

**ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION AMONGST THE PLANTATION COMMUNITY:
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO LARGE SCALE TEA ESTATES IN THE
DISTRICT OF NUWARA ELIYA IN SRI LANKA**

Dr. A.S.Chandrabose,

Senior Lecturer in Social Studies, OUSL[§]

INTRODUCTION

Habit of consuming alcohol amongst the plantation communityⁱ 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 average Sri Lankan.ⁱⁱ 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. In addition to that, the study also gives attention to the level of consumption of tobacco, beetle and narcotic drugs by different categories of persons amongst the tea workers.

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. About 36 percent of the tea workers receive less than Rs.3500/= as monthly income from estate work.ⁱⁱⁱ 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.

Apart from the publications of the Department of Census the various institutions and individuals also have been screening the magnitude of alcohol consumption of the tea workers in the country. 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 alcohol^{iv}. The other study titled Alcohol consumption in the estate sector also reveals 78 percent of the households in the plantation sector drink alcohol^v.

The District Secretary (DS) of the District of Nuwara Eliya also reveals certain aspects of the

[§] Email address of the author: ascha@ou.ac.lk or asboseou@yahoo.com

sales and consumption of alcohol in the district. According to him, the number of licensed taverns in the district was 216 and it is the highest number 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.

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 district of Nuwara Eliya. 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 in the district of Nuwara Eliya. They are (a) the estate located on average of three to five kilometers from the urban cities, (b) located six to ten kilometers from the urban cities and (c) located more than ten kilometers from urban cities. Stratify sample technique was used and three estates were selected based on the different location in the district of Nuwara Eliya. Accordingly, the estate selected under the categories of 'a' is Venture estate in Norwood and the Elgin estate and Sheen Estate are under the categories of 'b' and 'c'. Randomly, 30 families were selected from each estates and a total of 92 families were interviewed by using a structured questionnaire. Apart from the questionnaire survey, Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were also conducted in these estates. The FGD participated 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 2011. Respondents who were currently using alcohol and used them occasionally were defined as moderate users. 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 18 years.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Plantation communities consist of largely Indian Origin Tamils who are occupied as daily paid workers in the large scale tea plantation sector in Sri Lanka. 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. According to our survey the average size of the family 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. However, the estate workers are not merely confined to the estate works. 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.

The total population consuming alcohol in the sample was 70.4 percent (138 persons) and others (58 persons) refrained from the consumption of alcohol. Among the consumers of alcohol about 65.2 percent (89 person) are located in the category 'a' estates in the sample. The rest are considered to be moderate consumers of alcohol. The moderate consumers are mainly males with young families with school going children, and they stated that they drink for relaxation. The other category is problematic consumers of alcohol and consist of about 34.8 percent (49 people) of the alcohol consumers in the sample estates. These persons have

been found in the estate closer to the urban cities (i.e. category of 'a' estate) and most of them are not fully occupied in the estate jobs. 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. The prevalence of smoking was 12.2 among the males in the selected estates.

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. 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'. The tea workers buy the most expensive liquor during the pay day and during special occasions, but consume toddy the other days. 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 15-19 year olds was 12.9 percent and the 20-35 year old age group was threefold higher. The prevalence of smoking by the 15-19 age group was 28.6 percent which jumped to 52.3 amongst 20-35 year old age group. 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 Sheen 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 alcohol as 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.

ⁱ The terms of 'Plantation community', 'tea estate workers' and 'estate workers' are

interchangeably used in this study.

ⁱⁱ The amount of Rs 1322/= spent by the estate community is not only on Alcohol but also on Tobacco, Narcotic Drugs etc. as well. The average expenditure of alcohol etc. of the village and the urban community was Rs.651 and Rs.556 respectively. All these data were derived from the publication entitled 'Household Income and expenditure Survey – 2009/10', (Preliminary Report) by the Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka, in January 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ Data was obtained from the recent publication titled 'Red Color of Tea' , published by HDO in collaboration with CCFD France in 2011.

^{iv} The information has been derived from the news item which appeared under the title of 'Alcohol abuse affecting plantations' on 19 October 2005, in the **Tamil Guardian** published on 08th of April 2012 in the web site.

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