

CHANGING RELIGIOUS AFFILIATIONS AS A SURVIVAL STRATEGY: A
CASE STUDY OF THE URBAN POOR IN THE CITY OF COLOMBO

Hema Goonatilake
University of Kelaniya.

This paper is based on one aspect of a larger study the author has undertaken in three multi-ethnic slum and shanty settlements in the city of Colombo.

The data is derived from a questionnaire survey and participant observation. A sample of 75 households representing the four major religions was selected for the study out of a total of 316 households.

The results indicate that the meaning of religion and the nature of religiosity varies according to the particular economic situation of the urban poor. For these struggling for survival, religion has become only a means to improve their living conditions, either through financial and other assistance given by the church or through grant of their mundane wishes as answer to their 'vows'. Their attitude to religion was found to be based on functional and situational realities rather than on the ideological. There was also a strong tendency to change formal religious affiliations to a religion that would ensure financial and other day to day support. Such conversion was from Hinduism and Buddhism to Christianity.

With higher economic status, conversion did not occur and the professed religion was practised and a distinct religious identity was maintained.