

“Tree Ordination”: The Buddhist Ecology Movement for Forest Conservation - The Sri Lankan Experiences

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Introduction

Respecting trees is one of the main rituals in human society. Later such reactions have become a part of the main stream religious activities. “Tree ordination” is a concept of the Buddhist Ecology Movement that combines Buddhist philosophical thought and local system of beliefs among the people. While “tree ordination” ceremonies are varied, in general, ordaining trees simply means to consider them as sacred objects. An orange or a yellow robe is tied around trees, sometimes to designate a whole forest area as being ordained. The practice of tree ordination, was initiated to save local forests from logging. It has spread from its original home in Northern Thailand to Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Burma. Tree ordination, as a means of protecting community forests, often combines local spiritualism with Buddhist rituals and recognition of Buddhist and Thai values of right behavior toward the environment. This paper has discussed the practice and potential of ‘tree ordination’ campaign for conservation of forests and community empowerment against forest felling activities in Sri Lanka.

Methodology

This study is based on two cases at practical level. First one is *Nilgala* Tree Ordination Campaign and the second is *Soragune* Tree ordination Campaign. Both were organized by several NGOs and environmental activists. Participatory observations, focus group discussions, and case studies have been used for primary data collecting. Secondary data and information also have been derived from a literature survey.

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Discussion

Breaking the silence of government against the destruction of forests the civil society initiated a spiritual wave of 'tree ordination'. It is a trend of passive resistance against the government silence mode in damaging and destroying forests and it paves way to save the forests from political powers holders and commercial interests. Saffron robe wrapped around tree is no longer in existence as a just tree but as a 'sacred tree'. Oral historical memories such as living of *Deva* in the big-old trees are used by the tree ordination movement to avoid damaging the trees in a forest. Soon fear and faith is instilled in the minds of people as an approach to protect the trees. Some actual examples are as follows: Venerable Keeranthidiye Pannasekera Thero and some environmental activists ordained giant 'Dun' tree (*Shorea zeylanica*) located near Baduraliya- Kukulegama road in 1997. Venerable Dr. Balaharuwa Sirisumana Thero collaborated with the local farmers' organizations in Badulla ordained the giant 'Red sandalwood' tree (*Pterocarpus santalinus*) in 2008 to protect it from a decision to cut down for road expansion (Withange, 2014). With the support of civil organizations 'tree ordination' took place in *Nilgala* and *Soragune* forests in 2014.

Why the Government of Sri Lanka often fails to take effective action to prevent the encroaching and destroying the forest for commercial interests. Legislative provisions for protection of flora and fauna were enacted as far back from 19th century. The forest law of Sri Lanka found on the basis of forest ordinance of 1885 was amended in 1988. It provided for the establishment of the institutions such as the Department of Forests and forest conservation is handled by the department of Forest of Sri Lanka today. In addition, it has a duty to conserve the village forests and other state forests. Wild Life Department and wild life act (FAUNA AND FLORA PROTECTION ORDINANCE) of Sri Lanka stands to protect the fauna and ecosystems in the forests. Felling of Trees Act No 9 of 1951 was designed to

prohibit the felling of specified trees. National Environmental Act No.47 of 1980 (as amended in 1989) among other things was also promoted rational exploitation and wildlife management in the forest resources. It is to conserve the threatened flora and fauna species and promote the reforestation, timber management, park and wildlife management and the establishment of industrial tree plantations. Central Environment Authority was established in general, to implement the environmental friendly policies.

Then, Why Buddhist monks and the civil society had to confront the issue of deforestation? In Buddhist philosophy, the ultimate aim of Buddhism is to relieve suffering, the root causes of which are greed, ignorance, and hatred. The Buddhist monks see the destruction of the forests, pollution of the air and water, and other environmental problems as ultimately caused by people acting through these evil inclinations, motivated by economic gain and the material benefits accrued through development, industrialization, and hyper-enjoyment of consumerism.

Conclusion

‘Tree ordination’ is not only to project and conserve the forests but also to empower the vulnerable communities around the areas. It reflected the unity among diverse groups in joining hands to protect the environment. Sinhala-Buddhist and Muslim brotherhood blended well together in this movement. The heavy physical constructions under a neo liberal economic policy will have a negative impact on the forest. The ‘tree ordination’ movement has shown promising potentials for conservation of forests and empowering peripheral communities for their physical and spiritual advancement.

Keywords: ‘Tree Ordination’, Nilgala, Soragune, Forest, failures of laws and Government

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