

# GOD OF COMPASSION AND THE DIVINE PROTECTOR OF 'ŚRĪ PĀDA': TRENDS IN POPULAR BUDDHISM IN SRI LANKA

## Introduction

Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka has always coexisted with various forms of other religious practices oriented to deities, planets, astrology and demons (*yakku*), and some of these often figure in the Hindu tradition as well. However, the Buddhist doctrine in its canonical form stands apart from the culturally-specific forms of popular religious practices. Beliefs in gods and other supernatural powers and rituals are, in theory, inappropriate to be considered as part of Buddhism. But many anthropologists and sociologists who have spent extended periods of time in Theravada Buddhist societies have shown that Buddhists do believe in various types of supernatural powers and the magical efficacy of rituals which are outside the Buddhist doctrine. According to Obeyesekere (1962) astrology, gods and demon belief in 'Sinhala Buddhism' are guided by basic Buddhist principles such as karma, rebirth, suffering etc. So in that sense the practice of deity worship cannot be described as totally un-Buddhistic, yet at the same time it does not fall into the category of folk religious practices like *bali* and *tovil* adopted by popular Buddhism (see De Silva 2000, 2006). In Sri Lanka, there are four deities regarded as the guardians of the Buddha-sasana in the island: Viṣṇu, Saman, Kataragama, Nātha and Pattini. Although Viṣṇu and Kataragama (Skanda) are originally Hindu gods, the Buddhists have taken them over as Buddhist deities, referring to them also by the localized designation, Uppalavaṇṇa and Kataragama. The role of Kataragama, Viṣṇu, Nātha and Pattini worship in the contemporary Sri Lankan society has been well researched by several scholars (e.g., Obeyesekere 1984; Holt 1991, 2005; Gunasekara 2007) but the position of god Saman in the similar context has not been adequately investigated. Hence this paper explores the rise of the popularity of god Saman and his worship in contemporary Sri Lanka.

### Deity Worship in Sri Lanka

This I explain through a study of one of the main shrines of the Saman worship, Śrī Pāda. God Saman is always worshipped along with the other guardian deities of Sri Lanka. He is one of the most benevolent deities in the Sinhala Buddhist divine hierarchy after the god Nātha who is often identified with the next Buddha, Maitreya (Holt 1991). The operation of these deities and other lesser supernatural beings in the Sinhala Buddhist pantheon has been sufficiently discussed by several anthropologists (e.g., Obeyesekere 1962, Kapferer 1983, and De Silva 2000). According to them, those figures operate through the moral logic of Buddhism particularly notions of karma, authority (*varam*) and merit. The order in the Sinhala Buddhist pantheon has its own cult and special mode of propitiation, although Obeyesekere (1962, 1982, 1984) has pointed out that the hierarchy is integrated by the supreme position held by the Buddha in the pantheon and the dogma that all supernatural beings participate in the human world by the Buddha's permission or *varama*. The concept of *varama* organizes the dispersal or distribution of authority of the Buddha.

According to Obeyesekere, the power that is exercised by the gods is generated through their spiritual virtues - a combination of power with benevolence known as *ānubhāva*, "spiritual influence" and their physical attributes (1984: 62). All major gods, including god Saman, have these qualities, although they are not evenly distributed. Viṣṇu, Saman, and Nātha, or example, are more benevolent than punitive, thus closer to the Buddha and they share some of his characteristics. Kataragama, however, is considered the most powerful and is more involved in matters concerning the human world.

In Obeyesekere's analysis, the most benevolent gods like Nātha, Viṣṇu and Saman have been identified as dysfunctional (1984:65) and they have been replaced by the Gods like Kataragama (see 1977, 1978,1982), Sūniyam (1988: 112-132) and Goddess Kāli (1988: 133-162) who through their involvement in helping people have become the most popular figures in the current Sinhala Buddhist pantheon. Obeyesekere is right to the extent that, in postcolonial Sri Lanka, deities like Kataragama, Sūniyam and Kāli have become more attractive to Sinhala Buddhist devotees and thus have been elevated from their original position in the pantheon. The rise of popularity of these deities, Obeyesekere argues, is a response to changes in social, economic and political circumstances, and the resultant frustration and anxiety which sections of the population experience. The wide appropriation of these deities, particularly the god Kataragama, Obeyesekere sees, as the 'adoption of traditional pathways to achieve new goals' (1977: 389). However, his claim on the decline of a benevolent god like Saman from his world-involved nature does not correlate with his popularity at Śrī Pāda in particular, and the province of Sabaragamuva in general. Saman might be not as popular as Kataragama, Sūniyam and Kāli, yet according to my observation, at his main shrines such as Śrī Pāda and

Ratnapura, people still ask for his help (*pihiṭa*) and believe that his compassion (*karuṇāva*) will end their day-to-day personal crises.

In this paper, I explore the mundane intervention and popularity of god Saman in contemporary Sri Lanka through the ethnographic research that I carried out from August 2001 to September 2002, and briefly in 2006 at one of the most popular pilgrimage site in Sri Lanka, popularly known as ‘Śrī Pāda’<sup>1</sup> or the temple of the sacred footprint, also known to the English-speaking world by its Anglicized name “Adam’s Peak”. This temple is situated on a lofty mountain called Samanala (butterfly), roughly 7360 feet (2200 m) above sea level. It rises dramatically on the south-western edge of the central hills as a part of the boundary between the Sabaragamuwa Province and Central Province. This tropical forest mountain territory or Samanala *aḍaviya* comes under the jurisdiction of the guardian god Saman who is venerated along with the sacred footprint at this remote jungle temple. Both the peak and the mountain bear his name – *Samantakūṭa* (pali), and *Samanala* (Sinhala). God Saman also figures in the account of the first visit of the Buddha to Mahiyangana in the island, where the Mahavamsa itself refers to him as Mahasumana of the Samantakuta (Mv. Chap, v33). According to both popular tradition and chronicler accounts, it was at the special invitation of god Saman that the Buddha hallowed the mountain by leaving the impression of his left foot thereon during his third visit to the island. Since then, the Buddhists propitiate him as one of the benevolent guardian deities in the Sinhala Buddhist pantheon. Before discussing Saman’s popularity and his intervention on personal crises of his devotees, let me highlight some of his physical and spiritual attributes in detail.

### Iconographical features

Generally, God Saman is represented as white, that is ‘pure’, and his head is covered with a jewelled crown. He is mounted on a white elephant and carries a white lotus in his right hand. Unlike the other major gods, Saman does not carry a weapon. However, in one of the two images at the shrine at Śrī Pāda temple, god Saman is represented in white, with no crown, weapon or elephant, but his right arm remains in the posture of forgiveness or *abhayamudrā*. This image is believed to be the ‘oldest’ Saman image popularly known as “*handun deva rūpaya*”<sup>2</sup> (lit. the god image that is made out of sandalwood). The second image, popularly known as “*ridi deva rūpaya*” (lit. the god image that was made out of silver), was originally placed in the shrine in 1940 and Saman is pictured with a

<sup>1</sup> I use ‘Śrī Pāda’ in this paper quite loosely but not to emphasise its Buddhist connection. Hence, hereafter I use ‘Śrī Pāda’ without referring to any religion.

<sup>2</sup> Remarking on the image, Paranavitana states “it is not impossible that this is the identical image fashioned by Devapatiraja in the thirteenth century (1958:48). But the priest of deity Saman at the Palabaddala temple told me that this image is not older than hundred years, and it was offered to Śrī Pāda by the person called “Moses guru”.

crown, an elephant vehicle and a bow and arrow instead of a white lotus. Surprisingly, the sandalwood image of the god Saman is not identical with the silver image like most of the images of god Saman found in either mural or image form in the 'old' Buddhist temples in the Sabaragamuva area. Carrying a bow and arrow, wearing a jewelled crown and riding the white elephant vehicle are the most common features of the 'old form' of god Saman. The most remarkable of these features is the weapon (arrow) in Saman's left hand. Even at the Ratnapura main shrine of god Saman, the object of worship, which is paraded in the annual procession, is an arrow and not an image of the god. Interestingly, this 'warrior' character of the god Saman has completely disappeared in the modern form of iconographical and mythical representations of him. Hence, I suspect the 'ascetic' iconographical representation of god Saman might be a recent innovation in which his Buddhist character has been prominently remade. Today, there is no weapon in his [left] hand. Instead, he holds a white lotus and his right hand shows the posture of *abhyamudrā*, the symbol of forgiveness. These Buddhistic benevolent forms of representing the god Saman can be widely seen in the shrines that have been dedicated to him at the newly emerged 'temples' in the Śrī Pāda area and in other Buddhist temples on the island. Furthermore, new pictorial images of the god Saman are now widely available for sale at the shops of the pilgrimage bazaars.



**Sandalwood and Silver Images of God Saman**  
 Photograph by Premakumara de Silva:

### Main sites of worship

I now move on from his iconographical representation to the main places at which God Saman is worshipped. Besides the shrine at Śrī Pāda temple, the other main shrine is situated in the provincial capital of Ratnapura of the Sabaragamuwa Province. It is popularly known as *maha saman devāle* (The Great Saman Temple). There are also a number of other shrines dedicated to his name, among which Mahiyangana, Deraniyagala and Boltumbe are the most popular shrines where annually, in the month of August, colourful processions are held in his honour. The most spectacular celebration is always held at his main shrine, lasting for fifteen days. During this celebration his consort, *biso deviyo* (the queen) and son, *kumāra deviyo* (the prince) are paraded, together with the goddess Pattini, a form of worship that cannot be found at similar celebrations at other popular shrines of god Saman. At the major shrine in Mahiyangana, Saman is propitiated along with his sister, who is popularly known in the region as “*maha loku akkā*” (literally, elder sister). What is significant is that she is not propitiated in any form at other popular shrines in the island, although Obeyesekere has found that the Vāddā people in Mahiyangana-Maho Oya area propitiated her as a mother goddess or *Maha Lokuvo* or *Maha Kiriamma*. The Vāddās too claim the god Saman as their own ancestor (2002: 29). Meanwhile, Paranavitana (1958) claims that the god Saman, originally Yama, the god of the underworld, is a demonic being and suggests that he was not an obscure god of purely local significance, but one who came from North India to later become the Buddhist god known as Saman. Evidence of Paranavitana’s view is hard to find in the popular mythological discourses that surround the god Saman.

### God of Compassion

However, Sinhala Buddhists generally view Saman as a pious disciple of the Buddha, who attained the first step (*sōvan*) in the path of nirvana after meeting the Buddha at Mahiyangana during his first visit to the island. Hence, Saman is popular as the god of compassion (*karuṇāva*), and the god who provides limitless help to humans. A devotee of the god Saman told me that he finds him the only ‘Buddhist’ god in Sri Lanka and for him, other gods are all Hindu<sup>3</sup>. Hence, Saman is not usually approached for maleficent purposes or for vows of

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<sup>3</sup> Similar opinions were expressed quite regularly by many of the people with whom I spoke during my fieldwork. In particular, the chief *kapumahattaya* of the main shrine in Ratnapura empathetically stated, “There is no Buddhist god other than god Saman. He met Buddha at Mahiyanganaya and became the first Buddhist ‘*upasaka*’ (pious lay Buddhist) in this country. Unlike other gods, he was born in this country and he is the most benevolent, compassionate and meritorious deity to whom, Buddhists can worship without hesitation”. Such assertions clearly indicate that the god Saman has come to be viewed as the “Sinhala Buddhist nationalist deity” in contemporary Sri Lanka.

revenge; such intent is generally thought inappropriate for his benevolent nature. Though he is characterized as a benevolent and meritorious deity, he is, however, expected to inflict punishment on those who dishonour or show disrespect to the temple, which has become a territory under his jurisdiction (*aḍaviya*). Fear of the god's anger should ensure a pious attitude amongst the pilgrims to Śrī Pāda, but as a *kapumahattaya* officiating at the *devāle* told me, the god Saman would not directly inflict harm on people even if they showed disrespectful conduct in his territory. However, he has given permission to the deity Sūniyam to punish such visitors to his territory<sup>4</sup>. Generally it is felt that in the past, fear of the god's punishment was greater than it is now. Now the god is less revengeful and thus pilgrims are more relaxed in their attitudes throughout the journey to Śrī Pāda as well as at the temple. Some have commented that the present-day fearlessness can be correlated with the general decline of religious commitment in the country.

At Śrī Pāda, pilgrims constantly utter the word *karuṇāvayi*, throughout the journey when they ask for 'the protection' or 'help' (*pihiṭa*) or kindness from the territorial deity, Saman. A veteran pilgrim informed me that the pilgrims frequently utter the word *karuṇāvayi* because it is directly connected with the god Saman. For him the god Saman is the god of kindness ('benevolent kindness') and without his kindness people would not be able to visit Śrī Pāda. As a tribute to him people utter *karuṇāvayi* and refrain from using inappropriate words against him. Similarly, Paranavitana shows that 'the devotee wending his way to the Footprint shouts *karuṇāvayi* as an invocation to the god on the Peak [Saman], and not in reference to Buddha as an embodiment of compassion' (1958: 54). Hence *karuṇāva* or compassion in the context of Śrī Pāda would be understood as the most intrinsic quality of the god Saman. That is why we do not hear this word in other major Buddhist sites where the god Saman is not so powerfully represented. This moral quality of the god Saman is constantly expressed through the devotional language and restrained behaviour of pilgrims. For example, the compassion of god Saman is clearly expressed in the following poems:

*Vaṇḍinna yana-mē nadeta* (this group is going to worship)

*Saman devindu- karuṇāvai* (may it be protected by the god Saman!)

<sup>4</sup> Sūniyam is a protective deity by definition benevolent to his devotee, but malevolent toward his enemies (see: Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1988: 96-132; Kapferer 1997).

*naginna yana mē aýya ta* (the elder brother who is ascending,)

*Sumana Saman devi pihītai* (May he be blessed by the god Saman)

These qualities of god Saman, compassion (*karuṇāva*) or kindness, have apparently play a central role in this pilgrimage site. The absence of revenge and curse-removing rituals (even coconut breaking), trance, and divine and demonic possession at his shrines are further evidence of his benevolent qualities.

### **Protector of ‘Śrī Pāda’**

However, pilgrims who visit Śrī Pāda still seek the protection and help of the deity Saman. This is reflected in the activities they carry out at his *devāle* in the temple. His shrine at Śrī Pāda temple is only opened during the pilgrimage season and except for the time of ‘official’ offerings it remains open day and night for the devotees. During this period many people visit his shrine to seek his protection and help for variety of reasons. Most of the pilgrims seek his protection for a safe visit to the temple. Having reached the temple safely they express their gratitude by offering coins (*panduru*) and transferring merit that they gain through journeying to Śrī Pāda. Some, however, seek further blessing (*sēth shāntiya*) and ask *kapumahattaya* to make plaint or *yātikāva* (*kannalavva*) on their behalf. The process usually involves the *Kapumahattaya* chanting a lengthy plaint and at the end of it placing a yellow dot of sandalwood paste (*tilaka*) on the foreheads of the clients for further blessing. For such services the *yātikava*, *kapumahattaya* is sometimes paid privately by his clients although the *tilaka* is quite frequently put on every client who happens to visit the shrine even without uttering *yātikāva*.

The extracts below are a recording of the *yātikāva*, or plaint chanted by the *kapumahattaya*:

O meritorious Śrī Sumana Saman possessed of great spiritual powers who resides at the mount of Samanta [Śrī Pāda] in this isle of Sri Lanka and rides on a white elephant (*elei ath*). O meritorious reverend, sir, you cast your divine eye on to the main shrine at Sabaragamuva [Ratnapura], Bena Samanala, Divāguhā, Gettampāna, Daraniyagala and this Śrīpādastānaya. O Lord, people have come to this divine place to offer you flowers, fruits, cloths, incense and coins (*panduru*) and have respectfully worshipped you in order to tell their grievance (*duka*). O meritorious reverend sir! If they have done wrong [to you], please forgive them and kindly take the merit (*pin*) that they transfer to you and

protect them from the bad influence of the nine planets (*nava graha dosa*), evil eye and evil mouth of human, sorcery (*hadi hūniyam*), influence of inhuman (*yaksha, preta*) and banish all ninety eight diseases, ninety nine troubles and two hundred and three misfortunes. Also, O Lord, bless them to improve their jobs, business and children's education day by day and [I appeal to you to] protect them on their way back a!,home. O Lord, may you attain nirvāna.

Similarly, *kannalavva* is also chanted by the *kapumahattaya*, when people make or fulfil their vows individually at the *devāle*, although there are slight differences in this process. The following table gives an idea of the reasons people make and fulfil vows at the Saman *devāle* in the Śrī Pāda temple.

**Table 1** Reason for making and fulfilling vows at the deity shrine.

Reason	%
For Jobs/business	29
To succeed in education and examinations	27
For a safe return home (general blessing)	15
For help with childlessness	10#
To cure diseases	9
To Return to Śrī Pāda	7
For issues of marriage /affairs	5#
Total	100

Source: Simple Survey - 2002. [According to my discussion with the chief *kapumahattaya* at the *devāle*, the numbers given on issues of marriage and infertility should be higher].

Table 1 shows that the greatest proportions of vows made at the Saman *devāle* were for successful jobs [foreign & local] and businesses and second was education and success at examinations. A considerable number of vows were also made for successful human reproduction. Additionally, vows were made for curing diseases and resolving problems of marriages and love affairs. Several multi-purpose vows were also made and many people came to the *devāle* simply to obtain blessings from the god for a safe journey home. Below I provide accounts of a few of the cases of vows made or fulfilled at the Saman shrine.

Case 1. A twenty year old young woman came to Śrī Pāda with her mother to fulfil the vow she had made in the last year (2001) at this shrine. The vow had been for a successful interview to secure a post as a clerk at one of the locally owned private banks on the island. She had been successful in the interview and before assuming duties she wanted to thank god Saman for his help by offering him a fruit tray (*pūjā vatti*) at his shrine. At the same time, her mother wanted to make another vow for her son who, in a few months time, was going to sit his final examination in civil engineering. The mother and daughter had come from Deraniyagala, an area where one of the main shrines of the god Saman is situated. They believed that the shrine of the god Saman at Śrī Pāda was more powerful than other shrines, because certain vows that they had made previously at Śrī Pāda had also been successful.

Case 02. A young couple made a vow to seek help from the god Saman to bring back the mother of one of them who had not returned home since she left to work as a housemaid in the Middle East 22 years ago. They had come to Śrī Pāda with a pilgrim group from the southern coastal town of Ambalamgoda.

Case 03. A Buddhist woman, in her mid-forties who had visited the Saman shrine in Śrī Pāda temple with her husband and child had passed through the inauspicious astrological period of Saturn. They had brought a large picture of the god Saman and offered this to him to release the

vow they had made some years earlier to protect their son from the malevolent influence of Saturn.

Case 04. A thirty-five year old man, a three-wheeler driver from Kotahena in North of Colombo, strongly believed<sup>5</sup> that the vows made to the deity Saman at Śrī Pāda are always successful. He gave me several interesting examples of this to prove his faith which are reiterated below:

“My aunt (*nānda*) made a vow to the deity Saman to ask his help for building a house within a year. Surprisingly, she finished it even before a year-Also my brother had a tumour in the head. It was cured because we made a vow at Śrī Pāda. Similarly, my sister’s son had a lung problem and the doctors predicted that he would be dead within seven days. We went to Śrī Pāda and made a vow at Saman *devāle* and promised to fulfil it with two conches (*hak geḍi*) and a gold chain. The lung problem was cured (*ēhemama nātiunā*).

Last year (2001) one of my friends made a vow to secure a job. This year he fulfilled the vow by offering a fruit tray to the deity Saman”

Case 05: Gunapala, a Sinhala Buddhist man in his forties was from the neighbouring town of Ratnapura. He owned several gem mines in that area and had come to Śrī Pāda to give an offering of a fruit basket (*pūjā vatti*) to the god Saman. He had previously asked the god Saman to help him to find gems (*vāsiyak*) in his mines and this wish had been fulfilled. His offering was made with the first piece of a gem he had found in his mine. Gunapala strongly believed in the god Saman and said that there was a strong belief among those involved in the gem industry in his area that “after the installation of the deity statue at Śrī Pāda temple, the possibilities of finding gems would surely be increased”<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> The combination of making a vow as well as undertaking the arduous and often painful journey to Śrī Pāda was, for him, the main reason that his vows had been successful Śrī Pāda.

<sup>6</sup> Another gem trader told me that this would happen after the lighting of the lamp at the deity shrine of Śrī Pāda temple. This is a situation where the outcome of a certain course

The statistical evidence demonstrating the variety of problems that have been brought by the devotees to the deity shrine at Śrī Pāda is supported by these cases. Similar situations were also recorded at the footprint shrine. As previously stated, vows were not only made to the deity Saman at the *devāle* but also to the sacred footprint at the footprint shrine. The *kapumahattaya* maintained that all vows were made to the God Saman, the foremost God amongst all those who congregated at Śrī Pāda temple. However, those who make vows frequently claim to make and fulfil vows to the sacred footprint itself. Indeed, at the temple, people can make vows at the special coin post<sup>7</sup> (*panduru gaha*), which is placed between the footprint shrine and the *devāle*. Therefore, it is only necessary to visit the footprint shrine or the *devāle* for the fulfilling of vows rather than the making of them<sup>8</sup>. Some people make offerings in the footprint shrine that might be thought more appropriate to be made to the *devāle*. I met a gem miner who had come to the temple to fulfil a vow that he had made a year ago. He had released the vow himself by offering a few small gems to the sacred footprint. Similarly, a woman fulfilled a vow that she had made on behalf of her son (who is a soldier serving in the war torn area of the country) with a small figure (*rūpe*) made out of metal. This is a common way in which people attempt to fulfil their vows<sup>9</sup> at the footprint shrine. Similar offerings are also made to the *devāle*, although it is clear that people do not offer fruit trays (*pūjā vatti*) to the footprint as they would offer to the god Saman when they fulfil the vows at the footprint.

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of action is extremely uncertain. Gem miners frequently come to Śrī Pāda. Otherwise they visit the main shrine of god Saman in Ratnapura to make their vows in order to seek their fortunes in the extremely uncertain gem industry.

<sup>7</sup> I was informed that this coin post was kept for menstruating women. It however; I noticed that both men and women made their vows at this place. The pollution (*killa*) associated with menstruation, childbirth and death is not clearly reflected now at Śrī Pāda temple, but it is generally argued that *killa* is dangerous when approaching the Gods, but is insignificant and irrelevant to the Buddha.

<sup>8</sup> People generally believe that the best place to make new vows to the God Saman is at the *devāle* of Śrī Pāda, rather than at local *devāles* that have been dedicated to him throughout the country.

<sup>9</sup> Spencer reports that some people fulfil their vows to climb the mountain every year and in doing so, add a lamp to the flames of the larger lamp at the temple (1990:136).

I also noticed that some people, particularly traders or ‘business’ people, offer gold chains to God Saman as a higher offering. These can be seen around the neck of the deity statue at the *devāle*. Interestingly, such an offering is hard to find at any other shrines of the God Saman. Even, chief the *kapumahattaya* at the *devāle* could not say with certainty why people would offer gold chains in order to fulfil their vows<sup>10</sup>. A consideration of when the offerings of this kind began is of less importance than deciphering whether those who come to the *devāle* are engaged in making or fulfilling a vow or simply making an offerings for general blessings. In addition to these common practices, there are some new technologies of addressing god Saman developed by his devotees at Śrī Pāda. For example, as some members of the Temple staff told me, they found bundles of pieces of paper on which some pilgrims had written their grievances either directly to the sacred footprint or the deity Saman. I was given two such pieces of paper but there is no specific name, hence I call them “grievance notes” to the divine power. These grievance notes were directed to both the footprint and the God Saman. The first was asking a baby from the footprint and the God Saman “*saman-Śrīpada babek*”. The second one is so interesting that I would like to translate it:

Oh Lord Buddha! Oh God Saman I came to worship the Gutama Buddha’s left footprint but I am so disappointed because my elder daughter, M.A.D. Chandravati. has been facing a lot of trouble in the middle-eastern county of Lebanon. Hence, please bring her to the land of Sri Lanka-This is her mother

The majority of the misfortunes are either family or personally oriented. It is interesting to note that among them, revenge or counter-revenge activities are totally absent, although acts of revenge have widely increased in contemporary

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<sup>10</sup> I was informed by an ex-official monk of Śrī Pāda temple that this practice might have been introduced by the Colombo based Tamil traders, more precisely jewellery and gold traders, who came to Śrī Pāda during the *Mahasiva ratri* ceremony. If this is the case, then it can be assumed that the Sinhala traders have copied this practice from the Tamil trades. I never met Tamil traders who have had come to make such offerings during the course of my fieldwork, however, this could perhaps be explained by the dramatic drop in the number of Tamils participating in Śrī Pāda pilgrimage following the escalation of the ethnic war in the island. However, offering jewellery and other valuable items to Śrī Pāda, as we have seen throughout the temple history, should not be viewed as a recent phenomenon.

Sri Lanka. This is because performing such activities or simply bringing them to Śrī Pāda goes totally against the central Buddhist value, that is *karuṇāva*, of the pilgrimage site. This point is supported by Preston who notes that “pilgrims typically re-enact the original experiences reported to have occurred at holy sites, rites that link them back to the core values of their tradition” (1992:34). Ironically, as recent studies have shown, “Un-Buddhist” practices (sorcery, anti-sorcery, trance, demonic possession etc.) have become popular largely among the poor peasants and urban fringe dwellers. It is these people who outnumber the other pilgrims participating at Śrī Pāda stick into the core value of Śrī Pāda temple when seeking solution to their own problems. Such people ask help from benevolent gods like Saman and by helping them gods earn merit or good karma. In other words, gods help humans with the goods of the world and alleviate their suffering whilst humans help the gods in their quest for salvation through the transference of merit. This exchange between humans and the gods, like other social exchange, is one of true reciprocity which is quite evident in the propitiation of God Saman at Śrī Pāda.

### Conclusion

Śrī Pāda is a place where the power of the Buddha and God Saman is present through their relics and images. People believe that power can be tapped through a range of offerings, activities and pleas that they make at the temple on worldly as well as other-worldly matters. For anthropologists, like Obeyesekere, a god like Saman is now disfavoured by the people because of his lack of involvement in the mundane world as well as, due to the enhancement of his benevolent attributes and Buddhist virtues (1984: 65). They have argued that those deities now have been replaced by deities such as Kāli and Sūniyam, especially Kataragama, with their “dark sides,” and immediate worldly aims, including vengeance and other morally suspect motives (see Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988). However, the limited empirical and historical information that I possess does not appear to warrant such an assertion. The continuing popularity of deity Saman at Śrī Pāda in particular and in Sabaragamuva in general, challenges their claim. The intrinsic quality of Saman as a deity of *karuṇāva* or ‘compassion’ (a fundamental Buddhist value) is vital to his popularity at Śrī Pāda. People ask for his *karuṇāva* on matters ranging from having a safe journey (to Śrī Pāda), to personal crises. Interestingly, as my data suggests, most of the people who ask *karuṇāva* of the deity Saman at Śrī Pāda belong to disadvantaged social classes: peasants and the working classes (see De Silva 2005). These are the groups who most need *karuṇāva* from their superiors. Such people bring their ‘worldly matters’ to the god Saman by deploying different techniques ranging from vow-making and offerings to ‘*prarthanāva*’ and ‘grievance notes’. I also show unique differences, mainly reciprocal and non-reciprocal ideology, behind the highly private act like vow and wish making. So, the types of religious behaviour at Śrī Pāda have further complicated the

conventional anthropological understanding of deity worship in contemporary Sri Lanka. This dominant anthropological discourse is inadequate to understand not only the role of the Buddha but also the role of gods like Saman in the rapidly transforming Sri Lankan society. The popularity of Saman at Śrī Pāda and at his other major shrines in the country clearly indicates his continuous involvement in mundane matters and his being viewed as the god of the 'Sinhala Buddhist nation'.

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