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Prevalence of Alcoholism amongst the Tea Plantation Community in the District of Nuwara Eliya in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This study is attempt to analysis the occurrence of alcohol consumption amongst the tea plantation community in Sri Lanka. The people mainly concentrated in the tea cultivation in the hills of the central part of the Sri Lanka are comes under the category of tea plantation community in the country. The location of the estate is also a factor which determines the consumption of alcohol amongst the tea workers. The location of the tea estates could be divided into three major categories based on the distance from urban cities. The findings of this study indicate that use of alcohol was significantly higher among the persons who are not fully engaged in the estate work and live in close proximity to the urban cities in the tea plantation areas. An intensive campaign against alcohol consumption should be carried out amongst the young people in the estates, and change the life style of continuity in depending on estate jobs into self-motivated jobs could condense level of consumption of alcohol amongst the plantation community.

Keywords; Alcohol consumption, Tea Estate workers, liquor and Kasipu

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Introduction: Habit of consuming alcohol amongst the plantation community is pervasive in Sri Lanka. According to the recent survey on Household Income and Expenditure 2009/10 of Sri Lanka, the average monthly expenditure for beverage etc. by the estate community was Rs.1322 and it was 10.2 percent of the average monthly expenditure of the estate workers, and roughly three times more than the expenditures of alcohol etc. incurred by the ¹average Sri Lankan (DCS 2011) It should be noted that the expenditure on beverages includes not only alcohol but also the consumption of tobacco, beetle and narcotic drugs as well. The tea workers also spend a considerable amount of money to consume tobacco, beetle and narcotic drugs. However, the breakdown of each expense is not easily available. Therefore, the study attempts to estimate the amount of expenses that

the tea estate workers incurred for alcohol consumption and in what context the consumption of alcohol influences the day to day life of tea workers in the sample areas of study.

Tea Plantation Community: The people mainly concentrated in the tea cultivation in the hills of the central part of the Sri Lanka are comes under the category of tea plantation community in the country. A total of 0.6 million population are depending on the large scale tea sector and they are mainly concentrated in the districts of Nuwara Eliya, Badulla, Kandy and Matale. Plucking of tea leaves from the bushes is the major job and it is mainly perform by the female workers in Sri Lanka and the men on the plantations engage in other manual works and or in low & middle level supervisory. Most of the tea plantation workers Tamil speaking Hindus and they are either third or fourth generation of the indentured labourers brought by the British from South India. The migrated Tamil speaking south Indian formed a new social life in Sri Lanka. The plantation system was a new economic activity when compared to the traditional agricultural occupations of those Tamils who migrated from South India. The migrated Tamils also brought their ancestral social values such as caste system, ritual performances, festivals and continued practice in the country and distinguish them from Sri Lanka Tamils concentrated in the North-East areas of Sri Lanka (Sasikumar et al 2009). The migrated Tamil also adjusted to the new system of working conditions in the plantation economy with its special characteristics of regimented type of work, 'wages for work', 'work on all six days' 'living in line rooms' 'carrying out tasks dictated by the planter' and so on.

It must be noted that the strength of migrated Tamils faced several the challenges after independence from the British rule in the country in 1948. Particularly, the politically motivated Citizenship Act No 18 of 1948 which was tripped off the democratic rights of the Tamils of Plantation community and isolated from the main stream social life for 40 years from 1948 (Thondaman.S 1994). Indeed, the thirty years of Civil War which was end in 2009 also de-motivated their social life of Tamils of plantation community in the country.

The ethnic identity of the migrated Tamil speaking south Indian is 'Indian Tamils' in the official records in Sri Lanka. They also identified as 'Estate Tamils', 'Up-Country Tamils', 'Tea Estate Tamils' and 'Indian Origin of Tamils' in the various literatures and reports in the country. The census reports from 1981 are not given the actual number of Indian Tamils due to ambiguous of the nomenclature of the ethnicity of this community living in the country. Therefore, estimation of the ethnicity of Indian Tamils has turn into inevitable. According to the estimated figure of the total population of Indian Tamil is around 1.3 million living in Sri Lanka. Among them around 900,000 (70 percent) are living in the plantation sector (Chandrabose 2004).

At present tea plantation has now administered by various type of three institutions in Sri Lanka. The three institutions are a) Regional Plantation Companies (RPC) 195,000, b) Elkaduwa plantation, Janatha Estate Development Board (JEDB), Sri Lanka State Plantation Corporation (SLSPC) and c) Tea Smallholdings. Whereas, the Tamil speaking plantation

community mainly confined to first two category i.e a) and b) in the country. Paradoxically, the social development indicators such as level of education, income, housing and health of the plantation community is significantly lower when compare to the rural community in the country. Though the national literacy rate is 98 percent but it is only 75 percent amongst the tea workers in the country. As far as the income is concerned the tea workers receive only Rs.500.00 (slightly higher than US \$ 3) as the average income per day whereas it is roughly Rs.1500.00 (almost US \$ 10) for the rural workers in 2018. Indeed, 94 percent of the rural women are living in their own house. However, none of the estate women possess the ownership of house and around 51 percent of the tea workers are living in the 'line rooms' which were constructed by the British in the 1870s (Chandrabose 2015).

The tea workers are mainly concentrated in the central part of the hill-country which has relatively humid and cool climate throughout the year, and such a climate is essential for growing of tea in the country. Tea workers come under the plantation management system and their life in the estate is significantly different from others. Daily wage is the major income source of the estate workers and it is determined by the collective agreement between the representatives of employers and trade unions. Several agreements have been made, but the workers still receive a poor income from the estate jobs. The workers live in houses provided by the estate management and roughly 65 percent of the population lives in the line rooms which were constructed by the British in the later part of 19th century. The line rooms are generally damp, smoky and dark and severely charged on health condition of the occupants. The tea workers are also governed by the Labour Ordinance which was first introduced in the 1930s. Indeed, a number of changes has taken place in the estate sector, but the tea workers have not sufficiently been brought under the national public administrative system in the country.

Literature Review: The magnitude of alcohol consumption in Sri Lanka is well presented not only by the various socio economic survey carried out by the Department of Census but also individuals written as a feature articles in the news papers and public speech. Many of the researched articles are published by the medical doctors and mainly discussed about the impact of alcohol intake in the human body. A few were analyzed in the context of social life of the community.

According to the media spokesperson of Alcohol and Drug Information Centre (AIDA) in her recent reporting, alcoholism has increased in the plantation sector and "...chronic drinking was so widespread in the industry's and often these workers do not turn up for the next day work due to hangovers and even if they do, they often are drowsy and are unable to work properly." The media spokesperson also quoting the findings of University of Colombo stated that the habitual drinkers in the Estate community spend a staggering 40 percent of their income on alcohol¹. The other study titled Alcohol consumption in the estate sector also reveals 78 percent of the households in the plantation sector drink alcohol (Anula Wijesundere 2003).

The District Secretary (DS) of the District of Nuwara Eliya also reveals certain aspects of the sales and consumption of alcohol in the district. According to the DS, the number of

licensed taverns in the district was 216 and it is the highest number that of provided in any districts in the entire country. He also went on to state that the district has consumed liquor to the sum of 5800 million Rupees, whereas the estimate for the entire district for development programs has been 1500 million Rupees. The highest liquor consumption was in the plantation sector with the 476 *Gramasevaka* divisions. The DS also added that in addition to the licensed liquor booths, there are a number of illicit liquor booths in the district. Thus, it is clear that the consumption of alcohol is high amongst the plantation community in Sri Lanka (Nuwara Eliya District Secretary Report 2013).

A study titled 'Can People in Sri Lanka Estate Sector Break Away from Poor Health and Poverty' by (Priyanka Jayawardena 2013) appeared in the Talking Economics of the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka reveals that regular alcohol consumption in the estate sector significantly increased the prevalence of malnourished women. Alcohol consumption was extensively higher among estate sector people. According to Demographic of Health Survey (DHS) in Sri Lanka 2006/07 data, 40% of the estate sector families were regular users of alcohol; whereas in the other two sectors it affected around 17% of families. Although the estate sector recorded the highest poverty levels (11.4% of people compared to 8.9% at national level), they spend Rs. 1,216 per month on alcohol, tobacco, etc., which is roughly double that of the average household-level spend on alcohol in the rest of the country.

The article titled as 'Alcohol-Good or Bad' has published by Anula Wijesundere in the Journal of Ceylon College of Physician in 2003 is clearly articulates about introduction of brewing culture in Sri Lanka. According to her the brewing began in Sri Lanka in 1881 primarily to meet the needs of the colonial tea planters. Despite the country's tropical weather the preferred beer styles have remained relatively unchanged, with strong 'stouts' are remaining popular. Anula also went on to state that the alcohol appears to the panacea for everything. To many, alcohol seems to be the solution for insomnia, tiredness, sorrow, joy, hot or cold weather, for energy or to forget problems. Others drink to be in vogue, to go with the herd, for sexual drive, to feel high and may take one drink for the road with disastrous consequences. Some others drink alcohol to get "Dutch courage" to commit crimes which they would never have resorted to if they were not intoxicated. So it appears that people drink for any imaginable reason or every reason or no reason at all. To many to them, alcohol is "pure magic".

Alcohol is only good for State coffers and distilleries companies in Sri Lanka. During the tax year ending 2015 the Distilleries Corporation of Sri Lanka recorded a phenomenal profit of Rs 84.1 billion. Unfortunately, all successive governments of Sri Lanka encourage Sri Lankans to drink by handing out liquor licenses liberally to all political stooges for favors granted. Thus alcohol is freely available with easy access even in the remotest part of the country. Following reduction in excise duty on beer, the beer consumption increased in Sri Lanka by 523% in 10 years. The population increase in this period was only 13.9%. These only encourage men, youth and even some women to consume alcohol. It should be

noted that the liquor industry contributed around Rs. 23 billion in 2007 and Rs. 27 billion in 2008 as excise tax.

Apart from the legal alcohol, it has been estimated that there are over 200,000 illicit brew retailers, compared to the 3,200 licensed retail shops (wine stores) in the country with rising costs putting hard liquor beyond their reach, many drinkers are turning in large numbers to illicit-drink (popularly known as *kasippu*), brewed by about 5,000 producers nationwide and estimated to comprise about 60 per cent of the total alcohol market. Police have arrested nearly 70,000 people and seized more than 1.5 million litres of illicit brew in raids on producers and outlets so far this year.

According to G.D. Dayaratne, Manager of Health Policy Programmes at the Institute of Policy Studies the consumption of *kasippu*, considered the poor man's drink, is thriving as locally-produced licit alcohol is slapped with more and more taxes, driving up its price. An estimated 60 per cent of the alcohol market is illicit, with only 30 consisting of legal hard liquor and just 5 per cent beer and there are estimated to be more than 200,000 illicit alcohol outlets operating in the country and about 5,000 manufacturers (The Sunday Times, News Paper:23.11.2014).

The objectives of the study:

1. To study the introduction of alcohol amongst the tea the plantation community in Sri Lanka
2. To examine the distribution pattern of alcohol consumption and its impact on the social life of the tea worker community.

Methodology: This study is based on both the primary and secondary data. The primary data was collected from three large scale tea estates in the Divisional Secretariat (DS) of Ambagamuwa in the district of Nuwara Eliya. The tea estates were selected by using the random sample techniques from the list of estates published by the annual report of Ambagamuwa DS in 2011. Accordingly, tea estates of Laxapana, Venture and Bloomfield were selected for the study. It was decided to select a total of 115 families to conduct the household survey by using the stratify sample techniques from the selected tea estates. Hence, 30 families from Laxapana estate and the families selected from the tea estates of Venture and Brunswick are 40 and 45 respectively. The selected families were interviewed by using a structured questionnaire. However, the study is finally end up with the completion of 92 families representing each 30 from Laxapana and Venture estates and 32 families from Bloomfield estate. The information on various aspects in relation to the consumption of alcohol was derived only from the chief households of the respective families. Apart from the questionnaire survey, Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were also conducted in these estates. The FGD was comprised by the cross section of the estates communities including teachers, estate committee leaders and young people as well. The study was conducted in the month of December 2017.

Distribution of sample population: According to the survey the average size of the family in the sample household is 4.8 and it is very much parallel to the average family size in the

country. On average, around 2.2 members are involved in income generating activities in the sample population. Amongst the sample population (442) 11.3 percent of them are children and they belongs to the age group of 0- 4 and 24.4 percent of the sample population is in the age group between 5-13 years and many of this age group are school going children. Around 60 percent of the age group of between 14 – 18 are school children and others completed their 11 years of school education and some are living with their parents in the estate and a few occupied various jobs mainly in Colombo. It should noted that among the sample 49.6 percent of the population are the age group from 19 to 55 in the estates. However, the estate workers are not merely confined to the estate works and according to the sample household survey only 65.6 percent of them are involved estate jobs and others are occupied in various jobs other than the estate jobs in the vicinity.

The type of occupation of the tea workers varies from the location of the categories of 'a', 'b' and 'c' in the estates. Accordingly the occupation of the estate workers which is located under the category of 'c' is mainly confined to estate work, whereas the others in the categories of 'a' and 'b' are engaged in both the occupation of estate jobs and non-estate jobs. A recent study on employment opportunities of the estate workers in Sri Lanka also shows that only 65 percent of the workers are fully engaged in the estate work and others are engaged in various types of jobs in the vicinity of the estates and non-estate jobs.

Alcohol consumption: The inquiry about the pattern consumption of liquor is reveals that the 70.4 percent the (165 persons) of the people in the age category of 19 years of age and above are consuming alcohol in the sample. The others 29.6 percent (72 persons) refrained from the consumption of alcohol. The study also found the location of the estate is the motivating factor of consumption of alcohol. The estate located 12 kilometers away from the estates i.e Laxapana and consume only 16 families out of 30 families of the sample (54.0 percent) is consuming of alcohol on daily basis. Whereas, the others are mainly young families with school going children consume alcohol occasionally. Many parents of the young families will by an arrack bottle on the salary day of the month and drink at home.

The pattern of consumption of alcohol by the tea estate workers can be drawn in to three categories, namely 1. 'Daily consumer'. 2.'Moderate consumer' 3. 'Occasional consumer'. As mentioned above the tea estate of Laxapana can group in to a moderate consumer. However, the other two tea estates of the sample are come under the category of 'Daily consumer' and 77.6 percent of the sample households are consuming the alcohol on daily basis. Amongst the total family surveyed 31 families (33.6 percent) is consuming alcohol occasionally. There is evidence of consumption of alcohol among the adult females in the estates and it is most commonly found amongst the elderly persons in the estates.

Those who drink regularly are considered to be problematic. Indeed, inquiring into the level of consumption of alcohol is a sensitive issue and therefore, the study interacted only with the adult members of the household, particularly those above the age of 18years. It should be noted that the prevalence of smoking was 12.2 among the males in the selected estates.

Amount Spent for consumption of Alcohol: Varieties of liquor are available in the liquor shops in the urban cities. Among them the variety of Gal Arrack is mainly consumed by the tea workers. The price of a quarter bottle of Gal Arrack is Rs.250/=. The arrack is also locally available for consumption in the estate and if sold illegally the highest price may be up to Rs.1500/= per bottle. The tea workers buy the most expensive liquor during the pay day and during special occasions, but consume toddy the other days.

Apart from the arrack bottle, drinking toddy is also popular among the workers. A bottle of Toddy costs around Rs.60/=. The brand name of bottled toddy available in liquor shops in the cities are ‘Horse Power’, ‘Singha’, ‘Manohary’, ‘Egal’ and ‘Amabastor’.. In times of crisis two people may share each Rs.30/= and consume toddy in the vicinity of the liquor shops.

Women who consume liquor do not go to the liquor shops instead it is brought by their husbands to be consumed at home and it is very difficult to measure the level of consumption of liquor by female workers in the estates.

The study also looks at the situation of tobacco consumption and smoking among the different age categories as well. Accordingly, the prevalence of tobacco consumption above the age group between 19-25 year olds was 12.9 percent and the 26-35 year old age group was threefold higher. The prevalence of smoking by the 19-25 age group was 28.6 percent which jumped to 52 .3 amongst 20-35 year old age group. The people participated in the FGD reveals about the smoking of cigarettes and consuming of tin beer by school children between the age group between 16 and 18 in the estates. The consumption of beetle for both the male and female workers is common in the estates. An average Rs. 20/= is spending for consumption of beetle per day.

Alcohol plays an important role in violence in the estates. As far as the outcome of the FGD is concerned, around 40 percent of the all incidents involving aggression occur while under the influence of alcohol in the estates. There are 12 police cases reported in the Brunswick estate during the last *Deepawali* festival on cases involving alcohol. Violence on the streets and domestic violence while under the influence of alcohol happen often in the estates.

Conclusion/Recommendations: The findings of this study indicate that use of alcohol was significantly higher among the persons who are not fully engaged in the estate work and live in close proximity to the urban cities in the tea plantation areas. The study also found that not all tea workers spend the same level of money for the consumption of liquor. The consumption of alcohol can be divided in to three categories such as high, moderate and those who abstain. The families consuming high levels of alcohol are vulnerable in several aspects including relationship, education of children, consumption of meal etc. Moreover, the families depending on female workers working abroad are also most vulnerable as far as consumption of alcohol is concerned. It is also to be noted that the plantation economic system, created a working class and an environment for the marketing of alcohols an integral part of the system amongst the plantation workers. A group of young people in the

two sample estates are trying to control the consumption of alcohol during the annual temple festival and attempts have been successful.

The followings could be considered for the control of alcoholism among the tea workers in the country. 1) Authorities should take the necessary arrangements to stop further expansion of liquor shops in the plantation areas. 2) An intensive campaign against alcohol consumption should be carried out amongst the young people in the estates, and change the system of continuity in depending on estate jobs into self-motivated jobs in the estates.

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