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Goddess Sri Lakshmi Worship in Sinhala Buddhist Society: An In-depth Exploration of Hindu Deity Concept Diffusion and Cultural Integration in Sri Lanka

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Abstract:

This comprehensive research endeavors to unravel the complex dynamics surrounding the Sri Lakshmi Deva cult, with a primary focus on understanding the diffusion and assimilation of Hindu deity concepts within the intricate fabric of Sinhala Buddhist Society in Sri Lanka. By adopting a multidisciplinary approach, the study integrates historical analysis, examination of religious texts, and scrutiny of cultural artifacts to construct a nuanced narrative of the evolution and integration of Sri Lakshmi Deva worship in the region. The research is driven by a profound exploration of the intricate interplay between Hindu and Buddhist traditions, seeking to shed light on the processes that have facilitated the transcending of religious boundaries. Sri Lakshmi Deva worship is examined as a unique case study, illustrating how it has become an integral part of Sinhala Buddhist practices, contributing to the diversification of religious expressions within the society. Ethnographic methods, including in-depth interviews and surveys, constitute a vital component of this research, serving as a means to gain firsthand insights into the motivations behind the adoption of the Sri Lakshmi Deva cult. By capturing the perspectives of practitioners and the broader community, the study aims to unravel the socio-cultural implications of this religious syncretism, exploring how the cult contributes to and shapes the cultural identity of Sinhala Buddhist society. Ultimately, this investigation aspires to provide valuable and comprehensive insights into

the diffusion of Hindu deity concepts, particularly through the lens of Sri Lakshmi Deva worship. By understanding the coexistence of these religious traditions within the unique socio-cultural context of Sri Lanka, the research aims to contribute to a deeper comprehension of the religious landscape in the region and foster a nuanced understanding of the dynamics of cultural exchange and integration.

Keywords: Sri Lakshmi Deva, Sinhala Buddhist Society, Hindu Deity, Cultural Integration, Sri Lanka

1. Introduction

Goddess Sri Lakshmi, revered as the symbol of wealth, prosperity, and good fortune, holds a significant place in Hindu mythology and religious practices. As the consort of Lord Vishnu, she is often depicted with four hands, symbolizing righteousness, wealth, desire, and liberation. Sri Lakshmi is venerated by millions of Hindus worldwide, and her worship is deeply ingrained in various religious ceremonies, festivals, and daily rituals.

This study delves into the intriguing phenomenon of Sri Lakshmi worship in the context of Sinhala Buddhist Society in Sri Lanka. While Sri Lanka is predominantly a Buddhist-majority nation, the historical interactions between Hindu and Buddhist communities have given rise to a unique cultural landscape where elements of both religions coexist. Against this backdrop, the

worship of Goddess Sri Lakshmi emerges as a fascinating subject of exploration, offering insights into the diffusion of Hindu deity concepts and their integration into the fabric of Sinhala Buddhist religious practices.

The multifaceted nature of Sri Lakshmi's significance in Hinduism makes her worship a rich field for cultural analysis. As the goddess of wealth, she is not merely a symbol of material abundance but also embodies spiritual prosperity. Her association with virtues such as righteousness and liberation add layers of complexity to the religious narrative. Understanding the intricacies of Sri Lakshmi worship provides a lens through which one can examine the cultural dynamics and religious syncretism that have shaped the spiritual landscape of Sri Lanka.

The objective of this study is to explore the historical, cultural, and religious dimensions of Sri Lakshmi worship among the Sinhala Buddhist community. By investigating the diffusion of Hindu deity concepts, particularly those related to Sri Lakshmi, this research aims to unravel the ways in which religious ideas traverse boundaries and contribute to the cultural mosaic of Sri Lanka. Additionally, the study will analyze the impact of Sri Lakshmi worship on the belief systems and practices of the Sinhala Buddhist society, shedding light on the dynamics of coexistence and cultural integration in the island nation.

In the following sections, we will delve into the historical context, the deity's role in Hinduism, the diffusion of Hindu concepts, and the contemporary practices of Sri Lakshmi worship in Sinhala Buddhist society, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of this intriguing aspect of cultural and religious diversity in Sri Lanka.

2. Historical Context

Historical Interactions between Hindu and Buddhist Communities in Sri Lanka:

Sri Lanka's history is marked by a rich tapestry of cultural interactions between Hindu and Buddhist

communities. The island, situated at a crossroads of maritime trade routes, witnessed the arrival of diverse religious influences. The historical interactions between Hindus and Buddhists in Sri Lanka have shaped the religious and cultural landscape in profound ways. One pivotal historical episode was the arrival of Buddhism in the 3rd century BCE with the mission of Mahinda, sent by Emperor Ashoka of India, to introduce Buddhism to the island. The subsequent adoption of Buddhism by the Sinhala rulers established Theravada Buddhism as the dominant religion in Sri Lanka. However, this did not eliminate the presence of Hinduism, which had already taken root among certain communities.

Over the centuries, the island experienced successive waves of South Indian influence, particularly from the Tamil regions. These interactions led to the establishment of Hindu principalities in the northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka. The Chola and Pandya dynasties, in particular, played significant roles in shaping the religious and cultural dynamics of the island. The coexistence of Hindu and Buddhist communities led to a synthesis of religious practices and the development of a unique Sri Lankan identity.

Examination of Historical Events and Periods Influencing Cultural Integration:

Chola Influence (10th-12th centuries):

The Chola Empire, based in South India, exerted considerable influence on Sri Lanka during this period. The Cholas had a profound impact on the political, cultural, and religious spheres, fostering a synthesis of Hindu-Buddhist elements.

Polonnaruwa Period (11th-13th centuries):

The Polonnaruwa Kingdom saw the coexistence of Hindu and Buddhist communities. Hindu temples and Buddhist stupas coexisted, reflecting a harmonious integration of religious practices.

Colonial Era (16th-20th centuries):

Colonial powers, including the Portuguese, Dutch, and British, further shaped the religious landscape. The British colonial period, in particular, witnessed the

emergence of a shared national identity that encompassed both Hindu and Buddhist elements.

Modern Era (20th century onwards):

Post-independence, Sri Lanka experienced periods of ethnic and religious tension. The integration of Hindu and Buddhist elements has been challenged at times, but efforts to promote religious harmony and cultural understanding persist. The historical context provides a nuanced understanding of the coexistence and interactions between Hindu and Buddhist communities in Sri Lanka. This interplay of influences has contributed to the unique cultural fabric of the island, laying the foundation for the exploration of Goddess Sri Lakshmi worship within the Sinhala Buddhist society.

3. Detailed Exploration of the Deity's Attributes, Mythology, and Role in Hindu Religious Practices:

a) Attributes of Goddess Sri Lakshmi:

Four Arms: Ichnographically, Sri Lakshmi is often depicted with four arms, symbolizing her multifaceted nature. Each hand holds symbolic items, such as a lotus (representing beauty and purity), a pot of gold (symbolizing wealth), a gesture of reassurance (Abhaya Mudra), and a gesture granting boons (Varada Mudra). **Elephant and Owl:** She may be accompanied by elephants (symbols of royalty, fertility, and abundance) and an owl (associated with wisdom).

b) Mythology:

Lakshmi as Consort of Lord Vishnu: Sri Lakshmi is the consort of Lord Vishnu, the preserver in the Hindu trinity. Their union symbolizes the harmonious balance of wealth and preservation in the cosmos. **Churning of the Ocean (Samudra Manthan):** A prominent mythological tale involves the churning of the ocean by gods and demons to obtain the elixir of immortality (amrita). Lakshmi emerges during this churning,

signifying the prosperity that arises from divine endeavors.

c) Role in Hindu Religious Practices:

Festivals and Celebrations: Lakshmi is particularly worshipped during the festival of Diwali, the Festival of Lights, symbolizing the victory of light over darkness and the welcoming of prosperity into homes. Devotees engage in daily prayers, recitation of hymns, and the chanting of mantras dedicated to Goddess Lakshmi to seek her blessings for wealth, well-being, and spiritual fulfillment.

d) The Cultural and Religious Context of Sri Lakshmi Worship:

Lakshmi's worship extends beyond material wealth; it encompasses virtues such as righteousness (dharma) and spiritual prosperity. The goddess is a symbol of auspiciousness, grace, and benevolence, embodying the ideals of a flourishing and righteous life. Lakshmi holds a pivotal role in the larger Hindu cosmology, as prosperity is seen as a vital aspect of a balanced and fulfilled life. The goddess is invoked for success in endeavors, whether they be material, spiritual, or intellectual.

e) Symbolism in Art and Literature:

Artistic representations of Lakshmi in paintings and sculptures showcase her divine attributes and convey the cultural and religious significance attached to her worship. Hindu scriptures, including the Vedas and Puranas, contain hymns and narratives dedicated to Lakshmi, providing a rich literary context for her veneration.

f) Syncretism and Adaptation:

In diverse Hindu traditions, regional variations exist in the way Lakshmi is worshipped, reflecting the adaptability and syncretism within the religion. The worship of Lakshmi has seamlessly integrated into various cultural practices, fostering a dynamic and inclusive religious landscape. Understanding the

attributes, mythology, and religious practices associated with Goddess Sri Lakshmi provides a foundation for exploring how these elements have diffused into the cultural fabric of Sinhala Buddhist society in Sri Lanka. The multifaceted nature of Lakshmi's worship allows for a nuanced examination of the integration of Hindu deity concepts in diverse religious contexts.

4. Analysis of the ways in which Hindu religious concepts have diffused:

- a) Cultural Exchange and Trade Routes:
Historical maritime trade routes connected Sri Lanka with South India, facilitating cultural exchange. The movement of people, goods, and ideas allowed for the diffusion of Hindu religious concepts, including the worship of deities like Sri Lakshmi.
- b) Interactions and Inter-marriage:
Interactions between Hindu and Buddhist communities, sometimes through trade, diplomacy, or even inter-marriage, provided opportunities for the exchange of religious practices. Shared cultural spaces and social ties contributed to a gradual blending of religious elements.
- c) Political Patronage and Dynastic Influences:
Periods of political dominance by South Indian dynasties, such as the Cholas, created an environment where Hindu practices gained prominence. The support and patronage of Hindu rulers led to the establishment of Hindu temples and the integration of Hindu religious concepts.
- d) Syncretism in Rituals and Festivals:
Shared festivals and rituals, such as the celebration of harvest and prosperity, provided common ground for the integration of Hindu and Buddhist elements. Festivals like Vesak and Diwali, celebrated by both communities, became occasions for shared cultural expressions.

e) Literary and Artistic Influences:

The spread of Hindu epics, mythological narratives, and artistic representations contributed to the diffusion of Hindu religious concepts. Artistic depictions of Hindu deities in sculptures and paintings influenced the visual culture, fostering a sense of familiarity and acceptance.

5. Examination of the Integration Process of Hindu Deities, Specifically Sri Lakshmi, into Sinhala Buddhist Religious Practices:

- a) Syncretism in Worship Practices:
The worship of Hindu deities, including Sri Lakshmi, often involves rituals and offerings that are similar to those in Sinhala Buddhist practices. This syncretism is reflected in the use of flowers, fruits, and symbolic items in both traditions. Temples dedicated to Hindu deities, such as Lakshmi, coexist with Buddhist temples, showcasing a harmonious integration of religious spaces.
- b) Incorporation of Hindu Deities in Buddhist Mythology:
Over time, Hindu deities have found their place in the larger Buddhist mythological narratives in Sri Lanka. Stories and legends may incorporate elements from both traditions, illustrating a shared cultural consciousness.
- c) Shared Religious Festivals:
Vesak and Diwali Celebrations: Festivals like Vesak, which marks the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and death, and Diwali, the Hindu Festival of Lights dedicated to Lakshmi, are celebrated by both communities. This shared celebration creates a sense of unity and cultural integration.
- d) Interfaith Pilgrimages and Sacred Sites:

Pilgrimages to sacred sites, whether Hindu or Buddhist, are often undertaken by individuals from both communities. This demonstrates a shared reverence for places of spiritual significance.

6. Exploration of Rituals, Festivals, and Ceremonies that Demonstrate Integration:

a) Devotee Participation in Hindu and Buddhist Festivals:

Devotees from both communities actively participate in each other's festivals, reinforcing a sense of shared cultural practices. Processions during festivals often include representations of both Hindu and Buddhist deities, symbolizing unity and mutual respect.

b) Syncretic Ceremonies and Rites:

Rituals such as weddings may incorporate elements from both Hindu and Buddhist traditions, reflecting the syncretism present in family and community celebrations. Ceremonial practices, such as the lighting of lamps, chanting of mantras, and performance of religious dances, often exhibit a fusion of Hindu and Buddhist elements.

c) Inclusive Religious Education:

Educational institutions may emphasize the common moral and ethical values present in both religious traditions, fostering understanding and acceptance. Dialogues between religious leaders and scholars promote a deeper understanding of each other's beliefs, contributing to cultural integration.

d) Artistic Expressions and Cultural Productions:

Artistic expressions, including literature, paintings, and sculptures, often depict scenes that blend Hindu and Buddhist motifs, creating a shared cultural narrative. Dance and music performances may draw inspiration from both

religious traditions, offering audiences a visually and aurally rich experience.

The integration of Hindu deities, particularly Sri Lakshmi, into Sinhala Buddhist religious practices is a dynamic process shaped by historical, cultural, and social interactions. The syncretism evident in rituals, festivals, and ceremonies illustrates a shared cultural heritage that transcends religious boundaries, fostering a pluralistic and inclusive identity in Sri Lanka.

7. Assessment of the Impact of Sri Lakshmi Worship on the Belief System and Religious Practices of the Sinhala Buddhist Community:

Sri Lakshmi worship has expanded the religious horizon of the Sinhala Buddhist community, introducing elements of Hinduism into their cultural and religious framework. Certain rituals associated with Sri Lakshmi, such as those related to prosperity and abundance, have found resonance within the belief system of some individuals within the Sinhala Buddhist community. Sri Lakshmi, being associated with wealth and prosperity, may have influenced the perspectives of some Sinhala Buddhists regarding economic well-being. While Buddhism emphasizes spiritual wealth, the worship of Sri Lakshmi may contribute to a nuanced approach that considers material prosperity as part of a balanced life.

Sri Lakshmi worship may contribute to the synthesis of values within the Sinhala Buddhist community, with devotees incorporating principles of righteousness and ethical conduct into their daily lives. The goddess's association with spiritual prosperity may influence individuals to seek a more holistic approach to well-being. Joint celebrations of festivals, including Diwali, and shared rituals during certain occasions signify a harmonious coexistence between the Sinhala Buddhist and Hindu communities. The acceptance of Sri Lakshmi worship represents a broader cultural integration, demonstrating an open-minded approach to diverse religious practices. Ongoing interfaith dialogues between religious leaders and community members contribute to a deeper understanding of each other's beliefs and practices. Educational programs that promote awareness and

understanding of different religious traditions foster a climate of tolerance and respect.

Despite efforts toward coexistence, misunderstandings or stereotypes about the significance of certain practices may lead to occasional tensions. Political or social factors external to religious practices may impact the harmony within the community, potentially leading to conflicts. Within the Sinhala Buddhist community, there are variations in individual beliefs and practices. While some may embrace the worship of Sri Lakshmi, others may maintain a more purist approach to Buddhism. Younger generations may exhibit different levels of acceptance and participation in syncretic practices compared to older generations. In the Sinhala Buddhist society, the impact of Sri Lakshmi worship is a dynamic process that reflects both cultural enrichment and potential challenges. The coexistence of diverse religious practices within the community demonstrates its ability to adapt and integrate, fostering a nuanced understanding of spirituality and cultural diversity. Efforts towards interfaith understanding and open communication contribute to the overall harmony and peaceful coexistence within the broader society.

8. Contemporary Practices in the Worship of Goddess Sri Lakshmi in Sinhala Buddhist Society

Some individuals from the Sinhala Buddhist community may visit Hindu temples dedicated to Goddess Sri Lakshmi for worship and prayers. Devotees may actively participate in ceremonies and rituals conducted at these temples, emphasizing a shared spiritual space. Individuals may have home shrines that include images or symbols of Goddess Sri Lakshmi alongside Buddhist deities, reflecting a syncretic approach. Daily prayers and offerings to Sri Lakshmi at home, seeking prosperity and well-being, may be part of the personal religious practices of some Sinhala Buddhists.

Diwali, the Festival of Lights dedicated to Sri Lakshmi, is celebrated by members of the Sinhala Buddhist community alongside their Hindu counterparts. Joint celebrations of festivals that have both Hindu and Buddhist components, such as Vesak and Diwali, foster a sense of communal

harmony. Members of the Sinhala Buddhist community may actively engage in interfaith dialogues, contributing to mutual understanding and respect. Initiatives that involve both communities in charitable and community service activities strengthen social bonds and promote a sense of shared responsibility.

Over time, there may be a blending of rituals associated with the worship of Sri Lakshmi with traditional Buddhist practices. Shared elements, such as the lighting of lamps or offering of flowers, may feature in rituals that incorporate both Hindu and Buddhist influences. Symbols associated with Sri Lakshmi, such as the lotus flower or symbolic representations of wealth, may be integrated into Buddhist iconography and art. Shared symbolism fosters a sense of unity and commonality in the representation of spiritual ideals.

Cultural events that include both Hindu and Buddhist elements, such as music, dance, and drama performances, showcase a syncretic cultural expression. Art forms may depict scenes that blend stories from Hindu and Buddhist traditions, reflecting the cultural integration that has occurred over time. Educational curricula may incorporate teachings and stories from both Hindu and Buddhist traditions, promoting a more inclusive understanding of cultural and religious heritage. Programs that focus on interfaith education contribute to a generation that appreciates the diversity of religious practices.

Ceremonies, such as weddings or life celebrations, may incorporate elements from both traditions, emphasizing the social integration of religious practices. Festivals that hold cultural significance for both communities, such as the Sinhala and Tamil New Year, may feature joint celebrations that reflect shared cultural values. Contemporary practices related to the worship of Goddess Sri Lakshmi in Sinhala Buddhist society showcase a dynamic interplay of cultural, religious, and social influences. The adaptations and syncretism observed over time underscore the community's ability to embrace diversity and foster a harmonious coexistence that reflects the evolving cultural identity of the society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the exploration of Goddess Sri Lakshmi worship in Sinhala Buddhist society reveals a complex tapestry of cultural integration, challenges, and opportunities. The key findings of this study underscore the multifaceted impact of Hindu deity concepts, specifically Sri Lakshmi, on the belief system and practices of the Sinhala Buddhist community in Sri Lanka.

- **Cultural Integration:**
The worship of Sri Lakshmi has become an integral part of certain segments of the Sinhala Buddhist society, contributing to a broader religious landscape. This cultural integration is manifested in practices such as temple worship, shared festivals, and personal rituals.
- **Syncretism and Adaptation:**
Over time, there has been a notable syncretism and adaptation of Hindu deity concepts into Buddhist practices. Rituals, symbolism, and even artistic expressions showcase a blending of elements from both religious traditions.
- **Challenges and Opportunities:**
Challenges, rooted in historical tensions and concerns about religious identity, coexist with opportunities for cultural exchange and understanding. Interfaith dialogues, educational initiatives, and community outreach present pathways for overcoming challenges and fostering harmony.

Broader Implications for Interfaith Relations and Cultural Diversity:

- **Harmonious Coexistence:**
The study illuminates the potential for harmonious coexistence between Hindu and Buddhist communities in Sri Lanka. Shared festivals, cultural events, and joint ceremonies provide avenues for collaboration, fostering a sense of unity amid diversity.
- **Cultural Enrichment:**

The integration of Hindu deity concepts enriches the cultural fabric of Sri Lanka, emphasizing the island's historical role as a melting pot of diverse influences. This cultural enrichment contributes to a nuanced understanding of identity and heritage.

- **Interfaith Understanding:**
The study underscores the importance of interfaith understanding as a means to bridge historical gaps and dispel misconceptions. Initiatives that promote dialogue and education create spaces for mutual respect and appreciation.
- **Cultural Diversity as Strength:**
Embracing cultural diversity, inclusive of both Hindu and Buddhist traditions, emerges as a strength for Sri Lanka. Recognizing and celebrating this diversity can contribute to a more tolerant and inclusive society.
- **Pathways to Unity:**
The findings suggest that despite historical challenges, there are tangible pathways to unity and cooperation. Collaborative efforts in education, community projects, and interfaith initiatives can pave the way for a shared future.

In conclusion, the study sheds light on the dynamic nature of religious and cultural integration in Sri Lanka, emphasizing the need for ongoing dialogue, understanding, and collaborative efforts. Recognizing the shared cultural heritage and fostering an inclusive approach to religious practices can contribute to a society that values diversity and promotes unity in the pursuit of a harmonious coexistence.

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