IMPACT OF RECREATIONAL PARKS ON SOCIAL INTERACTION: A STUDY OF THE FACTORS RELATED TO INTERACTION AMONG VISITORS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SELECTED EXAMPLES IN COLOMBO DISTRICT

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Abstract – Recreational parks are considered as important public spaces in urban areas which enhance the quality of life by means of improving health conditions, social interaction and recreation among urban population. Several recreational parks have been established recently in Colombo District as a part of physical development implemented by the government after the end of civil war. Although these parks seem to be used frequently by the urban population, it is necessary to ensure that the objectives of these establishments are achieved.

This study aims at examinimg the social interaction among urban people who use these parks, which is one of the objectives and is expected to be improved. The primary objective of this study is to find out the impact of recreational parks on social interaction in relation to some important factors related to interaction among visitors of these parks. Identifying the factors that should be improved to enhance social interaction is the secondary objective of this study. The study was carried out with special reference to three (03) selected recreational parks located in Colombo District. A total of 150 individuals (50 from each park) from different age groups were selected as participants among the people who visit the selected parks. Stratified random sampling method was used to select the participants. Primary data were collected using a researcher made questionnaire regarding the factors related to interaction such as distance from residence to park, purpose of visiting, opportunity to improve interaction among own relations, opportunity to build up new relationships, opportunity for communication among visitors, and use of built spaces and landscape elements. Data were analysed descriptively. Social interaction among visitors was identified in different levels in relation to the factors considered. Further, some aspects related to the above factors were identified to be improved for enhancing social interaction.

Keywords: Recreational parks, Social Interaction, Colombo District

I. INTRODUCTION

It is evident that there were gathering spaces in Sri Lankan history which showed close relationships with nature. Today, due to rapid growth of population and hasty urbanization, the need of public spaces has been more emphasized with complex and stressful human life style. Becoming important urban public spaces, recreational parks have been drawn more attraction as one of significant elements in urban design that give breathe for busy urban lifestyle through improving interaction among urban population. Some recreational parks have been successful in improving social interaction while others have been failed in that task. Recreational parks with organized landscape are the best approach of urban planning rather than building design. Several public parks were designed in Colombo District as a part of physical development implemented by the government after the end of civil war. Those parks should help to enhance the interactions between urban communities as expected by establishing them. Therefore, it is important to find out whether this interaction actually takes place in these parks. The ways of people perceiving those places physically and psychologically with landscape elements should also be taken in to consideration. As urban population comprises different ethnic groups, cultures and sub cultures, it is important to ensure that these parks are able to enhance

the interaction among them. This assurance would also help to facilitate the inter-ethnic reconciliation.

The primary objective of this study is to find out the impact of recreational parks on social interaction in relation to some important factors related to interaction among visitors of these parks. The secondary objective is identifying the aspects related to above mentioned factors that should be improved to enhance social interaction within recreational parks.

II. BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Excessive population has created irregular constructions and informal environment in the cities. It influences the social structure by forming loneliness, lack of interaction and improper communication among urban communities. To resolve this problem, most of urban designers have tried to find solutions by changing the spatial arrangements in cities. As a result, recreational parks emerged as urban gathering spaces which can contribute to create a new social structure in the cities.

Most of researchers define urban parks in relation to different aspects such as their roles, benefits, landscape characteristics, activities etc. Yuen (1996, p.955) has defined an urban park as "any public area of land set aside for aesthetic, educational, recreational or cultural use by the public amidst essentially urban surroundings". According to the Yuen's complex definition about urban park, it is the place that fulfils many social characteristics and human needs. Olmstead (1986) defined the park as a naturalized passive retreat which provides treatment to the people physically and psychologically.

Some of urban geographers have defined urban parks in terms of the landscape elements that contribute to enhance the quality of the place. Solecki (1994, p.93), emphasizes that landscape features serve many functions as providers of passive and active recreation, environmental benefits and wildlife habitats. This reflects the importance of landscape elements and outdoor characteristics of urban recreational parks.

Hesham et al. (2011) reveal that people choose to use or not to use urban parks not only because of the features, but also the condition of the environments and features maintained in the parks. For instance, the openness of the setting in parks attracts the people. "An open view helps

the person to see and make sense of a scene, whereas a blocked view limits this ability by making a sense more coherent, the open view may increase the preference." (Nasar, 1997, p.68). Hesham et al. (2011) emphasize that the green areas designed using natural elements contribute to socialization of the members of the society.

Water bodies are important elements in urban parks. Alexander et al. (1977, p. 323) states that we came from water; our bodies are largely water; and water plays a fundamental role in our psychology. Further, he emphasizes that we need constant access to water, all around us; and we cannot have it without reverence for water in all its forms. But everywhere in cities water is out of reach. This implies the inevitable connection between water and human being. Further it shows that moving water can create active impression on the human mind. Therefore, people usually prefer to gather around water. Yee (2010, p.38) reviewing the condition of the Charleston Park states that lakes enhance water quality and reinstitute tidal flushing, lively promenade experience and multiple gathering places giving attractive places to the visitors for socializing and recreation.

Sculptures and monuments enhance the quality of the place in particular environments. In large urban parks, monuments provide the legibility to the people providing the sense of belonging. Building patterns in urban parks are also important. Alexander et al. (1977) implies that tall buildings have negative psychological aspect among the individuals. It can destroy the spatial quality and interaction in the space. Uslu and Gökçe (2010) review that landscape design and colours are parts of suitable spatial arrangements which encourage more social interaction.

Peters (2009) finds the impact of green areas including trees and shrubs on social togetherness. In addition, he implies that most of the people enjoy their outdoor activities in a green and relaxing environment. Pathways defined by trees provide more pleasant and encouraging walking. "The great deal of planting along a path reinforces its image: paths along water or parks tend to be more memorable" (Lynch, 1960, p.51)

The patterns of events that take place in a space differ according to the people's sense of space and the way of experiencing the place. Activities in urban recreational parks differ as per their characteristic features and the ways of perceiving the spaces by people. Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) emphasize that tree element, seating and

beautiful spaces in urban parks contribute to promote visiting, relaxing, and experiencing the place. Recreational activities depend on peoples' perception as well as other factors such as age, ethnicity, gender etc. Social interaction is a communal connection between communities during their day today activities in a particular place. Gehl (1987) implies that human activities and design elements promote people to spend more time in urban parks. Also, he finds that most of people choose to sit on edges. It reflects relationship between human activities and outdoor elements.

Konau (2016) defines thedetermining factors for use of the urban green spaces such as familiarity with site, frequency of visit and distance from home, age groups of visitors, landscape style preferences and environment factors. Uslu (2010) determines the factors such as socio-demographic characteristics, the perception of research population about their living environments, the perception of the research population about neighborhood relations, places where the research population meet with their neighbors, factors that the research population find important for social interaction, communication of the research population with other people.

III. METHODOLOGY

Three recently established recreational parks in Colombo District were used as case studies namely Diyatha Uyana, Bellanvilla Park and Nawala wetland Park (Vally Park). A total of 150 individuals (50 from each park) from different age groups were used as participants among the people who visit these parks. Stratified random sampling method was used to select the participants. Primary data were collected using researcher made questionnaire regarding the factors related to interaction as mentioned below.

1. Distance from residence to park
2. Purpose of visiting
3. Opportunity to improve interaction between own relations
4. Opportunity to build up new relationships
5. Opportunity for communication among visitors
6. Use of built spaces and landscape elements.

Collected data were analysed descriptively.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data which were collected through researcher made questionnaires were summarized using graphs.
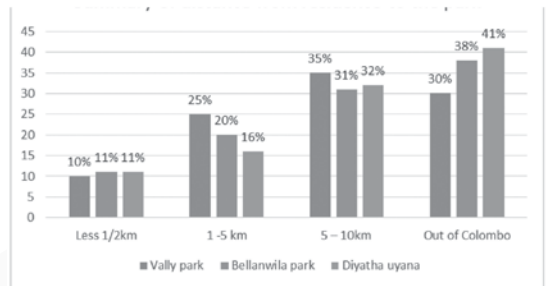
A. Distance from residence to park

Figure 1. Summary of distance from residence to park

According to the survey results, most of the visitors come from areas beyond 5km away from the park. (Vally- 65%, Bellanvila- 69%, Diyatha- 73%) A minimum number of people who live in nearby area (less than 1/2km) tend use the parks. (Vally- 10%, Bellanvila- 11%, Diyatha- 11%)
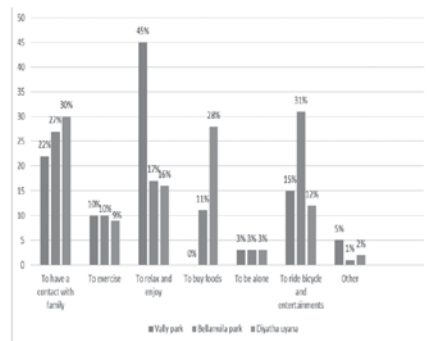
B. Purpose of visiting

Figure 2. Summary of purpose of visiting

It was evident that the purpose of visiting parks depends on personal preferences as well as on the intended purposes of the parks. Considerable amount of visitors expressed that they want to spend their time with family and others who come with them. (Vally- 22%, Bellanvila- 27%, Diyatha- 30%) Each park has used different tricks to attract people. For instance, there is an attractive bicycle track around the lake at Bellanvila park to provide facility of riding bicycles. (31%) Most of visitors use Vally Park to relax and enjoy. (45%)

C. Opportunity to build up relationships
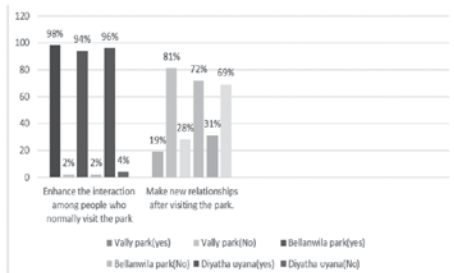
Figure 3. Summary of Opportunity to build up relationships

The survey questionnaire was prepared to get information about the relationship between own relations as well as other visitors. It was evident that there was an improvement of interaction between own relations in all three parks as illustrated in the graph. (Vally- 98%, Bellanvila- 94%, Diyatha- 96%) There are fewer propensities to make new relationships with other visitors. (Vally- 19%, Bellanvila- 28%, Diyatha- 31%)

D. Opportunity for communication among visitors
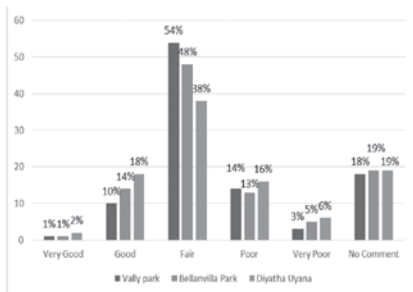
Figure 4. Summary of Opportunity for communication among visitors

High percentage of visitors has fair communication between other visitors. (Vally- 54%, Bellanvila- 48%, Diyatha- 38%) It is significant that the percentages of visitors who have 'very good' (Vally- 1%, Bellanvila- 1%, Diyatha- 2%) and 'good' (Vally- 10%, Bellanvila- 14%, Diyatha- 18%) communication were low for all three cases.

E. Use of built spaces and landscape elements
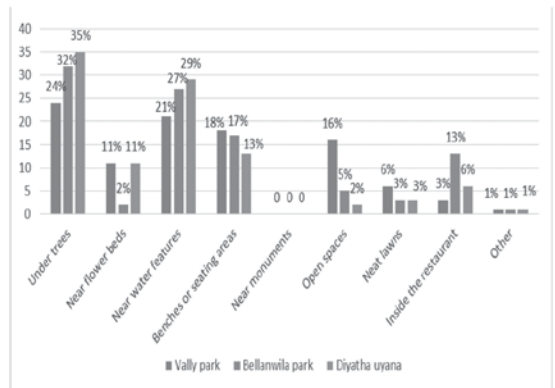
Figure 5. Summary of Use of built spaces and landscape elements

According to the study, most of the visitors preferred to spend their time under trees, (Vally- 24%, Bellanvila- 32%, Diyatha- 35%) near waterfronts (Vally- 21%, Bellanvila- 27%, Diyatha- 29%) and at seating areas.(Vally- 18%, Bellanvila- 17%, Diyatha- 13%)

V. CONCLUSION

According to the results received for selected three examples, the percentage of neighbouring people who visit recreational parks is low. It has adversely affected interaction takes place among different social groups. By analysing the purposes of visiting parks, it can be seen that most of the visitors come to spend time leisurely or enjoy with their families, relatives and friends. The opportunities for entertainment which can cause improving social interaction are less other than exceptional case in Bellanvila Park which has a bicycle track.

The results reveals that people do not tend much to build up new relationships while using parks rather than trying to enhance interaction among own relations who visit the parks with them. Having less percentage of 'very good' and 'good' communication among visitors, people show their attempt to maintain their own private space within the public space.

It also shows that people tend to use outdoor spaces than indoor built spaces and gather around natural elements like trees, water bodies, etc. Due to lack of trees which provide good shading, social interaction has been

decreased as minimum number of people visits the parks during midday.

According to entire results discussed above, it can be concluded that the impact of recreational parks on social interaction is evident in different ways and at different levels.

Introducing new ways of attracting neighbouring people can be suggested for all three parks to enhance interaction between different social groups. Introduction of different ways of entertainment can attract more visitors and facilitate improving interaction among visitors other than intra-family interaction. Adding more natural elements, trees with large canopies can attract more people during the day time enhancing social interaction taken place.

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