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Premakumara de Silva

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# Competitive sharing: Sri Lankan Hindus and Up-country Tamil religiosity at the Sri Pada Temple

PREMAKUMARA DE SILVA

The paradox of politics and nationalism in modern Buddhist polities is particularly acute in Sri Lanka, a historically multicultural and multi-faith island where four great world religions – Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity, a range of indigenous spirit beliefs, pilgrimages and astrology, have coexisted for centuries. This paper explained how such plural worship, particularly Hindu worship at Sri Pada temple, began to fade away with the advent of hegemonic Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism in (post) colonial Sri Lanka while to some extent accommodating a group of Up-country Tamil Hindus who accept the dominance of Sinhala Buddhist polity. Historically speaking, Sri Pada would have been the model for the post-colonial state formation where all ethnic communities could have been accommodated and respected as full citizens of Sri Lanka. Like modern Sri Pada, the state that has been created in post-colonial Sri Lanka became a model of Sinhala Buddhist dominance in which minority groups have not been accommodated to express their concerns without subscribing to the Buddhist dominance. The state should be able to function without immediately putting into question the political loyalty of a group whose religious allegiance is different from the ruler's. The use of shrines as symbols of dominance is not limited to Buddhism in Sri Lanka and, as Hayden explains, it is quite evident in Non-Buddhist religions in South Asia and the Balkans and even beyond such regions.

Sacred sites that have long been shared by members of different religious communities and may even exhibit syncretic mixtures of the practices of both may come to be seized or destroyed by members of one of them in order to manifest dominance over the other.

'Antagonistic Tolerance' Hayden 2002: 205

So, Adam's Peak which is both old and new – rather timeless – can well symbolise Ceylon's antiquity as well as her resurgence as a free people...making a special point on the fact that in one respect at least and that, in my opinion, the most important, Adam's Peak is almost an ideal emblem. It cannot evoke resentment in anybody's mind.

(on the question of National flag) Perinbanayagam 1980: 151-153

## Introduction

The cultural hegemony of post-colonial public religion has been one of the greatest banes to linguistic and religious minorities. Minority cultures have become invisible in a national culture increasingly dominated by a highly politicised and organised Sinhala-Buddhist polity. The politicisation of Buddhist culture is a significant aspect of the consolidation of the bi-polar ethno-racial-religious imagination in colonial and post-colonial Ceylon (Rajasingham-Senanayake 1999: 134). Though Sinhala Buddhist and Tamil Hindu linguistic communities have historically co-existed and shared a breadth of cultural and religious practices, they have emerged in the postcolonial period as opposed national communities. Nevertheless, Hinduism enjoys a certain effective uniformity of status with Buddhism, arguably due to their intertwined historical roots and ability to accommodate other deities. While Buddhism in theory is atheistic and Hinduism polytheistic, both religions are in practice polytheistic, entertain a multiplicity of gods and do not have injunctions against 'other' deities that religions such as Roman Catholic Christianity and Islam entail. The famous multi-religious sacred sites of Katharagama in the south, Sri Pada in central hill, Munneswaram in the North-west and Mannar in the west of the island are testimony to the co-existence of these two religions in Sri Lanka, in addition to the accommodation of Islam and Christianity.

The processes of translation and transformation that began in colonial times put in place the cognitive structures of the present configuration of identity politics in Sri Lanka whereby Sinhala-Buddhists and Tamils have emerged as singular ethnic groups. For in the post-colonial period, communal, or what are now termed ethno-racial or national identities were mapped on to conceptions of race, thereby changing existing identity configurations. What is clear is that linguistic and religious categories have been consolidated along an ethno-racial fault line in post-colonial Sri Lanka (Rajasingham-Senanayake 1999). Thus, even though Hindus and Buddhists share many common religious practices, they are viewed as belonging to different 'religions'. Though the island's Sinhalese majority, who are mostly Buddhist, have been in a bipolar ethno-linguistic conflict with the Tamils, who are mainly Hindu, in the post-colonial period, most Buddhists pay homage to Hindu deities and Buddhist temples have Hindu shrines. Indeed, religious co-existence and hybridity among Sinhala Buddhists and Tamil Hindus in everyday religious practice, have been as much unifying and bridging factors between these communities, as dividing ones since the rise of post-colonial Sinhala-Buddhist

nationalism. Though the post-colonial conflict on the island is primarily ethno-linguistic, public religion or Sinhala Buddhist nationalism has been used by a range of political actors to marginalise religious minorities. It is against this backdrop that this paper will explain the nature of religious co-existence among Hindus and Buddhists and their worship at one of the most popular pilgrimage sites, Sri Pada, and argue that such shared religious places, though once exemplary in promoting religious diversity and co-existence, have been subdued under the hegemonic majoritarian religion and politics in (post) colonial Sri Lanka.

### **A history of peaceful coexistence**

As Nissan and Stirrat point out, in pre-colonial states ethnic, religious, and linguistic differences were not used as the basis for inclusion or exclusion from the polity. At various times groups would speak alternative languages, adhere to alternative religions and claim alternative identities (1990: 26). As Tambiah, Anderson and Stein show, the pre-modern states of South and Southeast Asia, despite variations in detail, emerge as relatively loosely structured organisations built upon the bases of heterogeneity, relativity, and gradualist, and on the ideal of the delegation of power from the centre (cf. *ibid*: 24). This S. J. Tambiah describes as a 'Galactic Polity' (1976, 1986) and Burton Stein formulates as a 'segmentary state' (1980). In my view, such differences were evidently tolerated at the pre-colonial Sri Pāda, which had been continuously patronised by the pre-colonial states. Though Buddhist monks had controlled the Sri Pāda temple and Buddhist kings lavishly patronised it, alternative religious belief and practices were never excluded from pre-colonial Sri Pāda. Instead, they were accommodated and recognised (see de Silva 2007, 2012).

Historically speaking, Sri Pāda is a remarkable place of worship for people from all four major religions in Sri Lanka, where they share one particular object of worship, the sacred footprint, but with specific interpretations from their own religious traditions. The largest ethno-religious community, the Sinhala Buddhists (69%), maintain that the footprint at the top of the mountain was left by the Buddha during his third mythical visit to the island. Tamil Hindus (15%) claim it is the footprint of Lord Siva (*Sivan-oli-Pādam*). On the contrary, Muslims (8%) maintain that it belongs to Adam (*Baba-Adamalei*), which is exactly the same view (Adam's Peak) held by Christians (8%).

Like other major pilgrimage sites in Sri Lanka, thousands of pilgrims annually make the journey to Sri Pāda to worship the sacred footprint. In the past, many people climbed there with the intention of acquiring religious merit and indeed today they visit for many reasons. In common with several other major pilgrimage sites on the island, there is a particular time of year when Sri Pāda pilgrimage takes place with a strong seasonal bias. The main pilgrimage normally takes place during the months of December to May, however the busiest part of the year extends from February to April, with the peak of the pilgrimage season during at the festival of full moon day in March. At this time, crowds

are extremely dense for three or four days. In general, large crowds can always be expected in February to April, which is quite different to the popular times for visiting other national pilgrimage sites in the country. Sri Pāda continuously attracts thousands of pilgrims at least during these three months. According to police estimation, during 2000-2001 the number of pilgrims visiting Sri Pāda was 2.2 million, a figure that, if true, would indicate that one eighth of the total population of Sri Lanka is visited Sri Pāda <sup>1</sup>.

Until recently, this site has been considered as an extraordinary place where ethnic and religious diversity in the country is being upheld. But today, as I have shown elsewhere, Sri Pāda has been (re)ordered as a predominantly Buddhist site, and active participation of non-Buddhist groups is largely excluded with the advent of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in post-colonial Sri Lanka (see de Silva 2013).

The historical development<sup>2</sup> of the site showed how the Sri Pāda Temple has been constructed, reconstructed or ordered, and reordered under different powers at different historical moments in the temple history. It is also evident how Sri Pāda has been historically viewed as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious site and how multiple discursive and non-discursive practices have been contested and marginalised with the rise of Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism, particularly in postcolonial Sri Lanka. Although all sorts of 'bitter' disputes and contestations, antagonisms and exclusions have occurred in the 'official' domains at Sri Pāda Temple, the continued attraction of the large number of 'pilgrims' mainly from 'peasant and working class backgrounds' of all nominal religious affiliations is remarkably impressive. Obviously, the majority crowd is represented by the Sinhala Buddhists, the largest religious group in the island.

Unlike other Buddhist pilgrimage sites on the island such as Kandy, Anuradhapura, Muneswaram, and Kataragama, the Sri Pāda pilgrimage has never been abandoned<sup>3</sup> despite

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<sup>1</sup> It is hard to find early statistical figures on the pilgrims' attendance at Sri Pāda. However, some British 'official records' have arbitrarily reported figures in qualitative manner, for example 'full swing crowds' 'many thousand' 'large number' and this may give us some indication about the scale of the pilgrimage in the nineteenth century (SLNA 45/37). Early twentieth century administrative records provide some estimated figures on pilgrim attendance; in 1905 12,380 pilgrims were visited Sri Pāda, the figure rising to 40,000 in 1913 (AR 1912/13). By 1921, during February to April the number was 13,650 (AR 1921). In 1937, the Government Agent of Sabaragamuva reported 'The annual pilgrimage to Sri Pāda assumed *large proportion* in comparison with past three years' (AR 1931). By 1968, it was 600,000 to 700,000 (Daily News, 22 Dec. 1969).

<sup>2</sup> The cult of worshipping the footprint in Buddhist and Hindu societies in South and South-east Asia is undoubtedly an ancient religious practice. However, there is no definite historical evidence about exactly when the cult was popularised in the Hindu-Buddhist cultural regions. In the case of Sri Lanka, some argue that the worship of the footprint can be traced back to the second century BCE, but the site of worship was historically not the exact place where present worship takes place (Sri Pāda) (Ranavalla 1965: 187-219). However, R.A.L.H. Gunawardena says that evidently this shrine (Sri Pāda) was known and revered even at the time when the Mahavamsa was written (1979: 233). This may be true but, as I argue elsewhere, Sri Pāda was not a sacred site recognised by the state until the early twelfth century (see de Silva 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Kandy disappeared as a festival centre in the nineteenth century, to rise in importance again after the 1920s, and the 1950s, particularly (Seneviratne 1978) whilst Anuradhapura became increasingly important

the political difficulties that have arisen since it was firstly institutionalised as a popular pilgrimage site during the kingship of Vijayabahu I in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century. The factors that have affected the attendance numbers, and led to occasional breaks in Sri Pāda's popularity, have been insurgencies, outbreak of epidemics and unexpected weather conditions. Pilgrimage to Sri Pāda has otherwise remained a popular attraction for many people in Sri Lanka regardless of their religious faiths. The impact of such aforementioned factors on the popularity of other pilgrimage sites is no way comparable with that of Sri Pāda pilgrimage.

John Still, a civil servant in the British colonial government, reported in 1928 on what we may vaguely call the situation prior to post-colonial Sri Pada:

The Peak [Sri Pāda] must be one of the vastest [sic] and most widely revered cathedrals of the human race; but the shrine itself is only a little tile roof raised upon four pillars, or it may be eight, open on all four sides to every wind that blows ... Among the pilgrims I have seen, people of half a dozen races, with as many languages, and at least four distinct religions beside many sects, and I can testify to their reverence; for the East understands religion, whereas we of the West have made of it a form of warfare...The tolerance of the pilgrims seemed a thing that might well have been studied by Western ecclesiastics with honour and amazement, perhaps even in shame. I mentioned this tolerance once to a bishop, and was told it was a sign of weakness of faith; persecution, I suppose, is a sign of strength.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, Sir Vivian Majendie who visited Sri Pāda on January 1, 1896 reported that 'In the height of the pilgrim season the scene is most extraordinary – men, women, old and young, some almost decrepit, some who actually die on the way and many who have to be pulled or carried up – people from all over India, from China, from Japan, from Burmah, from Siam, from Ceylon, from Africa – from all the seats of the three great religions' (A Gazetteer: xi). Even British colonial administrator Sir Emerson Tennent reported that 'the Buddhists are the guardians of the Sri-pada, around this object of common adoration the devotees of all races meet, not in furious contention like the Latins and Greeks at the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, but in pious appreciation of the one solitary object on which they can unite in peaceful worship' (1859:137).

This historically viewed religious and ethnic co-existence at Sri Pāda has now been transformed, or rather constructed, into an ethnic majoritarian Buddhist space. Most pilgrims coming to Sri Pāda are Sinhala Buddhists, and the second largest group are

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as a popular pilgrimage site in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the 20<sup>th</sup> (Nissan 1988,1989). Likewise, Kataragama is said to have declined as a pilgrimage site from the early nineteenth century but became of major site for Buddhists in more recent decades (Obeyesekere 1977, 1978, 1992)

<sup>4</sup> John Still, *The Jungle Tide* (Edinburgh and London: Blackwood & Sons, 1930), 17.

Hindu Tamils from the tea estates in the area around the temple. But unlike in the past, Hindu, Muslim, Catholic and Protestant groups are notably absent in pilgrimages these days and do not play any significant ritual role at the temple. Although there is a small Hindu element present at Sri Pāda, it is largely insignificant when compared with the number of Buddhists. The violence against the Tamils around this period would have been a further reason for them not being present at Sri Pāda temple<sup>5</sup>. This situation is quite similar to what Gombrich & Obeyesekere describe at the temple complex at Kataragama in the south of the island (1988: 163-199). Like Kataragama, the Sri Pāda temple is fully controlled by Sinhala Buddhists, and the temple has been constructed or 'ordered' in a manner appropriate to Buddhist forms of worship. At Kataragama, as Gombrich and Obeyesekere have pointed out, 'Tamils still control some of the shrines' (1988: 187), but in the case of Sri Pāda the strong presence of Hindu priests had completely disappeared by the early 1960s.

### **A history of Hindu Worship at the footprint of Lord Siva (*Sivan-oli-Pādam*)**

Sri Pāda is regarded by Hindus as having been made a sacred ground by Lord Siva, one of the supreme gods of the Hindu pantheon<sup>6</sup>. In the mid-1950s a Tamil/Malayalam Hindu ritual practice oriented to the God Siva to whom Hindus believe that the sacred footprint at the temple belongs, begun to fade from Sri Pāda. Surprisingly, the historical origin of this particular Hindu practice at Sri Pāda is very ambiguous in its orientation<sup>7</sup>.

However, the ritual engagement of Hindu mendicants at Sri Pāda can be traced back to the period of the Tamil king of Ariya Chakkrawarti in the 14<sup>th</sup> century or even before (see de Silva 2009). For during the period from the late 16<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, a group of Hindu mendicants, popularly known as *āndiya*, controlled the

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<sup>5</sup> As I observed during my recent visit to Sri Pada and as one of my temple informants stated, the attendance of Hindu Tamils from Jaffna, Colombo and East coast has increased since the war ended. This is no doubt a recent phenomenon. During my fieldwork in 2001/2002 and briefly in 2006 non-Buddhist participation was not significant.

<sup>6</sup> The origin myth of Sri Pāda as a foot-print of Siva, popularly known as *Sivan-oli-padam*, is widely believed among Tamil Hindus in the country. They also call it *Shivanadipadam Mallei* (the mountain of Shiva's footprint) and *Swangarrhanan* (The ascent to Heaven). The basis for Tamil Hindu belief in the Sivan-oli-padam, according to the Chief Priest (76) of the Kotahena (North of Colombo) Ponnambalam Vanisvaram Siva temple is this: Siva appeared in his dancing manifestation, on this mountain for the performance of certain devotional austerities, at the end of which, in celebration of his abode there, he left the impression of his foot upon the mountain-top. Although the authoritative tradition of Tamil Hindus in Sri Lanka, and even in South India, has simply forgotten or dropped the mythology of Siva's connection with the Sivan-oli-padam, it is still popular among Hindu priests and the wider Tamil Hindus in Sri Lanka (see de Silva 2007)

<sup>7</sup> As Obeyesekere's recent study (2015) shows, in Sinhala Buddhist areas there is no record of Brahmins from the nineteenth century onwards although it is evident from historical evidence that Brahmin purōhitas, and priests were present in most, if not all the kingdoms of Sri Lanka. It is often assumed that Brahmins were not part of the general population, although there were constant South Indian migrations throughout history. Obeyesekere argues that those migrant groups, particularly Brahmins, were assimilated into farmer or *goyigama* caste or to higher aristocratic families.

Sri Pāda temple until it was taken over by a king of Kandy, Hindu Saivite and later pious Buddhist Kriti Sri Rajasinghe, under whom it was handed over to Buddhist monks.

By the third quarter of the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Kingdom of Kotte had split apart. Thus, Sri Pāda came under the authority of Rājāsinha I (1581-1593) whose royal court was established in Sitavaka. Unlike Gampola, the newly established royal court was located not far from the Sri Pāda temple but towards the western side of Sri Pāda mountain in the Kelaniya river valley. Ironically, Rājāsinha became a convert to Hindu Saivism, drove out the Buddhist monks in charge of Sri Pāda and placed it under the control of Hindu priests known as '*āndiyas*'. The conversion of Rājāsinha I from Buddhism to Hinduism, the Cūlavamsa narrates, was an event which caused a blow to Buddhism on the island<sup>8</sup>. Surprisingly, the Cūlavamsa does not mention the series of pious works that he had carried out for the protection of Buddhism from the Portuguese who were at that time powerfully in control of the maritime regions of the island<sup>9</sup>. In 1593, Rājāsinha I of Sitavaka died and his extensive kingdom broke up. Some of it was annexed by the Portuguese and the rest by the king of Kandy. After this the king of Kandy became the sole heir to the Sinhala kingship.

After Rājāsinha I, the Sri Pāda temple remained under the control of the South Indian Hindu priests (*āndiyas*) for many years. However, little detailed sociological information is available on *āndiyas*. At any rate, they came from the South Indian non-Brahman Saivite castes of priests. But Dewaraja reports that they were drawn from all castes, except Brahmin and *vellala*, and attached to the Siva temples of South India (1971: 49). Thurston notes that some *āndiyas* come from subdivisions of the *pandarams*<sup>10</sup> but others do not. During the reign of Rājāsinha I, many *āndiyas* settled in the Hevahata area<sup>11</sup> in the Kandyan region and one of the chief advisors in the royal court was an *āndiya* chief priest known as *Arittaki Vendu Perumal*, alias Mannamperuma Mohotti, who served the

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<sup>8</sup> Cūlavamsa reports Rajasinha as 'the great fool, even slew his own father and brought the royal dignity into his power, [...]. He annihilated the Order of the Victor [Buddhism], slew the community of the bhikkhus [monks], burned the sacred books, destroyed the monasteries...He placed miscreant ascetics of false faith on the Sumanakuta [Sri Pāda] to take for themselves all the profit accruing there from. In this way the impious fool, as he did not know what he should accept and what he should not have accepted, brought great evil upon himself (Cv 93: 4-13). But this image of Rajasinha of Sitavaka does not enjoy the same credence in the Sabaragamuva area (see Roberts 2002: 29).

<sup>9</sup> The most notable pious work included granting many villages to the main shrine of the god Saman in Ratnapura, bringing the most important relic - the Buddha's tooth - to this shrine as a protective measure and beginning to hold the annual procession to honour it. In addition to that, Rājāsinha I planted the four saplings of the sacred Bo tree [*Sri Maha Bodhi*], brought from Anuradhapura, at the premises of the Saman shrine. As well as these pious works, Rājāsinha I had, like former kings, shown his heroic ability, defeating the Portuguese for the first time during his relatively short [eleven-year] reign at Sitavaka.

<sup>10</sup> See Thurston, *Caste and Tribes* p.48.

<sup>11</sup> Rajasinha I settled seven *āndiya* chiefs in seven different places on the island; the powerful *giri āndiya*, for example, was settled in Mandarapura (Mp: 62-65)

successors of Rājasinha I as a military officer during the late 16<sup>th</sup> century<sup>12</sup>. In 1586, Rājasinha I also gave the village Gonadeniya, in the Atakalan korale of Sabaragamuva to an *āndiya* priest and his family<sup>13</sup>. Place names like Andiambalama (“the resting place for *āndiya*”), *andigama* (village of *andiya*) and the famous pilgrim’s resting place at Sri Pāda known as *āndiya mala tānna* (“the place of *āndiya* death”) clearly indicate that *āndiyas* were present not only at Sri Pāda but also in other parts of the island too<sup>14</sup>. According to the selective census carried out on 27<sup>th</sup> January 1824 there were 116 *āndiyas* and *pandarams* living in Colombo District (Census 1827: SLNA). Similarly, Obeyesekere and Gombrich reported that Kataragama was one place where *āndiyas* lived and that they were wandering mendicant devotees of Murugan (1988: 179). What is certain is that the *āndiyas* at Sri Pāda were not strong adherents of Murugan but rather devotees of Siva. Interestingly, what happened at Sri Pāda under the jurisdiction of Sitavaka Rājasinha was the transferral of the administrative power that had been enjoyed by the Buddhist monks to the Hindu priests or *āndiyas*. We know little about how the *āndiyas* controlled and managed Sri Pāda affairs for the more than one hundred and fifty years of their presence at Sri Pāda<sup>15</sup>.

However, control of Sri Pāda temple affairs did not rest peacefully in the hands of the Hindu *āndiyas*. As such, the Sri Pāda under the Kandyan king Kīrti-Sri Rajasingha symbolically represented how the controlling power of Sri Pāda temple affairs shifted from non-Buddhists, more precisely Hindu Saivite priests (*andiyas*), to the monks of the newly established Buddhist order in Kandy (See Malalgoda 1976; Blackburn 2001). Although the power vested in Hindu Priests to control the temple was shifted into the monks’ jurisdiction, the sharing of the site with non-Buddhist was not affected.

During the Colonial period a similar kind of group of Hindu mendicants used to perform a special annual *pūjā* oriented to the God Siva on a special day of *Mahasivarātri*<sup>16</sup>, in the month of March at Sri Pāda temple. This ritual can be identified

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<sup>12</sup> *Rajavaliya* 1954: 80-82

<sup>13</sup> Dewaraja 1972: 49.

<sup>14</sup> Most Sri Lankans assume that due to the contemporary absence of an *āndiyas* presence there have been no *āndiyas* in Sri Lanka at all. There is no record of *andiyas* from the nineteenth century onwards although it is evident from historical evidence that *āndiyas* were present in most of the late kingdoms (Kandiyan, Kotte) of Sri Lanka. It is often assumed that *āndiyas* were not part of the general population, in spite of the fact that there were constant South Indian migrations throughout history.

<sup>15</sup> Soon after the collapse of the Sitavaka royal court of Rājasinha I in 1592, the last royal court of the island was established in the hill capital city of Kandy by Vimaladharmasuriya I (1592-1604); this lasted until it was captured by the British in 1815. Vimaladharmasuriya I took over the Sri Pāda temple from the Hindu *āndiyas* at least for a brief period and put it once more under the authority of the Buddhist monks. According to the ‘intermediate text’ of *Mandāram pura puwata* (the story of the city of Mandaram), which was written in Sinhala in the Kandyan period and dealt with military, social and economic matters of the kingdom that had been overlooked by ‘historians of state’, Vimaladharmasuriya I had chased out the *āndiyas* (*siva tausān*) from their seven strongholds, which included Sri Pāda (Mandaram purapuwata 1958 [1996]: 13-14).

<sup>16</sup> J. Bruce Long (1982) provides a substantial account on this festival in South India.

as the making of their mythical claim on the sacred footprint as the God Siva into practice. The large numbers of Hindu pilgrims who mainly came from the Colombo area used to participate in the main annual ceremony of the Hindus at Sri Pāda. This special event was popularly known as the 'Cochin Pōya day' among the ex-temple staff of Sri Pāda Temple. The name 'Cochin' specified that the majority of the Tamil and Malayalam speaking Hindus who visited to the Temple on the day largely consisted of the immigrants' trading community from the region of Kerala in South India (see Obeyesekere 1984, 2015). The Hindu priests who performed special *pūjā* at Sri Pāda were generally known as *sāmi* ('lord') and some of these *sāmis* resided permanently at the place called '*sāmi madam*' at the northern foot hill of the sacred mountain, where they built a small temple for God Siva. However, the special *pūjā* on the Day of Maha Siva was conducted by the senior *sāmi* who came from a main temple in Colombo. Until the early 1930s the *sāmi* had no problem taking away the offerings made at the footprint shrine on this special day by the Hindu pilgrims<sup>17</sup>. But the practice was stopped by the newly appointed Temple trustee in 1936. However, the chief *sāmi*, known as Ramanathan *Sāmi*, made an appeal to the Public Trustee on the issue but his appeal was unanimously rejected<sup>18</sup>. It appears that, although the *sāmi* or his fellow *sāmis* lost their share for the ritual service, they continued their annual ritual service at Sri Pāda until actors of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism took full control of Sri Pada affairs in the mid-1950s (see de Silva 2013).

The Sri Pāda temple that was created in the decades after Independence does not represent a return to any previous condition. Rather, it was a new creation – a predominantly Buddhist space – a very concrete manifestation of current ideas of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism. Like Kataragama, the strong Buddhist element at today's Sri Pāda continues to grow (see Obeyesekere 1992). Hence, we don't see a sacred site where diverse non-Buddhist religious practices are being publicly held and openly accommodated. Instead we see a highly Buddhicised sacred space in which the large numbers of diverse Buddhist pilgrim groups have conflicting notions and express their Buddhist identity in different ways. By the 1950s onwards, Sri Pāda temple had become a 'sacred site' almost exclusively for Sinhala Buddhist practices. The special *pūjā* held by Hindu *sāmis* was brought to a standstill and their small temple at the foot of the sacred mountain was taken over by a Buddhist monk.<sup>19</sup> The violence against the Tamils around this period would have been a further reason for them not being present at Sri Pāda temple on this religiously important day for the Hindu pilgrims. During my fieldwork, I

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<sup>17</sup> According to a letter written by a temple servant to the Trustee of the Temple on 7<sup>th</sup> March 1932; A *sāmi*, S. Ramanatha had performed the *puja* at Sri Pāda and the value of the offering on the day was Rs. 143.57 and the value of the personal offering given to the *sāmi* for his ritual service by the Hindu pilgrims was Rs.47.85. And Ramanatha *sāmi* had given a gift (quarter sovereign of gold) to the Trustee (SLNA 37/985).

<sup>18</sup> Administrative Report of Public Trustee in 1937.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with the ex-executive monk at Sri Pāda temple on 30<sup>th</sup> September and 20<sup>th</sup> October 2001 in which he claimed that he took over the temple of the *sāmis*, which is popularly known as *Sāmi Madama*. Today, this place is run by a Buddhist monk, and part of it has given over to commercial purposes.

never came across such a ritual taking place at the Sri Pāda temple. Not surprisingly, according to one of my Tamil informants, the presence of the Tamil Hindu *sāmis* in the Sri Pāda Temple area had completely died out by the early 1960s<sup>20</sup>. Hence, this remarkable site of plural worship has now been constructed or ordered as a predominantly Buddhist site (see de Silva 2013). But interestingly, smaller number of pilgrims who are representing non-Buddhist religious communities are still present at the Sri Pada temple as subordinate groups to Buddhism. Let me introduce one of the groups that has an interesting ritual and non-ritual connection to the Sri Pada temple.



**Figure 1.** Mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Sri Pāda

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<sup>20</sup> Personal communication with S. Sivanandi (66) on 20<sup>th</sup> Dec.2000 and 24<sup>th</sup> August 2002. According to Sivanandi in the morning of the Mahasivarathri Day, one Sāmi (Bala Sāmi) was stationed at the Seethagangula where the Hindu pilgrims used to have a 'sacred bath'. Before the sacred bath the Sāmi performed a purification ritual in which each pilgrim was given a piece of banana leaf with a handful of white rice and a coin for putting on their head. With those auspicious objects, pilgrims had to take a bath and together with their wet clothes they used to climb the sacred mountain. Today such ritual performances at Sri Pāda are not visible. According to Sivanandi, under the 1964 repatriation pact, few *sāmis* of this place returned to India.



Figure 2. Sri Pada temple in 2015

### Presence of Up-country Tamils at the Temple

In the up-country of Sri Lanka, ritual festivals have become a symbol of Up-country Tamil heritage and tradition, going back to an Indian past while being performed in a Sri Lankan present (see Bass in this volume). Bass argues that Up-country Tamil Hindu religious discourses and practices have become part of the struggle for the recognition and affirmation of identification as Up-country Tamils (Bass 2012, 2016). As far as Up-country Tamil religiosity is concerned, the central religious festival that they perform annually is dedicated to the female goddess, Mariyamman. By celebrating Mariyamman, Up-country Tamils highlight their distinct identification with the island and their cultural differences not only with other ethnic groups in Sri Lanka but also diasporic Tamil Hindu communities (See Bass in this volume). However, Up-country Tamil religiosity is not confined to their own religious world and can be extended to major multi-religious sacred sites like Kataragama, Munneswaram and Sri Pada. In this section I will elaborate how they have connected with the Buddhist-dominated Sri Pada temple.

The presence of Up-country Tamil Hindus as ‘worshippers’ of the sacred footprint (Sri Pada) is quite recent when compared to other ethno-religious groups in the country. I suspect it would have been happening only for the last hundred years or so. Even so, until recently they could not establish a formidable direct relationship with the Sri Pada

temple<sup>21</sup>. It was after the late 1960s or early 1970s that they began to maintain some form of ritual and non-ritual connections [as ‘the weight carriers’ (*bara karayo*)] with Sri Pāda Temple. Interestingly enough, their ritual and non-ritual connections with Sri Pāda Temple are worth exploring here because they are the only non-Buddhist group who have been able to operate under the highly Buddhicised postcolonial Sri Pāda.<sup>22</sup> The temple authorities are well aware of the importance of the Tamil estate workers’ role in maintaining the Temple. For example, they supply most of the labour to carry the items required to sustain day-to-day Temple affairs. This non-ritual connection is an economic one or a contractive one and far more visible than their ritual connection with the temple. In other words, their ritual connection is limited in comparison to the number of non-ritual services that they provide to the Temple as weight carriers (*bara karayo*). Before I discuss these connections, let me provide some general information about the Estate Tamils in Sri Lanka.

The Up-country Tamils are an ethnic minority group comprised predominantly of plantation workers on tea and rubber estates in the Central Highlands of Sri Lanka. The term ‘Indian Tamils’, is also used for Up-country Tamils and refers to the descendants of recent immigrants from South India who share a common cultural heritage and association with the hill-country and estate life. Up-country Tamils are distinguished from the indigenous Sri Lankan Tamils who mostly live in the Northern and Eastern provinces in the island. They live mainly in the Central Highlands and are separated from the indigenous Sri Lankan Tamils by caste, culture, occupation, their relatively recent arrival in the island and political affiliations, (see Bass 2012). Although they share the same language and Hindu religion, the Up-country Tamils have neither identified their interests with those of the indigenous Sri Lankan Tamils nor supported their separatist claims for an independent state (cf. Hollup 1994: xvi; see Daniel 1989). The Up-country Tamil emerged as a relatively ‘closed’ community in the geographically and socially isolated territorial boundaries of the plantation regions.

Basically, Estate Tamils are worshippers of the God Siva’s two sons, Ganesh (Pillaiyar) and Murugan, and the mother goddess Amman. However, they believe that the deities with different names are only manifestations of ‘one’ God but not in the sense that the Christian and Muslims find one monotheistic God in their religious traditions.

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<sup>21</sup> Popular myths among Up-country Tamils, who mostly live in the central hill country of Sri Lanka, interchangeably claim the sacred foot-print as that of the god Siva and of the god Vishnu. Their annual ritual journey to Sri Pāda is more explicitly rooted in their belief in the footprint as that of god Vishnu. I found that the myth of Vishnu is predominantly popular among plantation Tamil Hindus, while the myth of Siva is popular among non-plantation Tamil Hindus, who live in the plantation area and elsewhere on the island.

<sup>22</sup> Though after the war ended in 2009, the visibility of non-plantation Tamils at Sri Pāda has been significantly high, but unlike up-country Tamils they do not play a significant role in the ritual structure of the temple.



**Figure 3.** A new *Mariamman* temple being constructed by Up-country Tamils along the Sri Pada pilgrimage path<sup>23</sup>.



**Figure 4.** Shiva Shrine established in 2013.

They also believe that each deity has a number of reincarnations (*avataram*), for instance Vishnu may emerge as Rama, Krishna etc. Similarly, the mother goddess also emerges as the Durga, *Mariamman* and the ferocious Kali. It is not my aim here to discuss at length the kind of popular Hinduism found among the estate Tamils in the island; rath-

<sup>23</sup> When I was conducting my first field research back in 2001/2002 this place had a very small shrine with a statue of *Mariamman*.

er my concern here is to show what kind of ritual and non-ritual relationships are being kept by the Up-country Tamils within the highly Buddhicised space of Sri Pāda Temple.<sup>24</sup>

Hence, let me first explain their ritual connection with the Sri Pāda Temple. Interestingly, during the entire Tamil month of Marghali (mid Dec-mid Jan) there is an important ritual event held among the estate Tamils in their respective temples (*kovil*) areas. That ritual is popularly known as '*bajanai*' (lit. chanting hymn of praise to God), performed for the honour of the God Vishnu or his seventh avatar God Rama. The God Rama is believed to be represented in a beautifully decorated hand-held spherical symbol with a stand artistically made in brass, known as the *kumbam* (lit. wooden stick). In the centre of the *kumbam* or the sphere the God Rama is represented through his weapon and symbol, namely a club (*namam* or *sula yudam*), a conch shell and a discus (*chakra*). The ritual *bajanai* is centrally performed around this moveable symbolic structure or *kumbam* of the God Rama (see picture 05).



**Figure 5.** A young Hindu priest holding a *kumbam*

During this month, which is considered to be an inauspicious period, they seek protection from the God through performing *bajanai* every morning and the evening to avoid becoming a victim of disease or being struck by any other misfortune. On this occasion, a group of young males and children walk in a procession and visit the line-rooms of workers and estate staff quarters singing religious hymns and devotional songs

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<sup>24</sup> In my recent visit to Sri Pada, I observed that several Mariamman shrines and one Shiva shrine were established by Up-country Tamils along the pilgrim's path (see pictures 3, 4).

for Rama to the accompaniment of music, while carrying beautifully decorated *kumbam* with great respect. As the procession arrives at the door steps of workers (without a gender difference), they perform several ritual activities to the *kumbam* or symbolically to the God Rama such as offering camphor flame, adding oil to the lamp, offering coin (*panduru*) and washing the bottom of the *kumbam* with pure water, which is symbolically marked for the washing of the feet of the God Rama. In return, each worshipper receives a dot of holy ash on their foreheads signifying a blessing from the God Rama. The *bajanai* group turn out every morning and every evening from the estate temple, where they usually sleep during the whole month. However, in some areas the *bajanai* do not perform daily as Hollup reports; in the Nuwara Eliya area, *bajanai* is usually performed two or three times a week (1994:286). The *bajanai* group mainly consists of young, unmarried males and there is a group leader or organiser who carries the *kumbam* to each and every line-room of the estate workers and returns to the *kovil* again before going to work in the fields.

Interestingly, before concluding the *bajanai* ritual in each season, the estate temples situated around Sri Pāda Temple carry out a special ritual practice at Sri Pāda Temple. The several groups of *bajanai* who belong to those estate temples carry the *kumbam* to Sri Pāda Temple to get a blessing from the sacred footprint, which they believe to be the footprint of the God Vishnu<sup>25</sup>. Taking *kumbam* to Sri Pāda Temple is no doubt a recent innovation. They carry the *kumbam* together with fellow estate workers, including men and women and their children. As soon as they arrive at Sri Pāda Temple, they wash their faces and feet with the holy water that is the mixture of milk and sandalwood before entering the upper courtyard of the Temple. Firstly, they circumambulate the central shrine of the sacred footprint, while they sing devotional songs for the God Rama to the accompaniment of music. Secondly, they sit in front of the sacred footprint shrine and continue the music and devotional songs for ten to fifteen minutes, during which no offering is made to the sacred footprint, but it is worshipped at the end of each song. Finally, the leader of *bajanai* group carries the *kumbam* to in front of the deity shrine of the Saman and offers a tribute to the God without entering into the shrine<sup>26</sup>, and marks the end of the brief ritual engagement of the Up-country Tamils at Sri Pāda Temple. There were about eight *bajanai* performances taking place at Sri Pāda Temple during my fieldwork and there was no notable variation between the performances that I have witnessed at the Temple. It is important to note here that I can only provide a brief account of this important ritual because providing a fuller account is beyond the scope of this paper. The *bajanai* is the only ritual that is noticeably performed by a non-Buddhist

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<sup>25</sup> But some Up-country Tamils believe it is the footprint of God Siva.

<sup>26</sup> They paid homage to the God Saman, guardian of the Sri Pada territory and there is no purity/ pollution issues here because the *bajanai* was allowed to take into the footprint shrine.

group at today's Sri Pāda Temple. But it has not been widely practised by the majority of Tamil Hindus who live in the Up-country plantation area. A similar practice is also carried out by a group of small businessmen of the same community before going on pilgrimage to a sacred site in South India popularly known as Sabarimala. Like Sri Pada, it is located in quite a remote area, and is probably the most important and popular pilgrimage site in South India today (see Daniel 1984). The Up-country businessmen are devotees of the Hindu God Aiyappan, to whose temple they make a yearly pilgrimage and sing many beautiful devotional songs and perform puja for his honour<sup>27</sup>. Hence, the performing of *bajanai* and pre-pilgrimage ritual at the Sri Pāda Temple by a specific group of Up-country Tamils has a political significance rather than a ritual or religious significance.

How do they find a ritual space in a highly Buddhicised religious space? As I mentioned earlier, the role of Up-country Tamil workers is crucial for maintaining the function of the Sri Pāda Temple. Without their help, I would argue that the running of the Temple would not be an easy exercise. They are the main weight carriers of all the essential food items, temple offerings, cash, material and things, required for the proper functioning of the Temple affairs. They have undertaken this difficult task since the Sinhala weight carriers (*bara karoyo*) in the neighbouring villages demanded a higher rate of payment for their duties in the early 1970s. Since then, the estate Tamils have been working as weight carriers for the temple for low wages but the amount that they receive from the Temple authorities is higher than what they receive from the plantation companies<sup>28</sup>. Today they hold the monopoly as the weight carriers to Sri Pāda Temple, whereas Sinhala labourers who had held this monopoly lost prominence under the contestation of Up-country Tamil workers. However, with the course of time the Up-country Tamil workers were strong enough to bargain higher rates for their services, and on a few occasions the Temple authorities responded to them positively. But this was not always the case, most of the time they had to win their demand after carrying out regular strikes against the Temple authorities.

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<sup>27</sup> Aiyappan is the son of the Hindu god Shiva and Mohini, a female form of the god Vishnu. Devotees make a yearly pilgrimage to his temple in Sabarimala. The pilgrimage itself emphasises the pluralism that is so important to traditions of Hinduism in India. All devotees are required to first pay their respects at the shrine of a Muslim saint before worshipping Aiyappan at his temple (See Daniel 1984).

<sup>28</sup> According to a Tamil weight carrier they received Rs.75 in the mid-1990s per journey, then it gradually increased from Rs. 85 to Rs. 100 after they had bargained with temple authorities. In 2003, they received Rs. 200 (2 dollars) for carrying 50 kg to the temple. In 2017, the amount is Rs. 35.00 per kilo just for carrying temple goods. For private goods the charge is higher than for the temple (e.g. 25k.g weight would be Rs. 1700 - around 11 dollars).



**Figure 6.** Up-county Tamil operating as weight carrier.

It is after the establishment of such bargaining power with the Temple authorities, that the *bajanai* ritual and other similar ritual practices began to visibly appear in the Buddhicised Sri Pāda ritual space. This is not to say that the religious connection of the Up-country Tamils with the Temple became established through the *bajanai* ritual because prior to that they were continually visiting the sacred site as Tamil Hindu pilgrims who believed the sacred footprint at the Temple belonged to their god. Their presence at Sri Pāda as worshippers is quite visible in the first two weeks of January when most of them come with *bajanai*, but the highest attendance noticeably occurs towards the end of the pilgrimage period in May. Though their historical presence at Sri Pāda as worshippers might not exceed overall numbers of Hindu pilgrims in the late nineteenth

century, they began to be present at the highly Buddhicised Sri Pāda with some form of religious symbol and performance (*bajanaī*) right after they firmly held the monopoly of providing the most 'difficult service' to the Temple.

The presence of the Up-country Tamil Hindu community at the Sri Pāda Temple both in religious and economic domains<sup>29</sup> could implicitly be seen as a form of non-Buddhist contestation for establishing a 'new' form of 'Tamil Hindu identity' at Sri Pāda. Despite this new development, Sri Pāda has become an increasingly majoritarian Buddhist space by excluding other religious practices that had operated alongside Buddhist practices for many centuries at the pilgrimage centre. As Hayden (2002) pointed out, in both India and the Balkans, as well as Sri Lanka, the political system dependent on the consent of the majority has led to the transformation of religious sites in ways that diminish or even destroy the practices of local minorities. In this context, the presence of the Up-country Tamil Hindu community at the Sri Pāda Temple should be considered as what Hayden argues 'antagonistic tolerance' and should not be viewed as an example of plural worship where minority religious practices are openly accommodated and encouraged. In such a situation coexistence does not mean harmony, and conflicts do not mean overt closure to Others. It is the bargaining power that creates a space for accommodation of the minority in an established hegemonic structure. As far as Sri Pada Hindu religiosity is concerned, the Sri Lankan minorities, specifically Up-country Tamil Hindus, have shown that carving out both ritual and non-ritual spaces is not possible without an establishing strong bargaining power under the powerful rather hegemonic Buddhicised Sri Pada. Under such hegemonic Buddhist space Up-country Tamils in particular and Tamil Hindus in general are not explicitly resisting and confronting the majoritarian Sinhala Buddhist but they use the 'weapon of the weak' to express their position as a subordinate group to the dominant one.

## Conclusion

As I pointed out, throughout its long temple history, different centres of power included Sri Pāda temple affairs in their court agendas and put them under the control of Buddhist monks and, on some occasions, Hindu priests. Under such arrangements, alternative religious beliefs and practices were not only tolerated but also generously accommodated along with the state religion. The case of Sri Pāda provides a classic example of receptivity to religious diversity in the pre-colonial states of the island. But such religious diversity and tolerance were contested instead of incorporated with the advent of colonial powers and later under the post-colonial state. In the colonial period in Sri Lanka, the masses were mobilised on the basis of a politics of numbers. Religion

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<sup>29</sup> It is important to note here that as far as pilgrimage economy is concerned a new trend has emerged among the Up-country Tamils in the Sri Pada area. Interestingly, they run many shops in the pilgrimage bazar town and along the pilgrim's path. The economic competition between them and Sinhala businessmen is also quite evident during the pilgrimage season (December to May).

came to play a dominant role in this, and, to some extent, what we see today in the appropriation of minority communities at the main shrines such as Sri Pada, Kataragama and Anuradhapura, is the outcome of this process. It continues to be important in a period of post-colonial Sri Lanka in which the state has come to be used for the suppression of minorities.

This paper explains how a plural worship, particularly Hindu worship, at the pilgrimage site of Sri Pada temple began to fade away with the advent of hegemonic Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism in (post) colonial Sri Lanka while to some extent accommodating a group of Up-country Tamil Hindus who accept the dominance of Sinhala Buddhist polity. Historically speaking, Sri Pada would have been the model for the post-colonial state formation where all ethnic communities could have been accommodated and respected as full citizens of Sri Lanka. Like modern Sri Pada the state that has been created in post-colonial Sri Lanka became a model of Sinhala Buddhist dominance in which minority groups have not been accommodated without subscribing to the Buddhist dominance. The state should be able to function without immediately putting into question the political loyalty of a group whose religious allegiance is different from the ruler's. The use of shrines as symbols of dominance is not limited to Buddhism in Sri Lanka and, as Hayden explains, it is quite evident in Non-Buddhist religions in South Asia and the Balkans and even beyond such regions (e.g. Jerusalem). Sri Pada demonstrates that mutual religious understanding and respect can be established in a domain in which interaction has tangible advantages, whether in solving the existential problems of securing health, fertility, and prosperity or in satisfying the desire to enjoy and share in festivities. As open-minded scholars, like Handy Perumbanayagam, suggested at the national flag controversy, renowned multi-ethnic and religious sites like Sri Pada in its original sense should have been a symbol of the new nation that would evoke the spontaneous loyalty of all the people of Sri Lanka. 🙏 |

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