



Superstitious Beliefs and Practices in Politics: An Aspect of Political Culture in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Superstitious beliefs and practices are common features among the cultures of Sri Lanka (Known as Ceylon earlier). Those beliefs and practices were inherited from the people of India with whom the Island had maintained close relations since ancient times. The traditional political culture of Sri Lanka was modernized with the introduction of democratic political reforms during the British colonial period and the country was gradually transformed into a modern secular state. Nevertheless, some traditional beliefs and practices that were prevalent in the general culture have refused to die out because they are being perpetuated by all the people including present-day politicians who mix it with their political activities. Thus, the main objective of this paper is to examine and assess the behavior of the politicians who due to their ingrained superstitious beliefs engage in various practices, hoping this will help them to realize their political goals. This paper used primary and secondary data with mostly observations constituting the primary data. The secondary data of the study was mainly drawn from electronic and print media reports, as well as books and journal articles relevant to this topic. Astrology has been the most popular guiding force among the politicians seeking ways to fulfill their political ambitions. Many politicians embark on their political careers and engage in important activities only at auspicious hours worked out by their astrologers. During election times astrologers are always sought out by the candidates who expect them to make accurate predictions about the election results. This has become a most popular practice nowadays. Another common practice is for politicians to engage in the age-old ritual of “dashing coconuts” at various religious places like “Seenigama Devol Devalaya,” “Munneswaram Kovil,” “Katharagama Devalaya,” and so on. The politicians engage in these superstitious activities more in order to build public opinion in favor of their election campaigns rather than with any idea of obtaining the blessings of the deities to solve their problems.

Keywords: *Astrology, Dashing coconuts, Political Culture, Superstitious beliefs, Superstitious practices.*

Citation: OsanthaNayanapriyaThalpwila (2021). Superstitious Beliefs and Practices in Politics: An Aspect of Political Culture in Sri Lanka. *International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Studies*, 3(5), 51-57.

INTRODUCTION

Superstitious beliefs and practices are very common characteristics of the South Asian culture. During the ancient era in South Asia, many primitive societies in the region were very superstitious and used to believe in black magic, which was part of their social life. The strong influence of religion and astrology on the South Asian people’s minds contributed significantly towards shaping the culture of South Asia at large. In fact, these two factors have been the most influential in promoting the superstitious beliefs and practices that are now an integral part of the culture of South Asia. Although superstitious beliefs were ingrained in the minds of people in the traditional societies of the past, many South Asian societies still continue to pay considerable attention to these practices even in the present day.

Sri Lankan culture has long been shaped by Indian cultural values and customs that are mainly grounded on the heritage of Theravada Buddhism and Hinduism. Historical evidence chronicles the arrival of King Vijaya and his companions from Orissa in India to Sri Lanka where they established themselves as the founder members of the Sinhalese race. Further, Theravada Buddhism was introduced to the country by Indian Emperor Asoka around the third century, BC. It was his son Mahinda who went around converting the islanders to Buddhism. Hinduism is also a legacy from India. Therefore, many practices and beliefs of early Indian society had the effect of shaping the culture of Sri Lanka from ancient times[1]. Over the course of centuries, many superstitious beliefs and practices of ancient Indian culture had permeated to Sri Lankan society and they became a common feature of the culture of Sri Lanka. Then the ancient traditional society in Sri Lanka became modernized during the British colonial period that lasted from the 19th century to the 20th century. Although the Portuguese and the Dutch controlled some of the coastal areas in Sri Lanka from 1505 to 1796, the British were able to control the entire country from 1815 onwards. During the period of British colonial rule the traditional Sri Lankan feudal system underwent many changes in the economic, social and political spheres. By way of Liberal democratic reforms made by the British, Sri Lanka’s political system was developed into a system of parliamentary democracy based on Western political values and administrative systems. New types of crops such as coffee, tea and rubber were introduced to commercial agriculture by the British, thus connecting the country’s economy to the global economy. The British thereby transformed the prevailing self-sufficient economy to the new

liberal capitalism. Therefore, it can be said that by the time Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948, the country had been transformed into a modern state as a result of 152 years of British colonial administration. The Sri Lankan society had been changed from following traditional practices into a modern society [1]. In that context, many traditional beliefs and practices were challenged by the modern rational ideologies as well as the western scientific education that was established in the country.

Problem statement of the paper

The modern political culture in Sri Lanka is made up of many democratic values, practices and customs. Any linkage between politics and religion had been strongly discouraged during the colonial period of the country. At the time Sri Lanka gained independence from British rule, the country had been transformed into a modern democratic state. Although the country is supposed to have a modern political culture, the politicians still continue to adhere to traditional superstitious beliefs and engage in such practices in Sri Lanka. Why do they persist in harboring those superstitious beliefs and mix them with their politics?

The objective of this paper

The main objective of this paper is to examine and explain the behavior of politicians who believe in superstitions and practice them with the expectation of achieving their political aims.

Methodology of the Paper

Primary and Secondary data were used for this paper. The primary data were drawn mostly from observations made in the thematic field. The secondary data were collected mainly from electronic and print media reports, relevant journal articles, and books. All of the data have been arrayed and descriptively analyzed to fulfill the research objective of the paper.

Culture and Political Culture

Culture can be identified as the mirror to a country's identity. The term 'culture' can be defined in short as a collection of ideas, beliefs, general customs and traditions of a particular group of people at a particular time period (Cambridge Dictionary). The term 'culture' has been defined in various ways by various scholars in the field of Sociology. According to sociologists, culture reflects the values, beliefs, systems of language, communication, and practices that people share in common and that can be used to define them as a community. Culture also includes the material objects that are common to that group or society. Almond and Verba define culture as relating and linking the micro and macro aspects of social processes [2]. Das and Choudhury[2] explain culture as a complete process relating to a man's being which covers every aspect of a human being. According to them,

“Culture gives meaning, coherence, and intelligibility to man's being as a whole. Man's activity and roles, thoughts and actions, his awareness of himself, his artistic creation and his perception of nature are all inter-related. It is one of the most significant models of self-expression and self-fulfillment of man in politics” [2].

The political culture of a country can be recognized as the basic attitudes and orientations of its people toward the existing political system. However, the political culture is not a separate entity from the culture. Between the culture and the political culture there are some relations.

“The culture and the political culture are both concepts influencing and influenced by the society. The nature of the society, and its attitudes and orientations toward the political system in particular, have a most profound effect on that system” [2]. According to Sidney Verba [3], political culture consists of many features such as empirical beliefs, expressive symbols, and values that define certain political actions that take place in a society. Further, he explains that political culture is an integral aspect of the more general culture. Lucian Pye defines political culture as the set of attitudes, beliefs and sentiments that give order and meaning to the political process, and which provide the underlying assumptions and rules that govern behavior in the political system [4]. In terms of Pye's definition, political culture consists of separate attitudes, beliefs, sentiments and practices in the political system of a country. However, the set of values of political culture is influenced by the general culture.

Das and Choudhury [2] focused on the question of the belief system between tradition and modernity in a society. The belief system that exists in a modern political culture in many transitional societies is completely different from the ancient traditional political systems as changes have been occurring constantly. This will lead to a contradiction between the modern political system and traditional beliefs in the general culture. According to them,

“This may cause severe stress on the people of those nations, who are forced to act within the prevailing political culture and the more general culture at the same time” [2]. In the same way, Rudolphs and Rudolphs[5] pointed out that

tradition cannot be completely removed from modernity. They further argued by citing many studies on modern society and drawing attention to its traditional features which are still prevailing in modern society.

Political Culture in Sri Lanka

Ancient political culture in Sri Lanka had been shaped by the feudal political beliefs and practices. The traditional political environment had been rapidly transformed during the British colonial period in Sri Lanka. As a result of the liberal democratic reforms introduced by the British colonial rulers, the political system in Sri Lanka was transformed inline with the Western Democratic model. After the introduction of political and constitutional reforms over an extended period from 1833 to 1946 to establish liberal democracy in Sri Lanka, the country had to adopt a number of modern political practices, beliefs, and values. The new order supported the creation of a modern political culture in Sri Lanka. The new political system was comprised of a set of democratic political beliefs, patterns and practices such as rule of law, constitutionalism, separation of political powers, parliamentary democracy, universal franchise, periodically conducted free and fair elections, political parties, political ideologies, political opinions and mass political participation by society. After Sri Lanka was granted independence in 1948, there was no room for any kind of ancient traditional political systems to flourish in the country. In other words, Sri Lanka had become a modern secular state in the South Asian region.

Universal franchise was granted to all adults in the country in 1931. Since then, the political participation of citizens for selecting representatives to the legislature of the country had become strongly established. The total number of registered voters was 3,048,145 in the general elections held in 1947. Eight political parties and 181 independent groups contested in the general elections of 1947(elections.gov.lk). Presently, the total number of registered voters in the country has increased to 16,263,885 while there are more than 70 political parties registered by the Election Commission (elections.gov.lk). It is clear that the democratic system and the regular conducting of elections has taken a firm hold in the political culture of the country. Certainly, ‘people’s choice’ or in other words the free and fair election system is the core mechanism available for the people to elect to power or remove from power a government as well as the parliamentary representatives. In Sri Lanka elections are held to choose the national government, provincial governments, as well as local governments and to select the representatives for these bodies. In addition, the modern political party system, which has been built on modern political philosophy, whether democratic or socialist, does play an enormous role in shaping the political beliefs and practices of the voters. The multi-party system in Sri Lanka has performed a valuable role in maintaining parliamentary democratic norms and practices[5]. All these positive features of democracy have helped to create a modern political culture in Sri Lanka. In short, modern western democratic beliefs, practices and values have played a significant role in sustaining a robust and secular political culture in the state of Sri Lanka.

Superstitious Beliefs and Practices in Sri Lanka

Superstitious beliefs and practices are characteristics of the culture of Sri Lanka. Even though the culture of the country is dominated by Buddhist and Sinhalese values, the influence of many other factors has also contributed to shape it. Interestingly, Sumanasuriya [6] has identified five distinctive Sinhalese values that have dominated Sri Lankan culture. His reference to this is as follows:

“..... that is characterized by five dominant features – Religion (Buddhism), Ayurveda including folk medicine, propitiation and invocation of deities, astrology, and pre-Buddhist practices” [6].

Therefore, the general culture of Sri Lanka is a self-sustaining socio-cultural melting pot of beliefs, myths, customs, values and practices. Many of these beliefs and customs were inherited from ancient South Indian culture, such as the propitiation and invocation of deities, astrology and pre-Buddhist practices. Although Sri Lanka inherited a well-developed and modern social order from the Western colonial rulers, propitiation and invocation of deities and astrology are still playing important roles in the culture of the country. Anyway, these two practices have been going on for a long time despite being decried as superstitious beliefs and practices by many.

Astrology as a Popular Business

Many individuals in the Indian sub-continent naturally and spontaneously turn to astrology for guidance in the conduct of their lives. Prof. Fonseka [7] explained that Astrology is the belief that the position of the celestial bodies at the time and place of a person’s birth determines the structure and functioning of his body, mind, personality, behavior and final destiny. The Sinhalese culture in Sri Lanka too has attached much importance to astrology for guiding them in the conduct of their lives. Astrology has been playing a major role in the Sinhalese culture of Sri Lanka from ancient times. Generally, the Sinhalese people do inaugurate many important events of their life at the astrologically calculated auspicious time.

Many daily and weekend newspapers in Sri Lanka regularly publish a column on astrology that is supposed to predict the immediate circumstances and events that are likely to occur in the individual's life. Besides that, there are some astrological tabloids that are published weekly in the country such as Subasetha, Ira Handa, Sithumina, Tharuwa, Vishwa, etc., which are mainly focused on matters pertaining to astrology. In Sri Lanka, there are thousands of individuals who practice as professional astrologers and depend on it for their livelihood. There are hundreds of advertisements published in the media offering astrological services, such as writing horoscope, reading horoscope, determining auspicious hour and reading of palms, round the year. Even though there may be doubts regarding the authenticity of some professional astrologers due to the unreliability of their predictions, it is still a lucrative business in Sri Lanka. People belonging to all social classes and all levels of education depend on the services of astrologers to provide guidance, which they must follow to ensure the success of their future.

Dashing of Coconuts by the Villagers to Seek the Intervention of Deities

Dashing coconuts is one of the renowned practices followed by the traditional community in Sri Lanka. This practice is mostly performed by the Hinduism temples, where it has been a tradition. Hindus always use coconuts in their rituals. For example, Hindus break the coconut into two halves at poojas (holy mass). They keep the upper half of the coconut on the Poorna Kumbha (A pot filled with water and topped with a coconut on which deities are invoked) or at the doorsteps, gates of temples or before Hindu deities, particularly in front of God Ganesh[8]. Although the dashing of coconuts is traditionally carried out by the Hindus as a part of their religious rituals, the practice has been absorbed by the Sinhala culture, too. Dashing coconuts has now become a part of traditional culture in Sri Lanka and its purpose is to propitiate the deities to find remedies for their grievances [9, 10]. In the Sinhalese culture, the custom of dashing coconuts is also done for personal reasons such as to evoke the blessings of a God or to bring down a curse on someone to punish him. However, some people dash coconuts to gain a victory or achieve some goal. Regrettably, some individuals perform this ritual in order to take revenge against people they dislike in the belief it will sabotage all their plans. Their desire is to destroy their enemies, to have the verdict in a legal case go against them, or to teach a lesson to someone who has cheated them, etc.

There are some places that are famous for the practice of dashing coconuts and performing other 'Black Magic' in the country. 'Seenigama Devol Devalaya' in the Southwest is the most famous place in Sri Lanka for this type of activity [9]. In addition, 'Munnesvaram' Hindu temple in Chilaw in the North Western Province, 'Katharagama Devalaya' down South, and 'Kali Amman' Hindu Kovil in Modera, Colombo are the famous places for dashing coconuts in Sri Lanka. Many of these places are dedicated to the Hindu Goddess Kali. People participate in the rituals conducted in those places in the hope of realizing their harmless objectives or evil objectives, as the case may be. Further, another practice of the villagers is 'Chillie Grinding' that is performed at some 'devalaya' (a place of worship dedicated to deities). This is a common practice in the traditional culture of Sri Lanka in which the intervention of the deities is invoked to destroy one's enemies.

Superstitious Beliefs and Practices Prevalent in the Political Culture of Sri Lanka

Many politicians in Sri Lanka depend on astrology to advance their political careers. The late Sri Lankan medical scientist Prof. Carlo Fonseka [7] pointed out many examples of superstitious Sri Lankan prime ministers who served in the post-independence period. He claimed that many Prime Ministers did believe in the idea of auspicious time in conducting their statecraft. For example, Fonseka mentioned that Ceylon became the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, precisely at the astrologically prescribed time of 12.43 p.m. on the 22nd of May 1972. Prof. Fonseka [7] pointed out another example of a leader of the country taking the oath of office at the auspicious time decided by his astrologer. J.R. Jayewardene's assumption of office as President of the Republic was reported by the Newsweek magazine of 13th February 1978, as follows: "Facing East at 8.58 last Saturday morning – the auspicious hour chosen by his astrologer – Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Junius Richard Jayewardene took the oath of office as his country's first President..."[6].

The government in power in the early sixties (1960-1965), even decided to amend some words of the National Anthem of Sri Lanka in deference to the opinion of some astrologers. They had advised the government that some words in the National Anthem had a bad influence on the country and its leaders. Therefore, the leaders of the country made a decision to amend slightly the National Anthem, which started with the words 'Namo Namo Matha'. A Sri Lankan newspaper explained the issue as follows:

"The new Government took the campaign against 'Namo Namo Matha' seriously. The Home and Cultural Affairs Minister Maithripala Senanayake appointed a committee of 'experts' to examine the issue and determine whether the National Anthem was the cause of the country's troubles. The committee recommended that the words 'Namo Namo Matha' be changed to 'Sri Lanka Matha'" [11].

Although democratic beliefs, values and practices mostly support the framework of a modern political culture in Sri Lanka, some traditional practices also play an important role in politics in Sri Lanka. The Research finds that certain superstitious beliefs are still rife in the Sri Lankan political culture even in the realm of modern political practices. Observations and information reveal that astrology plays a significant role in the electoral process as well as in shaping the opinion of voters during elections. It is a common practice for many astrologers to forecast the election results of any impending elections. Whenever a presidential election or parliamentary election is called by the election department, a number of astrologers appear from nowhere and assail the public by making predictions as to who will be the winners at the election. Some astrologers analyze the horoscope of the candidates while some others analyze the astrological influence on the country to do their forecasting. These astrologers mainly use the mass media, either print or electronic, to express their opinions on the outcome. Further, a number of astrological newspapers would emerge during the period of Presidential or General Elections in the country. The traditional astrological newspapers were published regularly but some newspapers would issue astrology supplements during the election period. All newspapers would devote a large amount of column space in their newspapers to publish the opinions of astrologers on the forthcoming election. In addition, many television channels would broadcast programs in which astrologers would appear as guests and be interviewed and asked to predict the fortunes of the candidates as well as the parties at the elections. Some TV channels would even arrange debates between astrologers on this matter. The astrologers would debate and challenge each other in the television program and every astrologer would try to justify his prediction. Naturally, the question will be raised, as to how astrologers can make divergent predictions about the election outcome when all their calculations are based on the same astrological theories.

Not only is the forecasting of election results, but the entire election process is dominated by astrology. The nomination hour of the candidates, sometimes the date of the election, date of conducting the first election rally, and finally the date of taking the oath of office for the winning candidates depend on the auspicious time decided by their astrologers. There is a famous rumor that President Mahinda Rajapaksa called the Presidential election in 2015, nearly two years before his period of office ended, due to the advice of his astrologer, only to lose the election [12].

Like the belief in astrology, dashing of coconuts is also a practice to which the politicians in Sri Lanka are highly addicted. As mentioned earlier, the practice of dashing coconuts was adopted from the ancient Hindu religious culture that found its way into the country. In fact, the research has observed that on some occasions, politicians perform the coconut dashing right in Hindu Kovils or Temples in the hope of realizing their political ambitions. Especially, they do this when they wish to destroy or punish their political enemies, or undermine rival political processes, and also for their own election victory. There are some famous religious places in the country where many phenomena have been reported in recent times. However, these traditional superstitious practices are performed by the politicians for their political success. Several incidents in connection with the dashing of coconuts have been reported by the media recently, and a few examples can be given. A leading newspaper reported such a ritual that was performed by the opposition party in Sri Lanka in 2016.

“The Joint Opposition has attributed the ‘successes’ of its Hyde Park rally to the serial dashing of coconuts at the kovils and temples against the government and its members. It has vowed to continue with the ritual until the government is packed off home. Joint Opposition front runner Kumara Welgama said fruitful results are emerging from the coconut dashing spree while Bandula Gunawardena said the Joint Opposition started dashing coconuts at Seenigama Devalaya calling for the intervention of the deities to bring relief to the people” [13].

When the government established the “Financial Crimes Investigation Department” (FCID) to investigate financial corruption that occurred during the previous government’s tenure, that was strongly criticized by the opposition party that accused the government of taking revenge against them. Therefore, they embarked on a series of coconut dashing events at Seenigama [14]. In contrast to this, the study revealed that those who were loyal to the government also started to smash coconuts to counteract the effects of the serial coconut dashing exercise performed by the Joint Opposition party. It was learnt that the “counter ritual” was performed by Government supporters to render the opposition’s coconut smashing ritual null and void. The event was reported in the media as, “Countering the Joint Opposition’s dashing of coconuts at Seenigama Devala Maha Devala in Hikkaduwa, a group of non-governmental organizations held religious observances to seek divine support to protect the good governance government and the FCID” [14].

Interestingly, the media reported that since both parties were getting ready to use the same venue to smash coconuts, the Police blocked and dispersed the government supporters before they could enter the Seenigama Temple premises.

Media reported another coconut dashing event held by Tamil politicians in Jaffna in Northern Sri Lanka. The aim of that ritual was to bless Hillary Clinton, the Democratic candidate in the US election of 2016. According to media reports, “We will dash 1,008 coconuts on November 08 to bless her ahead of the US election. We expect her to win the election said M.K. Shivajilingam, a Tamil National Alliance (TNA) member of the Tamil-controlled Northern Provincial Council.

The event will take place at Jaffna's historic Kandasamy Kovil in Nallur" [15]. Sri Lankan Tamil politicians believe they can find a political solution only through the intervention of a Democratic Party led government in the United States of America.

Another incident of coconut dashing was reported when the government arrested its rival presidential election candidate General Sarath Fonseka in 2010. When General Sarath Fonseka was kept under arrest, his supporters commenced a movement to keep dashing coconuts in Kovils and Temples invoking the wrath of the Gods on the government [16].

Many of the foregoing events were organized by the opposition political parties and their supporters. It was clear that dashing coconuts at events mostly had the objective of protesting against the policies and actions taken by the government of which the opposition parties disapproved. Those coconut dashing events had been given good media publicity through the efforts of the organizers. Therefore, it is clear that the politically motivated programs had been conducted by the party and its supporters. For example, the joint opposition parties implemented a number of strategic programs to reorganize their political movement in order to regain power. To these parties, the serial dashing of coconuts was more in the nature of a political program than a means to seek divine assistance to realize their objectives.

CONCLUSION

Although the Sri Lankan culture is dominated by Buddhism many superstitious beliefs and practices have been absorbed into the general culture. The controversial point is that Buddhist philosophy rejects all types of astrological forecasts and other dubious practices as the superstition of fools. But the fact is, those superstitious beliefs are practiced not only by the people in traditional society but also by those who are part of the modern society in Sri Lanka. In addition, according to the foregoing observations, considerable attention is paid to astrology and superstitious beliefs by the political culture, too. The study reveals that astrologers play a dominant role in Sri Lankan society and politics, and further, many of the political predictions made by astrologers are based on their own political biases. Most astrologers simply publish their own opinions while claiming them to be astrological forecasts in order to support their preferred candidates and political parties. Recently, it has become a common phenomenon to see many tabloid astrological newspapers published during the election period in Sri Lanka. The study reveals that the main purpose of those newspapers is to promote their favorite candidates by predicting their election victories through publishing biased forecasts. On the other hand, the candidates also draw attention to the astrologer's predictions in the course of their election campaigns. In other words, astrologers' predictions tend to directly influence public opinion in election campaigns. This is what is known as a "Self-fulfilling prophesy." Therefore, it is clear that astrology plays a significant role in politics by way of molding public opinion during election season in Sri Lanka.

Dashing of coconuts is resorted to by politicians as a strategy of their political agenda and its purpose is to motivate their own supporters, while building a negative opinion about their rival political parties among the voters. The politicians are exploiting these superstitious practices as a political propaganda tool rather than as an invocation calling on the deities for their intervention. And the politicians have become used to these cultural rituals because they are received well by the general public.

Although the majority of people also believes in superstitious beliefs and practices and engages in them in keeping with their own traditional culture, the modern-day Sri Lankan politicians engage in superstitious practices merely in order to achieve their political objectives. Even though the political culture in this country has been shaped by modern democratic values and practices, the politicians have made use of traditional culture mainly in order to achieve their own narrow political objectives. Today, astrology and other superstitious practices are commonly used by politicians in Sri Lanka to generate positive public opinion about themselves during their election campaign and to build a favorable future for their own politics.

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