

WORKPLACE INTERACTION AMONG THE SINHALESE (BUDDHISTS) AND THE MUSLIMS IN SRI LANKA

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to explore the level of interaction through measuring the workplace interaction among the Sinhalese and the Muslims in Moneragala, which is one of the 25 administrative districts in Sri Lanka. The Moneragala district consists of two major religions, Buddhism and Islam, forming two religious communities living side by side in a few traditional villages, namely Bakinigahawela, Godigamuwa, Kanulwela, and Medagama. This is an ethno-religious study of workplace interaction among the Sinhalese and the Muslims in the said location, and the 'workplace interaction' has been prepared as an indicator in order to measure the level of interaction among them. This was measured through a questionnaire survey on a total of one hundred respondents were drawn from the Sinhalese and the Muslims. The samples together with the above mentioned indicator showed that the Sinhalese and the Muslims in Moneragala were having positive workplace interaction. Therefore, the significance of the study lies mainly showing the level of interaction among the Sinhalese and the Muslims in Moneragala area.

Keywords: workplace interaction, Sinhalese, Muslims, Moneragala, Sri Lanka.

INTRODUCTION

Moneragala is one of the 25 administrative districts of Sri Lanka. This district was also called as Wellassa by its ancient residents. It is located in the Uva Province in the South Eastern region of Sri Lanka. It has a terrain extension of 5639 sq KM. The geographical land space is 2nd to the largest district in Sri Lanka next to Anuradapura. In 2012 the total population was 451058 in Moneragala. Of these people there are 97.7% rural and 2.3% estate and most of them in the estate areas are Tamil people (Department of Census and Statistics, 2012). Moneragala has been maintained as a separate district since 1958 (Gwillim Law, 2003). In Moneragala, the Sinhalese (Buddhists) are the predominant ethnic group, consisting 426762 of the total population (Department of Census and Statistics, 2012). They speak Sinhala an Indo-Aryan language. The Tamils are second major ethnic group in Moneragala, consisting 11997 of the population including Sri Lankan Tamils and Indian Tamils (Ibid). The Muslims are the second largest minority of the district, consisting 9809 (Ibid).

The Muslims settled down in Moneragala or Wellassa area during the time of Portuguese rule (1505-1656) onward from Central (Kandy) and Southern (Matara) provinces of Sri Lanka and increased their settlements gradually during the Dutch (1656-1796) and British regimes (1796-1948) (Razick, 2007). At present, they are spread out in 06 of total 11 Divisional Secretariat (D.S.) divisions, namely Medagam, Bibile, Badalkumbura, Wellawaya, Buttala and Moneragala, and the majority of the Muslims are living in Medagama division. In Moneragala district, there are 05 villages having Muslims in majority, namely Alupotha, Bakinigahawela, Godigamuwa, Kanulwela and Medagama. Also there are many town areas and hamlets where the Muslims are living as minorities. Very few Muslims live in other D.S. divisions namely Katharagama, Thanamalvila, Madulla, and Siyambalanduwa. In Sewanagala D.S. division Muslim settlements are not to be seen (Razick, 2007). The Sinhalese are the majority in all of above mentioned D.S. divisions in the district.

The history of Sri Lanka reveals that Moneragala (Wellassa) region was very popular in the ancient time. The arrival of Aryans (06 B.C.), visits of king Dutugemunu (B.C 161-137) (Educational Publications Department, 1992) and the activities of Veddhas (Huntsmen) (Nur Yalman, 1971) are the examples to support this view. Therefore, the history of Sinhalese in Moneragala district began with the arrival of Aryans who were the first to come to this area. The Veddhas are the progenitors of the Sinhalese and Dutugemunu is a well known Sinhala king in the history who visited to Wellassa in ancient time (Razick, 2007).

There are evidences that the Sinhalese and the Muslims have been maintaining a cordial relationship in Sri Lanka along the history to date, including Moneragala district as well (Razick, 2007). But in recent past years in Sri Lanka, the number of religions such as Islam and Christianity have been misinterpreted among the societies by a few third party Buddhists nationalist groups (Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2013). Therefore, there is a suspicious situation developed that whether this could be made the divisions among the societies, especially between the Sinhala-Buddhists and the Muslims in terms of social interaction in Sri Lanka. Given the above backdrop, this paper attempts to examine the workplace interaction among the Sinhalese and the Muslims in Moneragala district through a questionnaire survey, with giving emphasize to the current context of Sri Lanka.

CONCEPTUAL NOTE ON WORKPLACE INTERACTION

The word interaction has different meanings in various disciplines. In the view of Sociology, interaction is a mutual or reciprocal action between two or more individuals. Also it is a dynamic interplay and relationship of joint determination between two or more variable (Borgatta and Borgatta, 1992). In the book of E. Shaw (1981) interaction defines as when individuals emit behaviour in each other's presence, they create products of each other or they communicate with each other (Quoted by Alwi and Rashid, 2011). Social interaction is a process of changing sequence of social actions between individuals or groups who modify their actions and reactions according to the

actions by their interacting partners (ibid). In the religious perspective, generally the social interaction is a prominent role plays by all religions in order to be kind to the fellow beings (Alwi and Rashid, 2011). All religions promote peace and harmonious life. One way to achieve it is through interaction among the believers and non-believers of their specific adherence. With regards to Buddhism and Islam, both have their own perspectives of social interaction and their attitude towards other religions.

Workplace interaction is considered by many authors to be the outcome of well-being between individual characteristics and is to be understood the significance attributed to the idea of well-being in the workplace by employees. Workplace is not merely a place to work but rather a place where people could interact and understand about others way of life. Hence, the Muslims in this study either directly or indirectly have to work with the Buddhists in few villages of Moneragala district. If they are working under governmental sectors definitely there will be Muslims working together with them. If they are self-employed, for instance, a farmer or a businessman, they still have to deal with the majority Buddhists. So, when discussing sharing workplace, Muslims cannot isolate themselves from their fellow Buddhists. Thus, measuring the sharing workplace includes the frequency of the fairness of people in their dealings with others.

METHODOLOGY

The data were collected from the villages namely Bakigahawela, Medagama, Kanulwela and Godigamuwa which are located in Moneragala district and two communities are living there mixed. Altogether 100 informants have been selected as participants of this study from the above villages based on the convenience sampling technique. To measure the workplace interaction among them, simple frequencies and percentages, as well as means are calculated. Based on responses of the questionnaire, 74% were Sinhalese and 26% were Muslims from those 100. The study shows that the Sinhalese male respondents were the majority with 55% followed by the Muslim males 18%, Sinhalese females 19% and lastly Muslim females constitute the smallest number, 8%. The frequency for each sex group showed males were 73% followed by the

females 27%. The detail explanation of the result is as follows:

WORKPLACE INTERACTION AMONG THE SINHALESE AND THE MUSLIMS

There were two types of questions designed to the respondents when measuring interaction in the workplace in this study. The first, sought 'yes' and 'no' answers, while, the second type requested the respondents to select a proper answer based on five point likert scale. With these two types of questions, there are six items to measure interaction in the workplace of the respondents. Items one to five are using the 'yes' and 'no' options. Only item six uses the scale.

The item one attempts to find whether there are non-Sinhalese or non-Muslims in the workplace of all the respondents, either Sinhalese or Muslims. Majority of 90% indicated that there were non-Sinhalese or non-Muslims in their job settings. There were 10% of respondents who have no colleague of different religious faiths in their workplace. Interestingly all of these respondents were Sinhalese. It can be assumed that some of the Sinhalese were working among their ethnic group without sharing the workplace with the Muslims. While, all the Muslims who are the minority, have to share their workplace with the Sinhalese in Moneragala district.

The item two seeks to examine whether the respondents were having close relationship with non-Sinhalese and non-Muslims in their workplace. More than half of the respondents answered that they have a cordial relationship with the people of different faith. In particular, 57% positively responded, while, 43% negatively. However, 06 of Muslim respondents and 37 Sinhalese respondents said that they have no close relationship with non-Muslims or non-Sinhalese in their workplace. It might be due to religious differences, for some strict Muslims and Sinhalese (Buddhists) were quite rigid about their faith and as a result they tend to have no close relationship to non-Muslims or non-Buddhists either in their work setting.

The item three attempts to find whether the respondents were comfortable to share work setting with the colleagues of other religious faith. About

80% of respondents answered positively, whereas, 20% negatively. It could be find that due to lack of information and knowledge of other religions such as the issues of religious customs, rituals and practices, the respondents tend to have bad feeling of sharing their work setting with other religious believers.

With item four, is to find whether adherents of other religious faiths understand the respondents religious obligation. Generally, with the majority of 60%, indicated that both parties, Sinhalese and Muslims did understand the religious obligations of the two religions. 40% stressed that other religious believers at their workplace did not know about their religious duties.

The item five asked the respondents whether segregation of religious groups exists in their job settings. Almost all of them answered that there was no such group existed in their workplace. It can be observed that 92% of the respondents noted 'no' while, 8% claimed negatively that there was separation of religious groups in their workplaces.

Item six is designed to ask the respondents whether religion guides it followers negatively like being arrogant and ignorant as well as lazy, stupid and backward. For the Sinhalese, the question was about whether the Muslims were arrogant and ignorant persons. Specifically, 70% strongly disagreed and 11% agreed with item six, 12% were uncertain and 7% strongly agreed. For the Muslims, the question was about whether they agreed that the Sinhalese are lazy, stupid and backward persons. 77% of the respondents strongly disagreed with this item, while 18% were uncertain, whereas only 5% strongly agreed.

CONCLUSION

Based on previous discussions, there is no doubt that the residents of Moneragala district were having positive interaction in their work settings. This is because majority of them did not have any problem and even comfortable in sharing the same career and place of work with the other believers. Another important point is majority of the respondents reported that there is no such segregation occurs in their workplace. Above all,

both groups either Sinhalese or Muslims insisted that their colleagues would help each other as a team in completing a task regardless of their religions.

Also it can be said that the Sinhalese and the Muslims in Moneragala were having positive relationship in their workplaces due to several possible reasons. Firstly, the Muslims had no communication problem. The Muslims who live in everywhere of the Island are fluent in speaking Sinhala language except Eastern and Northern provinces (Hussein, 2010). By so doing, they are easily accepted by the Sinhalese. This scenario could make the process of communication smooth and effective. Secondly, most of the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka are very kind and innocent from ancient time onward (Kamalika Pieris, 2013). During the Kandyan kingdom (1469-1815) the Sinhalese kings and its people allowed the Muslims to settle down in Kandy region and donated their lands to settle down and even to build the mosques (Dewaraja, 1994). Therefore the Muslims normally assimilated by the Sinhalese into their society irrespective of religion, race and ethnic in every aspect of life. In case of Moneragala, for many centuries the Muslims have been peacefully living among the majority Sinhalese. In this way, they were living among the Sinhalese with mutual understanding and co-existence, also with good will and tolerance (Razick, 2007). The result of the study yielded an affirmation towards the process of assimilation. The above two mentioned reasons are the best explanations of the assimilation process in Moneragala. They freely interact with each other, because, their religious faiths encourage them to do so.

It is observable that, the Muslims in Moneragala used to socialize and interact well with the Sinhalese in their daily life (Razick, 2015). They cannot avoid themselves from interacting with the majority Sinhalese. This is perhaps, there are Sinhalese neighbours in their settlements. The same thing happens to their work life where there are Sinhalese who work together with them regardless of their job. Even if they are self-employed, these Muslims still have to deal and interact with the majority of Sinhalese.

As a conclusion, we could say that the residents of Moneragala were having positive interaction among

the two groups-Sinhalese and Muslims. Even though they have huge differences of religious beliefs, culture, norms and practices yet it could not break the closed relationship that they still have. Uniquely, there is no conflict or collision case reported by the history of Sri Lanka (Razick, 2007). It shows that they were having good interaction with each other.

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