many diseases, their children being busy and the availability of numerous television programs have made them think that they are not going to lose a lot. After the preliminary survey the researcher found out that many aged parents are happy with the role played by

television on their lives. The researcher was informed that most of these aged parents have made it a habit to watch and listen to the religious programs telecast or broadcast on television and radio early in each day. So it means that there is a positive social aspect of the television. A father from Kandy mentioned that:

'I studied religion at school from grade three onwards, after O/Ls we did not pay much attention to religion even though we attended temple on poya days and participated in religious festivals and processions. During A/Ls religion was neglected totally. While employed there were very few times we engaged in religious activities and we were thinking of building our own house and the education of our children. But now we are old. As we get older we feel insecure. When we think of death and life after death we think of being religious. Television gives a good opportunity because I always watch Dhamma discourses. Many intellectuals representing lay and the clergy take part and we learn the complex aspects of religion in a simple way'.

The above example summarizes the world view of the Buddhists. All Buddhists believe that being born a human is a rare opportunity. With the influence of Hinduism they firmly believe in rebirth also. What one does in this life will decide one's life in next birth. So they have to accumulate merits when they can, to have a better life after death. A mother from Colombo replied that:

'I believe in rebirth, if I do good only I will have a better life in my next birth. So I want to do good to be born in a better place. I always remind myself the good things I have done in this life. I think I will be born in a good place'.

In analyzing the answers received from the respondents the researcher could formulate how individuals use, perceive, interpret and respond to the media. The media dependency theory developed by Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin DeFleur (1976), the Cultivation theory developed by George Gerbner et al (1986) and the Social action theory developed by Anderson and Meyer (1988) have certain relevance to the social conditions experienced during the study.

The social action theory developed by Anderson and Meyer, suggested that media has hidden messages that influence their audience. Unlike the original research the media content has a positive influence on the viewer. According to them the meanings arise in relation to the 'intentions of the producer, the conventions of the content and the interpretations of the receiver' (p. 48). In all these religious programs the main aim was to win the people for the channel and they have used different methods to attract the audience. Since the individual is unable to visit some important places the television crew visits the specific place and bring it live to the sitting room of the viewer. So the viewer actively participates in the programs that are telecast. John Fiske (1990) was also in the opinion that the television viewers involve in creating meaning and interpreting the program's text. A comment made by a mother from Colombo was a real testimony to this.

'I wanted to visit India before I die. But I don't have money. My children also cannot spend a lot of money on that pilgrimage. The television brought all those places I wanted to visit during the last poya day and now I am very happy. I feel like I have been to the place. I saw places like Bodhgaya, Kusinara, Lumbini and many other places I have learnt and read. If I can watch that program again I am happy'.

So it was understood that most of the Sri Lankans during their old age wish to go to the birthplace of the Lord Buddha and many sacred places associated with the life of Gautama Buddha. But due to financial restrictions, they are incapable and they do not want to be a burden to their children reminding the media dependency theory. According to the media dependency theory developed by Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin DeFleur (1976) audiences depend on media information to meet needs and reach goals. In this context the need is the spiritual satisfaction of the aged individuals. The goal is to counter loneliness through Dhamma counseling. The elders have more knowledge through books and religious newspapers and the content of media messages and their effects on audiences are vital. The main idea of the Cultivation theory developed by George Gerbner is that the 'persistent long term exposure to television content has small but measurable effects on the perceptual worlds of audience members'. In doing this the social institutions and media systems interact with audiences to create needs, interests, and motives in the viewer. The most important fact to note was that most of these theories consider the effect of media as negative but the researcher identified the opposite.

The researcher got to know that almost all in the sample have similar views in analyzing the type of the psychological conditions the aged people undergo. All of them were suffering from different psychological conditions but in a wider range. They were suffering from loneliness, insecurity, depression, anxiety, stress and social isolation. A considerable number of respondents voiced their opinions about the existing conditions. A father from Colombo explained:

'True we are old and suffer from many diseases. Those are natural. But I think while having medicine for the body we need a special therapy for the mind. The best mental therapy comes out of religion. The best treatment for the dejected mind is Buddhism'.

A mother from Kandy replied that:

'No use of taking medicine. As you become old the sufferings are natural. I know some of these things do not have medicine. Best thing is to accumulate merit for the next life'.

So, many of them were in the opinion that the freely available religious programs in the television find them solace in their old age. Thompson (1995) mentions this type of interaction as mediated quasi-interaction. The aged people foster a monological relationship with the television. Some admitted that they have one-way communication while watching the program and later a discussion with oneself over the matters learnt. Normally counseling takes place as one is 'listening to someone and giving them advice about their problems'. In this context it is the aged individual listening to the television program and receives the advice given by the venerable Sangha or any other lay intellectual. The Dhamma counseling takes place in relation to technology. The electronic temple; television, has become the source of religion, guide and advice for the problems created by the old age.

It was noted that irrespective of the level of education and socio-economic background all the respondents in the sample were aware of the ideas of Buddhist philosophy. They knew that the solution to all these problems is to live an exemplary life, which means, a principled life. The cycle of life – the journey of Samsara, should be stopped. Many of them have become vegetarians and are devoted to meritorious acts.

They cherish Dhamma as the most important thing in their lives. Nearly fifty percent in the sample had cassettes, DVDs, CDs, books and newspapers to watch, listen and refer as they want. Rather than visiting the temple and getting the doubts clarified by the priest they have used to use the technology available. A very few (5%) have joined the internet websites that cater to Buddhist philosophy. A mother from Colombo mentioned that:

'I need something to engage in when I do not have anything specific to do. That is why I ask my children to get me these books. They are highly valuable and I have a very good collection of Buddhist resources. I share those with my friends who are also like me. We talk about these things. Now we realize that only thing one can take with oneself is the good things one does'.

Many aged individuals in the sample confirmed that they have nothing to achieve other than a peaceful death. Almost all were happy that they had produced worthy children and they perform well in the society. They are happy with the grandchildren and ready to leave this world for somewhere which is beyond their comprehension. The only hope is the hope for a better life after death. The only way to achieve that is to remain the rest of life in a responsible manner. In obtaining that they need to utilize everything that they can have and one way is to utilize the religious programs to improve their spirituality. The spiritual solace would eventually lead to their destination. A father from Kandy stated that:

'Death is inevitable. We have to face that reality. If we have not done anything wrong we should not be afraid. But as lay people we all wish to be born in heaven. That is also craving in one way. Yet according to Buddhism it is the thought process at the decisive moment takes one to heaven or hell. That also we cannot control. I take it as it is'.

Conclusion

Old age is a critical phase in anyone's life. It is assumed that any lay person gets disturbed when he thinks of death. Since he cannot avoid he has to face it. Like in many other challenges in life the respondents have decided to take this challenge also. In meeting this uncomfortable experience they have to have a clear mindset. Loneliness associated with the old age aggravates the fear of death and uncertainty of life. The aged individuals convinced the researcher that they use religion to condition their minds on brevity of life, impermanence and transience. The most powerful medium for this is the religious programs telecast by television. The audio-visual effects internalize the religious teachings in their minds in a very powerful manner. At this moment they need an amicable counselor who can share their sentiments. Even though the television is inanimate the aged individuals consider television as the counselor that can pave way for them to their salvation.

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