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Anthropological Studies on South Asian Pilgrimage: Case of Buddhist Pilgrimage in Sri Lanka

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Anthropological studies relating to South Asian pilgrimage have been of several types. Interest in the field can be traced back to at the time when Victor Turner was writing on this subject (notably, the works of Vidyarthi, 1961, 1979; Jha, 1985, 1995; Bhardwaj, 1973 and; Bharati, 1970). Among the relevant ethnographies for South Asia there are a number of studies which mainly concentrate on describing a pilgrimage centre or sacred place. In general, the emphasis of these studies is on priests, the organization of the pilgrim centres, and other occupants of the pilgrimage centres; in other words, they are more 'sacred place' oriented rather than focussing on the pilgrims themselves. The pilgrimage literature for South Asia, in general, lends greater support to the competing discourse perspective than to the Turnerian approach. However, most academic studies of pilgrimage in South Asia have concentrated on the explicitly religious domain, on the major religious traditions and on regional pilgrimage cults, and has placed far less emphasis on pilgrimage in secularized contexts such as the pilgrimage service economy, that has grown around pilgrimage centres, politics, nationalism, ethnicity, gender, pilgrimage sites associated with dead cultural heroes, touristic dimensions of pilgrimage, educational visits to sacred and historic locations, or simply pilgrimage for the sake of journeying (for 'fun').

Anthropological studies of pilgrimage in Sri Lanka mainly derive theoretical orientation from the functionalist approach (Obeyesekere, 1966, 1978, 1981; Evers, 1972; Seneviratne, 1978). However, more recent studies by Pfaffenberger (1979), Nissan (1985, 1988), Stirrat (1982, 1991, 1992), Whitaker (1999), and Bastin (2002), mainly put their theoretical arguments against a 'universalistic' perspective and emphasise the importance of considering multiple historical representations of Buddhist pilgrimage centres in Sri Lanka, rather than studying them as a unified tradition.

In this paper I will attempt to break down the boundaries around the anthropology of pilgrimage, questioning the dubious division between structure (e.g., Turnerian view), and process (e.g., competing discourse), religion and politics, and this and other worldly formulations. These dominant views in the anthropology of pilgrimage are tested with my ethnographical and historical materials particularly in relation to the Sri Pāda (Adam's Peak) pilgrimage site and the pilgrims journeying to it. I would argue with my findings that it is hard to grasp an overall picture about the pilgrimage site, as well as the journey to it in the context of Buddhist pilgrimage in Sri Lanka, if too much emphasis is placed on either theoretical perspective.

Key Words: Pilgrimage, South Asia, Sri Lanka, Buddhism

Introduction

Pilgrimage is one of the most common phenomena found in religious culture, occurring in just about every major religious tradition. However, until recently the phenomenon was not one that had been well studied by anthropologists. Just as anthropological attention to pilgrimage has grown, so has pilgrimage itself flourished. Pilgrimage has adapted to a purportedly secularising world, and even benefited from contemporary modes of transportation and

communication. Planes now carry Muslim pilgrims to Mecca, and Buddhist pilgrims travel in groups to Buddhist sacred sites in North India (*dambadiva*) and Buddhist sites throughout the country, by bus, train and other motor vehicles. Pilgrimage is often more organised, easier and safer, than previously. It is also more widely advertised. Television and newspapers carry stories of pilgrimage events and new pilgrimage sites are popularised. Nationalism and ethno-religious movements and ideologies provide a further impetus for pilgrimage. Initially, the study of pilgrimage in

anthropology explored small-scale face-to face communities, but since the 1970s attention turned to wider and more extensive groupings and gatherings. According to the functionalist view, pilgrimage is an activity which brings together diverse local communities and social strata into more extensive collectivities. Thus, pilgrimages have been treated as instilling in the participants, consciousness of a wider and more inclusive identity.

Victor Turner (1973, 1974; also Turner and Turner, 1978) was one of the first anthropologists that systematically explored the trans-local implications of pilgrimage. Turner provided an alternative theoretical formulation by studying Christian pilgrimage traditions in England, Mexico, Ireland and France - defining pilgrimage as a liminal social experience 'betwixt and between the categories of ordinary social life' (1974: 272). Ordinary social life is seen as structured and bound by a more or less distinctive arrangement of mutually dependent institutions and institutional organisation of social positions (ibid.). In contrast to ordinary social life, pilgrimage is characterised by anti-structure, defined as that which 'tends to ignore, reverse, cut across, or occur outside of structured relationships' (1974: 274). Anti-structure is essentially egalitarian, 'representing the desire for a total, unmediated relationship . . . person to person' (ibid.). Turner equates anti-structure with *communitas*, and defines it as a state of normlessness experienced during liminality. *Communitas* liberates social identities 'from conformity to general norms (ibid.) and is quite distinct from highly structured normal relationships. According to Turner, the achievement of *communitas* is the pilgrim's fundamental motivation. Logistical and organizational imperatives invariably compromise this goal. Pilgrimage strips actors of their social persona and restores their essential individuality beyond social restrictions. Turner's arguments had a tremendous impact on those who wanted to give symbolic action an important place in the study of society. This inspired a new generation of ethnographers to study the phenomenon of pilgrimage in diverse religious traditions using Turner's model as point of reference.

Many of Turner's critics have clearly highlighted the reinforcement of social boundaries and distinction in the pilgrimage context, rather than their amelioration or dissolution. The most sustained response so far to Turner's model has been provided by Eade and Sallnow in their important and exceptionally well integrated edited volume *Contesting the Sacred* (1991). They not only challenge the anti-structure hypothesis

but also posit a new general approach (post-modern) to the anthropological study of pilgrimage. One of the main sources of criticism of *communitas*, is that it failed to take account of the mundane conflicts inherent in pilgrimage - this is used as the very foundation of the new approach. They argue that the idea of anti-structure not only prejudices the complex character of the phenomenon, but also imposes a spurious homogeneity on the practice of pilgrimage in widely differing historical and cultural settings (Eade & Sallnow 1991: 5). Hence, they present pilgrimage as a capacious area capable of accommodating many competing religious and secular discourses. Though they formulated this theoretical approach by analysing Christian pilgrimage, their thesis has a more general relevance to the overall anthropology of pilgrimage.

Simply tracing the contrasts between *communitas* and the competing discourse perspective is tempting, and to some extent, revealing. However, though both perspectives have considerable differences, they are concerned with broad patterns of social relations, interactions within and between groups or communities. Hence, in this paper I suggest that both perspectives can be equally useful for analysing the pilgrimage site, as well as the journey to it, even in the context of Buddhist pilgrimage. My point here is that the anthropology of pilgrimage must be able to speak to more than one theoretical paradigm at a time, but so far seems divided between Turner's *communitas* and the Eade and Sallnow post-modern notion of 'competing discourse'. The latter may emerge from an emphasis on discrepant discourse, scepticism towards grand narratives and mistrust of the very category of pilgrimage, but as Dubisch notes (1995: 45), the Turnerian approach itself calls attention to post-modern issues of performance and staging. Simon Coleman has recently shown how both theoretical perspectives have considerably overlapped, rather than being mutually antagonistic (2002: 355-370) and suggests that, in order to move from this theoretical deadlock, 'pilgrimage' needs to be used as a case-study for understanding human behaviour, rather than focussing on it as an institution or firmly bounded category of action (ibid. 365).

Following Coleman, I am going to suggest through my material on Sri Pāda that both theoretical perspectives can be fruitfully used. This suggests that our understanding of 'pilgrimage' cannot be easily limited to either theoretical stance. For example, the contest over control of Sri Pāda temple management affairs between lay élites and Buddhist monks, and among

them, shows that a pilgrimage site is not necessarily free from conflicts and resentment. However, this approach, as we shall see, helps to understand the more 'egalitarian' behaviour of newly emerged pilgrims' groups, particularly those I call 'youth pilgrims'. But equally, it has visible limitations when analysing the 'traditional' organisation of pilgrim groups whose behavioural pattern is different from 'youth pilgrims'. 'Traditional' pilgrim groups are basically arranged in a rigid hierarchal manner. So, unlike the new 'youth pilgrims', traditional pilgrims are not free from hierarchical roles but subject to the authority of a group leader called *nadegura*. As Coleman puts it:

Neither [Turnerian] communitas nor contestation [Competing discourse] should themselves become fetishized in order to produce neatly symmetrical anthropological theory, made up of views that appear to constitute a simple binary opposition (2002: 363).

To overcome such theoretical adequacy 'we should not allow such ethnographically rich spaces [pilgrimage sites] to become prisons of limited comparison' (ibid. 366).

Anthropology of Pilgrimage in South Asia

Anthropological studies relating to South Asian pilgrimage have been of several types. Interest in the field can be traced back to the time when Victor Turner was writing on this subject (notably, the works of Vidyartha, 1961, 1979; Jha, 1985, 1995; Bhardwaj, 1973 and Bharati, 1970). Among the relevant ethnographies for South Asia there are a number of studies which mainly concentrate on describing a pilgrimage centre or sacred place. Notable studies in India include Appadurai (1981), Eck (1982), Fuller (1984, 1992, 2003), Good (1987, 2004), Van der Veer (1988, 1994), Parry (1994) and Sax (1995), and for Sri Lanka, Obeyesekere (1978, 1981), Seneviratne (1978), Stirrat (1982, 1992), Nissan (1985, 1988) and Bastin (2002). In general, the emphasis of these studies is on priests, the organisation of the pilgrim centres, and other occupants of the pilgrimage centres; in other words they are more 'sacred place' oriented rather than being focussed on the pilgrims themselves.

However, some other studies concern the pilgrims themselves, although these can overlap with information provided by sacred place-oriented studies. For example, the work of Ann Gold (1988) is a village-based ethnography, which includes extensive

discussion of some pilgrimages undertaken by people from her fieldwork area. Gold's study is the first anthropological description of the rapidly expanding form of 'motorised pilgrimage'. A study by E.V. Daniel (1984) differs from Gold's in being of a 'walking pilgrimage' in South India in which Daniel participated fully. Alexander Gath (1998) has also paid much attention to the journeying aspect of a group of Syrian Christians of Kerala in South India. There is no such work in which the anthropologist becomes an active participant in a Sri Lankan pilgrimage except a recent study by Gunasekara on 'Walking to Kataragama' (2010). However, there are some notable studies in South Asian pilgrimage (Morinis, 1984; Obeyesekere, 1981; Fuller, 1984; Stirrat, 1992) which are based mostly on observation at a pilgrim centre, not participation in a full sense, but aim to provide supplementary information, by means of interviews, random survey and conversations, in order to provide a fuller picture of pilgrims and their concerns. This approach has been taken at pilgrim centres where 'the journeying component' is not strongly emphasized. To avoid such bias, my study has focused on both the 'centre' and the 'journeying' component of Sri Pāda pilgrimage.

The pilgrimage literature for South Asia, in general, lends greater support to the competing discourse perspective than to the Turnerian approach. However, most academic studies of pilgrimage in South Asia have concentrated on the explicitly religious domain, on the major religious traditions and on regional pilgrimage cults, and have placed far less emphasis on pilgrimage in secularised contexts such as the pilgrimage service economy, that has grown around pilgrimage centres, politics, nationalism, ethnicity, gender, pilgrimage sites associated with dead cultural heroes, touristic dimensions of pilgrimage, educational visits to sacred and historic locations, or simply pilgrimage for the sake of journeying (for 'fun'). According to Reader, these aspects of pilgrimage can be considered to be modern 'secularised' forms of pilgrimage (1993: 5-10). However, James Clifford (1997) argues that 'sacred' meanings tend to predominate even though people go on pilgrimages for secular as well as religious reasons. This indicates that pilgrimage is not only connected to its sacred world but also connected in complex ways to the non-sacred world around it. Obviously, it is a very hard exercise for an anthropologist who focuses on a particular pilgrimage site to explore all dimensions of the phenomenon.

Pilgrimage in the Anthropology of Sri Lanka

Anthropological studies of pilgrimage in Sri Lanka mainly derive theoretical orientation from the functionalist approach (Obeyesekere, 1966, 1978, 1981; Evers, 1972; Seneviratne, 1978). However, more recent studies by Pfaffenberger (1979), Nissan (1985, 1988), Stirrat (1982, 1991, 1992), Whitaker (1999), and Bastin (2002), mainly put their theoretical arguments against a 'universalistic' perspective. For example, Nissan (1988) has pointed to the incorporation of pilgrimage sites and associated motifs into a broad political discourse propagating an ethnically biased, Sinhala Buddhist nationalist agenda in Sri Lanka. She illustrates this through one particular pilgrimage centre, the sacred city of Anuradhapura, which became important for revivalists and nationalists as a national centre for the Sinhala Buddhist population. She also emphasises the importance of considering multiple historical representations of Buddhist pilgrimage centres in Sri Lanka, rather than studying them as a unified tradition.

There are a number of anthropological and sociological works on pilgrimage centres in Sri Lanka. With regards to Buddhist pilgrimage sites,^[1] notable works include: H.L. Seneviratne's writing on the Temple of Tooth relic of the Buddha in the capital city of the former Kandyan kingdom (1978); Gananath Obeyesekere's work on the deity shrine of Kataragama in the Southern province (1977, 1978, 1981); Elizabeth Nissan's investigation of Anuradhapura, the first capital of pre-colonial Sri Lanka (1985); Jonathan Walters' work on both Kelaniya near the capital city of Colombo (1996) and Mihintale near Anuradhapura (1998:133-162); Steven Kemper's study of (1991: 148-160) Seruvila in the Eastern Province, and; de Silva's recent study on Sri Pāda (2005, 2012, 2013). The latter example is an exceptionally important place that has not been fully studied by anthropologists, apart from brief mentions in passing (e.g., Gombrich, 1971; Spencer, 1990d).^[2] The work of Pfaffenberger (1979), Whitaker (1999), and Bastin (2002) on Hindu pilgrimage sites is also notable here, as is Jock Stirrat's exploration of Catholic pilgrimage sites (1982, 1991, 1992), and Dennis McGillivray's work on Sufism and Muslim saints' shrines in Sri Lanka (2004). Despite this range of work, there are many more important pilgrimage centres, both Buddhist and Hindu, even Islamic, to be studied in the country.

Each of these pilgrimage centres has a major annual festival. For example, Anuradhapura fills with pilgrims for the Poson festival, which falls on the full moon in June, followed by the Kataragama festival in July and the August festival of the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy. The annual festivals in Munnesvaram are held around February-March and September-October. Similarly, the largest number of pilgrims visit Sri Pāda between February and April, particularly during its main festival in March (*Mādin Pōya*).

Similarly, each centre has developed its own pattern of religiosity. For example, Kataragama shows more expressive forms (externalised) of worship, practising *bhakti* devotionism with vigorous dancing, and sometimes displays of ecstatic emotionalism such as fire-walking and hanging from hooks. The Kataragama pilgrimage is notable for the fact that expressive forms of worship at the site were originally an almost exclusive concern of Tamil Hindus. The recent involvement of Sinhala pilgrims in more expressive forms of *bhakti* devotionism at Kataragama is one of the key themes which Obeyesekere has explored in his study. But, the majority of pilgrims going to Kataragama do not engage in any externalised devotional religious activities; their primary activity is making and fulfilling vows by making various kinds of offerings to the god. That said, the ecstatic forms of religious behaviour are highly visible during the festival (see Obeyesekere, 1981 and Gombrich & Obeyesekere, 1988).

In contrast to the religiosity of Kataragama pilgrims, Nissan's study in the sacred city of Anuradhapura has shown a different type of religiosity (1988). Pilgrims go to the sacred city mainly for worshiping and to make merit, and emphasise both physical and emotional restraint and calm (externalised devotionism is absent). An attitude of internalised devotion is appropriate for such merit making. The pilgrims to the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy are very different from Anuradhapura and Kataragama. According to Seneviratne, pilgrims come to see the great annual pageant of the former Kandyan Kingdom, while many pilgrims make offerings in the Temple of the Tooth as well (1979). Unlike Anuradhapura and Kandy, devotees come to Munnesvaram, according to

1. For a general discussion on Buddhist pilgrimage, see Gombrich (1971), Kekulawala (1979), and Holt (1982).
2. A few studies have carried out by other scholars, notably Paranavitana (1956), Aksland (1990), Ratnapala (2001) and Dissanayake (2001)..

Bastin, to engage in non-merit-making activities such as the practise of sorcery and counter sorcery rites and seek alleviation from misfortune and other forms of suffering (2002) which are hard to find at Sri Pāda.

Stirrat (1992) suggests a shift in devotional interest of Sinhala Catholic pilgrims from the older, place-specific shrines to the new person-centred cults. Charismatic cult leaders, actively invoke particular saints to salve the misfortunes of their devotees. Such breakaway person-centred shrines differ from the older establishment yet, they offer another perspective on bodily healing in the context of (post) modern pilgrimage in Sri Lanka. But such development is hard to find at the ancient pilgrimage sites like Sri Pāda. Interestingly, at Sri Pāda, both external (e.g., singing devotional songs and passing friendly greetings) and internal devotionalism are emphasised as forms of worship, albeit in different ways from these other centres.

All of these pilgrimage centres are nationally significant and draw large crowds; Kandy and Anuradhapura are almost exclusively Buddhist, whilst Kataragama, Munnesvaram and Sri Pāda draw pilgrims from all of Sri Lanka's religious groups, predominantly Buddhist and Hindus, but also Muslims and Catholics. These centres have not all been equally important in the past. However, due to low country Buddhist revivalist activities in the latter part of the nineteenth century, most of these pilgrimage centres have become nationally significant. For example, pilgrimage centres like Anuradhapura rose to prominence during the colonial era and have been reclaimed as a national heartland since the independence of Sri Lanka (see Nissan, 1985).

Like other major pilgrimage sites in Sri Lanka there is an association between Sri Pāda and Sinhala Buddhist kingship. However, those who have discussed the political aspects of these pilgrimage centres, such as Seneviratne (1978) and Evers (1972), have chosen centres in which the hierarchical, royal aspect of Buddhist political symbolism is salient, and are thus able to see continuity between pre-colonial and post-colonial expressions of statehood. Moreover, these studies are biased towards the perspectives of a particular kind of temple associated, primarily with royalty and hierarchy, but they have ignored the historical dynamics of political symbolism in these centres. As in other recent studies (Nissan, 1985, Whitaker, 1999 and Bastin, 2002) I dealt with those

issues, elsewhere, in order to explore multiple histories of the Sri Pāda pilgrimage site and read those histories against the hegemonic nationalist history being constructed around the pilgrimage site as a part of its 'Buddhicization' (see: de Silva 2005, 2012, 2013).

In common with several other major pilgrimage sites on the island, there is a particular time of year when the Sri Pāda pilgrimage takes place, with a strong seasonal bias. The main pilgrimage normally takes place during the months of December to May, however the busiest part of the year extends from February to April, with the peak of the pilgrimage season during the festival of Mādin Full Moon Day in March. At this time, crowds are extremely dense for three or four days. In general, large crowds can be expected from February to April, which is quite different to the popular times for visiting other national pilgrimage sites in the country. Kataragama, Kandy and even Mahiyangana fill with large numbers of pilgrims during their festivals, which fall during August and Anuradhapura on the full moon in June. However, Sri Pāda attracts thousands of pilgrims daily, during these three months.^[3] In this period, heavy pressure from pilgrims travelling is quite normal.

Pilgrimage to Sri Pada Temple or the Temple of the Sacred Foot-print

Sri Pada is a major pilgrimage site in Sri Lanka and is known to the English-speaking world by its Anglicized name 'Adam's Peak'. This name is still used as a sign of the long colonial presence in the island. Historically

3. It is difficult to find early statistical figures on pilgrim attendance at Sri Pāda. However, some British 'official records' have arbitrarily reported figures in a qualitative manner, for example "full swing crowds" "many thousand" "large number" and this may give us some indication about the scale of the pilgrimage in the ninetieth century (SLNA 45/37).

In the early twentieth century, administrative records provide some estimated figures on pilgrim attendance; in 1905 12,380 pilgrims visited Sri Pāda, the figure rising to 40,000 in 1913 (AR 1912/13). By 1921, from February to April the number was 13,650 (AR 1921). In 1937 the Government Agent of Sabaragamuva reported 'The annual pilgrimage to Sri Pāda assumed *large proportion* in comparison with past three years' (AR 1931). By 1968, it was 600,000 to 700,000 (Daily News, 22 Dec. 1969).

According to police estimates, during the 2000-2001 events, the number of pilgrims attending Sri Pāda was 2.2 million, a figure that, if true, would indicate that one eighth of the total population of Sri Lanka visited Sri Pāda.

Recent Photograph of Sri Pada Temple on Mount Samanala



Youth Pilgrim Groups at Sri Pada Temple



The Sacred Footprint at the temple



The Old Temple Structure



speaking, Sri Pāda is a remarkable place of worship for people belonging to all four major religions in Sri Lanka, where they share one particular object of worship, the sacred footprint, but with specific interpretations from their own religious traditions. Like other major pilgrimage sites in Sri Lanka, thousands of pilgrims annually make the journey to Sri Pāda to worship the sacred footprint. In the past, many people climbed there with the intention of acquiring religious merit and indeed today they visit for many reasons.

Sri Pāda temple is situated on a peak of the wilderness mountains on the southwest edge of the central hill country of Sri Lanka, which annually attracts hundreds of thousands of pilgrims mainly from the Buddhist majority in the island.^[4] This tropical mountain forest territory (*samanala adaviya*) is said to be protected by the god Saman, considered the guardian of Sri Pāda (see de Silva, 2008). Until recently, this site has been considered as an extraordinary place where ethnic and religious diversity in the country is being upheld. But today, as I have shown elsewhere, Sri Pāda has been (re)ordered as a predominantly Buddhist site, and active participation of non-Buddhist groups is largely excluded (see de Silva, 2013).

The cult of worshipping the footprint in Buddhist societies in South and South-east Asia is undoubtedly an ancient religious practice. However, there is no definite historical evidence about exactly when the cult was popularised in the Buddhist cultural regions. In the case of Sri Lanka, some argue that the worship of the footprint can be traced back to the 2nd century BCE, but the site of worship was not historically at the exact place where present worship takes place (Sri Pāda) (Ranavalla, 1965: 187-219). Ranavella argues that the present pilgrimage site of footprint worshipping (Sri Pāda), emerged around the 10th century CE. There is good reason to accept his argument because, having examined Mahavamsa documentation after the 5th century, of the Buddha's mythical engagement with Sri Pāda, it is hard to find textual or archaeological information on any significant human engagement at Sri Pāda before the 10th century. As Paranavitana puts it

It is in the reign of Vijayabahu I [1055-1110], we have the earliest historical evidence in the chronicles and in inscriptions for the cult of the Footprint on Adam's peak (1958: 12).

I want to make clear that this particular historical moment marked the beginning of the state or king

taking seriously (or 'politically recognizing') Sri Pāda affairs in their court agendas. In other words, the institutionalisation of footprint worship under the Buddhist states began, as I have argued elsewhere, only after the early 12th century (see de Silva, 2012).^[5]

Examining the 'historical development' and evolution of 'official' religious practices of the Sri Pāda temple pays little attention to the issue of pilgrims and their practices. The historical development of the site showed how different Sri Pāda Temples have been constructed, reconstructed or ordered, and reordered under different powers at different historical moments in the temple's history. It is also evident that Sri Pāda has been historically viewed as a multi-ethnic and multi-religious site and how multiple discursive and non-discursive practices have been contested and marginalized with the insurgence of Sinhala Buddhist Nationalism, particularly in postcolonial Sri Lanka. Though all sorts of 'bitter' disputes, contestations, antagonism and exclusion have transpired in the 'official' domains at Sri Pāda Temple, the continued attraction of the large number of 'pilgrims' mainly from 'peasant and working class backgrounds' of all nominal religious affiliations is remarkably impressive. Obviously, the majority crowd is represented by the Sinhala Buddhists, the largest religious group in the island.

Unlike other Buddhist pilgrimage sites on the island such as Kandy, Anuradhapura, and Kataragama, Sri Pāda pilgrimage has never been abandoned,^[6] despite the political difficulties that have arisen since it was first institutionalised as a popular pilgrimage site

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4. Sri Pāda is situated at the top of Samanala (butterfly) mountain, roughly 7360 feet (2200 metres) above sea level.
 5. R.A.L.H. Gunawardena says that evidently this shrine (Sri Pāda) was known and revered even at the time when the Mahavamsa was written (1979: 233). This may be true, but in my view until the early 12th century, Sri Pāda was not a sacred site recognised by the state.
 6. Kandy disappeared as a festival centre in the nineteenth century, to rise in importance again after the 1920's, and the 1950's, particularly (Seneviratne, 1976) whilst Anuradhapura became increasingly important as a popular pilgrimage site in the second half of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth (Nissan 1985, 1988). Likewise, Kataragama is said to have declined as a pilgrimage site from the early nineteenth century but became of major site for Buddhists in more recent decades (Obeyesekere, 1977, 1978, 1981)

during the kingship of Vijayabahu I in early 12th century. The factors that have affected attendance numbers, and led to occasional breaks in Sri Pāda's popularity, have been insurgencies, outbreak of epidemics and unexpected weather conditions. Pilgrimage to Sri Pāda has otherwise remained a popular attraction for many people in Sri Lanka, regardless of their religious faith. The impact of such aforementioned factors on the popularity of other pilgrimage sites is in no way comparable with that of Sri Pāda pilgrimage.

In Sinhala Buddhism, journeying to major pilgrimage sites is popularly known as *vandanā gamana*, which literally means 'worshipping journey'.^[7] There are sixteen such major pilgrimage sites (*sōlōsmastana*) in the island where Buddhists would go on *vandanā gamana* in their lifetime. Without doubt Sri Pāda would be one of the most important sites for such journeying, with the sentiment of great devotion as well as the great care. The purpose for focusing on the journeying aspect of Sri Pāda pilgrimage is a reaction to the visible lack of ethnographical information dealing with the 'journeying aspects of pilgrimage' in the context of ethnographic studies of Sri Lanka in particular, and South Asia in general. However, Gold (1988), Daniel (1984) and Gath's (1998) studies are notable exception in this regard. The work of Ann Gold is a village-based ethnography, which includes extensive discussion on the rapidly expanding form of motorized pilgrimage undertaken by villages in her fieldwork area. In contrast, Daniel's study focuses on a walking pilgrimage to the Sabari Malai, one of the most popular pilgrimage sites in South India, in which Daniel participated fully with a group of village pilgrims. Gath's study is based on a group of Syrian Christians from Kerala in South India in which he

discusses the varieties of pilgrimage experience in Central Kerala. Although there are notable studies on major pilgrimage sites in Sri Lanka (e.g., Obeyesekere 1966, 1978, 1981; Seneviratne 1978; Nissan 1988), surprisingly, the 'journeying' component has not been fully explored or more precisely, has not been strongly emphasized

Generally speaking, going on pilgrimage must be collective and pilgrimage (*vandanāve yāma*) to Sri Pāda is no exception. According to older informants, pilgrim groups were formed around close relatives and sometime fellow villagers and friends. A group of pilgrims is called *nade*, and the person in charge is known as *nadeguru* (i.e. the teacher of the pilgrim group). During the pilgrimage, nobody would have the courage to question the authority of the *nadeguru* and pilgrims would have to obey him, respect him and conduct themselves according to his word. This arrangement goes against what Victor Turner calls 'communitas'. The structure and the operation of '*nade*' certainly does not fit into the Turnerian framework. For now, I argue that going on pilgrimage to Sri Pāda does not achieve 'communitas,' or anti-structure but rather, it creates structures or emulates 'normal society'. However, when considering newly emerged pilgrim groups (e.g., youth pilgrims) it appears that they do maintain some form of 'communitas'. As I go on to show, the hierarchical arrangement of the 'traditional' *nade*, mostly the role of the *nadegura*, has been severely challenged by the newly emerged pilgrim groups, particularly the youth pilgrim groups.

Formation of Pilgrim Groups

In *nade* or a pilgrim group, apart from the *nadegura* (traditionally a male figure), two types of pilgrim can be identified. The first is those who have never been to Sri Pāda, generally called *kodu*^[8] [*kāraya*] meaning 'newcomer'; if he or she is an older person they would be called *dandukodu* meaning 'adult newcomer', and if a child they would be called *kirikodu* generally meaning 'child newcomer'. The *Kodukārayas* were always under the special care of the *nadeguru*. The other type of pilgrim included in a *nade* is generally known as *purudukāra*, meaning experienced or veteran pilgrim.^[9] Exploring this terminology with a *nadegura*, I was informed that a person becomes a *purudukāra* pilgrim only after finishing his or her third journey to Sri Pāda. So, traditional pilgrim groups were structured and operated through these distinctions, with the *kodukāra* and the *purudukāra* subjected to the

7. Gombrich mentions that pilgrimages had taken place in Sri Lanka from time immemorial (1991:128-129). He also describes a Sinhala book, *Baudda Adihilla*, from the medieval period, that gives the particular forms of worship to be performed at the different pilgrimage sites in the country. Similarly, a well-known 16th century book, *Nam Potha*, gives a catalogue of sites to be visited by Buddhist pilgrims. This list includes Sri Pāda and almost all the sites that are popular today.
8. Words such as '*kodu*' and '*nade*', according to literary scholar Udaya Meddegama, are not found to have any relation to Pali or Sanskrit roots but these words, he suggests, may have a Tamil origins (Email conversation on 23rd Oct, 2003).
9. Markus Aksland (1990), who has documented his journey to Sri Pāda with a pilgrim group in Southern coastal town, finds slightly different language for *kodukārayas* which are called '*kodi*' and *purudukaraya* - called '*vadi*'.

authority of the ‘*nadeguru*’. During the journey, *kodukārayas* were always placed to the front of the pilgrim group and *purudukāra* walked behind, but in front of the *nadeguru*, who gave all instructions and directions from the back. In a *nade*, *Kodukāra* could be easily identified by their appearance. Usually they dressed in white and sometimes covered their head with a piece of white cloth identical to a headscarf. Also a *kodu pandura*, a coin wrapped up in a piece of white cloth, was usually tied to their left wrist or forearm (This coin would later be offered to the temple). Such, symbolically distinctive features would no doubt create some form of ‘social’ distance, rather than ‘commonality’ between the *kodukārayas* and the veteran pilgrims, as well as the *nadegura*. Furthermore, such a ‘distance’ can be identified in different situations. For example, at the end of worshipping at Sri Pāda temple, it was a practice that each *kodukārayas* would kneel down in front of the *nadegura* and respectfully worship him in order to show their gratitude.^[10]

So far I have presented the typical structure of a pilgrim group, in order to show its functions and internal hierarchical differentiation in the operation of *nade* on the journey to Sri Pāda. This is different from the situation discussed by Daniel (1984:244-278) for pilgrim groups journeying to Sabari Malai, a Hindu pilgrimage site in South India. He identifies himself as a member of a village’s pilgrimage group:

the pilgrim leaves behind his temporal, differentiated identity and exists only as the atman, a pure, unmanifest, and undifferentiated form of substance. It is no longer meaningful to speak of self or other or of perception, since there are no distinct entities to perceive’ (1984: 270).

Pilgrims journeying to Sabari Malai, according to Daniel, are equal or undifferentiated: no social or symbolic differences prevail among them, everybody is addressed as “Ayyappa Swami” and pilgrims wear similar cloths (*vesti*), with holy ashes across their chests and foreheads, and a consecrated beaded necklace. None can command an Ayyappan pilgrim even when they belong to the lowest caste group. Such equal or undifferentiated ‘*communitas*’ is / was hard to find among pilgrims to Sri Pāda, which has / had been subjected to the authority of *nadegura*.

It is difficult to trace the genealogy of figures like *nadegura*, *kodukārayas* and even *nade*. I am sure these are not recent innovations. Hence, organising a pilgrim group around *nadegura* no doubt is a ‘traditional’

phenomenon. The general feature of going on pilgrimage among Sinhala Buddhists is the accompaniment of a veteran *nadeguru* who is expected to have good knowledge about the major pilgrimage sites and to be skilful in conducting certain rituals appropriate to the site. In particular, their service and organizational ability is quite prominent in the pilgrimage to Sri Pāda where special care and guidance throughout that sacred journey is much required. Taking pilgrim groups to the great sacred sites in the island particularly Sri Pāda would be considered a highly meritorious act.

However, more organised pilgrimages around *nadegura* became popularly visible with the advent of ‘modern’ transportation and communication systems on the island. According to my older informants, they went on pilgrimage with their fellow villagers by bus, usually hired by *nadeguras* from private bus companies,^[11] which could have easily accommodated forty to sixty pilgrims. No doubt, with the advent of ‘modern’ public transportation, particularly trains and buses, more large scale ‘pilgrims tours’ might have been organised and parallel to this the importance of the *nadegura*’s role in the whole journey must also have increased. The emergence of such motorised pilgrimage has attracted large groups of pilgrims to the **scattered** great sacred sites (*sōlōsmastana*) - most of these ancient sites were reinvented and transformed into national pilgrimage sites by the mid twentieth century (Nissan 1985, 1989, Kemper 1991). The journey to those sites is popularly known as ‘*vata vandanava*’ (i.e. circle pilgrimage) in which the *nadegura*’s role has become so important.

However, today we see a rather different picture as far as the journey to Sri Pāda is concerned. Many people now prefer to go on pilgrimage to Sri Pāda not in large groups, but instead, with a smaller number of people, particularly their immediate family members or close relatives.^[12] Some, especially young pilgrims, prefer to

10. Similarly, there was another practice that *kodukārayas* treat their fellow pilgrims on their way back from the temple. This treat was popularly known as *kodu dāne* (i.e. almsgiving of *kodu*) and was usually given with a specially prepared ‘sweet ball’ known as *kodu aggala* (*Aggala* is made out of jaggery, ginger, pepper and raising flour) but instead of *aggala* many pilgrims now use biscuits and other sweets for this treatment.

11. They named a few of the bus companies: Ebert Silva, South-Western bus company of Cyril De Zoysa, Swarnapali. But among them only Ebert Silva bus company has survived until today.

Table 1 Size of the Pilgrim Groups

	Frequency	Percent
0-1	54	6
2-10	337	37
11-20	351	38
21-30	58	6
31-40	47	5
41-50	29	3
51-60	24	3
61-70	10	1
71+	14	2
Total	924	100
Source: Simple Survey -2002		

travel with their friends, schoolmates and fellow workers. As my survey^[13] information (hereinafter referred to as 'Survey 2002') shows, nearly 75% of pilgrims journeyed to Sri Pāda in fairly small groups that consisted of 2 to 20 members, the rest were made up of larger groups. The scaling down of the pilgrim groups has considerably undermined the role of the *nadegura*.

Today many pilgrim groups are not guided by a veteran *nadegura*. Instead, small pilgrim groups now enlist the services of an experienced fellow pilgrim who can pass on basic instructions to fellow members (particularly the *kodukāra* pilgrims) in their journey to Sri Pāda (and other major sacred sites too). This experienced figure could be an elderly male or female pilgrim and sometimes quite remarkably, less experienced younger figures carry out a similar role within the group that they themselves have formed. Interestingly, I have observed at Sri Pāda, that experienced female figures in these small groups were visibly engaged in providing ritual instructions for their fellow pilgrims, a role formerly requiring a veteran male *nadeguras*. This dramatic transformation can be illustrated to some extent through the following two cases of experienced female *nadegura*.^[14] One female was from Ratnapura in the Sabaragamuva province and the other from Matara in the Southern province:

B.S. Fernando is a 51 year old woman who came to Sri Pāda as a nadegura with a small group of pilgrims from Ratnapura where she lives and runs a flower-selling stall near the main shrine of the god Saman. Since 1983 she

has taken this pilgrims' group to Sri Pāda every year, a group which usually consists of her family members, relatives and neighbours. From her childhood, she used to accompany her father to Sri Pāda - a veteran nadegura and a skilful carpenter from Kahapola, Piliyandala, near south of Colombo - which enabled her to learn some basic skills in guiding pilgrims' groups to Sri Pāda. After the death of her father in 1971, she continued to guide the same pilgrim group that he had guided, until she moved to Ratnapura in 1982. According to her calculation, as a nadegura she has visited Sri Pāda 24 times so far.

The second female *nadegura*, Mango Nona, age 72 from Dikwella, Matara, in the Southern province gave me the following account:

This is my thirty-fifth visit to Sri Pāda. I began to visit Sri Pāda about fifty years ago, but some years I was not able to come here. I used to come with a nade of fellow villagers. My father was the nadegura of our nade. Before my father, my grandfather had taken the nade from my village to Sri Pāda. Nobody in my family wanted to become nadegura after my father. My brothers all went . . . fishing in the sea like my father [She has four brothers and she is the youngest and only girl in her family]. My father

12. This is quite similar to the process of scaling down of the organisation of traditional rituals such as bali-tovil from communal to private domain in contemporary Sri Lanka (Simpson 1995, De Silva 2000).
13. This was not a random survey but rather a sample of those who were willing to talk to my assistant and myself and had the time to do so. This survey was carried out over some weekends and holidays during the months of January to May 2002. To collect numerical data at a major pilgrimage site is by no means an easy task. Large numbers of pilgrims come and go and the interviews took place in an extremely busy situation, particularly after the long and tiring climb of the mountain. There is also limited space at the temple, preventing the pilgrims from staying long at the premises. In view of such difficulties, it is hard to judge how far the information obtained was reliable. Nevertheless, for what they are worth the figures are presented in this and coming chapters. In all, we interviewed around 924 pilgrims groups. But we deliberately excluded foreign nationals who visited to temple as tourists rather than pilgrims. Given that pilgrims tend to arrive in groups, we tried our best to ensure that members of the same group were not interviewed more than once at different times or over and over again. Hence, 924 individual pilgrims are representing some form of 924 pilgrims groups though they answered the questions individually.
14. There is no specific name for female *nadegura*; hence I have therefore called them 'female *nadegura*'.

wasn't keen to teach me how to become a nadegura but I taught myself by going on pilgrimage with him. He took us to all the major pilgrimage sites (Sidastāna) in the country. It was a journey of eight days [vata vandanava or circle pilgrimage]. Those days we went even to Nāgadepa [another major Buddhist site in Jaffna peninsula] and Seruwavila [on the east coast].

Since 1985, I began to take our nade on that journey but we don't go to Nagadepa and Seruwavila today. We first come to Sri Pāda and then go to other pilgrimage sites [she named a few; Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Mahiyangana, Mutiyangana, Maligavila]. I don't take other nada [plural form of nade] on pilgrimage and I only take our nade [which according to her always consisted of her children, grand children, relatives and neighbours. When I met her at Sri Pāda she was leading the nade of 70 pilgrims]

Though some women have taken over the 'traditionally' male dominated role of the *nadegura*, some fascinating changes have emerged among the youth pilgrims groups, where new types of pilgrim leaders seem to have become apparent. The expressive role and the responsibilities of this new figure are entirely different from the 'traditional' *nadegura*.

The newly emerging '*nadegura*' in most of the youth pilgrim groups is popularly known as [in English term] either 'manager' or 'leader'. The manager is the person who is temporally selected amongst the experienced members of group. His responsibility is very simple in comparison to the 'traditional' *nadegura*. Basically, his task is to manage and maintain the collective fund of the pilgrimage group, which is normally collected from the fellow pilgrims before the journey begins. The money is for spending on travel, food, cigarettes, liquor, and sometimes the expenses of unemployed members of the group. Such newly emerged youth pilgrim groups both implicitly and explicitly have challenged the highly restricted and authoritative role of 'traditional' *nadeguras*. Veteran *nadeguras* are constantly ridiculed through a hostile song that is widely popular among the youth pilgrims groups:

nadegura harima hōra (the nadegura is a real cheater)
apiva dāla pānala giya (who left us and ran away)

The general attitude regarding *nadegura* seems to me to have significantly changed over a period of time.

The most commonly heard criticisms of them are of drunkenness, rudeness and the misuse of pilgrims' money. This is not to say that all the veteran *nadeguras* are like this; despite the fact that they constantly receive criticism, some of them still manage to bring fairly large pilgrims groups to Sri Pāda. Interestingly, some also manage to attract a considerable number of youth pilgrims into their respective pilgrims groups.

I particularly make a comparison between my work and that of Valentine Daniel whose description and analysis is mainly based on a group of village pilgrims journeying to one of the most popular pilgrimage sites in South India. This is partly because of the unavailability of such an ethnographical description of pilgrimage journeying in the Anthropology of Sri Lanka. As I mentioned before, most of the works on major pilgrimage sites in the island are concentrated on describing and analysing sacred centres, and surprisingly the journeying aspect has largely remained untouched.

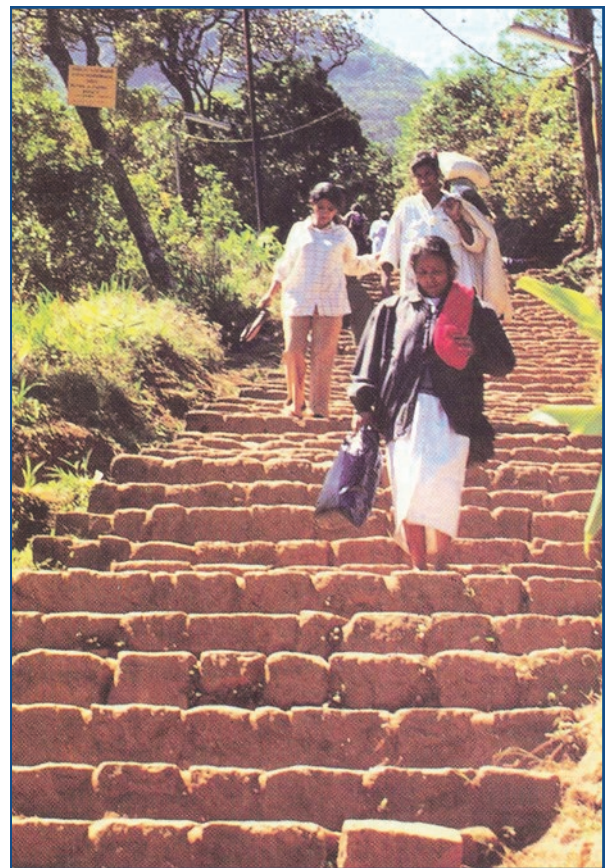
Daniel's work, by and large, is in agreement with the Turnerian approach or notion of *communitas*, which describes the individual pilgrim's temporary transition away from mundane structures and social interdependence into a looser commonality of feeling with fellow pilgrims. Daniel shows that the pilgrims journeying to Sabari Malai gradually develop a sense of *communitas* or more precisely the 'Firstness' through the 'Secondness' even before they undertake the journey. For Daniel, pilgrimage itself is an exercise in the progressive and processual acquisition of knowledge and the corresponding shedding of ignorance. In other words it is a journey which moves through 'Thirdness' and 'Secondness' to the 'Firstness'. Daniel explains that the Hindu pilgrim is less optimistic about Thirdness, which emphasises rules, laws, theories, categories, and distinctions that alienate the pilgrim from a true synthetic knowledge of oneness. Therefore, he must strive to move away from the world of theories and laws, through Secondness, which dissolves the rules and theories that classify 'the other', which looms out against the self. Firstness, is beyond all self and other distinctions (1984: 244). In Firstness, the pilgrim leaves behind their temporal, differentiated identity and exists only as the *atman*, in an undifferentiated form of substance. In this sense everybody becomes 'Ayyappan pilgrims', with no social distinction, hierarchy or authority prevailing.

Quite contrary to Daniel's thesis, I have shown that Buddhist pilgrims journeying to Sri Pāda maintain

A Group of Ascending Pilgrims



A Group of Descending Pilgrims



their differences and divisions, albeit in rather different forms from the mundane structures of society. The differences that are found among Sri Pāda pilgrims are not necessarily a repetition of the divisions and ranks that are found in their everyday world such as caste and class and thus, in this regard, the formation and operation of *nade* or pilgrims' groups is an extremely interesting phenomenon. As I have explained, *nade* does not reproduce similar social differences of rank and status that can be found in the everyday world, instead, it produces a new form of 'structure', which operates beyond the mundane social interdependence of its participants, yet remains opposite to the Turnerian notion of 'communitas'. Within a *nade*, unlike 'Ayyappan pilgrims' all pilgrims do not enjoy equal status; everyone is not addressed or treated in an equal manner (this explanation is not relevant to the newly emerged youth pilgrim's groups and in my view, youth groups are clearly aligned with the Turnerian notion of 'communitas'). Instead, as I have shown, there are differences of rank and status notably present in the formation and the operation of *nade*. The *nadegura* or pilgrim leader has unquestionable

authority over fellow pilgrims and the fellow pilgrims are further divided regardless of their gender, as 'experienced' or veteran pilgrims (*purudukāra*) and as unexperienced pilgrims or new comers (*kodukāra*). New comers are further differentiated by their age. The external appearance as well as special rituals designed for the *kodukārayas* are further marked by the imposition of roles, ranks and statuses of difference in a *nade*. Such differences are equally found in *nades* operating under the 'traditional' *nadegura* and the newly emerged 'female *nadegura*'. However, those differences are markedly unfound among the youth pilgrim groups which operate in an egalitarian manner under the newly found figure of 'manager'.

Apart from this, the differences are further exacerbated in the use of every day kinship language (by referring to pilgrims as brother, sister, mother, grand-mother etc.), through the pilgrims passing these friendly greetings to each other, and also the operation of different regional traditions and practices at Sri Pāda which could not support the idea of 'The Firstness' or more loosely 'Communitas' among Sri Pāda pilgrims.

Hence, it is clear that the Turnerian theoretical formulation would not be adequate for our understanding of differences among Sri Pāda pilgrims. As Eade and Sallnow remind us, pilgrimage cannot be understood as a universal or homogeneous phenomenon but should instead be deconstructed into historically and culturally specific instances (1991:3). Despite its inadequacy, the Turnerian notion of *communitas* could easily be used when analysing the newly emerging youth pilgrim groups because these groups themselves have become a centrally organised phenomenon as opposed to the highly structured conventional form of *nade*. Such youth pilgrim groups as I would argue, do maintain some form of ‘communitas’ or egalitarian social interaction, which Turner discusses.

Before concluding I want to make a theoretical suggestion here that both the competing discourse perspective of Eade and Sallnow, and Turner’s conjectures would be useful for understanding pilgrimage in Sri Lanka. Hence, pilgrims journeying to Sri Pāda could not be adequately understood if we relied on one or other of the theoretical formulations. Making a clear distinction between the journey, on the one hand, and conduct at the pilgrimage site on the other is critical. Mainly because the pilgrims for whom the journey is fundamental, display quite different features from those for whom it is not so essential and only the proceedings at the site are important. In this paper, I paid attention to the journey as an integral part of the whole pilgrimage process; how you get to the destination is as significant as what you do when you are there. Any generalisation about pilgrimage, which does not take account of these sorts of basic distinctions (journey and the site proceedings), whether endorsing a Turnerian or competing discourse point of view, should be regarded with scepticism.

However, it is clear that away from that vague sacred domain, not only youth pilgrims, but also other pilgrim groups behave differently. Hence, we can simply conclude that what youth pilgrims do on their journey to the Sri Pāda temple, is quite different from what they do at the temple. In a Turnerian view, both contexts provide what he calls ‘communitas’, which involves for them an escape from ‘*societas*’ or the world of normal society:

a structured, differentiated and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation separating man in terms of “more” and “less” (1969: 82).

My point here is that both religious attainment and non-religious experiences are equally important when understanding the pilgrim groups in general, and youth groups in particular, at a religious site like Sri Pāda. Neither aspect of these sites, in Sri Lanka in particular, and South Asia in general, have been explored sufficiently by the anthropologists working in the region. My attempt in this specific section is to show some forms of ‘secular’ and ‘sacred’ activity of youth pilgrims who can be identified as a separate sociological category in the context of the Sri Pāda pilgrimage.

Conclusion

This paper is structured by blending histories of pilgrimage governance and ethnography of the devotees or pilgrims, I attempt to break down the boundaries of the anthropology of pilgrimage, questioning the dubious division between structure (e.g., Turnerian view), and process (e.g., Competing discourse), religion and politics, and this and other worldly formulations. These dominant views in the anthropology of pilgrimage are tested in my analysis, particularly in relation to the pilgrimage centre and the pilgrims journeying to it. My findings suggest that it is hard to grasp an overall picture about the pilgrimage site, as well as the journey to it if too much emphasis is placed on either theoretical perspective. However, the ethnographic and historical material that I have presented in this paper owes more credit to Eade and Sallnow’s (1991) theory of competing discourse (the history of Sri Pāda provides numerous examples which support their claim) than the Turnerian approach. According to the received wisdom, in the Turnerian view ‘communitas’ can occur, as far as pilgrimage is concerned, in highly structured agrarian societies.

But, I have shown that such an approach can be useful, with some qualifications, in understanding (post) modern phenomena like youth pilgrimage. Unlike other pilgrim groups, youth groups have shown a sense of (‘communitas’) solidarity and friendship with enthusiastic engagement in singing, dancing, joking etc. during the journey. The emergence of a ‘new pleasure sphere’ and social activities within the newly emerged pilgrim groups is further support for the Turnerian view. Unlike these groups, the ‘traditional’ pilgrim groups are arranged in a rigid hierarchal manner, albeit that their formation is completely different from the everyday social order. Basically, such groups are subjected to the authority of a group

leader called *nadegura*. Although the authority of the *nadegura* has been challenged by the new group leaders - such as female *nadegura*, 'managers' of youth groups and 'leaders' of urban pilgrims visiting from the capital city of Colombo, they still manage to maintain their authority over pilgrim groups by adjusting to the new socio-economic conditions of the country. Such traditional arrangement does not mesh with Turnerian notions of 'communitas'. The pilgrims' behaviour at Sri Pāda shows us that pilgrimage may involve consensus and communitas, but at the same time it also involves divisiveness and discord. By considering the above facts we can conclude that both approaches (Turnerian and the 'competing discourse'), with some qualifications, are useful for our understanding of pilgrimage to Sri Pāda.

If we need to seek a new approach, as Simon Coleman (2002) suggests, the anthropology of pilgrimage should move from this theoretical deadlock. I have quite clearly demonstrated that such an attempt would not be difficult if we treat 'pilgrimage' as a case-study for understanding human behaviour, rather than focussing on it as an institution, or firmly bounded category of action.

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