Samaja Viggraha

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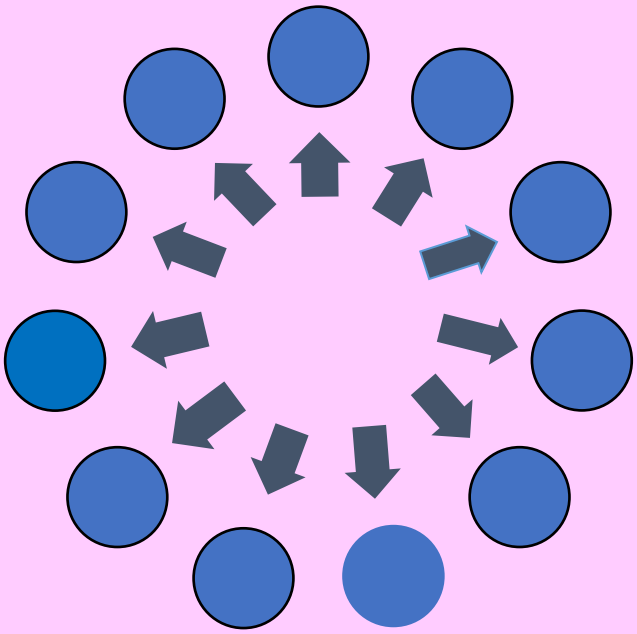

Department of Sociology
University of Colombo
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Note of the Editor-in-chief

Samaja Vigraha is a biannual, peer-reviewed journal published by the Department of Sociology at the University of Colombo. The journal provides an interdisciplinary forum for the dissemination of scholarly research in the fields of sociology, anthropology, psychology, and social work. We welcome submissions of original articles in both English and Sinhala. While the present issue features articles in English, the journal welcomes submissions in both languages.

We are pleased to announce the publication of the inaugural issue of Volume II of *Samaja Vigraha***.** I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to the authors and reviewers, who have generously dedicated their time, expertise, and effort to the success of this journal. I would also like to express my appreciation to the founding editor, Senior Professor Premakumara de Silva; the former members of the Editorial Board and all former Heads of the Department, whose dedication, vision, and initiative were instrumental in the establishment and development of this journal. Special thanks are due to the associate editor, Ms. Iresha Samarasinghe, and the language editor, Dr. Bihimini Abeywickrama, for their invaluable contributions and assistance in ensuring the successful publication of this issue.

I cordially invite academics, practitioners, and researchers to submit their original research articles and review papers to *Samaja Vigraha*. We look forward to receiving your valuable contributions and to continuing to promote scholarly dialogue and knowledge dissemination in the fields.

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Panel of Reviewers

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Demassification of Social Control and De-panopticonization of Surveillance in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

J. D. A. Kumara

Abstract

This paper analyzes Michel Foucault's panoptic model of social control and its historical validity in the age of artificial intelligence (AI) driven world as a turn has been marked in the realms of surveillance and social control with decentralized and algorithmic systems. Foucault's analysis of the panopticon and diffusion of its model throughout modern institutions have laid the foundation for understanding how power operates through visibility and internalization in the modern world. However, the rise of AI with collection and analysis of larger sets of data with a ubiquitous approach as well as predictive algorithms have resulted in a shift in social control compared to the Foucauldian world. This change is an outcome of the demassification and de-panopticanization that happened consequently. This study is based on a multidisciplinary qualitative methodology. The ideas of Michel Foucault, for example, disciplinary power, and biopower, are used to analyze the case. Foucauldian discourse analysis and archaeological methods are employed accordingly. In conclusion, surveillance is no longer confined to centralized spaces or panoptic regimes; social control is now embedded within dispersed networks, data flows, and automated systems, fundamentally reshaping the dynamics of power and resistance.

Keywords: Foucault, surveillance, artificial intelligence, panopticon, social control.

Introduction

Michel Foucault (1926 - 1984), a French historian of ideas and philosopher, argued that his contemporary society was structured differently from the society that preceded him as it was designed to reverse the barbarity of previous periods where punishment was effected on the body in public displays of torture, dismemberment, and obliteration (Felluga, 2015). The "gaze" of the panopticon was pervasive in the 20th century with mass surveillance with the modern technologies and it tied to the power-knowledge nexus (Backus, 1999). The power-knowledge relationship does not imply that power and knowledge are synonymous, rather it suggests that power is both a cause and an effect of knowledge (Digeser, 1986). The functioning of power depends on the knowledge that the watchtower is the place where the guards reside. In contrast, the idea that power precedes knowledge does not seem to be contained within the panoptic device, and this is a sense in which the panopticon is not a satisfactory analogy for Foucault's conception of power.

> "In the ceremonies of the public execution, the main character was the people, whose real and immediate presence was required for the performance. An execution that was known to be taking place, but which did so in secret, would scarcely have had any meaning. The aim was to make an example, not only by making people aware that the slightest offence was likely to be punished, but by arousing feelings of terror by the spectacle of power letting its anger fall upon the guilty person: : 'In criminal matters, the most difficult point is the imposition of the penalty: it is the aim and the end of the procedure, and its only fruit, by example and terror, when it is well applied to the guilty person." (Foucault, 1995).

Foucault highlighted that the discourse on modern power, surveillance, and discipline is fundamentally different in the 20th century as punishment and discipline become internalized and directed to the constitution and, when necessary, rehabilitation of social subjects. Foucault observed the role of discourse, or language practices, in cementing new truths and extending the penetration of power into new areas of social life. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault pointed out that the exercise of absolute, monarchical authority, with power over life and death, has become both impractical and untenable. Instead, Foucault conceives of a modern form of disciplinary power achieved through surveillance, or rather the possibility of surveillance (Clarke, McQueen, Pnacekova & Sahli, 2020).

This attempt cannot be categorized under the negative understanding of power. In his *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault came up with a comprehensive critique of the negative understanding of power pertaining to sovereignty discourses. Foucault's main concern was to paint a picture on the emergence of new forms of power in the 19th and 20th centuries. He mapped out how, over time, the sovereign's negative power, e.g. the power to mercilessly execute offenders, is transformed or replaced/ supplemented by fundamentally different ways. According to Foucault, this new form of power (discipline) has a range of characteristics, only a few of which will be highlighted here (Borch, 2014). To situate this discussion, the paper first revisits Michel Foucault's conception of the panoptic model. The paper highlights how AI systems are transforming disciplinary mechanisms in societies. The study then focused on surveillance and social control that have moved beyond centralized visibility of older panoptic models toward algorithmic and decentralized systems. Finally, the paper identifies how AI-driven personalization can represent fragmented, automated, and opaque forms of control.

Objectives

1. To critically examine the Foucauldian panoptic model of social control and how surveillance in his contemporary society worked.
2. To understand how transformative effects of artificial intelligence have changed modern surveillance and social control.
3. To identify how AI personalization departs from traditional disciplinary power by replacing centralized, visible surveillance with fragmented, automated, and opaque mechanisms.

Literature Review

Foucault metaphorically used Jeremy Bentham's panopticon to demonstrate how modern societies have transitioned to an era of disciplinary power rooted in constant observation and self-regulation. He observed the power of panopticon where "the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so" (Foucault, 1977, p. 201). In the "panopticon" the prison is structured in a way that cells would be open to a central tower and individual prisoners are barred from interaction from each other at the same time they are monitored even in the absence of the central guard. Even the nothingness turns into an entity of power. The "discovery" behind the panopticon, as Foucault presents it, was a double one: Moral appeals, religious sermons, and the like had no effect by themselves. Rather than rely on such "normative" appeals, the panopticon made possible the operation of a set of uninterrupted exercises and activities. These worked to "turn" the gross, empirical social offender by inculcating more socially acceptable habits and dispositions. Not the "moral sense" of the already socially shaped human unit but a community of sub individuals was the object and creation of this punitive rationality" (Ransom, 1997).

This system of control replaced the old-fashioned brutal and inhumane treatment of prisoners while surveillance was pushed to private spheres of human life with new surveillance technology. This created a new form of social organization and a single corrections mechanism was still in place. However, with the rise of the Semantic Web which is often labelled as Web 3.0 has made digital environments understand and anticipate human behavior resulting in personalized contents for the users (Szeredi, Lukácsy & Benkő, 2006). The structured data, intelligent agents, and linked information found on Semantic Web helps machines to interpret, categorize, and act on user inputs with autonomy, limiting the world of the user. The Semantic Web was initially envisioned as a framework that would enable machines to interpret and process information on the web. That allowed intelligent agents to locate, combine, and act on data to assist users in their daily online activities. However, the original enthusiasm for the Semantic Web has diminished, and it is now often discussed under the terms Linked Data or the Web of Data. Under this, it pursues a modest objective focused on automating information integration. Linked Data involves structuring and publishing web page information in a way that software can easily process. With this shift, Semantic Web methods are useful for integrating data from multiple sources and generating additional value from that information (Sánchez-Alonso & Athanasiadis, 2010).

The AI driven Semantic Web leads to digital spaces where users are exposed to a selected set of opinions and information, predominantly chosen by the bots. The reinforcement of beliefs happens, accordingly. However, this is different from the old fashioned propagandic big lies (*große Lüge*) where a gross distortion or misrepresentation of the truth is primarily used as a political gain at mass scale in totalitarian states like Nazi Germany. In such regimes, the ruling party uses propaganda and shapes communications in their favor (Gray, 2023). They prohibit opposition from political parties, disregards and outlaws the political claims of individual and

group opposition to the state, and completely controls the public sphere and the private sphere of society. In the field of political science, totalitarianism is the extreme form of authoritarianism, wherein all socio-political power is held by a dictator. The continual propaganda campaigns are broadcast by state-controlled and state-aligned private mass communications media (Conquest, 1999). In AI personalization, such state-controlled information with a mass-approach is not witnessed.

The AI driven echo chambers are basically discursive enclosures with bounded spaces where alternative perspectives are marginalized or excluded. The algorithms built on semantic data are used to predict and influence the user and they read, buy, believe, or even feel what is directed by a bot. This is basically decided on the digital footprint of the user. In a sense this echoes Foucault's idea of biopower where the user data is being to regulate themselves, not only by collective trends but by individual subjectivities (Morar & Cisney, 2016). In the contemporary world, human health, consumption, relationships, and even identity are mediated by the AI driven agents while defining norms in line with the underlying semantic structures.

This has transcended the Foucauldian idea of discipline where observance, surveillance and accumulation of knowledge extended to hospitals, schools, and factories. In his historic analysis, Foucault was successfully able to argue that the disappearance of public executions in the old world had been gradually eliminated as punishment in a society ruled by reason (Foucault, 1977, p. 10). With AI personalization a societal and collective reason has been outdated and it has been replaced with the "reasoning bubbles" that are much personalized and unique. AI personalization is acting as a biopolitical tool in the Foucauldian sense as they manage desires, shape identities, and optimize behaviors (Johnsen, 2024). According to Foucault, the new governmental reason needs freedom; therefore, the new art of government consumes freedom. It

must produce it, it must organize it. The new art of government therefore appears as the management of freedom, not in the sense of the imperative: "be free," with the immediate contradiction that this imperative may contain (Foucault, 2008, p. 63).

It has individualized governance while transcending the traditional notion of the architecture of control and reinforcement norms with much fragmented, user-specific experiences.

> “Al personalization is the process of using artificial intelligence to tailor the content and features of a service or product to each individual user. In the context of social media, AI personalization can involve analyzing a user's profile, preferences, behavior, and network to determine what kind of posts, stories, ads, and recommendations to display on their feed. AI personalization can also help users discover new content and people that match their interests and needs. The benefits of AI personalization for social media platforms are twofold.” (Musiolik, Rodriguez & Kannan, 2024)

Accordingly, Foucault’s argument on panopticon and its centrality is outdated in the age of AI where the centralized control through visibility as contemporary digital society operates under more opaque, networked regimes that surpass the panoptic model as AI personalization represents a subtle and strong control through functions of personalized systems such as mechanisms of behavioral steering, normalization, and indirect discipline (Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2022). Those personalization algorithms are actively constructing preferences by reinforcing certain behaviors, values, and patterns of thought. This paper examines the transformation that has taken place in the realm of social control and argues that the AI-powered surveillance mechanisms represent a form of de-panopticanization. This new form of social control

is a departure from centralized surveillance toward a decentralized, demassified structure shaped by AI and algorithmic governance.

Research Problem

What is the turn that has taken place with the Foucauldian model of disciplinary power in the era of AI-driven personalization and the Semantic Web, and what are the implications of this change in case of subjectivity, agency, and governance in the contemporary AI age?

Sub-questions

1. How do the AI personalization algorithms act as contemporary mechanisms for sustaining disciplinary power?
2. How does the Semantic Web transcend the architecture of the panopticon?
3. How are individuals' subjectivities constructed through algorithmic suggestions and reinforcements?
4. Can resistance or agency exist meaningfully within algorithmic governance and digital reasoning bubbles?

Research Methodology

This study is focused on a multidisciplinary qualitative methodology that is basically grounded in Michel Foucault's theoretical ideas linked to the disciplinary power, panopticism, and biopower. These particular ideas have been articulated in Foucault's major works such as *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1977) and *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault, 1978). Based on these texts, the study has adopted a Foucauldian discourse analysis that will serve as the principle examining method to understand how power manifests in AI-driven contemporary digital platforms. Foucauldian archaeology, a method of historical analysis to study how systems of thought and knowledge are formed, organized, and transformed over time, has also been used as a

method of analysis in this study. Under this method, the study delves into the layers of discourse to reveal the rules and systems of thought pertaining to surveillance. This methodology of Critical Discourse Analysis has been used to investigate the structures, and semiotics of AI-driven systems, for example AI-based personalization, recommendation algorithms, Semantic Web, hidden mechanisms of normalization and control, etc. The study is based on literature analysis and literature on algorithmic governance, AI personalization, recommendation systems, and semantic technologies are used as sources of the study. Foucauldian and post-structural perspectives are employed to understand surveillance, normalization, and the production of knowledge. Philosophical evaluation of algorithmically curated environments is employed here to understand the turn that has taken place in the realm of social control, making a shift from Foucauldian understanding of panoptic regimes, where power-knowledge interconnection has been elevated into a new dimension with preferences of the user himself, instead of a panoptic tower has become the basis for control. In the older system, though, the ability to see inmates in the panopticon allows for the exercise of power, without a single point of observation is invalid with echo chambers and personalized contents.

Accordingly, surveillance and disciplinary practices have changed their trajectories, as compared to earlier institutions such as penal systems and public health apparatuses in contrast to the modern algorithmic control. The operationalization of Semantic Web technologies has been studied in a broader discursive practice and examined how user identity and reinforcing behavioral norms have been shaped with AI personalization.

De-panopticonization of Surveillance in the Age of AI

Foucault opined that the idea of punishment evolved from bodily spectacle to internalized discipline as the 20th century dawned corporal punishment diminished and the state was able to

secure the right to administer more subtle methods of punishment and discipline. The public and brutal aspect of punishment was evaded, and according to Foucault, the modern systems emphasized reform, regulation, and normalization, paving the way to the "carceral society" (Garland, 1986). In a "carceral society" the punishment and control are deeply embedded in social structures, institutions, and everyday practices; the threat of punishment becomes normalized and internalized, shaping individual behavior and social relations.

> "Foucault treats the panopticon as a metaphor for modern society, the carceral or imprisoning society, an expression reminiscent of Weber's 'iron cage. For this metaphor, Bentham's model has the relevant features of being purportedly a completely rational plan for the treatment of prisoners, thus reflecting the extent to which thought is devoted to devising ways of controlling people; emphasizing the extent to which the system is designed to encourage people to control themselves through reflection on their own conduct; conceiving the thoroughly constant and pervasive supervision of the inmate: the model represents the ideal of a totally administered society" (Cuff, Dennis, Francis, & Sharrock, 2006, p. 236).

This is a diffuse system of control as it is more focused on shaping individuals' behavior through discipline and observation. However, this observation originates from a central source. In contrast to Foucauldian analysis, in the age of AI, no central source of observation is present. The idea of the single observer of the panopticon model is obsolete in the contemporary world and the subject is monitored by multiple bots with their specified algorithms. No single source would induce self-discipline upon the users in the AI world but by a different set of bots by tracking preferences, locations, interactions, and habits. The Semantic Web-based surveillance enables a

form of ambient surveillance in which observation is constant, often imperceptible, and embedded in everyday practices and unlike traditional forms of surveillance where cameras or visible monitoring are central.

In the AI-driven world, the central tower of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon is missing. Users internalize a very personalized set of rules to adjust their behavior. No panoptic mechanism with polyvalent nature will be present in the AI age to stipulate a generalized function of power. The AI-powered Semantic Web invites the users to optimize their own behaviors with algorithmic suggestions. Accordingly, users are guided to govern themselves sans a central observation. Instead of internalization of the panoptic tower and policing themselves through a central point, their discipline originated from themselves. For Foucault, "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (Foucault, 1977, p. 202-203). In this subjection, the interpellation happens from an outer cause, that is even the nothingness, or absence of the guard, himself (Žižek, 2003). The panoptic tower, or the center addresses the individuals, and thus creates them as subjects. Nevertheless, in the AI-driven echo chambers, the subject is created not from an outer but from the user himself. In this process, there is a policing tower to hail. Their specific social role or identity is created from their preference bubble itself. However, these algorithmic processes are not a natural occurrence, but are actively constructed by a range of diffused structures.

In a panoptic regime, as per the Foucauldian understanding, the internalization of norms and authority, hailed by a single source, where the individual is subjected. With AI personalization, individuals are being subjected to their own preferences and they are the subject and the object of

the interpellation process, with less resistance and higher conformity (Arac, 1986). Foucault's idea was still on a grand and totalitarian society where docile and predictable individuals are created. But in the AI age, power creeps into the private sphere of life in a personalized form. The world tactics of use of identification numbers, surveillance cameras, digital records, and location tracking devices function to create an own bubble for the user with discursive enclosures. Accordingly, the reality is demassified and users are living in a schizophrenic world created for themselves by the algorithms. The modern control systems are not guarded by one single panoptic power, but by many algorithmic bubbles based on individual preferences.

The data-centric organization of human life is unprecedented and its vocation is not to become a generalized function" (Foucault, 1977, p. 207).Hence, 20th century panoptic machines are obsolete and the Foucauldian idea of "normal" is also outdated as algorithms and personalization mechanisms reinforce discourses that are not "normal", but highly shaped by individual beliefs effectively producing subjects whose truths are individuated. Foucault argued that normalizing forms of governance constitutes individuals as subjects (Haugaard, 2022, pp. 341–371). Such normalizing practices compare individuals to one another, single them out, and rank them in a continuum from the normal to the pathological. Whereas sovereign power emphasized the individuality of rulers by means of family crests, genealogies, and legends, bio-politics aims to individualize the targets of power. Foucault opined that modern individuality is not based on some authentic experience people have of themselves, but that it emerges instead as an effect of practices where governing takes place through normalization (McWhorter, 1999). The old form of bureaucratic layers of control are diminishing in the AI age. The mechanization of control has also been personalized; subject formation happens without a dominant discourse.

The AI era has transcended the logic of surveillance, replacing traditional panoptic models with individuated algorithmic guards. This happens through the creation of bubbles with preferences of the users' overt coercion of the old world or spatial arrangements and visual observation in panoptic regimes. Data collection, predictive algorithms, and automated decision-making are pillars of control where surveillance does not need a central watchtower. Surveillance is embedded in everyday technologies, smartphones, social media, wearables, and biometric systems and bots are capable of handling vast amounts of data to predict behavior, manage risk, and influence choices. The bubbles created based on individual preferences are ambient and continuous where individuals are free from being watched by a single watchtower, they are analyzed, categorized, and nudged with invisibility and decentralization. The AI surveillance is imperceptible as compared to the Foucauldian idea and it is embedded in algorithms and cloud infrastructure.

Contemporary surveillance differs fundamentally from Foucault's panopticon. Instead of centralized observation, networked and distributed systems are observed in the contemporary world and fragment control across digital platforms is witnessed. Hence, power is not wielded or emanated from one single source, but operates through code, data, and infrastructure. AI surveillance systems do not just watch the users, but they predict, recommend, and automate.

This form of control is demassified. Personal data is harvested and used by the AI systems and they are tailored to shape experiences, decisions, and sometimes perceptions of reality. In this shift, surveillance has become asynchronous and context-aware, while being fundamentally different to the panoptic understanding of the control (Mann, 2024). For AI-driven systems, the observer is hidden in code, making it impossible to locate or confront such codes. This new form of data extraction and algorithmic judgment make individuals increasingly governed by data they

do not see, processed by algorithms they cannot understand. The ethical accountability and democratic oversight are facing new challenges as surveillance shifts from the architectural to the algorithmic. Hence, the panoptic asymmetrical visibility will not explain the social control in the AI era.

As disciplinary power in the AI era operates through surveillance, normalization, and examination, AI personalization algorithms make individuals self-regulated. This happens in line with platform norms. This directly addresses the first research question—how AI personalization algorithms act as contemporary mechanisms for sustaining disciplinary power—as systems such as social media feeds, recommendation engines, and targeted advertising continuously monitor user behaviors, including clicks, watch time, and interaction patterns. This also happens in the absence of a centralized panoptic authority.

Regarding the second research question—how the Semantic Web transcends the architecture of the panopticon—the Semantic Web operates on a fundamentally different logic of control and visibility (Colomb, 2007). The central observer is missed in AI systems and it uses distributed, networked systems to structure, codify, and interconnect information. Power, in such cases, becomes less architectural and more ontological. Therefore, power will be embedded in the data structures and algorithms that organize and govern digital interactions.

The third research question—how individuals' subjectivities are constructed through algorithmic suggestions and reinforcements—is addressed by observing that AI-driven systems actively shape preferences, choices, and behaviors (Muhlert, 2025). The curated feeds, recommendations, and targeted content are instrumental in creation of subjectivities of the users and limited to platform logics, rather than centralized oversight coming from an external source.

Therefore, algorithmic tracking of micro-actions guides users to internalize norms and expectations encoded by the system itself.

Finally, in relation to the fourth research question—whether resistance or agency can exist meaningfully within algorithmic governance and digital reasoning bubbles—it is evident that agency still exists but manifests differently. This is different to traditional disciplinary systems and the realm of control is not clear and observable in contemporary AI systems. Individuals' exercise of agency is constrained and shaped by the infrastructure, ontologies, and algorithmic logics.

Reexamination of Foucault Surveillance

This study set out with three main objectives: first, to critically examine the Foucauldian panoptic model of social control and the ways in which surveillance operated within his contemporary society; second, to understand how the transformative effects of artificial intelligence have reshaped modern surveillance and mechanisms of social control; and third, to identify how AI-driven personalization departs from traditional disciplinary power by replacing centralized, visible surveillance with fragmented, automated, and opaque mechanisms.

In addressing these objectives, the paper argued that AI-driven systems mark a shift in the logic of social control. The older panoptic model emphasized centralized visibility and the interpellation of subjects. That happened within a disciplinary framework. However, contemporary algorithmic systems operate through networked, individualized, and opaque processes. This transformation has subtly influenced behavior, identity, and preferences. This shift entails both a "demassification" and a "de-panopticonization" of surveillance. Accordingly, power is no longer exercised through overt centrality. In this de-panopticonizatized model, power is exercised with personalized systems embedded in everyday digital interactions.

Foucault's insights remain crucial for understanding how power circulates and diffuses within society (Foucault, 1980). However, to fully grasp the implications of AI and data-driven surveillance, his idea has to be reinterpreted. The diffusion of power in the AI age can be understood as a phenomenon where control can be exercised even without a central surveillance authority. This signals a profound transformation in the relationship between surveillance, subjectivity, and social order.

Therefore, "de-panopticonization" is theorized with this paper to highlight the shift that had taken place with the rise of AI, Semantic Web technologies, and algorithmic systems. In contrast to Foucault's world, surveillance, at present, is embedded in data flows, predictive algorithms, and digital personalizations rather than physical institutions. AI personalization mechanisms construct the reality for the users with their own reasoning bubbles than the reasoning originating from a panoptic tower; curating content and shaping user experiences to limit their worlds to echo chambers (Wang, 2025). These echo chambers and algorithmic filtering act as "reasoning bubbles" as coined in this study, resulting in fragmented realities. While marking its difference from traditional propaganda models in totalitarian regimes, AI surveillance is not mass-directed, but has an individualized nature, shaping influence through digital footprints.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper argued that AI-driven systems have made a shift in social control with the transformation of surveillance techniques. Instead of the traditional panoptic model the networked, individualized, and algorithmic systems have been able to control the users without a panoptic centrality, that missed the interpellation "constitute" the human subjectivity. This change marks a "demassification" on one side and "de-panopticonization" of social control on the other; where power is exercised not through overt visibility like in the panoptic model, but through

personalized systems that shape behavior, identity, and preferences of the people. Foucault's theories remain relevant in understanding how power could be diffused but must be extended and reinterpreted to fully grasp the implications of AI and data-driven social control where diffusion of power is witnessed even without a central surveillance system.

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State-Citizen Relations and Political Patronage in Water Politics

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Abstract

This study examines how political patronage reshapes state-citizen relations in water through the Deduru Oya Water Development Project in Sri Lanka. The research aims to examine how political affiliations and patron-client relationships influence access to water, state decision-making, and the broader quality of citizen engagement in water governance. The study adopts a qualitative approach, with fieldwork conducted over seven months in the Wariyapola Divisional Secretariat of the Kurunegala District. Data was collected through 40 semi-structured interviews and 20 case studies. The study applies three theories: political ecology, patron-client theory, and hydro-hegemony. The findings reveal significant marginalization of resettled communities, including landlessness, economic instability, and inadequate compensation. Citizens' voices were often excluded from decision-making processes, and public protests were suppressed, indicating a weak state-citizen relationship. Political actors exploited water development projects as tools to gain and maintain power, thereby reinforcing patronage networks. Additionally, the absence of formal, inclusive policies exacerbated governance failures, leading to resource conflicts and social disintegration. The study highlights that water politics in Sri Lanka extends beyond resource management to become a field of political contestation, where patronage and unequal power relations shape outcomes. It calls for more transparent, participatory, and rights-based approaches to water governance to promote equity and strengthen state-citizen trust. The

study highlights unequal water access, inadequate compensation, and the use of water as a political tool to secure votes, illustrating how political patronage shapes state–citizen relations.

Keywords: state-citizen relations, political patronage, water politics, Sri Lanka

Introduction

Water politics in South Asia is increasingly recognized as shaped not only by hydrological and technical concerns but also by political power, competing interests, patronage networks, and unequal access to resources. Water politics in Sri Lanka, particularly in the context of large-scale development projects, reveals deep-seated dynamics of power, patronage, and state-citizen interaction. Although water is conceptualized as a public good, one which all enjoy in common without dismissing another's share (Samuelson, 1954, p.384), its distribution in South Asia shows persistent struggles over authority and control. Similar patterns of political contestation over water are observed globally, highlighting the relevance of examining local manifestations in Sri Lanka.

The Deduru Oya Water Development Project offers an important case to examine these tensions. As a major state-led initiative in Sri Lanka, it highlights how political patronage and state–citizen relationships influence the outcomes of development interventions.

While research on water governance in Sri Lanka is expanding, few studies integrate political ecology, cultural ecology, integrated water resources management (IWRM), and gender-water perspectives (Athukorala, 2022; Samad et al, 2017; Chandraseakra et al, 2021). This gap limits understanding of how power, ecological factors, and social relations intersect in large-scale water projects. To address this, the study adopts a multi-layered theoretical framework, drawing on patron–client theory (Handaragama 2013), political ecology (Bryant and Bailey, 1997; Swyngedouw,2004), and hydro-hegemony approaches (Zeitoun and Warner,2006), and Marshall's notion of social citizenship. Each provides a lens to interpret the observed tensions in state–citizen

interactions. Based on this, the study pursues two objectives: (1) to examine how political patronage shapes water access and decision-making in the Deduru Oya Project; and (2) to analyze the socio-economic and political consequences of resettlement for affected communities.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the dynamics of state-citizen relations and political patronage in water politics within the context of the Deduru Oya Water Development Project in Sri Lanka. Specifically, the research aims to: 1. examine how political patronage and power relations shape state–citizen interactions within the Deduru Oya Water Development Project. 2. Analyze how displacement and resettlement influence livelihoods, social relations, and access to water resources. 3. Assess the implications of water governance practices for equity, participation, and citizenship rights in Sri Lanka. Through these objectives, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how power relations and political interests intersect with resource management, affecting equity and trust in water governance.

Methodology

Case studies and face-to-face interviews were conducted in a village located in the Wariyapola Divisional Secretariat Division in the Kurunegala District; an area directly affected by the Deduru Oya Water Development Project. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select 40 interview participants, ensuring representation of affected farmers, women, resettled households, and community leaders. Fieldwork over seven months involved 40 semi-structured interviews and 20 case studies to capture household-level experiences of resettlement and political interactions. All interviews and case-study narratives were transcribed verbatim and coded using thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. Themes were developed iteratively, and preliminary findings were validated through member-checking with selected participants to ensure accuracy

and credibility. The secondary data was collected from books and published research papers, newspapers, academic articles, and journals.

Theoretical Framework

Water politics is deeply embedded in socio-political structures, and understanding state–citizen dynamics requires a robust theoretical grounding. This study adopts ecology, patron client relationships and hydro hegemony as analytical frameworks.

Political ecology is defined as the study of the interaction between political systems and ecological systems, examining how human activities, power relations, and institutional decisions shape environmental outcomes, resource distribution, and environmental inequalities (Robbins, 2012). It is applied to analyze state–citizen dynamics in water development projects. Through a political ecology perspective (Bryant and Bailey, 1997), this study demonstrates that water development extends beyond technical or environmental considerations, representing a fundamentally political process that reshapes state–citizen relations and reinforces existing hierarchies of power.

According to Scott (1972), patron-client relationships are informal, reciprocal ties between powerful patrons and dependent clients. In the context of water politics, political actors function as patrons by controlling access to water resources, while citizens act as clients who offer loyalty and political support in return, shaping state-citizen relations and reinforcing patterns of political patronage.

According to Cascao and Zeitoun (2010), Hydro-Hegemony Theory explains how a more powerful actor in a shared water system consolidates control over water resources, infrastructure, and governance through geographic, material, bargaining, and ideational power. This dominance allows the hegemon to shape rules, narratives, and allocation in ways that maintain unequal access

and influence over weaker actors. In water politics, hydro-hegemony helps analyze how state actors or elites control distribution, infrastructure, and decision-making, influencing state–citizen relations and patronage.

In this study, political ecology is applied to examine environmental interventions and social inequalities; patron-client theory helps analyze political control over water access; hydro-hegemony provides insight into state dominance over infrastructure and resource allocation.

Literature Review on Water Politics and Governance

Water projects and water governance in many parts of the Global South reveal that water is not only a natural resource but also a political resource — subject to negotiations of power, patronage, and state–citizen relations (Budds & Sultana, 2013; Hill, 2006). The political ecology approach to water underscores how hydro social relations are socially produced: water infrastructure, distribution, and management often reflect and reproduce existing inequalities and clientelistic networks, rather than equitable access (Budds & Sultana, 2013; Wilson, 2019). In such contexts, large-scale water interventions, dams, irrigation schemes, and water supply systems become tools through which states and political elites exercise control, distribute benefits selectively, and consolidate influence, effectively shaping citizen loyalty and dependency (Sidaoui et al., 2017; Coates, 2020). Research shows that participatory or "inclusive" water governance frameworks often fail in practice, because local elites or state actors capture governance mechanisms, resulting in elite dominance, marginalization of vulnerable groups, and weak citizen voice (Shunglu et al., 2022). These dynamics highlight a key paradox: while water policies and institutions may aim at inclusive management, in practice water politics can reinforce inequality, clientelism, and state–citizen asymmetry, undermining democratic accountability and social justice (Reis, 2019; Mason et al., 2012).

With regard to gendered water access, women often bear responsibility for water collection yet have limited participation in decision-making, reflecting intersectional inequalities in water governance (Sultana, 2009). Integrating gender perspectives underscores inequities and aligns with political ecology's focus on social power dynamics.

These global patterns provide a lens to understand similar inequalities observed in the Deduru Oya Project, where resettled communities experienced disproportionate social and economic costs.

In this light, the Deduru Oya Project offers fertile ground for a detailed empirical investigation of how water infrastructure becomes embedded in patron–client networks, shapes state–citizen relationships, and produces uneven social and economic outcomes, a gap that remains underexplored in existing literature on South Asia and Sri Lanka.

Discussion

This discussion examines how the Deduru Oya Water Development Project illustrates the intersections of state authority, citizen engagement, and political patronage in water governance. It links empirical findings to political ecology (Bryant & Bailey, 1997; Robbins, 2012), patron-client theory (Scott, 1972), and hydro-hegemony (Zeitoun & Warner, 2006) to explain patterns of marginalization, unequal access, and governance challenges. This positions Deduru Oya as a local expression of globally observed power asymmetries in water governance.

State-Citizen Dynamics in Water Politics

The Deduru Oya Water Development Project generated a range of socio-economic and political challenges, particularly for displaced and resettled communities. Resettlement disrupted land access, altered livelihoods, and weakened community cohesion, leading to marginalization and social disintegration. From a political ecology perspective (Bryant and Bailey, 1997), these

disruptions illustrate how environmental interventions are closely intertwined with power dynamics and social inequalities, often disproportionately disadvantaging resettled communities. This reflects Robbins' (2012) argument that political ecology examines how environmental change is shaped by political and economic power relations that tend to marginalize less powerful social groups. This study extends previous analyses by connecting these effects to citizen agency: how resettled families negotiate, protest, and adapt under political constraints.

The project fundamentally restructured agrarian life, reducing productive capacity and transforming both economic and social relations in affected communities. Previously, most families had access to over two acres of land, allowing them to sustain themselves through farming. However, under the resettlement plan, only half an acre was allocated to each main family and just a quarter acre to sub-families. This demonstrates a direct link between political decisions, resource allocation, and inequality.

Similarly, Nilanthi's experience highlights the change in household economic dynamics due to the loss of farmland. Her household illustrates how displacement forces shifts to informal labor markets, creating new dependencies and vulnerabilities.

The capability approach (Sen, 1995) highlights that well-being depends on freedom, security, and access to essential resources. In Deduru Oya resettled communities, these fundamental capabilities have been significantly undermined. The study shows that beyond material loss, the ability of citizens to exercise choice and maintain dignity is constrained by governance structures.

Living conditions include both tangible assets, such as land and housing, and intangible assets, such as skills and social networks (Chambers & Conway, 1992). The loss of these assets shows that resettlement is not only a technical process but also a political one, where access to

resources often depends on political connections. After the project, residents struggled to maintain their agricultural livelihoods, reflecting the unequal distribution of benefits. The reservoir built as part of the Deduru Oya Project submerged over 2,500 acres of land, including more than 1,500 acres of paddy fields, significantly increasing the social and economic hardships faced by affected communities (Samarakoon, Dayawansa & Gunawardena 2017). The case studies of Nimal and Dayani highlight how resettlement disrupted both tangible and intangible assets. The loss of land ownership undermined their primary livelihood as paddy farmers, while the relocation also affected their access to familiar social networks and local knowledge associated with farming. Following resettlement, both were compelled to take up wage labor on other farms within the resettlement area—a shift dictated by necessity rather than choice. Moreover, the uneven distribution of compensation further intensified their economic vulnerability and constrained their ability to re-establish sustainable livelihoods. (Field data, 2025).

A key argument made by affected citizens was that the government minimized the economic impact of losing fertile agricultural land. The farmers feared a significant reduction in domestic rice production and increased dependency on rice imports, which could jeopardize national food security. Their grievances were often dismissed by authorities, who promised alternative livelihoods like fishing. However, transitioning from farming to fishing was not culturally or economically viable for most. These two occupations require different skill sets, social identities, and capital investments. As a result, the proposed livelihood transition failed to provide an effective solution.

Fieldwork conducted in several resettled villages, including Polgammana, Peterveliwatta, Telahera Farm, and Kaluvaragaswewa, revealed growing political tensions between citizens and

the state. These tensions manifested in protests, forced evictions, and occasional use of state power to suppress dissent.

In theory, citizenship implies a relationship of mutual obligation between the state and its citizens. According to Marshall's theory of social citizenship, citizens are entitled not only to legal rights but also to meaningful participation in the civic, political, and social dimensions of society (Marshall, 1950). However, in practice, these entitlements were violated as people's voices were ignored and their rights suppressed. The government's approach favored technocratic development over inclusive participation, leading to adverse outcomes for vulnerable populations.

The Deduru Oya case highlights several structural issues in Sri Lanka's approach to development. First, resettlement policies lacked transparency, and the distribution of land was inconsistent and unfair. Second, compensation failed to reflect the true value of lost assets, particularly land and housing. Third, no meaningful alternative livelihoods were developed, especially ones that respected the cultural and occupational backgrounds of those displaced. Lastly, state responses to protests demonstrated a lack of sensitivity and accountability, further eroding public trust.

While infrastructure development like the Deduru Oya Project may benefit certain sectors, it often does so at the expense of rural communities whose livelihoods are directly impacted. The absence of participatory planning, weak compensation frameworks, and forced livelihood transitions leads to long-term socio-economic decline. This confirms the necessity of participatory water governance.

Over half of those displaced were farmers who lost traditional lands, fundamentally altering their livelihoods. Jayanthi, a mother of two, described how her son's education was disrupted by resettlement and how social ties eroded due to worsening economic conditions. Limited access to

public resources like clean water and burial grounds further heightened tensions between original settlers and newcomers. Dayani's testimony underlined persistent problems with water scarcity and exclusion from communal facilities, with minimal and inconsistent government support.

Data showed widespread dissatisfaction: 80% of affected families were unhappy with access to public resources, and 85% considered compensation inadequate. Many displaced farmers abandoned agriculture, shifting to low-paying, unskilled jobs such as brick cutting, marking a dramatic livelihood shift. This economic displacement intensified competition and conflicts over scarce resources between original residents and resettled families, deepening social fractures.

The government attempted compensation by allocating land and organizing resettlement sites. However, testimonies revealed compensation often failed to match the true value of lost lands and crops. Dayasiri, a displaced farmer, reported receiving smaller land plots and lower income post-resettlement, alongside experiences of discrimination.

In conclusion, the Deduru Oya Project's forced displacement inflicted profound social, economic, and psychological harms. Loss of land and livelihood, weakened social cohesion, inadequate compensation, and unresolved resource conflicts combined to create persistent difficulties for the affected communities. These findings highlight the urgent need for comprehensive, inclusive planning and fair compensation mechanisms in development-induced resettlement to mitigate negative impacts and promote social justice. Policy reforms must strengthen legal protection for displaced communities, enhance transparency in resettlement processes, and ensure community representation in water governance decisions. Global studies show that large-scale water projects often reproduce social hierarchies and marginalize vulnerable groups (Budds & Sultana, 2013; Sidaoui et al., 2017). The Deduru Oya case confirms this pattern

in Sri Lanka, demonstrating how state-led water development reproduces inequality and undermines citizen agency.

Water as a Political Tool: The Role of Patronage in State-Citizen Engagement

The Deduru Oya State Development Project illustrates how water infrastructure becomes a mechanism of political power, restructuring state–citizen relations through patronage, control, and selective resource distribution. Although intended for economic development and water management, the project has become a critical case illustrating how water functions as a political tool shaping state-citizen relations through patronage networks, socio-economic disruptions, and contested governance.

The project illustrates how access to water functions as a form of currency within patron-client networks. Irrigation water was preferentially allocated to politically connected farmers, reinforcing clientelistic ties and shaping citizen loyalty. This pattern reflects Handaragama (2013) and Weingrod (1963), showing that access to essential resources often depends on political loyalty.

This section examines the multi-dimensional impacts of the project on affected communities, focusing on how patronage dynamics and state responses influence economic viability, social cohesion, education, and political engagement.

Nearly fifteen years after the implementation of the Deduru Oya development project, its consequences remain unresolved and continue to escalate (Jayarathne, 2025:114). The project's implementation significantly disrupted the livelihoods of residents, particularly those dependent on paddy farming. Many families lost their agricultural lands without receiving adequate compensation or effective alternatives, undermining economic stability.

Siriyawathi, a resettled mother, highlights the project’s indirect effects on education:

“We moved here, and my husband stopped farming, so no one could accompany the children to school. I can’t travel far because of my youngest child, and there’s no reliable transport. We tried paying a tuk-tuk driver, but the costs were too high. We had to enroll the children in the local school, where the elder child faced disruptions despite previously excelling. The government’s projects don’t consider such impacts, and no solutions have been offered.”

Her statement illustrates how economic changes ripple through social aspects such as education, showing that development projects centered narrowly on economic growth often neglect human development priorities. This reflects a cycle of intergenerational disadvantage often produced by development-induced displacement.

Economic development is the primary goal behind such projects, intended to modernize underdeveloped socio-economic structures and generate financial returns over time (Gittinger, 1982; Fernando, 1978). Yet, the pre- and post-project phases reveal persistent economic problems, including conflicts between original settlers and new resettled populations, insufficient compensation, loss of jobs, and inadequate alternative employment.

A critical dimension of the project is the social and economic divide between original settlers and resettlers. The state failed to foster integration or strengthen civil society, exacerbating divisions.

Wijenayake, a former farmer turned shopkeeper, observes: “The village is split. Original residents don’t come to my shop only resettlers do. So, business profits are limited.”

This segregation reflects the absence of state intervention to manage socio-economic conflicts. The government’s neglect in integrating displaced communities sustains economic instability and social fragmentation.

Compensation for lost land and homes has been provided, but it remains insufficient, with residents' grievances largely going unheard. Insufficient compensation risks economic collapse for many families reliant on agricultural livelihoods.

The project resulted in a significant loss of farmland, the primary livelihood source for many families. The government's proposed alternative—fishing—proved inaccessible due to high membership fees (50,000 LKR) for joining the Fishermen's Society, which controls fishing rights.

Samaranayake, a 63-year-old former farmer, explains: "We farmed for 20 years. After losing two acres of paddy land, no replacement land was provided. We don't want to pay the fee to join the Fishermen's Association. Fishing isn't our way of life. Farming was more than a job—it was a part of life."

His experience illustrates that alternative livelihood opportunities must be accessible and culturally appropriate. The state's failure to ensure this issue is reinforced by economic precarity and discontent among displaced communities.

Field data confirms widespread perceptions of failure regarding measures to address livelihood impacts, with most respondents doubting the effectiveness of government actions.

Water distribution and control in the Deduru Oya Project have become entwined with political patronage. Access to water resources is manipulated by political actors to maintain influence over resettled and original residents alike. The unequal distribution of irrigation water favors politically connected farmers, reinforcing clientelist relations and undermining equitable development.

This politicization of water access exacerbates social divides and economic disparities, consolidating power among local elites aligned with the state. Patronage networks surrounding

water distribution create dependencies that shape voting behavior and political allegiance, illustrating how water governance becomes a tool for political control.

The project's socio-economic upheavals have generated political conflict between affected communities and the government. Protests against land loss and inadequate compensation were met with police violence, arrests, and suppression of dissent.

Piyasena, a former farmer and protestor, recounts: "We protested, but the police beat and arrested us. Political power was used to stop our protests. No positive actions were taken to resolve our issues. Even now, people distrust the government."

This suppression reflects a broader pattern of state authoritarianism in managing dissent, where political power is exercised to silence opposition rather than to negotiate solutions. The failure to address grievances deepens alienation and mistrust among the population.

The public sector's role in mitigating project impacts has been inadequate. There has been little meaningful follow-up on the socio-economic conditions of displaced persons or efforts to foster social integration between settlers and resettlers. Compensation schemes have been criticized for their insufficiency and lack of responsiveness to local needs.

Alternative employment initiatives have not accounted for cultural and financial barriers, leading to underutilization. Political repression of protests without addressing root causes has failed to build trust or cooperation.

Together, these failures highlight weaknesses in governance and planning, where economic development objectives are pursued at the expense of participatory decision-making and human development.

The Deduru Oya case reveals that water projects, beyond their technical and economic dimensions, are deeply political acts that shape state-citizen relations through mechanisms of

patronage, inclusion, and exclusion. When development projects neglect the social and political contexts of water governance, they risk exacerbating inequalities and conflict.

For development to be sustainable and inclusive, state actors must prioritize human development alongside economic growth, incorporating education, livelihood security, and social cohesion into planning. Transparent and participatory governance mechanisms are essential to mitigate conflicts and build trust.

The government must actively engage with affected communities, ensure fair compensation, and design culturally appropriate livelihood alternatives. Addressing political grievances through dialogue rather than repression is crucial for democratic governance.

The Deduru Oya State Development Project illustrates how water infrastructure projects can become sites of political struggle, where water is wielded as a tool for patronage and control. Economic dislocation, social fragmentation, and political repression underscore the need for integrated development approaches that center on human well-being and democratic engagement.

Only by balancing economic objectives with social justice and participatory governance can such projects fulfill their promise of genuine development—improving both livelihoods and state-citizen relations.

The implementation of the Deduru Oya Water Development Project, as well as the subsequent resistance against it, can be emphasized as related to political patronage.

> "The patron-client relationship is the connection in which patrons with capitalist power provide employment, security, infrastructure, and other benefits to relatively disempowered poor clients, to secure votes and other forms of favoritism toward labour." (Handaragama, 2013, p.101)

Patronage in modern power politics refers to the support of political parties and leaders. This approach can be investigated from both a political and a developmental sociological perspective. In the modern interpretation, the actors are the government, political parties, and politicians.

> "Exchanges will be made with polls, public institutions, and development projects for power prospects. In other words, the above components are used as sponsors of governments or political parties that come to power. Here, the controllers become the servers. It implies a distribution of public institutions and resources between individual political actors and the governed.'" Weingrod, 1963, cited in Hettinge, 1984, pp.158-162)

Successive governments made multiple attempts over previous decades to implement the Deduru Oya development project; however, these initiatives failed to be fully realized. The basis for this failure was that the habitat rights of the people living near the Deduru Oya Reservoir would be violated. However, marking a turning point during the previous administration, a development project was started based on Deduru Oya. The primary objective of this project was to satisfy the water needs and boost the agriculture industry in the district. The government that comes to power democratically implements various development programs to maintain their governing power formally and to keep the people connected to the governance frameworks. Accordingly, the development projects launched after the civil war in 2009 were integrated into the state's welfare-oriented political strategies.

Figure 1

Political Patronage in the Welfare Mechanism

Source: Handaragama, 2013

As shown in the diagram above, the political patronage inherent in development projects can be emphasized. This aspect can be discussed in light of the arrival of new political sponsors, as mentioned earlier. In this context, securing votes from the clients becomes a decisive factor, relying on their support and leveraging political power. Political activities are pillars of influence and power (Mollinga 2008).

The implementation of the Deduru Oya Water Development Project exemplifies how development initiatives in Sri Lanka are intertwined with political patronage networks. Two key political objectives emerge: securing community compliance and consolidating political support among beneficiaries. As one beneficiary remarked, reflecting skepticism about the project's underlying motives: "This started only partially well. It is done to get votes. This can lead to one-sided development." Field data further highlight the uneven impact: only 14% of respondents believed the project enhanced development through improved water provision, whereas 57% reported no benefits and expressed opposition from the outset. These findings indicate that, despite the project's political utility, its developmental outcomes were limited, unevenly distributed, and largely contingent on political affiliations. This dynamic further underscores how political

patronage becomes embedded in development projects, particularly as the emergence of new political sponsors reinforces clientelist expectations and transforms access to project benefits into a mechanism for securing votes and consolidating political power.

Concerns about the Deduru Oya Water Development Project often focused on the violation of water rights, including the environmental and democratic rights of people living in the affected villages. Many also questioned the political patronage connected to the project. When the project was implemented, several small water bodies were diverted into the Deduru Oya, and families living nearby began losing access to clean water for daily use. This problem was especially visible in the resettled Polgammana village, where people had to change the way they collected and used water.

Sena, a 49-year-old farmer who has lived in the village since birth, explained: “We used to get water from the lower well, but it doesn’t work anymore. After this project, all the little water that comes to the wells is taken away. That’s why there is no clean water to drink. At first, they brought water bowsers, but the 500 liters they gave us was not enough—not for drinking or for crops. Now they don’t even send bowsers. Water is always given to the same areas, so we receive very little. Water for crops can be taken from the Deduru Oya, and the betel trees get water from the south canal. But there is still no clean water to drink, and we cannot let the children drink from this canal.”

Sena’s experience shows that the government’s attempts to provide clean water were temporary and ineffective. This points to a clear violation of water rights and suggests that the project authorities did not follow a fair or scientific method of distributing water. As a result, principles of water democracy were not upheld.

In this situation, political sponsorship began to form around people's democratic rights, including their right to safe water. Political representatives who opposed the project acted as "political sponsors," while affected residents became "clients" of this emerging movement. Over time, these local concerns developed into wider political opposition. Political statements against the project first appeared at the regional level and later became part of national political debates. This shift can be seen as an important turning point in Sri Lanka's development politics, especially in discussions about democracy, rights, and water governance.

Conclusion

The Deduru Oya Water Development Project shows that water politics in Sri Lanka is not merely resource management but is deeply intertwined with power, patronage, and state-citizen relations. The resettlement process and water-allocation mechanisms disrupted livelihoods, undermined social cohesion, and marginalized already vulnerable communities. Citizens' voices were largely absent from decision-making, and protests were often suppressed, revealing a governance system in which political interests frequently override social equity.

Through the lens of political ecology, this study demonstrates that large-scale development projects can reproduce social hierarchies and exacerbate inequalities. These perspectives together reveal that water governance involves as much political negotiation as technical management.

Policy recommendations focus on:

- Transparent resettlement guidelines.
- Participatory water-governance boards.
- Culturally appropriate livelihood programs.

These strategies aim to balance developmental objectives with social justice, human well-being, and meaningful citizen participation, providing a distinct analytical and policy-oriented contribution beyond previous studies.

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Dhamma for the Digital Age: Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero's Modern Ministry and the Evolution of Buddhist Preaching in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This article examines the recent transformation of Buddhist preaching (*bana*) in Sri Lanka, with a focus on the contemporary ministry of Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero. Historically, sociologists like Max Weber viewed *bana* as a social compromise—a reciprocal arrangement that allowed the ascetic Sangha to receive material support from the laity in exchange for spiritual merit. Modern scholars, including Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekera, further refined this by identifying Protestant Buddhism and the shift toward rational, social reform. However, the term was first used by one of Melford Spiro's informants.

To investigate this shift, the present study employs a mixed-methodological approach combining digital ethnography and qualitative content analysis. The researcher analyzed a representative sample of over 100 sermons delivered via YouTube and TikTok between 2022 and 2024, focusing on thematic shifts in rhetoric. Additionally, the study incorporates virtual discourse analysis of user comments and digital testimonials to evaluate the perceived social impact and the changing nature of religious authority among the youth demographic.

The article argues that Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero represents a radical departure from these traditional frameworks. At just 27 years old, he has become a viral spiritual influencer, delivering over 500 sermons annually to massive crowds and millions of digital

followers. His ministry has shifted the dhamma from traditional scriptural recitation and nationalist rhetoric towards individualized psychological healing and social rehabilitation. Specifically, his sermons target modern crises such as toxic relationships and the surge of synthetic drug use (primarily methamphetamine) among Sri Lankan youth.

By utilizing digital platforms like YouTube and TikTok, Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero has moved away from the Weberian model of local reciprocity. In its place, he has established a content-consumer dynamic where religious authority is validated not by ritual orthodoxy, but by measurable social impact—such as testimonials of young people abandoning narcotics in order to fulfil their filial duties. Ultimately, the article illustrates how the *dharma salawa* (preaching hall in temples) has migrated to the smartphone, turning ancient wisdom into actionable, bite-sized insights for a globalized, secular age.

Keywords: Buddhist preaching (*bana*), Sri Lanka, digital religion, Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero, Weberian reciprocity, social rehabilitation, anthropology

Methodology

The methodology for this study adopts a multi-dimensional qualitative research design that bridges classical sociological theory with modern digital ethnography. To establish a historical and theoretical baseline, the research begins with a comparative analysis of Max Weber's model of religious reciprocity, which traditionally defines the Sangha-laity relationship in Sri Lanka as a material and spiritual exchange. This framework is further contextualized through the lens of Protestant Buddhism, as defined by Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekera, to determine whether the ministry of Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero represents a linear evolution

of rational reform or a distinct ‘Post-Protestant’ digital phenomenon characterized by a shift from nationalist rhetoric to individualized psychological care.

The core of the empirical data is gathered through netnography, an adaptive ethnographic method designed for the study of online communities. This involves a systematic content analysis of the Thero’s extensive digital footprint across platforms such as YouTube and TikTok. By reviewing a representative sample of his 500 annual sermons, the study tracks engagement metrics—including views, shares, and likes—to quantify the scale of his digital authority. Furthermore, the research employs commentary mining to analyze user-generated testimonials, specifically focusing on how followers articulate their recovery from ‘toxic relationships’ and synthetic drug addiction. This data allows for an assessment of how religious validation has shifted from ritual orthodoxy to measurable social impact.

To understand the specific rhetorical strategies employed by the Thero, the study utilizes thematic coding to categorize sermon topics. This process highlights the transition from traditional scriptural recitation to ‘bite-sized’ actionable insights tailored for a globalized, secular audience. Linguistic analysis is also applied to examine the use of contemporary vernacular over traditional Pali-heavy discourse, illustrating how the dhamma is rebranded for the digital age. By mapping the physical architecture of the *dharma salawa* against the digital interface of the smartphone, the methodology illustrates the migration of sacred space into the palm of the hand.

Finally, the research maintains rigorous ethical standards by anonymizing digital data related to sensitive topics, such as narcotics and mental health. The ‘social impact’ claims of the ministry are cross-referenced with broader sociological trends and news reports regarding the youth drug crisis in contemporary Sri Lanka to ensure a balanced perspective. This comprehensive approach ensures that the study captures not only the technological shift in preaching but also the

profound transformation in the nature of religious authority and social rehabilitation in the modern era.

Weberian Model of Bana

In his seminal study, *The Religion of India*, Max Weber explored the sociological evolution of Buddhism from a reclusive sect of wandering mendicants into a world religion with a massive lay following. Central to this transformation was the practice of *bana* or preaching. To Weber, *bana* was not merely a tool for spiritual education; it was the essential bridge—the social compromise in Weber's term—that allowed an asocial, intellectualist religion to survive and thrive within the material world.

Weber characterized early Buddhism as a religion of salvation for intellectuals. In its purest form, the path to Nirvana was a solitary, meditative journey that required the total rejection of worldly social and economic ties. However, this created a sociological dilemma: if the monks (the Sangha) produced no food or wealth, they were entirely dependent on a lay population, that they technically had no religious duty to serve, for *siv pasaya* (*pinda patha* or food; *civara* or robes; *senasana* or shelter /lodging' and *gilanapacccaya* or health care and medicine). Weber argued that *bana* emerged as the solution to this tension. Through preaching, the monk provided a service to members of the laity, justifying the material support they received from them. This exchange thus turned a purely mystical pursuit into a reciprocal social relationship.

Weber's analysis of Buddhist preaching (*bana*) revealed a fundamental split in religious expectations. He distinguished between the ethical frameworks of the monks and of the masses: while monks focused on the rigorous cessation of desire and the pursuit of Nirvana, the message for the laity was simplified into a focus on conduct (*sila*) and generosity (*dana*). This created a

two-tier system where the masses were encouraged to accumulate merit (*puñña*) for a better rebirth, rather than seeking immediate enlightenment.

Weber noted that, as Buddhism grew under royal patronage in India and in Sri Lanka, preaching became an institutionalized ritual. King Ashoka's patronage[1] in India turned Buddhism from a small sect of wandering ascetics into a world religion. Weber viewed Sri Lanka as the primary example where royal patronage successfully localized and preserved Buddhism[2]. He famously coined the term Monastic Landlordism to describe the Sri Lankan model creating a church-like structure that was far more politically integrated than the original Indian movement.

The act of listening to the *dhamma* evolved from a quest for knowledge into a merit-earning ceremony. This shifted the monks' role from a silent hermit to a parish preacher, creating what Weber called a bureaucracy of salvation. Weber argued, that, while this allowed Buddhism to compete with Brahmin rituals, it diluted the faiths rational-meditative core, steering it toward a more rationalist worldview.

While Weber provided a foundational sociological framework for *bana*, subsequent scholars have moved beyond this view. They have argued that preaching is not just a watered-down version of elite philosophy, but a sophisticated, performative, and politically charged medium that defines Buddhist life.

Richard Gombrich (1995) has been perhaps the most significant scholar of Buddhism to refine and challenge Weber's theories. In his work, *Precept and Practice* (1995), he explored the distinction between what Buddhists know (the cognitive) and what they do (the affective). He

[1] Pages 233–239: In the chapter 'The Twofold Face of Buddhism', Weber detailed how Emperor Ashoka's patronage transformed Buddhism into a universal religion and a tool for state administration.

[2] Pages 257–263: In the section regarding the Ceylonese Church, Weber explained how royal land grants led to monastic landlordism and a closer tie between the state and the Sangha (monastic community).

argued that *bana* acts as a vital bridge between these two worlds. Rather than seeing merit-making as a dilution of the faith, Gombrich viewed it as a necessary psychological and social tool that maintains the affective bonds of the community, helping the laity manage their spiritual anxieties in a practical way.

Gananath Obeyesekere, often working alongside Gombrich, focused on the evolution of preaching during the colonial era (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988; Obeyesekere, 1970). He coined the term Protestant Buddhism to describe how *bana* was transformed in response to Christian missionary pressure.

Obeyesekere (1988) observed that modern preaching became more focused on social reform, moving away from purely ritualistic merit-making. In his view, the *bana* tradition became the primary site for the development of a Buddhist conscience, shifting the focus from individual rebirth to a collective responsibility for the state of society. Seneviratne (1999) critically analyzed how the role of the monk shifted from a renunciate to a social servant and political actor. He suggested that modern *bana* often serves to reinforce nationalist identities rather than just spiritual merit.

Dhamma for the Digital Age

This article argues that Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero's popularity stems from his ability to make *bana* preaching practical for addressing issues like drug abuse, relationship stress, and toxic social circles. Its role can thus be defined as a social servant (Seneviratne, 1999) or a role that is more rational and focused on social reform as defined by Obeyesekere (1970; 1988) although Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero's advent to social reform is a much later occurrence.

Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero's *bana* preaching is a public event that usually takes place in a large space such as a sportsground that accommodates many thousands of people. in contrast to the traditional approach described by Weber, the lay people gathered in those places do not usually provide *siv pasaya* for the monk, but the masses reward him with likes and donations, and the *bana* ceremony is not considered as a direct individualized reciprocal act of the monk. The *bana* of Kathnoruwe Siri Dhamma creates an entirely different social space, with the presence of a large gathering of young people.

In the modern context of Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero, the traditional Weberian concept of reciprocation is arguably dissolving as the dynamics of preaching shift because of three principal factors.

The first of these is the parasocial nature of mass media, where sermons are largely disseminated through public events in spaces like sportsgrounds, which are then broadcast on platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook. By transforming the audience into anonymous observers, digital platforms replace Weber's 'physical reciprocity' (the direct giving of robes or food) with likes and emoji comments. Consequently, the deep-rooted community bonds of the village temple are traded for a more detached, consumption-driven model.

The second factor involves the celebrity-preacher phenomenon, where Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero is often viewed as a viral spiritual influencer. When preaching shifts from a local ritual to a mass-marketed event, the monk becomes a provider of content, while the devotee functions as a consumer. In this hierarchy, the laity often perceives themselves as receiving a service, such as emotional relief or entertainment, rather than participating in a reciprocal religious duty. The traditional obligation to sustain the monk is frequently abstracted

into large-scale temple donations or digital patronage, which lacks the intimate, face-to-face accountability inherent in Weber's model of reciprocation.

Finally, there is a significant shift from a moral community to individualized healing. While Weber's concept of reciprocation relied on a moral community where preaching guided centralized social behavior. Contemporary preaching often aligns with popular Buddhism by focusing on individual psychological well-being and mindfulness to address daily stress. When the focus shifts to the personal utility of a sermon for mental health, the act of listening becomes an end in itself. Consequently, the reciprocation becomes internal, as the listener simply feels better, rather than social, where the listener actively supports the Sangha as a collective institution.

Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero has emerged as a transformative figure in Sri Lankan Buddhism, bridging the gap between ancient scripture and modern social crises. Immensely popular, particularly among the youth, he delivers enormous number of sermons annually in Sri Lanka and abroad, that tackle contemporary issues like drug addiction, emotional distress, and workplace toxicity. By translating the *dhamma* into practical, relatable guidance, he has created a spiritual bulwark that helps followers navigate the complexities of 21st-century life with resilience and discipline. He is a preacher of social purification, which is why he stands out from the other prominent Buddhist preachers who have lived and preached in the past three decades.

Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero is a 27-year-old monk who was ordained at a young age. After entering the University of Peradeniya through a *pirivena* (a traditional monastic college) education system, he completed a four-year special honors degree in 2023. He has since returned to his native temple in Kathnoruwa, located within the Kurunegala District in the Northwestern Province of Sri Lanka. where he leads the temple, serves at the Sri Palita

Vidyayathana Pirivena, a monastic college, and has gained prominence as a gifted preacher. He has achieved iconic status in Sri Lanka over a short period of time, primarily due to the high demand for his *bana* preaching. He is remarkably prolific, delivering approximately 500 *bana* sermons of at least 45 minutes each, every year. His overwhelming popularity is evident in his schedule, as his booking calendar is completely full until the end of the year 2028. A significant characteristic of his following is his appeal to the younger generation: most of his followers and devotees are young people. However, his influence is not limited to this demographic, as many people in different age groups and of different ethnicities are strongly attracted to his preaching. The locations where his *bana* preaching takes place are very crowded with people often spilling out the actual venues.

Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero's sermons are characterized by their ability to translate profound Buddhist teachings into simple, practical advice for modern living, which is the key to his immense appeal and popularity, particularly among young people. He focuses on themes of mental health problems and drug abuse which are very significant social problems in present-day Sri Lanka. He offers clear guidance on how to navigate everyday stress, narcotic addiction, emotional distress, and relationship challenges by applying core Buddhist principles. His talks often address the specific pressures faced by various groups, including students, professionals, and families, using an emotionally resonant and engaging delivery style that makes the ancient wisdom of the dhamma directly relevant and accessible to a contemporary audience seeking peace and purpose.

A search for specific sermons by Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero on dealing with 'difficult people' confirms his practical focus, revealing titles such as 'It is the person next to you who is squeezing your neck' and 'Do this for those who are hostile, and no one can defeat

you'. These titles suggest he teaches listeners to protect their inner peace by handling people who create negative influences, jealousy, or obstructions, often through a blend of patience, compassion, and non-retaliation, a central theme in Buddhist teaching. He guides devotees on how to maintain their spiritual and emotional progress by managing external negativity and choosing not to be victims of others' actions, reinforcing the common thread of self-management and mental resilience that makes his sermons so popular.

The emphasis on inspiring change among the young population suggests that the Thero recognizes the vulnerability of youth to drug abuse and its potential long-term impact on the nation's future. His efforts seek to instill discipline, ethical conduct, and a clear understanding of the consequences of addiction, aligned with the foundational Buddhist principles of temperance and right livelihood. This community-focused campaign acts as a spiritual and ethical bulwark against the drug menace, contributing to a broader national effort to safeguard citizens from harm. Online videos of his preaching show *dhamma* sermons, which illustrate the kind of spiritual guidance he offers to his followers.

In the ministry of Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero, the traditional sociological exchange described by Weber is often replaced by a modern form of personal and social validation. The Thero frequently highlights deeply encouraging testimonials from his followers as a primary measure of his success. Specifically, he shares accounts of many youths who, moved by his powerful preaching style, have approached him to confess their previous involvement in the sale and use of narcotics. These testimonials suggest that his messages resonate with a demographic often considered difficult to reach through traditional temple rituals, providing him with a unique form of religious authority based on tangible life changes rather than just ritual reciprocation.

Beyond the cessation of drug use, these youths reportedly shift their focus toward fulfilling traditional filial duties, dedicating themselves to the care and support of their parents. This transformation serves as a potent validation of the Thero's ministry, offering evidence of a direct and measurable social impact within the community. While the physical reciprocation of material gifts might be less central in the digital and mass-event context of his work, this feedback loop of moral reform creates a new kind of spiritual currency. It positions his preaching as a transformative tool for social rehabilitation, effectively bridging the gap between ancient Buddhist ethics and the contemporary crises facing modern youth. The Thero does not merely preach abstract morality; he delivers a message that achieves real-world, transformative results, pulling young individuals out of the destructive cycle of drug trade and addiction and re-integrating them into family and productive life.

One of the main areas that Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero pays attention to in his sermons is the narcotic problem among young people in Sri Lanka, which is a new subject for dhamma sermons in Buddhism. Methamphetamine first came to widespread attention in Sri Lanka around 2008, when the authorities discovered the first clandestine production laboratory. Sri Lankas narcotic landscape is now characterized by a dramatic surge in synthetic drugs, with crystal methamphetamine (Ice) arrests in 2025 increasing by 161% compared to the previous year, reaching 68,132 arrests in 2024—a figure that now rivals traditional staples like cannabis (75,602 arrests) and heroin (75,097 arrests). (NDDCB 2025**)**. This shift is manifested in the discovery of local methamphetamine production labs and accompanied by a disturbing trend of traffickers targeting schools with drug-laced sweets. Prisons are currently operating at high capacity, with roughly 65% of inmates held for drug-related offences, most of them young people.

As one study (Nishshanka, et al. 2025) shows, the majority of methamphetamine users, mainly of male gender, resided in urban (57.8%) or semi-urban (36.1%) areas. Most (65.3%) initiated methamphetamine use between 21 and 30 years. The most cited physical impacts were weight loss (38.9% and loss of appetite (37.2%), while irritability (28.8%) and interpersonal relationship problems (50.8%) were cited as common mental and social impacts respectively. Findings reveal that young urban males are predominantly affected by Methamphetamine addiction, with moderate to severe dependence common. By incorporating anti-narcotics messages into his core teachings, Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero is directly engaging with a widespread problem, aiming to provide moral guidance, raise awareness, and inspire change among the young population to mitigate this pervasive danger.

By moving away from traditional institutional reciprocation, the Thero achieves real-world, transformative results that provide a potent validation of his ministry's social impact. He often shares deeply encouraging testimonials from youths who, moved by his powerful preaching, have abandoned the destructive cycles of the narcotics trade and addiction, dedicating themselves instead to supporting their parents and re-integrating into productive family life.

This personal feedback serves as a modern form of validation, proving that his message transcends abstract morality to deliver tangible social reform, even as the traditional structures of communal reciprocation evolve into individualized digital interactions. Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero uses these success stories to defend his unconventional preaching style against traditionalist critics, arguing that the true measure of a monk's influence should be found in his ability to rehabilitate the most vulnerable members of society. By emphasizing these narratives of youth reform, he shifts the focus of religious authority away from ritual orthodoxy toward measurable social intervention.

Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero's digital footprint is immense, with his collective likes across various platforms reaching well into the millions. As his sermons are broadcast through major media networks like Sirasa and Hiru TV, as well as hundreds of independent *dhamma* channels, no single total is readily available; however, a look at his top-performing videos reveals the scale of his reach. For instance, single viral sermons frequently amass over one million views and upwards of 25,000 likes, while his recent 2026 New Year addresses and youth-focused programs like *Thurunu Sitha* (Youthful Mind) drew thousands of engagements by young people within days of being uploaded. This high level of interaction, driven by his practical and direct approach to modern life, positions him as one of the most influential and widely-supported religious figures on social media in Sri Lanka today.

His counsel to these youths is strikingly direct and compassionate, focusing on restoring their physical health and he uses vivid, relatable language. He tells them, you are like persons who have lost virility and muscle mass, you are so thin, highlighting the devastating physical toll of their former life. This is immediately followed by a powerful, motivational command: give up this bad habit, and start earning money, buy good clothes: trousers, jeans, and wear a bracelet. This encouragement is not just about material gain; it is a symbolic call to embrace a life of self-respect, confidence, and visible success. The act of buying new clothes and wearing a bracelet represents the shedding of the stigmatized, marginalized identity of a drug user/dealer and adopting the respectable, dignified image of a responsible individual who can contribute positively to society and their family. It is a clear, tangible blueprint for their moral and financial rehabilitation that the monk is advocating through his preaching.

Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero's sermons are fresh and popular because they discuss how to solve the problems of everyday life through his sermons. This method is different

from the sermons preached by other monks. Usually, monks who preach explain the Buddha's teachings and sutras. Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero does not preach based directly on the Buddha's teachings. For example, in a sermon delivered in Monaragala, he stated that one should not say a word that hurts anyone. He went on to tell all young people, stop using drugs from tomorrow. Wash and clean the Buddha statue at home and offer it some water in the morning. From tomorrow every young child should do this. Do this for a week as I told you. Then you will understand that you will not even want to smoke a cigarette. Offer one spoon of the food you cook to the Buddha every day. Do this Buddha *vata* with everyone in the family. You will never go astray.

Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero's sermons have gained widespread popularity because of their fresh and practical focus on solving the challenges of daily life. His approach differs significantly from that of many other monks, who typically concentrate their preaching on the formal explanation of the Buddha's sutras and traditional doctrines. Instead of relying solely on scriptural analysis, Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero provides direct, actionable guidance tailored to the modern listener.

Furthermore, he encourages a shared sense of spirituality within the household by inviting every family member to participate in Buddha *vata*. This includes a daily practice of offering a single spoonful of the food they have cooked to the Buddha. By integrating these small but consistent acts of discipline into their daily routines, he asserts that individuals and families will find a reliable path toward a better life and will never go wrong.

The Evolution of Bana Tradition

The evolution of *bana* preaching in Sri Lanka represents a significant transition from localized, ritualistic traditions to a modernized system of public consumption. Historically, *bana*

was conducted through a traditional framework that centered on specific community events. This included temple-based preaching on poya days, monks being invited to private homes for *dana* ceremonies, and *mataka bana*, which is performed following a death in the family to invoke blessings for the deceased. These practices required the physical presence of both the clergy and the laity in specific, sacred, or domestic settings.

The first major transformative shift in this practice occurred with the institutionalization of the radio system. Initially introduced in 1923, radio was formally incorporated as a government department in 1949 and later converted into a broadcasting corporation in the 1970s. This development introduced a modernized framework for public *bana* programs, moving the practice beyond traditional, localized boundaries. For the first time, listeners were able to engage with preaching from the convenience of their own environments, breaking the requirement for physical attendance at a temple or home ceremony.

This process of modernization was further accelerated by the establishment of television channels in Sri Lanka. Television allowed for the telecasting of *bana* programs at specific times, particularly on poya days, making it even more convenient for families to watch these programs from their homes. In the contemporary era, the system has expanded into digital spaces; public *bana* events are now frequently telecast on TV and recorded on YouTube for global dissemination. This evolution allows people to listen to *bana* at their absolute convenience, whether they are traveling, in personal environments, or at home during the night.

Despite the significant institutional and processual developments in how it was delivered, the actual content of *bana* did not initially undergo much change. These programs primarily aimed to simplify the Buddhist *dhamma* to ensure it was easily apprehensible by the laity. To achieve

this, preachers relied heavily on explaining *jataka* stories, which are the birth stories of the Buddha, as well as various sermons delivered by the Buddha himself.

A shift in this traditional focus began with Venerable Kathnoruwe Siri Dhamma Thero, who introduced more mundane and contemporary themes into his preaching. He started addressing practical life challenges, such as relationship issues and social problems like drug abuse. By encouraging people to refrain from harmful behaviors and strive to become good citizens of the country, he moved the discourse toward a more socially relevant application of religious teachings.

Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero's *bana* preaching is unique and different from influential monks who lived in the last two decades. Venerable Gangodawila Soma Thero was a highly influential Sri Lankan Buddhist monk and social reformer who lived from 1948 to 2003. Recognized as an iconic preacher of *bana,* he and other well-known theros of national repute, such as Venerable Panadure Ariyadhamma Thero, did not focus their sermons on current social problems. Instead, Venerable Gangodawila Soma Thero's teachings focused on Sinhala nationalism. He described a trend where the Muslim population was increasing at the expense of Sinhalese Buddhists and, as a result, he preached that Sinhalese parents should produce more children as a method to counter this trend. Building on the work of Seneviratne et al. (1980), as he highlights how Venerable Panadure Ariyadhamma Thero revitalized the *bodhi puja* ritual, drawing massive participation from the Buddhist laity in the 1970s. Venerable Panadure Ariyadhamma Thero revitalized the *bodhi puja* by transforming it from a solitary ritual into a communal, emotional experience that offered psychological refuge. By introducing melodic Sinhala poetry and atmospheric ceremonies, he made merit-making and invoking the blessings of the *bodhi* tree accessible to the masses. However, his movement remained primarily devotional; unlike the reformist approach of Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero, Ariyadhamma Thero did not

specifically focus on addressing social issues such as the drug menace or the behavioral problems of the laity. The shift by Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero successfully bridged the gap between complex doctrine and popular piety, establishing the standardized format for contemporary Sri Lankan religious life. The success of such rituals suggests that Buddhism has dynamically evolved to address the practical and popular religious needs of its followers. This evolution, paralleling modern developments like the digital *bana* program, emphasizes the pursuit of divine intervention and the accumulation of merit (*pin*) to ensure more favorable future rebirths.

Conclusion

The traditional practice of Buddhist preaching in Sri Lanka has become a dynamic system of national construction. The monks of the *sangha* are the vital conduits, employing the tradition of *bana* and the rich tapestry of Jataka stories to clarify and reinforce the essence of the *dharma*. This process ensures that the fundamental truths—the causes and the potential end of suffering—are not confined to scholarly texts but are actively absorbed and lived by the Sri Lankan populace, thereby preserving a unique cultural and spiritual identity that continues to thrive. Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero's use of the preaching method does not affiliate to the traditional core of *bana* preaching. Thero's approach to *dhamma* propagation represents a significant departure from the formal, ritualistic constraints of traditional Sri Lankan *bana* preaching. While conventional sermons often adhere to a rigid structure—beginning with a formal Pali stanza, maintaining a rhythmic and somber vocal delivery, and focusing on the literal interpretation of sutras—the Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero prioritizes a highly conversational and psychologically driven style. He shifts the focus from scholarly recitation to a pragmatic, 'street-level' application of the Buddha's teachings, often stripping away the esoteric language that can create a barrier between the clergy and the layperson. By utilizing modern analogies, addressing

contemporary social anxieties directly, and abandoning the stylized *anusasana* (advising) tone, his method favors immediate emotional resonance and cognitive clarity over the preservation of centuries-old liturgical aesthetics. This evolution suggests that while the essence of the message remains rooted in the *dhamma*, the delivery mechanism has been re-engineered to survive in a fast-paced, secularized media landscape where traditional formats might struggle to hold the attention of younger or more skeptical audiences.

Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero's is different from the traditional method of preaching. In the traditional heart of Sri Lanka, the spiritual atmosphere was once defined by the sensory richness of the *dharma salawa*, where the heavy scent of coconut oil merged with the steady, hypnotic cadence of Pali stanzas to draw devotees into a deep meditative trance. This ancient ritual was governed by a strict, centuries-old formality: a monk, perched upon a high, ornate pulpit and obscured by a ceremonial fan to maintain detachment, would deliver sermons that stretched through the moonlit hours until dawn.

However, the digital age—as demonstrated by Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero—has fundamentally restructured this sacred geometry, shifting the experience from village temples to the palm of the hand or large gatherings. The physical pulpit has been supplanted by the YouTube algorithm, and the traditional fan has given way to the discreet precision of the lapel microphone. In this new landscape, the marathon overnight session has been distilled into a 15-45 minute, high-definition clip, optimized for virality and shared instantly across global WhatsApp networks, transforming a communal, night-long vigil into a Bite-sized insights on-demand spiritual insight.

The transition from the overnight vigil to the digital clip as in *bana* preached by Venerable Kathnoruwe Siri Dhamma has necessitated a shift in the very architecture of Buddhist rhetoric. In

the traditional *dharma salawa*, the monks' language was heavily ornamental, relying on *gatha* (verses) and high-literary Sinhala to evoke a sense of Spirituality. Today, however, the digital preacher must compete with a sea of secular content, leading to the rise of a conversational and pragmatic register. The objective is no longer to transport the listener to a higher plane through rhythmic repetition, but to provide actionable insights that can be applied to the stresses of modern life. This has resulted in the psychologization of the *dhamma*, where classical concepts like *dukkha* (suffering) are increasingly framed as clinical anxiety or workplace burnout.

This evolution is perhaps most visible in the thematic focus on scientific Buddhism and rationalism. To appeal to a globalized, tech-savvy audience, many modern sermons strip away the folkloric and supernatural elements that once defined village Buddhism. The traditional emphasis on *karma* as a cosmic ledger of merit and demerit is often replaced by a focus on mindfulness and neuroplasticity. By framing the Buddha's teachings as a precursor to modern psychology, these digital sermons bridge the gap between ancient wisdom and the modern preference for empirical evidence making the teachings more sharable in a secular, globalized context.

In the digitized system of *bana* of Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero empiricism manifests through a deliberate rebranding of the Buddha's teachings to align with the rigors of the scientific method. This evolution shifts the focus away from the village Buddhism model, which relies on ritual, faith, and the supernatural, toward a scientific Buddhism that treats the *dhamma* as a laboratory for the mind. In digital sermons, the Buddha is no longer presented merely as a transcendent figure to be worshipped, but as a scientist of the mind or a proto-psychologist whose insights into human suffering are framed as early discoveries of cognitive behavioral principles. This framing appeals to a globalized, tech-savvy audience that demands empirical evidence and practical utility over metaphysical dogma.

The language used in these digital spaces further reinforces this empirical shift by replacing traditional cosmological concepts with modern biological and psychological terms. For instance, the traditional understanding of *karma* as a cosmic ledger of merit and demerit is often sidelined in favor of neuroplasticity. Within this digital framework, the consequences of one's actions are described not as a mysterious force governing future life, but as the physical rewiring of the brain's neural pathways. This allows the listener to view spiritual practice through a lens of cause and effect that is observable and 'testable' within a single lifetime, effectively turning the practice of mindfulness into a data-driven self-improvement tool.

Furthermore, the structure and delivery of digitized *bana* emphasize immediate, measurable results, such as stress reduction and enhanced focus, rather than the long-term goal of *Nirvana*. By stripping away folkloric elements, such as deities or supernatural realms, digital platforms present a sanitized version of the *dhamma* that fits neatly into the secular world of mental health and productivity. The authority of the sermon shifts from the weight of scriptural tradition to the validity of personal experience and scientific alignment. This transformation makes the ancient wisdom of *bana* accessible to a modern preference for empiricism, essentially marketing the path to enlightenment as a verifiable psychological breakthrough.

Furthermore, the social aspect of the sermon has been entirely redefined by the logic of the comment section: in the physical temple, the sermon was a one-way transmission where the audience remained silent and receptive, whereas, in the digital space, the sermon becomes a starting point for debate, interpretation, and even controversy. The themes chosen by modern monks are often those that trigger engagement—social issues, political crises, or relationship dramas. This makes the dhamma more immediate and relevant, but it also risks turning the spiritual

teacher into a content creator whose success is measured by likes, shares, and the ability to stay trending within the volatile digital ecosystem.

The transition of a spiritual teacher into a digital content creator introduces a significant risk because success becomes tethered to the metrics of the volatile digital ecosystem. When a monk's influence is measured by likes, shares, and the ability to stay trending, the primary objective of *bana* may shift from delivering authentic *dhamma* to maximizing audience engagement. This creates a fundamental tension where the monk must compete for attention against secular entertainment, potentially compromising the depth of the message to suit the fast-paced nature of social media algorithms.

This evolution raises several critical issues regarding the integrity of the spiritual path. First, the selection of themes based on what triggers engagement—such as social issues, political crises, or relationship dramas—can lead to a sensationalized version of the *dhamma*. While these topics make the teachings feel immediate and relevant, they risk overshadowing the core spiritual goals of detachment and inner peace with worldly controversy. The monk, as the spiritual teacher, may feel pressured to adopt a personality-driven brand, focusing on optics and virality rather than the traditionally humble and selfless role of a monk.

Furthermore, relying on digital metrics can distort the monk and laity relationship. Instead of a traditional hierarchy based on wisdom and monastic discipline, the relationship becomes one of creator and consumer. This consumerist model encourages cherry-picking the most palatable aspects of Buddhism—like mindfulness for productivity—while discarding the more challenging, less shareable moral and ethical requirements of the faith. Ultimately, this raises the concern that the *dhamma* may be diluted into a commodity, designed more to satisfy the cravings of the digital audience than to provide a path for the cessation of suffering.

The shift towards a digital *dhamma* has fundamentally reconfigured the economic and spiritual contract between the monk and the laity. Traditionally, the act of Dana (giving) was a physical, ritualized event: a family would visit the temple to offer alms, robes, or medicine, receiving a personal blessing in return. This created a localized ecosystem where the temple's survival was tied to its immediate community. Today, however, digital merit-making has decentralized this economy.

However, this electronic economy of faith introduces new complexities regarding monastic identity and discipline. As monks become digital content creators, like Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero they enter the attention economy, where financial support is often driven by viral engagement and algorithmic visibility. This can create a tension between the traditional monastic vow of renunciation and the modern need to manage digital branding and financial transparency.

Ultimately, these technological changes have birthed a hybrid mode of religious life for monks and for lay people. While the core principle of earning merit remains, the delivery of that merit has moved from the temple hall to the cloud. This evolution allows for greater accessibility, especially for the Sri Lankan diaspora, but it also risks distancing the devotee from the physical, disciplined life of the Sangha. The relationship is no longer just about the proximity of a village temple, but about a networked connection where faith is increasingly mediated by the same screens and systems that govern our secular, financial lives.

While these traditional forms were deeply revered, they often struggled to engage individuals, mainly young people, who found the complex doctrine inaccessible. The focus frequently remained on ritualistic elements, such as *mataka bana* or all-night chanting, which emphasized tradition over practical, everyday application. However, the advent of mass media

through Radio Ceylon initiated a significant transformation. Radio and television removed the visual anonymity of the preacher, forcing monks to become effective communicators.

The transition that stripped away the visual anonymity of the preacher in Sri Lanka was catalyzed by the nationwide launch of television in 1982. Before this milestone, religious broadcasting was dominated by radio, a medium where monks existed only as disembodied voices. In the radio era, which began in the 1930s, the monk could remain detached and stoic, relying entirely on the rhythmic chanting of Pali and formal Sinhala to convey authority. Because the audience could not see the speaker, there was no pressure for the monk to manage his physical appearance, facial expressions, or the setting in which he spoke.

The arrival of the Independent Television Network (ITN) and the Rupavahini Corporation altered this dynamic by placing the monk directly within the public's visual field. This shift forced a new generation of monks to become effective, charismatic communicators who could command attention on a screen. No longer shielded by the invisibility of the radio booth, they had to develop a 'screen presence,' using gestures and more emotive delivery styles to engage viewers who were now accustomed to the visual stimulation of modern media. This era marked the beginning of a move away from the traditional, rigid sermon toward a more performance-oriented style of preaching.

As the media landscape expanded with private channels in the 1990s, this evolution accelerated. Monks began to abandon the high-register, academic language of the past in favor of colloquial Sinhala and relatable anecdotes to compete for audience ratings. This 'mediatization' of the *dhamma* meant that the monk's success was increasingly measured by his ability to connect emotionally with a mass audience. By the time dedicated religious channels like the Buddhist TV

were established in the mid-2000s, the monk had been fully transformed from a remote ritual figure into a highly visible and sophisticated public communicator.

Reformists monks often paved the way, but Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero carved out a unique niche by introducing a deeply intellectual, almost clinical new perspective that challenged the emotionalism of his peers. While many monks of the television era leaned into charismatic performance or sentimental storytelling to win over the masses, Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero utilized the medium to restore a sense of analytical rigor and doctrinal purity, often focusing on the deep philosophical mechanics of the mind rather than mere ritual or devotion. He viewed the visual platform not as a stage for personality, but as a classroom for '*Yonisomanasikara*' (systematic attention), stripping away the traditional, often flowery *bhakti* (devotional) veneer to present the *dhamma* as a logical, verifiable science. By doing so, he added a perspective that appealed to the intellectual skeptic—a growing demographic of the urban middle class who sought a Buddhism that was both cognitively demanding and practically applicable to modern psychological stresses, effectively bridging the gap between traditional monastic scholarship and contemporary secular inquiry.

As Sri Lanka transitioned into the 21st century, the traditional landscape of religious practice underwent a profound transformation, moving away from merit-making as a primary spiritual goal toward a more pragmatic, therapeutic engagement with Buddhism. In the pre-modern and early post-colonial eras, listening to *bana* (sermons) was largely viewed as an act of *punna*—the accumulation of spiritual merit to ensure a better rebirth. However, the rapid urbanization of the late 1990s and early 2000s broke down the traditional village-temple structures, replacing the communal, ritualistic atmosphere with the isolated, high-pressure environment of the city. As families transitioned into nuclear units and lost the support systems of the extended village

network, they began to view religious practice through a problem-solving lens, seeking immediate psychological relief from the anxieties of urban competition and economic volatility.

The economic instability of the era, exacerbated by the closing stages of the civil war and the subsequent global market shifts, created a populace burdened by ‘modern life's stresses,’ ranging from career burnout to financial insecurity. This shift in demand for religious content meant that listeners no longer wanted long, esoteric recitations of scripture in a language they couldn't apply and understand to their daily struggles. Instead, they sought *dhamma* counseling—teachings that provided emotional regulation, mindfulness techniques for stress, and moral guidance on navigating complex modern relationships. This shift compelled the monk to assume the role of a spiritual therapist or life coach, adapting the ancient doctrine into a contemporary guide for mental well-being. The sermon evolved from a passive ritual meant for the ‘next life’ into an active, psychological tool designed to survive the ‘current life.’

The evolution of the ‘preacher-counselor’ in Sri Lanka was not a sudden rupture, but a deliberate progression built upon the foundations laid by the previous generation of reformist monks, like Walpola Rahula. In the late 20th century, figures like Venerable Gangodawila Soma Thero broke the traditional mold of the stoic, passive monk by addressing socio-political issues and the perceived ‘moral decay’ of society directly. He proved that a monk could be a public figure with a massive television following, effectively shifting the sermon from a temple ritual to a broadcast event. This paved the way for the current generation to move a step further, transitioning from the ‘social reformer’ role of their predecessors to a ‘psychological healer’ role. While the previous generation focused on national identity and outward discipline, today’s charismatic monks focus on the inner landscape, recognizing that their audience is more likely to be suffering from clinical depression than from a lack of ritual knowledge.

These modern preachers have successfully integrated contemporary psychology into their delivery, often stripping away the intimidating Pali terminology to explain the mechanics of the mind in a way that resonates with a secularized audience. By using humor and storytelling, they bridge the gap between the ancient texts and the digital age, making the monk an approachable figure rather than a distant deity. For example, instead of explaining *karma* through abstract rebirth cycles, a modern monk might use a recent viral news story or a relatable anecdote about workplace politics to show how one's current mental state dictates their immediate reality. This relatable approach allows them to tackle sensitive topics like marital conflict and professional burnout with a level of nuance that traditional sermons lacked, effectively rebranding the temple as a mental health resource for a stressed-out population.

The success of this new generation lies in their ability to maintain the 'saffron-robed' authority of their predecessors while speaking the language of the modern world. They have mastered the visual medium that their mentors first navigated in the 1980s, using high-quality production, relatable humor, and empathetic counseling techniques to ensure the *dhamma* remains a vital, living tool for survival in the 21st century.

Despite its popularity, this modern shift has not been without its critics. Traditionalists express concern that the increasing emphasis on entertainment value sometimes supersedes the depth of core teachings like the Four Noble Truths. They argue that this trend risks turning the monk into a performer rather than a spiritual guide, marking a controversial yet undeniable new chapter in the history of the *dharma*. The preaching style of Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero serves as a modern embodiment of the historical and sociological shifts. There has been a notable transition in the history of the *dharma* where early sermons, once focused on practical understanding and intellectual liberation, shifted toward the act of acquiring merit. Venerable

Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero's approach aligns with this by emphasizing the emotional core of Buddhism, utilizing a rhythmic and melodic delivery akin to *kavi bana* that allows the teachings to reach laypeople who may lack a scholarly background. By prioritizing the narrative and devotional aspects of the faith—such as the *jataka* tales—this style of preaching transforms the sermon into a participatory ritual of faith rather than a dry academic exercise. However, this popularity brings the performer aspect to the forefront, echoing the concerns of traditionalists who argue that an increasing emphasis on entertainment value risks superseding the depth of core teachings like the Four Noble Truths. Consequently, Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero's *bana* stands as a controversial yet undeniable new chapter in Buddhist practice, where the monk is sometimes viewed more as a performer than a traditional spiritual guide, marking the ongoing tension between making the dhamma accessible and maintaining its philosophical rigor.

Figure 1

The Shift from a Traditional Weberian Model of Buddhist Practice to a Modern Digital Ministry

Feature	**Traditional Weberian Model**	**Modern Digital Ministry**
Primary Goal of what??	Merit-making (*puñña*) for better rebirth.	Practical problem-solving and mental well-being.
The Exchange	Physical reciprocity (Food/Robes for *dhamma*).	Digital engagement (Likes/Shares/Donations).
Setting	Local village temple (*dharma salawa*).	Massive public arenas and social media apps.
Communication	Ornamental, ritualistic, and scriptural.	Conversational, snackable, and influencer-led.
Focus Area	Ritual orthodoxy and community bonds.	Individualized healing (e.g., drug rehabilitation).

The provided chart illustrates the shift from a Traditional Weberian Model of Buddhist practice to a Modern Digital Ministry, highlighting a fundamental change in the religious objective from merit-making (*puñña*) for a better rebirth to practical problem-solving and mental well-being. In the traditional model, the spiritual exchange is based on physical reciprocity, such as offering food or robes in return for the *dhamma*, whereas the modern model operates through digital engagement, including likes, and shares. The setting has similarly expanded from the local village temple or *dharma salawa* to massive public arenas and social media platforms. Furthermore, communication has evolved from an ornamental, ritualistic, and scriptural style toward a conversational, bite-sized insights, and influencer-led approach. Finally, the focus area has transitioned from a commitment to ritual orthodoxy and community bonds to a new emphasis on individualized healing, such as addressing specific social issues like drug rehabilitation.

The New Frontier of the Dhamma

The emergence of Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero signals a profound paradigm shift in the history of Sri Lankan Buddhist preaching. While Max Weber once defined *bana* as a ritualized bridge of material and spiritual reciprocity, the digital age has effectively de-territorialized the sermon. The transition from the smoke-filled village *dharma salawa* to the high-definition smartphone screen has transformed the monk from a specialist in ritual into a social clinician and digital influencer.

This evolution represents more than just a change in medium; it is a change in the moral economy of Buddhism. By centering his ministry on the narcotic landscape and the psychological pressures of the 21st century, Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero has moved the *dhamma* away from the abstract pursuit of *Nirvana* or the nationalist agendas of his predecessors. Instead, he offers a rationalized Buddhism that functions as a pragmatic toolkit for survival. His success is

measured not by the density of scriptural citation, but by the spiritual currency of rehabilitated lives—youths returning to their families and addicts reclaiming their health.

Ultimately, this digital *dharma* highlights a new form of religious authority based on utility and virality. As the traditional bonds of reciprocation in local temples dissolve, they are replaced by a globalized, individualistic consumption of spirituality. Whether this content-driven Buddhism dilutes the faith's meditative core or revitalizes its social relevance remains a subject of scholarly debate, but one thing is certain: the ministry of Venerable Kathanaruwe Siri Dhamma Thero has successfully bridged the gap between ancient ethics and the modern digital age, ensuring that the *dhamma* remains a living, breathing force in the lives of the contemporary generation.

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The Taste of Thirst: Symbolic Desire, Marriage, and Irregular Migration of Sri Lankan Women to Italy

Jagath Wellawatte

Abstract

This article explores the sociological dynamics of irregular women's migration from Sri Lanka to Italy through deceptive, marriage-based strategies. It investigates how Sri Lankans use marriage as a tool for irregular migration and examines the challenges they face in settlement and adaptation. The study draws on in-depth interviews with 20 undocumented Sri Lankan migrants living in Rome, Milan, and Naples, with four cases (three women and one man) analyzed in detail. Theoretical insights are drawn from Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of taste, habitus, and symbolic capital; Jean Baudrillard's notions of simulation and hyperreality; and Julia O'Connell Davidson's theory of symbolic coercion. These frameworks illuminate how the desire for symbolic and material mobility is shaped by fantasies of modernity and emotional scarcity. The article challenges simplified narratives of trafficking and irregular migration, showing how marriage functions as a strategic and performative act that blurs the boundaries between consent and coercion, romance and transaction. The migrants' own use of the term "thirst" captures the symbolic, gendered, and emotional intensity of their aspirations. By revealing the interplay of illusion, survival, and strategy, this study contributes to broader debates on irregular migration, gendered desire, and the moral complexities of legality.

Keywords: irregular migration, symbolic capital, marriage strategies, human trafficking, symbolic coercion, taste

Introduction

On a cold winter morning in Rome in 2023, a 65-year-old Sri Lankan woman named Beatrice walked into the Sri Lankan Embassy, With tears in her eyes, she complained that the Rome *'Commune'* (police station) had denied her pension on the grounds that she was married, despite her official Sri Lankan documents declaring her as unmarried. "Sir, I have a big problem. I came from Sri Lanka a long time ago. Now I'm a citizen here, but they rejected my pension application. They say I am married and need husband's signature for his consent or if he is not alive, his death certificate but I have never been married," she said, pleading for an embassy letter confirming her single status. Upon receiving this complaint, the counsellor in the Embassy began an investigation. It was confirmed that multiple written requests had been sent to Sri Lanka regarding her status, but no responses had been received. Tracing her records proved difficult, as she had left the country in 1982. Eventually, Italian authorities produced documentation showing that Beatrice had once submitted a marriage certificate, which legally registered her as married.

This encounter became the starting point for this paper and the research on migration pathway informally known among Sri Lankans as "the way of marriage." Over the past four decades, this route has enabled hundreds of Sri Lankans particularly women, to enter Italy using forged or symbolic marriage documents. While Pathirage (2025) highlights how migrants employ social capital and community networks to navigate such routes, I argue that these practices constitute a covert form of human trafficking masked as legitimate migration. Despite the illegality of their entry, many of these migrants eventually succeed in regularizing their status, obtaining residence permits or even citizenship.

This article examines the central research question of how Sri Lankans employ marriage-based strategies to migrate illegally to Italy and the challenges they face in the process of

settlement. The study pursues two key objectives: (1) to examine the role of brokers and intermediaries in facilitating marriage-based migration and the benefits they derive, and (2) to explore how migrants reconstruct their lives and identities within Italian society after legal regularization. Based on purposive sampling, the study draws on the experiences of twenty undocumented Sri Lankan migrants residing in Rome, Milan, and Naples. In-depth interviews were conducted with all twenty participants, of whom four were selected for detailed case studies. Four others served as key informants. Fieldwork took place between June and December 2023 and involved home visits and participant observation, Some interviews were facilitated through community networks, while others emerged through personal encounters and fieldwork. with follow-up conversations conducted via WhatsApp in early 2024 to complete data collection.

By situating these intimate life stories within broader sociological frameworks, this study interprets the "way of marriage" through Pierre Bourdieu's (1984 and 1990) concepts of 'habitus and symbolic capital,' Jean Baudrillard's (1994) concept of 'notion of hyperreality' and Julia O'Connell Davidson's (2013 and 2005) analyses of symbolic coercion and trafficking. Together, these theoretical perspectives reveal how personal desire, gendered vulnerability, and global inequality converge to produce a simulated moral legitimacy, a façade of marriage that conceals deeper structures of social coercion. Ultimately, this article demonstrates how Sri Lankan migrants' pursuit of dignity and belonging transforms marriage into a complex site simultaneously marked by resistance and exploitation.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a centralized approach, emphasizing Bourdieu's cultural sociology and Baudrillard's postmodern concepts, while drawing on O'Connell Davidson's theory to further explain the dynamics of consent and coercion.

Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1990) provides insight into how migration is used as a strategy to convert economic, social, and cultural capital into symbolic capital. Women leverage sexuality, kinship, and gendered roles to perform legitimacy across both Sri Lankan and Italian contexts. Their aspirations are shaped by a habitus embedded in neoliberal economic pressures, consumerism, and shifting gender norms. Through Bourdieu, the case studies demonstrate how symbolic and social capital are strategically mobilized to achieve mobility, even under precarious conditions. Jean Baudrillard (1994) complements this analysis by emphasizing how Italy is imagined prior to being experienced. Migration, in this sense, is directed toward a symbolic construct—of modernity, pleasure, and prestige—circulated through gossip, social media, and remittances. Marriage functions as a staged legal fiction, a performance that facilitates symbolic access to Europe rather than romantic commitment. O'Connell Davidson (2013, 2015) offers a framework for understanding symbolic coercion, illustrating how consent and agency are mediated by structural inequalities. Although women such as Beatrice and Deena appear to act voluntarily, their decisions are shaped by manipulative networks, gendered limitations, and deceptive practices that mimic legality.

By integrating these theories, the article consistently links ethnographic evidence to conceptual frameworks, demonstrating how symbolic capital, habitus, and hyperreality interact with gendered migration strategies.

A Brief Overview of Global and Sri Lankan Migration History

Migration has long shaped human societies across regions and civilizations. Patrick Manning (2020) emphasizes that the "global historical turn" recognizes human mobility as a key force in societal transformation. Although difficult to trace precisely, migration has influenced labor markets, social structures, and cultural exchanges for centuries. Mishra (2020) highlights

that the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed a dramatic rise in transnational and intercontinental movement. Often described as the "century of men on the move," this era saw mass flows driven by industrialization, colonialism, and global labor demand. Between 1850 and 1914, approximately 10% of the global population migrated internationally (World Bank), compared to only about 3% today. The number of international migrants rose sharply in recent decades—from 99 million in 1980 to 190 million in 2005 (United Nations, 2007). By 2005, women accounted for 49.6% of all international migrants (United Nations, 2007; Siddiqui, 2008), reflecting the gendered nature of migration.

Andrey Volodin (2022), in *South Asian Migration to Western Europe: Origins and Trends*, notes that until the early 1990s, South Asians primarily migrated to former colonial powers, especially the United Kingdom. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, migration patterns diversified: while 50% of Indian migrants went to the UK, 18% to Germany, and 12% to Italy. Smaller communities also formed in Belgium, Sweden, and France. In France, for instance, approximately 1,000 Indian migrants arrived annually, with the community reaching 65,000 by the mid-2000s—many from Madagascar, Seychelles, Réunion, and Mauritius.

In Sri Lanka, female labor migration intensified following the economic liberalization of 1977. Open-market reforms expanded opportunities for international mobility, and by the early 1980s, women comprised the majority of outbound migrant workers. Between 1993 and 1997, women constituted nearly 75% of labor migrants, primarily engaged in domestic work in the Middle East. By 2014, domestic work still represented around 80% of female departures, though numbers declined after 2008 due to policies discouraging low-skilled migration while promoting skilled migration with better protections (Thimothy & Sasikumar, 2016).

Pathirage (2011) notes that nearly two million Sri Lankans now live abroad, most of whom are registered with the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE). However, many irregular migrants in Europe and North America are unrecorded in official statistics (UNHCR, 2007). Early Sri Lankan migration to Europe included Vatican pilgrimage visas, which gradually evolved into marriage-based and symbolic entry strategies. Jayawardena (2020) estimates that about three million Sri Lankans now live abroad, including one million permanent settlers—500,000 in the Americas, 400,000 in Europe, and 70,000 in Australasia. Irregular migration has long involved forged documents, altered photographs, and unsafe travel. Today, marriage-based routes and high payments to brokers have become common. Pathirage and Collyer (2011) demonstrates that family and social networks function as migration capital, providing access to housing, jobs, and legal assistance. These networks institutionalize irregular migration as a community-based strategy. Later, Pathirage (forthcoming) argues that such networks also reshape intimacy and family life, often generating moral and religious anxieties within the diaspora.

Migration from Sri Lanka, particularly of women, must therefore be understood as both a structural and symbolic process. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of capital, these women strategically convert social, cultural, and familial capital into symbolic capital to navigate Italy's legal and social systems. Meanwhile, O'Connell Davidson's (2010) concept of symbolic coercion explains how structural inequality, gendered expectations, and brokered networks create conditions where consent is shaped by limited options—disguising coercion as choice. Together, these frameworks illuminate the complex interplay between aspiration, agency, and vulnerability in Sri Lankan women's migration.

Taste, Illusion, and Reality

Across the life narratives of Sri Lankan women who migrated to Italy through the so-called "way of marriage" routes, each story reveals a distinctive blend of emotional, familial, and strategic motivations. Taken together, however, these narratives point to a shared social and symbolic pattern: the journey from rural Sri Lanka to Italy is not merely a strategy for survival, but a deeply symbolic pursuit of social legitimacy, dignity, and modernity, shaped by imagination, performance, and calculated choices. The following case studies explore these women's experiences in their own voices—stories that blend hope and hardship, love and illusion, mobility and constraint. Each narrative reflects how global structures of inequality intersect with personal aspirations, highlighting the tension between symbolic desire and lived reality.

Case Study 1: Beatrice Anne Mary

I met Beatrice in 2023 in Milan. She is a 65-year-old Roman Catholic woman who grew up in a middle-class family in Colombo, describing her childhood as marked by both affection and constraint. "I always felt I needed to prove myself," she recalls, reflecting on the pressure to meet family expectations while navigating a changing social landscape. Following Sri Lanka's 1977 economic reforms, new consumer goods, urban lifestyles, and aspirations for global mobility became powerful symbols of social status among youth. Beatrice internalized these aspirations, shaping her habitus, her dispositions, tastes, and expectations toward a life beyond Sri Lanka.

At the age of 24, she decided to migrate to Italy through a marriage arrangement. "It was not just about the money; it was about being seen differently, about having a life people would admire," she explains. Her decision combined practical strategy with symbolic desire, the pursuit of social and cultural capital. She relied on brokers who connected her to Italian men seeking

marriages of convenience. Through this network, she converted her social and familial knowledge into opportunities abroad, negotiating symbolic value in the marriage market.

In Italy, Beatrice encountered both opportunity and constraint. Although her marriage granted her legal residence, she soon realized that her autonomy was shaped by structural conditions—dependence on her husband, brokers, and social expectations within the diaspora. She navigated these dynamics with strategic compliance, maximizing her symbolic capital to access education, employment, and social recognition. Yet the arrangement carried subtle forms of coercion: the constant pressure to maintain appearances and fulfil obligations within an unequal system.

From a theoretical perspective, Bourdieu's notion of habitus and capital explains how Beatrice's socialized dispositions and learned strategies enabled her to maneuver within these structures (1984, pp. 6–8; 1990, pp. 52–55). O'Connell Davidson's concept of symbolic coercion clarifies how a seemingly consensual marriage was shaped by social and economic pressures that limited genuine choice. Together, these concepts illuminate the delicate interplay between agency and structural constraint in Beatrice's migration experience (2005, pp. 14–18).

Beatrice's migration through a marriage arrangement illustrates how individual agency is exercised *within*, rather than outside of, structural constraints. Her decision was neither purely coerced nor fully autonomous; instead, it emerged from a historically specific configuration of class aspirations, gendered expectations, and global inequalities shaped by Sri Lanka's post-1977 socio-economic transformations. Through Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital, Beatrice's actions can be understood as strategic maneuvers informed by deeply internalized dispositions that oriented her toward social mobility and symbolic recognition beyond the national context. At the same time, O'Connell Davidson's notion of symbolic coercion reveals how these strategies

operated within unequal power relations that limited the range of genuinely available choices, particularly in the marriage-migration nexus. This case, therefore, challenges simplistic binaries of victimhood and choice in migration studies, demonstrating instead how consent, desire, and constraint are intertwined. Beatrice's experience underscores the need to conceptualize marriage migration as a socially embedded process in which gendered agency is negotiated through, and often compromised by, structural inequalities operating across local and global scales.

Beatrice's migration illustrates how agency is exercised within structural constraints rather than outside them. Her decision to move abroad reflected both practical strategy and the pursuit of social recognition, shaped by internalized dispositions and aspirations cultivated in a transforming social and economic landscape. While she navigated opportunities for education, employment, and social visibility, her autonomy remained intertwined with familial, marital, and community expectations. By strategically negotiating these constraints, Beatrice converted her social knowledge and symbolic resources into tangible and symbolic forms of mobility. Her story highlights how marriage migration operates as a socially embedded process, where desire, consent, and structural limitations are continuously intertwined, and where the pursuit of recognition is as much symbolic as it is practical.

Case Study 2: Deepa Geethanjani (Deena)

I met Deea at the end of 2023 in Naples. She is a 45-year-old mother of three who migrated to Milan in 2005 "by way of marriage," notably without paying brokers. Her journey began through a love affair developed on Facebook with a factory worker in Milan, driven largely by her desire to go to Italy.

Deena grew up in a semi-urban area of Sri Lanka, where opportunities for young women were limited. From early adolescence, she was drawn to nightlife and urban social spaces, seeking

excitement and social recognition. “I wanted to live a life that felt free, visible, and important,” she recalls. This aspiration reflects a habitus shaped by exposure to media, urban consumption, and peer networks, illustrating Bourdieu’s idea of dispositions cultivated through social context.

At the age of 22, Deena entered the migration circuit through informal brokers who connected young women with Italian men seeking marriages of convenience. The decision was strategic: it combined the pursuit of symbolic capital with practical migration goals. “I knew it wasn’t just about love; it was about positioning myself in a world I could control,” she explains. Her story highlights how young women negotiate social expectations, personal desire, and structural opportunities within irregular migration networks.

In Italy, Deena navigated complex social and gendered hierarchies. While the marriage facilitated legal residence, it also imposed constraints and obligations. She engaged in social performance, maintaining appearances, fulfilling her marital role, and cultivating relationships within the migrant community to maximize her symbolic capital. Her narrative reflects a form of agency exercised within structural limitations, where autonomy is intertwined with dependency on brokers, husbands, and social norms. Deena’s experience also reveals the subtle coercion embedded in irregular migration. While she exercised choice in pursuing the marriage, structural pressures, including economic necessity, social expectations, and broker-mediated networks shaped her options. concept of symbolic coercion clarifies how migration strategies, even when formally voluntary, are embedded in broader patterns of constraint and obligation (O’Connell Davidson, 2013, pp. 176–195).

Deena’s habitus and accumulation of social and cultural capital enabled her to navigate these dynamics, while the concept of notion of hyperreality sheds light on the symbolic allure of migration, nightlife, and transnational status(Baudrillard, 1994, pp. 23–28). Her fascination with

"Little Rome," Facebook profiles, remittance-funded houses, and images of wealth created a hyperreal Italy that existed more in imagination than in material reality. Her marriages functioned as symbolic passages into this imagined world, blending care, sexuality, and survival.

Deena's migration journey shows how aspiration, imagination, and structural pressures intersect in shaping marriage migration. Her pursuit of visibility, freedom, and social recognition was guided by dispositions cultivated through media, urban networks, and peer influences. While she exercised choice in entering marriage arrangements, her options were shaped by economic necessity, social expectations, and broker-mediated networks. By performing relational and social strategies, she negotiated a constrained form of agency that balanced personal ambition with survival. Her story highlights how migration operates as both a symbolic and material project, where imagined opportunities and hyperreal ideals drive action alongside real-world constraints, and where the negotiation of autonomy and dependency defines everyday migrant life.

Case Study 3: Anjaleena Dabare (Aeen)

I met Aeen at the end of 2023 in Naples. She was a 45-year-old mother of three who had migrated to Milan in 2005 "by way of marriage," notably without paying brokers. Her journey began through a love affair on Facebook with a factory worker in Milan, driven by her desire to go to Italy.

Aeen grew up in a semi-urban area of Sri Lanka, where opportunities for women were limited. Her aspirations were shaped by images of wealth and modernity. Visiting her friend Mary in Nattandiya, she saw "massive houses everywhere—palaces, not homes…cars and jeeps shining like ships." Mary explained that families had migrated to Italy through visas, fake documents, or marriages. For Aeen, Italy became a "thirst"—a symbolic desire for recognition, dignity, and a transformed life.

Determined to reach Italy, she sent friend requests to several men on Facebook. Christy, a factory worker in Milan, responded. Despite his ordinary appearance, Aeen agreed to marry him. She recalls, “I just wanted to go to Italy…he was my ticket to that dream.” In Milan, they lived together for two years and had a child, while Aeen sent money home to support her parents and younger sister. Realizing Christy could not fulfill her larger dreams, she moved on. In Rome, she met Anthony, who ran an illegal money transfer business. Aeen became his mistress, had another child, and started a small lending business serving Sri Lankan families.

When Anthony was imprisoned, she lost everything. Eventually, she moved to Naples with Jayasena, a widower running a hotel. They now live together with their son. Despite the hardships, Aeen remains determined: “One day, I’ll build the biggest house in Sri Lanka…Until then, I’ll continue to enjoy this Italian thirst.”

Aeen’s story illustrates how migration intertwines with symbolic aspiration. Bourdieu’s concept of taste (1984) explains her fascination with “Little Rome”—a landscape of wealth, modernity, and prestige displayed through houses, gardens, and cars. Her migration is not purely economic; it reflects a pursuit of social recognition, aesthetic transformation, and upward mobility.

Baudrillard’s notion of simulation (1994) shows how her dream was constructed from Facebook profiles, remittance-funded houses, and imagined wealth. Her marriages and relationships acted as symbolic passages into this hyperreal Italy, blending desire, survival, and performance. O’Connell Davidson’s (2005) concept of symbolic coercion clarifies how her choices, though seemingly voluntary, were shaped by social pressures, brokered networks, and structural inequalities. Aeen’s narrative captures how women negotiate agency, desire, and constraint—using their bodies, relationships, and social networks as tools to navigate structural limitations while pursuing dignity, beauty, and recognition. Her repeated reference to “thirst”

embodies a longing that is emotional, symbolic, and transformative, reflecting both personal ambition and structural constraint.

Aeen's migration journey demonstrates that marriage migration is not a single event but an ongoing process shaped by desire, loss, and reinvention. Her repeated movement through intimate relationships reflects a deeply internalized orientation toward mobility, recognition, and aesthetic transformation, cultivated through exposure to visible symbols of transnational success. Italy functioned less as a concrete destination than as a persistent object of longing—a "thirst" sustained by images, stories, and material displays promising dignity and distinction. While her choices appear strategic and self-directed, they unfolded within structural conditions that tied legal security, economic survival, and social legitimacy to gendered intimacy and emotional labor. By using relationships as migratory and economic resources, Aeen exercised a constrained but meaningful form of agency, continually negotiating opportunities and vulnerabilities. Her story highlights how aspiration itself can become a structuring force in migration, driving action even when material outcomes remain fragile and uncertain.

Case Study 4: Ranjith Ubewansa (Podi Ranji)

Ranjith Ubewansa, better known as Podi Ranji, is a 42-year-old permanent resident of Catania, Sicily. He first arrived in Naples at the age of 19 in 1997 using a "helmet passport," pasting his photograph on someone else's visa. Today, he earns a substantial income through both legal and illegal means and holds wide influence among Sri Lankan migrant networks in Italy, particularly facilitating women arriving from Romania.

"I grew up in Wenappuwa," he recalls. "My father was a fisherman, my mother made dried fish, and my brother ran a small shop. I dropped out of school in grade 9 and helped him. I've always been mischievous—lying, cheating, tricking people… mostly to get money." Early on, he

began helping couples find rooms, tracking debtors, and doing broker work. Over time, he and his friends expanded into sending people abroad, making fake documents, and assisting with visas, earning substantial income. “Then I wondered why everyone was so obsessed with Italy. I had to see it for myself.”

Arriving in Naples, he discovered a stark reality: overcrowded housing, lack of work, and the pervasive presence of the mafia. “Where Sri Lankans lived… was hell. Mafia stronger than police. Thieves everywhere. I realized I couldn’t play the games I played back home—but I could learn the real game.” After three years in Naples, he moved to Catania, Sicily, and began providing informal facilitation to Sri Lankan migrants, helping with passports, certificates, and other documents—real or fake—while charging fees or offering loans with interest. He also created systems such as ‘*Seettu’*, a rotating savings group that provided arriving migrants with upfront cash to cover initial expenses. “If I don’t help them, who will?” he says.

Podi Ranji’s trajectory exemplifies Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) forms of capital. He accumulates economic capital not through formal employment but through hustling within informal networks: lending money, arranging documents, and running financial schemes. His social capital—ties to embassy staff, political figures, and transnational networks—establishes him as a gatekeeper for migrants seeking legitimacy, survival, or mobility. Although he lacks formal cultural capital, he thrives through embodied knowledge and practical mastery of Italy’s informal systems, exploiting bureaucratic loopholes and structural vulnerabilities.

Jean Baudrillard (1994) explains Podi Ranji’s story. Italy initially appeared as a paradise built from remittance-funded houses, stories, and visual markers of success—a simulation detached from lived reality. Upon arrival, he encountered overcrowded homes, mafia control, and economic precarity. Rather than rejecting this, he reinvented it, becoming both producer and

enforcer of new simulations: providing forged documents, establishing financial networks, orchestrating informal marriages, and assuming multiple roles as protector, employer, and father. Women arriving from Romania seeking “Little Ranji” pursue not only practical support but also the illusion of safety and opportunity within a carefully staged social world.

O’Connell Davidson’s (2015) concept of symbolic coercion further frames his operations. While women appear to consent to financial, intimate, and housing arrangements, these choices are structured by economic precarity, gendered vulnerability, and migration restrictions. Podi Ranji maintains authority and control while projecting benevolence, blurring the lines between assistance and exploitation. His actions demonstrate how symbolic power and emotional negotiation create a system where dependency and normalized inequality replace overt force.

Podi Ranji’s trajectory demonstrates how agency and power can be exercised within informal migration networks, blending entrepreneurship, social influence, and strategic performance. His success relies not on formal qualifications but on accumulated knowledge, practical skill, and the ability to navigate and manipulate structural vulnerabilities, transforming scarcity and precarity into opportunity. By providing financial, housing, and relational support to new migrants, he creates systems of dependency that mix protection with control, illustrating how symbolic and social power operate in transnational contexts. His story also highlights the interplay between imagination and reality: the aspirational “Little Italy” of visual wealth and remittance-funded success becomes a landscape he both inhabits and constructs, sustaining desire while mediating constraint. Pody Ranji’s life underscores the complex hierarchies within migrant communities, showing that agency can be both enabling and coercive, and that power often emerges through perception, networks, and the management of opportunity rather than formal authority.

Summary and Conclusion

The four case studies—Beatrice, Deepa Geethanjani, Anjaleena Dabare, and Ranjith Ubewansa (Podi Ranji)—collectively demonstrate that migration from Sri Lanka to Italy is far more than a strategy for economic survival. These narratives reveal migration as a complex interplay of desire, social networks, and symbolic aspiration, where individuals negotiate agency within structural constraints, yet their trajectories differ across gender, social positioning, and networked opportunities. Social and cultural capital is transformed into migration potential in ways that are deeply relational, affective, and strategic.

Bourdieu's (1984 and 1990) concepts of habitus, taste, and social capital illuminate how migrants navigate structural limitations while pursuing recognition, upward mobility, and social legitimacy. Women such as Anjaleena and Beatrice are drawn to "Little Rome" through an aesthetic and social imaginary of wealth, modernity, and prestige. Their aspirations reflect habitus shaped by local observation, media, and peer networks, where migration becomes a vehicle for symbolic transformation and social recognition. In contrast, Podi Ranji exemplifies the strategic deployment of social and embodied capital, orchestrating migration opportunities, establishing financial networks, and consolidating authority, despite lacking formal institutionalized cultural capital. Across the cases, the interplay of structure and agency is evident in the careful negotiation of relationships, labor, and networks.

Baudrillard's (1994) notion of simulation explains how imagined landscapes—remittance-funded houses, Facebook profiles, and mediated social realities—construct hyperreal desires that shape migration decisions. Marriages, intimate relationships, and labor are not simply practical acts; they serve as symbolic passages into these imagined worlds. Women's engagements with brokers, husbands, and informal networks, as seen in the narratives of Beatrice, Deepa, and

Anjaleena, reveal how fantasy, aspiration, and survival converge, producing both opportunities and dependencies. In these hyperreal spaces, the migrant body functions as a medium through which social and symbolic aspirations are enacted.

O'Connell Davidson's (2013and 2005) framework of symbolic coercion highlights the subtle pressures embedded in migration decisions, especially for women. Choices that appear voluntary—marriages, relocation, or labor arrangements—are often shaped by economic necessity, social expectation, and broker-mediated networks. These women exercise agency while navigating these constraints, negotiating opportunities while reproducing structures of dependency. Men like Podi Ranji, meanwhile, exploit networks and relationships to establish authority, demonstrating how informal power structures govern access, mobility, and survival within transnational communities.

These narratives also foreground the affective, cultural, and symbolic dimensions of irregular migration. Recurrent references to "thirst," aesthetic aspiration, and social recognition capture a profound longing for dignity, self-realization, and transformation. Local success stories, remittance landscapes, and visible migration networks act as both inspiration and pressure, shaping desires, guiding action, and sustaining imagined futures. Migration emerges as a performance—a negotiation of identity, belonging, and aspiration enacted through labor, relationships, and social navigation.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that migration is simultaneously real and imagined, strategic and affective, practical and symbolic. By integrating ethnographic narratives with the theoretical lenses of Bourdieu, Baudrillard, and O'Connell Davidson, it shows how desire, imagination, and structural opportunity converge to produce pathways of mobility that are constrained yet creatively enacted. The journeys of Sri Lankan migrants—through marriage,

informal networks, or transnational facilitation—reveal migration as a profoundly human process, shaped by imagination, aspiration, and social negotiation. The recurring concept of "thirst" captures the enduring hunger for recognition, dignity, and transformation. Migration becomes a medium through which individuals negotiate structural constraints, enact social and symbolic aspirations, and construct new possibilities of life, revealing the deeply strategic, creative, and emotionally resonant dimensions of mobility from rural Sri Lanka to Italy.

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Water Politics in Sri Lanka: A Sociological Analysis of Mass Movement against Contamination of Drinking Water

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Abstract

This study investigates the socio-political factors that drove the 2013 collective mass protest against drinking water contamination by an export-oriented latex glove manufacturer in Rathupaswala, Sri Lanka. Following violent state repression that resulted in civilian casualties and escalated to an international human rights concern in Geneva, this exploratory mixed-methods case study utilized questionnaire surveys, in-depth interviews, and newspaper content analysis to understand the community's mobilization. Results indicate that grassroots action was overwhelmingly driven by lived experiences and socially constructed realities regarding public health, which overrode the lack of definitive scientific evidence linking the factory to the pollution. The findings reveal that an overwhelming majority of villagers participated with full commitment, motivated by intrinsic environmental consciousness rather than personal grievances. Furthermore, while most respondents reported no direct religious influence in instigating the movement, local religious leaders provided crucial grassroots solidarity and physical sanctuary during military crackdowns. Ultimately, the crisis fostered strong cross-class integration, uniting ordinary citizens, the business community, and the educated middle class against a powerful state-corporate alliance. The study concludes that the Rathupaswala movement was a profound demonstration of middle-class environmentalism and ecological

democracy, illustrating how vulnerable communities within a "Soft State" mobilize against unequal political ecology to demand basic human rights.

Keywords: water politics, political ecology, middle class environmentalism, collective action

Introduction

Water is perceived in fundamentally different ways depending on the context as a traded commodity, a shared common, a sacred resource, or a fundamental human right. In Sri Lanka, water is deeply intertwined with daily life and religious rituals, functioning as a symbol of life, fertility, and purification (Herath, 2009). However, dominating our understanding of water with just one of these partial perceptions can lead to misguided conclusions (Iyer, 2003).

Hydrologically, Sri Lanka is endowed with rich water resources primarily emanating from the central highlands. The mean annual rainfall is approximately 1,900 mm about two and a half times more than the global annual mean of 750 mm (FAO, 2011; International Water Management Institute, 2000). The country is broadly divided into wet and dry zones, receiving a mean annual rainfall of 2,424 mm and 1,450 mm, respectively (Central Environmental Authority, 2014). The total volume of fresh water received annually is 13,230 million cubic meters (FAO, 2011). While Sri Lanka possesses abundant water resources in aggregate terms, this overall picture is highly misleading due to severe seasonal and regional variations in availability (Anon, 1998).

When the uneven distribution of vital resources collides with industrialization and political mismanagement, severe tensions arise. Globally, water and fertile land have become prominent sources of dispute, leading to what Shiva (2000) terms "water wars" or "ecological conflicts" These range from interstate disputes over shared rivers such as the Tigris and Euphrates (Turkey, Syria,

Iraq) or the Jordan River (Israel, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon) to intra-state conflicts over major rivers in India (Gleick, 2000; Shiva, 2000).

To critically understand these localized and global water conflicts, frameworks from environmental sociology and political ecology are essential. Environmental sociology examines societal-environmental interactions, focusing on the socio-cultural factors that cause environmental problems and the societal impacts of these crises (Benton, 1989; Dunlap, 1997; Hannigan, 2006; Murphy, 1994). Political ecology goes further, examining how unequal power relations and the political economy shape environmental management. In developing nations, it highlights how conflicts over natural resources are directly linked to systems of political and economic control, which ultimately increase the marginality and vulnerability of the poor (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987; Bryant, 1992).

This vulnerability is exacerbated by what Gunnar Myrdal (1968) identified as the "Soft State." In a Soft State, laws and environmental regulations are passed but rarely enforced. This flabbiness encourages rampant corruption, which in turn weakens the state further. In Sri Lanka, democratic practices, heavily influenced by market-driven economics and party politics, have fostered new patron-client relationships. This political culture has corroded social order and made the impartial enforcement of environmental regulations in local governance a severe challenge (Brow, 1996; Mahees, 2011; Spencer, 2007).

Against this backdrop of a Soft State and highly politicized environmental management, the contamination of water due to rapid industrialization has become a critical crisis in present-day Sri Lanka (Central Environmental Authority, 2014). Historically helpless against industrial pollution, affected communities are now mobilizing, giving rise to grassroots environmental movements. Unlike aesthetic environmentalism, these Sri Lankan movements are deeply rooted in

livelihood vulnerability, religious leadership, and an ecologically determined culture (Mahees, 2010).

A defining catalyst for this new wave of social movement occurred in Rathupaswala, located in Weliweriya within the Gampaha District. In this populated area, numerous factories operating under the Board of Investment provide employment and economic benefits, but at a severe environmental cost. Villagers alleged that an export-oriented glove-manufacturing factory was heavily contaminating their groundwater with dangerous chemicals. Conflicting water quality studies deepened the divide between the "scientific reality" presented by authorities and the "social reality" experienced by the community.

Driven by the threat to their lives and livelihoods, the community demanded their basic right to clean drinking water and the closure of the factory. The protests peaked in late July 2013. On 1 August, villagers launched a massive demonstration with the support of local Buddhist monks and Christian priests. The state response was violent, the army and police opened fire to disperse the crowd. While the government officially reported four deaths, it is widely believed that six people died and 25 were injured.

This day, remembered as "Black Thursday," devastated the community but failed to extinguish the movement; villagers continue to organize. The unrest in Rathupaswala sparked a precedent. A subsequent mass protest for clean drinking water in Thunnana, Hanwella (on the Colombo-Ratnapura Road) led to further violence, resulting in the death of a police inspector and the mass arrest of villagers. This study seeks to investigate these acute conflicts, analyzing the collision between rapid industrialization, state power, and the fundamental human right to clean water through the lens of political ecology and grassroots environmentalism.

Objectives

The main objective this study is to investigate the factors contributing to collective mass action against drinking water pollution caused by an export-oriented factory at Rathupawala, Sri Lanka. The main objective can be specified as follows.

1. To examine the association between the collective mass actions against the contamination of drinking water and the environmental sensitivity of people
2. To identify the political power relationship of the local community in terms of mass movements against the drinking water issue.
3. To assess the role of religion and local culture in mobilizing people towards the social movement against the contamination of drinking water.

Methodology

This is an exploratory qualitative study based on a case study of mass movements against the contamination of drinking water in the Rathupaswala area of Gampaha District, Sri Lanka. The case study method applied to this mass movement was useful for examining the subjective and less visible contradictory aspects of the public protest. This study attempted to promote interdisciplinary approaches and data collection techniques. Although this study mainly focused on qualitative aspects of collective mass movement against water crisis, quantitative data will also be collected from the relevant respondents in order to quantify some of the findings and results. The following data collection tools were used to study mass movements based on the case study method.

Review of Secondary Information

Secondary data were collected from a range of existing sources, including academic publications, government reports, policy documents, previous research studies, and media reports

related to water pollution and environmental movements in Sri Lanka. This helped to contextualize the study and support the analysis with existing knowledge.

Semi-Structured Questionnaire

A semi-structured questionnaire was administered to 100 households in the affected area to gather quantitative and qualitative data on perceptions of water pollution, participation in the protest movement, and environmental awareness. The semi-structured format allowed for both fixed responses and limited open-ended insights.

In-depth Interview

In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 key informants, including villagers, community leaders, government authorities, journalists, and politicians. These interviews provided detailed insights into personal experiences, perceptions, power dynamics, and the social processes underlying the protest movement.

News Paper Content Analysis

A content analysis of selected newspapers was carried out to examine how the water crisis and protest movement were reported in the media. Articles about the protest published in 2013 (Daily Mirror and Lankadeepa) were systematically reviewed to identify key themes, narratives, and representations of the event.

The data generated from questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively by using Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS). Quantitative data were analyzed on proportionate basis. The data collected from in-depth interviews and informal discussions were analyzed based on the theoretical concepts of environmental sociology, and political ecology.

Qualitative data were gathered through in-depth interviews and newspaper content analysis. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured guide, allowing participants to

express their experiences and perceptions of the water crisis and protest movement. Key stakeholders, including villagers, community leaders, authorities, journalists, and politicians, were interviewed, and the data were recorded and transcribed.

In addition, newspaper articles published during the protest period were systematically reviewed to comprehend media representations of the crisis. The qualitative data were analyzed by identifying recurring themes and patterns related to environmental perceptions, social mobilization, power relations, and collective action. These themes were interpreted using the theoretical perspectives of environmental sociology and political ecology.

Results and Discussion

As has been pointed out, the mass protest was carried out due to contamination of water caused by the industrial plant at the center of the dispute in that Rathupaswala area. According to the newspaper content analysis, 1 August 2013 was a significant date in the history of Sri Lanka, marked by an unforgettable incident. It was the date on which four innocent civilians were killed while demanding access to clean drinking water. This protest was initiated by the villagers in Weliweriya in Gampaha District against the water contamination. Even though the brutal clash occurred between army personnel and civilians, the roots of the issue can be traced back to the period when the company was established.

Even though the residents of Weliweriya had been complaining against the Dipped Products PLC since its establishment, a well-organized public outcry was launched in 2013. By 28 July 2013, the residents of Rathupaswala/Weliweriya and nearby villages engaged in a protest demanding an expeditious solution to the contaminated water reserves in the area. Then by 30 July 2013, residents in Weliweriya led by a chief monk in Galloluwa Sri Sambuddhathwa Jayanthi

Viharaya, Venerable Theripaha Siridhamma Thero launched a fast unto death after talks with the government and the private company to resolve the groundwater contamination crisis broke down.

It is possible to examine the views of the people regarding water pollution caused by the factory based on the data collected from the questionnaire. According to Table 1, villagers strongly believed that drinking water had been polluted by effluents from the factory.

The questionnaire survey data further reveal that 96% of the villagers stated that they participated in the protest movement with full consent and commitment. As one respondent revealed in the in-depth interview,

> "Although we had some differences among ourselves, we got together on behalf of villagers and formed environmental committee with three different level of leadership (1) Rich high status (2) middle class level (3) ordinary people"

According to the study, respondents expressed their views regarding water pollution. Table 2 illustrates the correlation between various causes associated with water pollution attributed to the factory. The primary factor identified by respondents (39%) was that water quality tests had revealed contamination. The second reason for participation in the protest movement was the disposal of effluents by the factory into water bodies.

According to the content analysis of newspapers, the protest against the industrial plant at the center of the dispute arose when people began to experience a number of health hazards due to chemical imbalances in the water. Newspaper reports indicate that villagers suffered from various health issues, which they attributed to water contamination (Daily Mirror, 2013). Some media sources further suggested that water quality tests indicated acidic conditions in the wells. Since the establishment of the company, there have been several instances in which people have protested against these issues.

Several villagers reported that interior of the factory emitted a strong odor. They also stated that acidic chemicals used in the production of rubber gloves were hazardous to human health. The factory had discharged their chemical wastage into a site that was not properly designed for such disposal. These chemicals were described as highly acidic. The water in the surrounding area was also reported to have a foul smell, and aquatic life had died due to the effects of those toxic substances. A female resident of Rathupaswala further stated that a former factory employee had died as a result of chemical exposure (Lankadeepa, 2013). She also mentioned that the factory had provided compensation to the affected family for a considerable period of time.

According to the newspaper content analysis, one villager, who was also a former factory worker, stated that a scientific examination of well water revealed that approximately 15,000 liters of chemicals had been released into the environment by the factory. He further claimed that these chemicals had been discharged since the establishment of the factory. During the seven years he worked there, he observed that the machines intended to purify water were in use. Moreover, he explained that the factory avoided using those machines due to the high maintenance costs involved. Furthermore, on several occasions, villagers from Rathupaswala travelled to Kadawatha and Mahara to request that government authorities conduct water testing; however, the reports were not released at the time.

Data generated from interviews with respondents indicate a form of conflict between scientific reality and social reality with regard to water pollution caused by the factory. Although there was a lack of definitive, widely accepted scientific evidence establishing a direct chemical link between the factory and groundwater contamination, the community's lived reality shaped their convictions. As one respondent stated:

> ‘We are not scientists, we cannot do scientific test on water but we know that water is polluted according to our experience, science is not always correct, as farmers we have been dealing with water for a long time and we know the taste and color of water more than the test, in this country anything is possible to happen, even water testing can be bribed, so can we trust those reports”

It is crucial to understand the grievances of villagers through their lived experiences of health challenges. Such phenomenological perceptions may be contested by the scientific arguments based on empirical evidence. However, there could be many social realities that cannot be fully captured by scientific explanations. Table 3 clearly indicated that the majority of the respondents believe that people’s health has been severely affected by water pollution. This is further supported by the content analysis and interview data.

One resident of Rathupaswala stated that acidic water discharged from the factory into paddy fields had also harmed several farmers. Some individuals were reported to have developed eye-related illnesses. Most water sources had become unusable. Another resident explained that when people drank from a well located very close to the factory, they experienced a burning sensation in their mouths. She believed that this was due to the water becoming acidic as a result of factory waste. She also stated that the factory waste was discharged into abandoned lands in the area.

However, the villagers strongly believe that their illnesses resulted from the activities of the fully owned manufacturing subsidiary of the corporation in question. They reported that many villagers had developed long-term health conditions. One male resident of Weliweriya stated that when he sought treatment for a throat infection, the doctor initially diagnosed it as a thyroid-related condition, which was later identified as cancer. Another male respondent diagnosed with a thyroid-

related illness further noted that several others had been diagnosed with similar conditions. He also stated that at least three individuals had been prescribed thyroid hormone treatment. Overall, these accounts suggest that a number of patients in the Weliweriya, Kudumiriswatta area were diagnosed with similar thyroid-related illnesses.

Moreover, it was reported that some villagers were suffering from skin diseases. However, these cases were observed in remote areas located more than 10 km from the glove factory. Similar cases were observed in Panwila and Galoluwa in Rathupaswala as well. Even though the factory authorities were aware of the issues reported by villagers, they consistently denied the allegations. They maintained that such health problems were not associated with the factory's activities.

In relation to public participation against water contamination, people organized themselves into a mass movement. Villagers mobilized on a voluntary basis without political or religious support. According to the questionnaire survey, 97% of respondents stated that they were not influenced by any political forces in participating in the movement. At the same time, 82% of respondents reported that there was no religious influence, while 18% acknowledged that religion did have some influence on the movement. According to one respondent,

> "This is Buddhist majority area and there were considerable Christians in this area, but the Church did not directly support the movement, the Church wanted to be with people, one Buddhist monk of the area who had close relationship with the government worked against mass protest. However, all religious leaders supported the 1 August protest."

It is evident that religion or religious based organizations of the area did not directly influence the people to join the mass protest. Villagers willingly participated in the protest movement without significant religious. However, on the main protest day, 1 August 2013, the protest march was led by Buddhist monks and Catholic priests. According to newspaper content

analysis, at around 6.30 p.m. on 1 August, protesters were assaulted with poles and shots were fired into the air. Tear gas were also used to disperse the agitated crowd. Many sought refuge in the church grounds and immediately the church bell was rung. A resident of Weliweriya, who witnessed the incident, reported that he escaped and took shelter inside the Weliwariya *pola* (Daily Mirror, 2013). He said that it was pitch dark when he heard continuous gun shots and people screaming. He further said that he heard gun shots near the church and people crying for help from the church grounds. He also reported seeing a pool of blood on the church corridor, which was reportedlywashed away by army personnel the following morning. However, several blood-stained boot prints remained on the polished cement floor. Traces of dried blood were also observed in pools of water.

Figure 1 reveals that only 12 Buddhists and five Christians stated that religion motivated them to participate in the movement whereas 62 Buddhists and 17 Christians and three Hindus expressed that religion did not influence their participation. It is important to identify who encouraged villagers to join the protest movement. As shown in Table 4, the entire protest campaign was primarily organized by affected residents of the area, with strong support from local elites. These individuals formed an organization called *Siyane Environmental Protective Organization*. Even outsiders, trade unions supported this organization. This is further supported by newspaper content analysis. The secretary of Ceylon Teachers' Association, Joseph Starling stated at *Sanasa* Hall in Gampaha that more than 40 state and private sector trade unions had agreed to support Weliweriya water crisis movement. He further noted that if an immediate solution was not provided to the villagers, a one-day strike involving all government employees in the Gampaha District would be launched. Representatives of the *Siyane Environmental Protective Organization* also participated in this meeting (Lankadeepa, 2013).

Table 5 indicates that villagers engaged in the protest not due to any personal grievances with the factory. 64% of the respondents disagreed with the statement that people had personal issues with the factory while 35% of respondents strongly disagreed. In addition, 45% of respondents stated that environmental concern motivated their participation, indicating that environmental awareness contributed to collective mass protest against the water pollution in the area.

The nature of threats and risks experienced by people is presented in Table 6. Furthermore, the clear majority of respondents stated that all those who participated in the protest faced various threats and risks during the protest campaign. This is further confirmed by the interview statement.

> "We were threatened by government and some local politician not to organize or join the protest campaign. The fear aggravated further after the brutal attack by army on the August 1st and there were some conflicts among the leaders of mass movement considering the life risk. The participants had many other risk and fear regarding their day today life."

The attack and control of collective mass protest constituted a violation of the fundamental human rights and was later raised at the Geneva Human Rights Commission. According to newspaper content analysis, Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL) invited 26 state institutions including the Ministry of Environment, the Police Department, the Ministry of Water Supply, the Central Environmental Authority, and the Board of Investment. The then Human Rights Commissioner, Prathibha Mahanamahewa, had mentioned that a delegation of five senior officials visited the Weliweriya area and collected information by visiting the police station, the hospitals where the injured were treated, the church and the homes of the victims (Daily Mirror, 2013). This incident is widely regarded as a controversial event in Sri Lankan history due to alleged

human rights violations during a protest, which resulted in deaths and injuries. However, the villagers organized this collective mass protest through the mobilization of various social actors and stakeholders.

Conclusion

This study investigated the underlying factors driving the collective mass protest against drinking water contamination in Rathupaswala. Although the manufacturing facility provided local employment opportunities, the community overwhelmingly held it responsible for the severe degradation of their water supply and associated health hazards. First, regarding the community's environmental sensitivity, the findings reveal that collective action was deeply rooted in lived experiences. While definitive scientific evidence linking the factory's effluent to the groundwater was contested or delayed by authorities, the community's "socially constructed reality" shaped by visible environmental degradation and health impacts overrode official scientific narratives. The mobilization was not driven by isolated personal grievances, but by a shared environmental consciousness that recognized the existential threat to their basic human rights. Second, the crisis transformed local political power relationships by creating common ground among socially divided groups. The movement was characterized by middle-class environmentalism and ecological democracy, where the educated middle class, supported by the local business community and ordinary citizens, united to challenge a politically powerful state-corporate alliance. This highlights the unequal political ecology of the area, where vulnerable communities are forced to mobilize to protect themselves within a "Soft State" that prioritizes industrialization over environmental regulation. Finally, regarding the role of religion and local culture, the study found that while religious institutions did not directly instigate the protests, they played an indispensable role in the movement's survival. Local cultural dynamics and religious leaders,

namely Buddhist monks and Catholic priests, provided vital grassroots solidarity, moral legitimacy, and physical sanctuary during the violent state crackdowns.

Ultimately, the Rathupaswala protest exemplifies how grassroots environmentalism in Sri Lanka relies on strong social integration, shared lived realities, and community resilience to demand ecological justice and defend fundamental human rights against disproportionate political and corporate power.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1

Co-relation between water pollution and Factory

Do you agree with the idea that water was polluted due to the factory?	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	94	94.0%
Agree	6	6.0%
Disagree	0	0.0%
Strongly disagree	0	0.0%
Not relevant	0	0.0%
Total	100	100.0%

Table 2

Nature of the water pollution by the factory

Responses	Count	Percentage
It was revealed that water was polluted in the experiments conducted	39	39.%
The factory had disposed chemical waste into water bodies	23	23.%
Farming was badly affected after factory's waste was disposed into the environment	12	12.%
The factory had disposed chemical waste into the soil	7	7.0%
The fish died in the streams to which the factory had disposed chemical waste	7	7.0%
The water in the streams to which the factory had disposed chemical waste became unusable	8	8.0%
The water resources were badly affected only after the establishment of the factory	4	4.0%

Table 3

Health Concern of people due to water pollution

Do you agree with the idea that people had health concern due to the water pollution by the factory	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	18	18%
Agree	48	48%
Disagree	22	22%
Strongly disagree	05	05%
Not relevant	0	0.0%
No response	07	07%
Total	100	100.0%

Table 4

Sources of Encouragement for Participation in the Protest

Who encouraged people for the movement? (Multiple responses)	Frequency
Priests	7
Traders	1
Affected people	98
Elites of the village	37
Educated people of the village	7
Others	9

Table 5

Protest movement and personal problem with factory

Do you agree with the idea that people who had personal problems with the factory joined the protest movement?	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	0	0.0%
Agree	1	1.0%
Disagree	64	64.0%
Strongly disagree	35	35.0%
Not relevant	0	0.0%
No response	0	0.0%
Total	100	100.0%

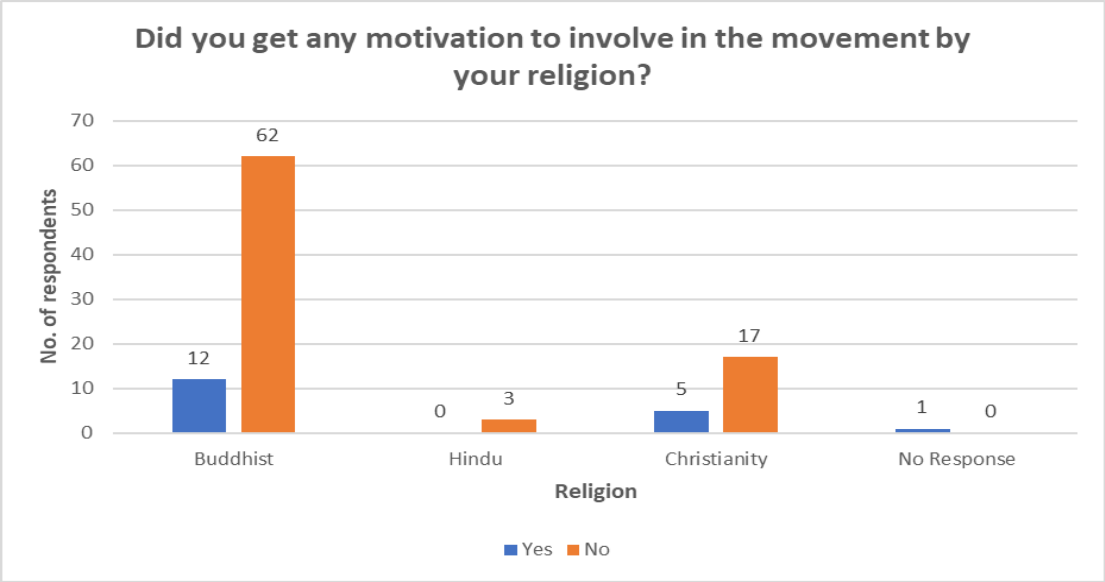
Table 6

Nature of the threat and risk

Nature of the threat and risk (multiple responses)	Frequency
Some people lost jobs	69
People were afraid of the military involvement	9
People lost water resources	65
Some people were threatened	51
People spent weeks of sleepless nights (Unfavorable for people's health)	11
People spent their wealth over the protest movement	8
Temples were closed in the village	9
People couldn't carry out their day-to-day activities	13
Several persons were killed in the protest	15
Some people were bribed to stop the movement	10
Children couldn't go to schools during the protest period	11

Figure 1

Motivation for the Mass Protest by the Religion



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