

# Rural settings: poverty and alcohol use

This chapter starts out by describing the different rural settings that we have looked at. Each is next described. Since there is much in common between these settings regarding norms of consumption, alcohol use and consequences of its use these are summed up for all the settings at the end of this chapter.

## Dry zone: poverty and vulnerability

### 4.1.1 The dry zone villages

Three villages in the dry zone were subject to ten days' field work each, one in Katharagama, Mihintale, and Polonnaruwa. In two of these villages the majority had settled there approximately 50 years ago. In all three villages most people are Buddhists.

In the village in Mihintale most villagers live on chena cultivation and this is an important income source in the Katharagama village too. Almost every family is engaged in paddy cultivation in the village in Polonnaruwa.

In all three villages the income sources are insecure, and the villagers are vulnerable to droughts. For instance in Katharagama we were told that the villagers face several difficulties in their farming. As they have one rainy and one dry season, whatever is planted in the rainy season gets destroyed

during the drought. Usually there is no rain for six months. This means that they must survive through the dry season on what they have earned before this period.

In Katharagama, another income source for the villagers, probably even more insecure than the farming, is gem mining. A few informants describe this as the main income source. There are a few people who have earned well from this business and built their own homes. According to several informants, many mines are dug illegally, and are frequently raided by the police.

Another income source that is special to Katharagama, is from pilgrims. But even this is as uncertain and seasonal as others. Most visitors come to Katharagama during the weekend. During these days small businesses profit but during the rest of the week there is no such luck. Even during the festival season the income depends on the crowd. Some villagers make necklaces to sell, some help in the small sweet stalls, tea stalls and grocery shops and earn a living during this period. The pilgrims also bring food and different items that they distribute randomly among the villagers. The dry rations given can be enough for three to four days. Then people stay at home without going for work.



Income in the dry zone is irregular. But for many, the day's expenses have to be met by what is earned on the day.

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In all the three dry zone villages, there are women working in garment factories. Some work as housemaids in the Middle East. We also heard that this creates problems and that many villagers are reluctant to go abroad. The trip is expensive, and villagers have to borrow money from various sources to go. Once abroad their earnings are sent to pay back the loans.

Of course the consequences of going abroad differs from woman to woman, and from family to family. Some have earned well but some are at the same state as before. Some have built their own homes and bought furniture and are now doing well. In some homes where the wife has gone abroad, the husband wastes the money on alcohol, we were told.

### **4.1.2 Poverty, indebtedness and gambling in the dry zone**

Poverty is a common theme in all the informants' stories in the dry zone. We were told that it is difficult to find a family who had developed by saving money. As the income is small they cannot save. Sometimes poverty represents a vicious circle. Even if someone finds a position for a jobless person, he may not have the money for his travelling. What is earned in that day meets the day's expenses. Many families are Samurdhi-beneficiaries. But if the family has a bike or if a member in the family is abroad, they will not receive such support.

Loans and indebtedness seem to be an important part of everyday life. There are moneylenders in the villages, and loans are relatively easy to get. Some take loans for a wedding, planning to pay back from the money received as presents.

People also take loans from the Samurdhi or Community Development Society to finance their weddings, often claiming that the intention is some kind of income generation. We were told that for a wedding a person would take about 15,000 to 20,000 rupees as a loan. The housing loans people take are repaid monthly. They pay about 150 rupees per month. If they do not pay they know that they will have to go to court. Normally the loans are about 7,500 rupees. Some take loans to finance their court cases. According to one informant, a sum of about 2,000 to 3,000 rupees is spent for travelling and the lawyers' charges during one hearing.

Particularly in the Polonnaruwa village, the debt and loan or credit formed a kind of cycle. The villagers get an income from paddy cultivation twice a year, during the Yala and Maha season. When they do not cultivate they buy their needs from the stalls on a credit basis. If you take 20 families, 18 of them are in debt, we were told:

*If they are in debt for 25 rupees last month, they pay only 10 rupees and keep the remaining 15 to the next.*

The money earned from paddy is spent on items such as a television set or radio. During the times when paddy cultivation is not done and they are in financial crisis, they pawn these items or their paddy land to get money. When they get money they pay back and bring the items home. Again they pawn and this goes on like a cycle. Several of the informants complained that the majority of the villagers spend the money they earn on unnecessary things. *Even if they don't have a place to keep the paddy they buy a colour television from*



Income from paddy cultivation is seasonal. People then buy TV sets or radios. When there is no harvesting they are in a financial crisis and have to pawn these items, or their paddy land, to get money.

*the harvest money, rather than building a room for the paddy. When it rains the paddy gets wet. They sometimes cover it with a water resistant cloth.*

In Polonnaruwa the development of new technology has changed their way of cultivation. What was done using cattle, is now done by tractors. They have to spend a large amount of money for the maintenance of these vehicles. Apart from this, fertilizer and other agro-chemicals also cost a lot. All this adds up to their difficulty in matching the expenditure with their earnings.

As mentioned above, a funeral is an occasion for spending. It is also an occasion for gambling, which seems to be a main feature in funerals in the villages. People from outside the villages also come to gamble.

To sum up, the economical situation of the dry zone villages is a situation of economic uncertainty, lack of steady income and poverty. In addition to the unquestionable objective poverty, there is also a certain element of what we could call subjective poverty, which seems to be an important hindrance to development. It also seemed that these villagers feel helpless. When poverty is regarded as destiny, or predetermined, it is seen as something to adjust to and live with rather than as something to fight.

### **Wet zone, closer to Colombo**

**W**e describe the wet zone community separately because we expected it to be less vulnerable and less desperate. We chose a village in Awissawella as our case community. As the discussion will show, the situation is very similar to what we experienced in the dry zone villages.

#### **4.2.1 The wet zone village**

The road to the village is bordered by rocks and a valley with a waterway. The coconut and rubber estates along with the virgin forests provide a continuity broken by the regular positioning of houses and the haphazard arrangements of large chicken farms. Lush greenery is constant throughout the village. Large areas of rubber estate are equally prominent, and from the time of daybreak both males and females are working in the rubber estates, transporting the extract produced or helping transport the processed sheets.

Most of the older generation of villagers have not attended school and cannot read or write. Among the newer generation very few have attempted the GCE O/L or A/L examinations. Even those who have attended grades 5 or 6 surprisingly cannot read or write even at a basic level.

The life style of the villagers follows a somewhat set and repetitive pattern. There is hardly any difference whether it is a weekday or weekend as there are no government sector or private commercial sector employees. Most being daily paid employees they seem to go to work when work is available and stay at home when there is no work.



Most people are daily paid. They can be seen working from daybreak, amidst the lush greenery of the rubber estate.

#### 4.2.2 Poverty and economy in the wet zone village

The main income appears to be employment in the rubber estates. The daily wage is Rs.85/= for females and Rs.100/= for males. The other sources of income are all outside the village: working in river beds digging out sand, working in a wood factory, a quarry, as a daily paid labourer or, in the case of a few, in the armed forces. A relatively new and quite prominent income source is the poultry industry. An outside firm provides the hatchlings, the necessary food and medicine while the villagers have to make the cages and provide security. At maturity the firm pays the villagers an amount according to the weight of the chicken.

Here as in the dry zone, a number of women have gone abroad to the Middle East to work as housemaids. At the beginning there seems to be some return with the presence of a few items of electronic equipment. Often these are sold off in a few months after return in search of the elusive air fare cost and the cycle repeats itself.

Three outsiders come to the village to ply their trade. The fish monger on the bicycle, the sweep ticket seller cum ice-cream seller on the motorbike and the sweep seller on the push bike. Sweep tickets are a great and very significant drain of the finances of this village.

#### A fishing community

Our knowledge of the fishing community is based on observations and interviews in a village in Gampaha District.

##### 4.3.1 The fishing village in Gampaha

Our field assistant described the place as “village where small motorboat and sailboat fishermen live”. The sea borders the village on three sides, and the village was situated below sea level. Compared to the agricultural villages this was rather big, with 800 – 1000 households, living in tight quarters with 2-3 families in each house. The houses are situated very close to each other. Most of the villagers are illegally living in this land<sup>1</sup>.

Even before entering the village a disgusting foul smell of rotten fish creeps in, and the smell intensifies as you get closer to the village. The wind, which brings this smell to the village, comes from the beach where parts of fish and droppings of crows and other birds rot. The village lacks trees and greenery.

Around five to six children live in each house. The small children did not look too healthy. Children from the age of 10 years help in the fishing industry. They collect fish from the fishermen and try to sell them. Some children play on the beach, because they do not have a garden at home or there is no room near their house. The majority of the elders were not educated. Even the youths were not well educated. The numbers attending school were few. They do not go for outside jobs as they earn well from their fishing business<sup>2</sup>.



There is no difference in the daily routine whether it is a weekday or a weekend. They work if work is available or otherwise stay at home.

The coast around the village docks more than 100 motorboats and about 20 sailboats. Near each boat at least three to four people were seen working. They were preparing the fishing nets for the next trip. Some were seen in water, up to their waist, throwing fishing nets into the sea. This was one way of catching fish for the people who did not have boats. All the men our field assistant met were occupied with some work involving the fishing industry.

The houses have 2 to 3 rooms. They lack a kitchen or toilet. They use public toilets, which are maintained by the Town Council (TC). There are eight such toilets and the TC cleans it every two weeks. The five public taps along the road are rather dirty. People take water to drink, wash and bathe from these taps.

Depending on what they do as a living, the time their day starts varies. Men who go to sea start around 4 in the afternoon and end their day around 3 to 4 in the early morning of the next day. Some go out in the morning. When they return, they send messages to their friends to come to the beach. This is when these people's day starts. From 4 am till about 7am they cut the fresh fish to make dry fish. From 7am onwards the traders join in and selling of the newly brought fish takes place. The men who do not have boats throw their nets to the sea around 7am and end the task by around 11am. Generally all the work of the fishermen who go out to sea is over by 12 noon. The fish sellers are left to finish their trading and by 2 or 3 everybody leaves for home.

### 4.3.2 Poverty and economy in the fishing community

The economy of the village is closely connected to the fishing, and it also includes the women and the children<sup>3</sup>. Numerous employment opportunities are generated from the sea. Boat owners give income opportunities not only to the fishermen but also to people engaged in maintenance of the boats. At the next level are the 'mudalalis' or traders, the middle men and their helpers. Then there are ice/salt sellers, producers and sellers of fish baskets, fish sellers, people who cut the fish, and people who dry the fish.

The major problem to the whole village is the time of year when people cannot go to sea. During these months their economy drifts and the boat owners and fishermen leave for other villages. This causes loss of employment to a large number of individuals who depend on these boats and fishermen. They know however that after these months they will have work again. If they have saved at least something, it is used during this season or they pawn their jewellery or take loans. All this is for 2 to 3 months. When they start to earn again they pay back the loans and live their normal life.

To our field assistant the village seemed an ideal place for money generation. Anyone coming to the village can find various ways to earn from the fishing industry. Not all that is earned stays in the village. The field assistant saw many reasons for this:

*For them, money is not so valuable. If they can do something with 100 rupees, they would spend 150 without hesitation. Maybe this is because they earn from the sea, which they feel is a free source of income. The money carries no weight. Even the fishermen feel that what they earn is 'easy money'. After spending the night or a few hours in the sea, they spend*



The beach has parts of fish and droppings of crows, which creates a foul smell. The wind, which comes from the sea, brings this smell into the village.

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*whatever money they have earned on fuel, fishing equipment and the boat. The remaining is used to 'remove their tiredness'. 'We went to sea' is their slogan and they use it as a cover to spend their money to relax and enjoy the rest of the day. They are not afraid to spend. They know that they can earn more the following day.*

One informant described the situation like this:

*"There is no limit for a fisherman. A family has many children, but they get plenty to eat. As opposed to a government officer or a labourer, these men get benefits from nature. He comes, eats, drinks, nobody looks for faults. Today we eat, today we live and tomorrow we die, who cares!"*

Because the villagers know that they can earn tomorrow again by going to sea, they are not afraid even to take large loans<sup>4</sup>.



Men go to sea in the afternoon and return early morning. Then others come to the beach. This is when these people's day starts.

### The estate community

**O**ur conclusions about the estate community are based on field work in a tea estate in Kandy district.

#### 4.4.1 The tea estate

The estate extends over 300 acres and belongs to the state. The tea factory was established in 1934 but is now closed. On the main road leading to the estate there are no shops but there is a bar. The bar seemed to be quite busy attracting not only the estate labourers but also the estate officers, police personnel and travellers and passers by, even in the morning.

The people are on average small built and are very lean. They are also very old looking when compared to the real age that they give. The literacy rate is quite low even though the exact figures are unknown<sup>5</sup>.

There are 120 families on the estate, and of these around 80 families have employment on the estate. Out of these there are about 15 Sinhalese families. The main income comes from the tea estate, where the women gather tea leaves and the men do work like cutting the overgrown trees and spreading fertilizers etc. A typical working day starts around 7.00 am. The men finish their work by 2.00 pm but the women finish their work only at 5.00 pm. After work they carry the plucked tea down to a place where it is weighed and noted. Each person has a set amount of kilos that they have to pluck every day. The working conditions are difficult, and they have to brave the sun and the rain.

The women in particular are in a difficult situation; their day starts around 4.00 am cooking, getting the children ready for school and then going to work. When they return they have to make dinner and the cycle goes on<sup>6</sup>.

In addition to the gulf between those working at the village and those working elsewhere, there is also a strong segregation and categorizations based on the work one does. These are also related to the caste system with jobs being associated with low and high classes. This caste system is deep rooted. The person one talks to, the one whose house can be entered, the one who can be entertained and the one to entertain, are all influenced by the system.

There are basically two types of houses on the estate. The individual houses are on the right hand side of the main road from the town, and the 'line houses' on the left hand side of the road. The line houses are a strong illustration of what we have called the porosity of the life of poor people, and they get their name from the way they are built. There are about fifteen to ten houses built together (as a row or line), each with a single room. The houses are separated from each other by the others' wall.

There are another fifteen houses on the opposite side. These are individual houses with a front garden and with at least two rooms. They are built quite close to each other and are separated by fences that only indicate the boundaries. One informant from this part of the estate gave an illustration of the porosity of the life in the line houses, when he said:



The women start the day at around 4.00 am; cooking, getting the children ready for school and then getting to work.

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*'Now when we come home after work we can stay home. Earlier, when we were in the line houses, there would be a lot of noise from men drinking, and the radios would be screaming through the night'.*

The facilities on the estate are meagre. The most pressing problem apart from poor wages, as seen by the villagers, is the problem of water. It is immensely difficult during dry seasons to get water, and they say it affects their life.

There is access to electricity though not all houses have the facility. Around half of the households have a radio or television. But this is more scarce in the line houses. There are virtually no toilet facilities in the line houses. They share a very few poorly maintained common toilets.

### **4.4.2 Poverty and economy among the estate workers**

Due to economic reasons the estate has seen a decline in people working there. Especially the younger generation is seeking employment outside the estate. They consider working on the estate degrading. However, the main source of income is still the tea estate. A person who works in the estate on average earns about Rs.120.00 per day and their monthly income is around Rs.1500.00. It should be more, but they say that the estate cuts their salary for EPF<sup>7</sup> and union fees. There are few other income opportunities within the estate itself. Some people used to rear cows, but this too has declined due to the fact that people regard the trouble as not worthwhile.

Some people from the estate have gone in search of jobs in the cities and some

have even gone abroad. A person who goes to town to do daily manual labour, gets around Rs. 200 to 300 for a day. Even if he spends 50 for lunch and other expenses, he could still bring home around 200 and he could return home early too. Some women are also working in the garment factories. They apparently earn less than on the estate (Rs. 86), but consider that job as more honourable<sup>8</sup>.

Shops commonly give credit, and as people buy on credit the shop owners also add a percentage to the retail price. As it is very difficult for these people to repay the debts, credit is regarded as a risky business for the shop owners. The shop owners normally have as collateral the EPF money, and they do trust that their dues will be settled because everyone knows everyone else in the estate. When the workers do get paid at the end of the month, they usually do not settle the entire amount they owe the shop owners. There is always some carry over to the next month.

The field assistant felt that one of the main reasons for their poverty is the lack of or rather absence of planning for the future. When the loan amount keeps increasing they respond to the owner of the shop when he brings up the issue by saying that they will never run away, and that they will at least pay it off using the EPF.

Another reason for their poverty could simply be that, because their resources are so limited and their income always less than their expenditure by a large amount, they have simply given up and take each day as it comes. Doing otherwise may only lead to greater despair and unhappiness. They also have to look after their elderly parents in most cases as these people lose their houses when they "retire" from the estate.

## Communities of displaced persons, humanitarian crisis

We have data from two rather different communities of displaced persons, one in Puttalam and one in Vavuniya. However they have some important characteristics in common. Both communities are extremely poor, in every sense of the word. There is a great lack of not only financial capital, but also of social capital. And both communities represented a real challenge and several hardships to the field assistants visiting them. One indicator of the situation that complicated the interview situations was that any conversation with an outsider was quickly taken over with evident practice in showing and explaining their needs and requirements by virtually one and all. *“As you are from an organisation; well we don't have this and this ... ..; you could do this and this... .. but if that is too difficult, you could try this and this... ..”* According to the field assistant they go on and on in what would be comical if not for the desperate nature of their requests.

Both villages were rather depressing places to stay. We will start by describing the village in Vavuniya, and then come to the Puttalam village. The latter will be described in more detail than the other because of the particular situation in that village.

### 4.5.1 The village in Vavuniya<sup>9</sup>

The small, exclusively Tamil village is situated in the so-called “cleared areas” but with the LTTE having an unofficial say in the village. The village which is

around 60 years old and comprises around 450 families, has around 300 families who have settled in after 1999.

The majority of the basic needs of these villagers have not been met. The people are seen to struggle to cope with their needs of housing, water, transport, electricity, health, and sanitary facilities. The new settlers are crowded into a relatively small area of around 2 – 3 acres centred around the school, cooperative shop and other shops. The land on which they now live belongs to the Government and they stay there technically illegally. The natives live some distance away with their houses spread out over a larger amount of land.

There is no electricity and the homes are dimly lit with the help of bottle lamps. The village has around five public wells constructed by UNHCR. These wells and a few more in the houses of the natives provide drinking water to the villagers. Water is scarce in the wells during the dry season. The sanitary conditions are not good. Five toilets built by UNHCR for the settlers are now crammed and emanate a terrible stench around the area. No functioning health care centre is currently present in the vicinity. Deliveries are conducted at home.

Many of the displaced persons have spent years in the refugee camps (welfare centres) before being relocated. This experience has of course affected them in several ways, not least the welfare of their children. One of the teachers at the local school commented that teaching the children from the camps was like trying to split a rock and make rope out of it.

The literacy rate is poor. Most adults seems not to be able to read or write. There is

barely any reading matter and no newspapers in the village. The school attendance is rather low. The school principal told that due to the relocation of the displaced, the school had got several new buildings along with other facilities, but out of around 300 students registered at the school 100 – 130 are absent daily.

The principal also said that most of the children lack birth certificates. Most marriages are unregistered and the couples have no marriage certificates. People do not even have National Identity Cards. What is important to them and what they carry about is the Temporary Identity Card provided by the army.

There are several small grocery shops located near the school and bus stop. There is also a cooperative shop where the Government rations are handed out. On the day close to Deepavali (Hindu festival) when this was done, our field assistant was present. He observed that many if not all the natives also obtained dry rations on the pretext of being displaced.

The natives' houses are two-roomed and fenced off from each other by means of thatched coconut palm leaves. The residences of the settlers are crowded together. There is no fencing between the houses and the houses are not really separated from each other. They are made of clay and the roofs made of thatched palms. There is no flooring. The houses are so low that one has to bend to enter. They are small, usually made up of a single room. There are usually no windows with a wooden board in the role of a removable door.

Our field assistant felt that that the natives and the settlers treated each other with mutual respect. Abeysekera (2002:126) however, describes that the native villagers have been opposed to the displaced settlers bathing in the village tank, refuse to accept their food offerings at the village temple, and oppose their using the village burial ground.

### **4.5.2 Poverty and economy among the displaced in Vavuniya**

The poverty of the displaced community is illustrated by the state of their dwellings, the lack of furniture in them, their inadequate clothing, the state of their children and lack of even agricultural equipment. The life of the villagers depends heavily on agriculture. The main crop is paddy but it is cultivated only once a year due to water shortage. The native villagers own most of the land in the village, including all of the cultivatable areas. The settlers on the other hand do not own any land and are the labourers who work in the fields of the natives and of the neighbouring villages.

Some males have taken up hunting. Every day they bring hunted animals to the village to sell. Even people from other places come here to buy meat. Some meat is said to be processed and sent abroad.

The settlers depend significantly on the relief rations of rice, sugar and dhal, worth 1000 rupees, provided by the Government. It is worth mentioning that almost all the natives were also reported to obtain the ration presumably after obtaining signatures from the Grama Sevaka or



The community has not actually chosen this place to live, but has been driven there by circumstances.

headman of the village. The village as a whole has also benefited from other governmental and non-governmental agencies.

Kasippu brewing and selling play a crucial role in the earning as well as spending of this population. It seems that this is one of the main kasippu manufacturing places in Vavuniya. Many kasippu bottles are distributed to other areas from here. There are several reasons for this. One side of the village is bordered by the jungle and lakes, and this side is regarded no man's land, where neither the LTTE nor the government forces take much interest. Also the authority of other parts of the area remains undefined, so that no party is concerned with the illicit alcohol production, and nobody takes any action.

### **4.5.3 A village of displaced persons in Puttalam**

Because of its extreme situation, we have chosen to give relatively more space to this village. It seems that among "our" communities, these people are really what is commonly called the poorest of the poor. The community has actually not chosen this place but has been driven by circumstances.

The community under study is a resettlement (or rather relocation) village not far from Puttalam on the west coast. It consists of around 400 families crowded together in an open expanse of dry sandy land. The resettlement area has been in official existence for the last 5-7 years though the initial displacement from their native lands in the North and East of Sri Lanka occurred twelve years ago.

Our field assistant stated that the community seemed artificial as if it was part of a "lego game". Large proportions have been settled in at once probably arranged by outsiders similar to a housing scheme or a block of apartments but in a much more disparate fashion. The houses are nearly identical, constructed from very poor concrete blocks, have very weak foundations, and occasionally just fall apart in the rain.

The part of the village that one encounters first has the appearance of temporary dwellings and looks like a refugee camp. Even though the settlers have lived in this location for the last 10 years, the cottages do not convey this impression. Why this is so, is a matter of great curiosity not only to the outsider but to the residents as well. One informant expressed that the residents here have enough money but don't like to show it, because then want help from donors who come to the area. One of the settlers living in this part of the village mentioned that the Government Agent of the district had "*identified our camp as the poorest one*".

One part of the village is more pleasant, with tiled roofs on most houses. And the houses themselves are in a better state. The reason is that the around 40 families living here are being materially helped by a lady from Colombo. She collects money, clothes and even building material on their behalf.

The whole area is literally strewn with litter. There is no organized place or method to dump garbage, and this results in diverse methods being employed by the villagers. Most people dispose of waste by dumping it in the empty plots of land, while a few bury or burn the garbage. The garbage is mixed and as it is a windy open

plain it is blown all over the area with especially the paper and the polythene bags being caught in barbed wires and other fences.

There is no community centre as such where there can be community interaction but there are three children's nurseries catering to about 20 children each. The state of children, especially the younger preschool ones, is very poor. Usually they have no clothes at all and are very dirty, with runny noses, thin but not emaciated, defecating in the lawns and playing about in this state out on the streets. Quite a large number of school-going children and certainly more than what could be expected can be observed not attending school. When their parents are questioned as to the reason the usual and common reply is that they are sick. Education is just not seen as something which is a means of escape but rather as a burden. This is illustrated by the friction produced when the school requests even the payment of the Rs.35 charged as facilities fees. This is the only payment to school for the whole term.

#### **4.5.4 Poverty and economy among the displaced in Puttalam**

The traditional employment for the majority was tailoring and business before displacement. In addition to the language issue and the obvious difficulty of starting a tailor shop anew they complain of an inadequate demand in the area and an already saturated market. For businessmen of course the greatest difficulties have been the complete loss of capital and the loss of contacts, both buyers and sellers.

More than 12 years since displacement several families still depend and live entirely off the dry ration. When the government is not able to provide the ration regularly, it is a big issue and one that causes great distress to them.

The efforts of the charity lady from Colombo have not made the settlers any less dependent or more innovative in finding solutions to their problems.

*"Mrs Feroze (as we shall call the lady) said that she will come and build a wall around that well, but she hasn't come yet"* says the male who is bathing from the well.

*"Mrs Feroze said that she will find some money and build a religious school this year, but she hasn't turned up"* says a former community leader.

*"This road becomes all flooded when it rains. I told Mrs Feroze to repair it. God only knows why she hasn't come yet"*, says the elderly lady.

Our field assistant found that poverty was pervasive and striking in the area. No-one who is financially capable of finding another place would live here by choice. In effect poverty is what keeps them here.

The causes and maintaining factors of their poverty are complex. It could obviously be stated that the root cause of poverty for these people is their displacement from their homes in the north and east. But we have to remember that even before displacement, the vast majority of these people were poor back home as well. It was also found that those who are at least relatively well off amongst them are those

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who were financially better off back home. This is interesting considering that at the moment of displacement all were virtually at the same level, as if life was started all over again. One would have thought that the absence of any firm government or private sector jobs amongst the residents would have led to a more equal playing field. But it appears that the skills learnt earlier in life, or the lack of them in the case of most, seem to have made a difference.

The main ‘industries’, which drive the economy, are the scrap metals business, the ‘vadai’ (or fried snack) selling and a combination of tailoring, welding and other small businesses. The scrap metal business was started by some residents who collect scrap metal for weeks from far off places, transport the metal back to town and finally send it to Colombo for sale.

The “vadai” industry involves the making of a hot ‘Maldivian fish’ dish, which is sold principally near bars. The youth, many of whom are involved in this, take their trolleys in which they make and sell the food item to many parts of the island – ranging from Colombo, Jaala, Puttalam, Anuradhapura and Jaffna. They claim they are the pioneers of this fairly innovative and commercially successful idea.

There are several factors which contribute to the problems faced by the community that are not noticed by the residents. Of the many traders coming to the village to sell their products throughout the day, there is not one who is from this resettlement area. The community depends on outsiders even for its basic needs such as thatched palms and poles for the cottages.

The practice of “seettu” is very rampant: a group of people get together and agree

on the monthly amount payable per person, then draw lots to select the order of receiving the cash and collect a lump sum when their turn comes. In addition the residents are very prone to borrowing money from anywhere and everywhere. They borrow with interest from several grocery shop owners and other individuals within the community. There are others both at the nearest town and at Puttalam who lend larger amounts after retaining a security such as the land deed.

The villagers seem to have accepted the displacement, and if any bitterness exists it is not visible on the surface. They seem to have acknowledged that things could have been much worse as they could have been killed or physically harmed.

The views on the resettlement area in the nearest town are worth mentioning. Those outside the resettlement camp appear rather unsympathetic. A bank clerk stated that ‘those people’ are waiting for others to come and help them and are not capable of helping themselves. He felt that they will always like to live with the tag of the internally displaced as life is easier that way.



Villagers in Kataragama rely on pilgrims for their income. Stalls such as this which sell fruits for offerings at the Devale is thier main source of income.

## Conspicuous consumption, envy and jealousy

Those that we met from rural settings handle their poverty in different ways. Their poverty clearly is not only a question of income. We have to bear in mind that most of the inhabitants of our villages are born poor, they are raised poor and they are socialised into poverty. It is no surprise that they may feel inferior, as one informant put it. Poverty seems to be regarded as a destiny. It is perhaps no surprise then that they react with apathy, which some of our informants confuse with laziness.

One way of handling the situation, of asserting one's character and confirming one's identity, is through consumption. This is best achieved through consumption that is visible to others. Extravagant weddings with lots of alcohol, wearing jewellery, or simply returning from town in a three-wheeler instead of walking, are all examples of this kind of visible consumption. In keeping with Thorstein Veblen's description of America more than 100 years ago, we could call this conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1953). It is a way of holding oneself to one's standards, and at the same time becoming the focus of the jealousy and envy of others.

What the villagers seek as indicators of success become, ironically, hindrances to development. In all the social settings we studied the way of spending was one obstacle to development. Another was envy and jealousy leading to active obstruction of people's development. Thus the very display of things intended to show

progress serve to hinder progress. In the dry zone settings especially this is combined with a strong and rather condemning moralism. We also saw that the need for having a funeral or a wedding that is just as splendid or maybe better than the last one, is a cause of loans and indebtedness. One informant described how people in the village are fond of copying from each other:

*They do not try to do what is best for them, but what is best to show off. Sometimes they fall in debt trying to do things this way. Finally they regret the way they have behaved. There are instances where people sold their land to finance weddings and even funerals. "What the neighbours do we must also do. Otherwise people will scold us and the children will be disappointed – so we have to do it this way" is how they think. Finally they even lose the place they live.*

Similar stories were told in nearly all our social settings. The villagers seem to believe that spending shows that you are developed or rich. Therefore they work hard and earn money and buy a cassette player or something else that is a little expensive. This sort of spending is an important and visible aspect of village life. Therefore they spend their earnings on things, which they use to show others that they are rich. One informant in Mihintale said:

*"For the funeral at our place we only got 7,000. The coffin alone cost us 7,500 rupees. Then the expenditure is too heavy for us. Anyway we had to spend about 25,000. Otherwise it is no use. If we buy a cheap coffin, people will scold us. They will ask 'What is this box?' If the funeral is done nicely, everybody will appreciate it"*

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One type of visible consumption is spending lavishly for festivals and celebrations. One informant among our tea estate workers told us that he had spent close to Rs 45,000 to celebrate the 'age attainment' or menarche of his only daughter. He justified the spending of such an enormous amount of money (compared to their daily wages) by the fact that she also suffers from asthma and may not live long.

Several informants looked upon this show-off tendency as a consequence of and a reason for poverty. It seems that particularly those who have been abroad, earning an income in the Middle East, are an easy target for envy and jealousy. We were told that women who went abroad are easy to recognize. They wear fancy clothes and lipstick, their nails are coloured, hair cut short and they wear too many gold chains:

*When you see what these people bring back, others get excited and try to go abroad. "If we stay here, we will never be able to buy those things, but if we go abroad, we'll be able to" is what they say. There are women who went to be able to build a house, but when they came back, there was no progress.*

Also other informants told that the villagers are jealous about people who go abroad. We heard several stories of how people who had been abroad also liked to spend their money on unnecessary things, and how they hired a van to go to a good town and buy provisions for their homes. We also heard that women who had been housemaids in the Middle East were looked at with suspicion:

*People who look at these women in a sarcastic way say: "How can they earn so much just by working in a house? They must be going out and getting involved in unwanted business." Men make these remarks generally, but sometimes women also join in.*

It seems however that it is not only those who have been abroad who are envied, but everyone who is successful in one way or another. The statements below are from different informants:

*"Some people are lucky enough to get continuous work at the same place. These are the people who become targets of jealousy from the not so fortunate".*

*"Some are jealous about others' progress. If one gets a donation or gift for something, it is not warmly welcomed. 'I didn't get anything, we also need something' is what they would say".*

*"If one leads a decent life by earning in a decent way, there are about 25 % to 30 % of people who look forward to seeing them fail".*

*"Most of the time people who have their own houses and their own vehicles become targets of individuals who have almost nothing. These people are so much involved in making traps for others that they lose what they have. These are the people who are useless not only to the village, but also to themselves and in the end lose what they might have".*

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In the fishing community there were various types of houses. While talking to the villagers our field assistant realized that people living in palm leaf thatched houses do not like the others to improve and build brick houses:

*The people living in brick houses do not like others to come to their standard. Because of this, people living in houses of a lesser standard try to spend money to show that they are superior or equal to the so-called rich individuals.*

Also in the fishing community visible or conspicuous consumption was a way of achieving prestige and status<sup>10</sup>. The field assistant noted that people seemed to give credit for lavish spending but the few villagers who have ignored this 'norm' have been able to establish themselves and now live well. He also noticed that a person who owns a boat would build a small house and buy various electrical items. There is often no space in the house to keep all the items. But it still demonstrates that they are similar to a businessman or that they belong to a particular class of the society.

As we noted earlier, this kind of consumption not only gives status – it is also a cause of envy and jealousy. One informant, a young unemployed woman living with her mother in the fishing village, told us:

*“When we live well people are jealous. If we dress well, eat well and live happily others don't like it.”*

Whether people kept emphasising that others were jealous because they wanted them to be jealous is worth considering. Others' jealousy would be an affirmation that the person concerned had reached a level that justified jealousy.

Our field assistant felt that the 'norms' in this area have a great effect on the way money is spent. There are many complex cultures in the village. He felt that people are competing with each other and try to do better than the other.

### **Alcohol consumption as a part of everyday life**

**T**he most common form of alcohol used in all the villages studied is the illicit brew, kasippu. As legal arrack costs more, many drink kasippu. This, and the fact that kasippu is easily available, are given as the reason for kasippu use.

There were rather different ideas among our informants about whether the police cared about the illicit alcohol trade. Some said that the sellers get a good income and that even though they may have trouble from the police, not once have they been raided. Others told us that the 'kasippu joints' are raided by the police once in a while and that the penalty is about 3,000 to 5,000 rupees. Some informants believed that the police do not want to interfere with this business. 'On the contrary, the police help these people'. The police raid the kasippu outlets but they do not take everything they find.

We were also told that kasippu is put in empty milk packets:

*When we find them along the road we know what they are. One can find about 10 to 15 such packets in one day. On some days they stop selling because they are afraid that the police might arrive. Seven to eight people go off to drink during one*

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*day. They go independently and return quickly afraid of being noticed by others.* In Avissawella village the use of alcohol is rampant. Most of the alcohol consumed is illicit alcohol, kasippu. There are three to four places in the village which act as unofficial bars and stores. These are not apparent on first entry to the village as they are essentially normal looking houses. There is no place of licensed alcohol sale in the village or in the vicinity of the village.

The forest areas all around the village are reputed amongst the villagers to be hot spots for illicit brewing and selling of alcohol. The known houses which sell kasippu obtain the spirits in a nearby village from a large scale kasippu merchant. Kasippu is poured from gallons into glasses with  $\frac{1}{2}$  a bottle costing around Rs.20/=.

Most of the kasippu is served at evening or night though the sales places are open through the day. Those who work outside the village in sand quarries or in timber mills invariably after getting off from the bus proceed to one of these places and consume alcohol. While a minimum of  $\frac{1}{2}$  a bottle is consumed, in most cases it is much more. There are those who are said to consume kasippu throughout the day.

The owners of the kassippu stalls are villagers who used to be, or are still employed as labourers, masons etc. When they are not present, their female relatives, mother or wife, stand in for them. They have all at one point or the other been fined and arrested in the infrequent police raids. One of them said that they do not sell kassippu out of choice, but rather because they have to survive. He claimed that they only earn around Rs. 150/= per day and the rest goes to the businessman.

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There is no observable ritual or ceremony in the consumption of kasippu, at least not in these sites. Men come there, not uncommonly alone, request a drink, pay the money and gulp from the glass sometimes while standing. Males can be observed moving to and from these places especially in the evenings. A few of them can be seen and heard singing the tunes of popular songs. When they get home, loud arguments, quarrels, wails, screams and shouts are heard from the houses. The noise of beatings and the smashing of pots and pans are not far behind. No youth and no female were detected as having consumed alcohol.

In the estate community, the resthouse in the middle of the village is the most important place for the sale of alcohol. The main customers are the estate workers. There is a notice here which specifies the times in which the resthouse can serve alcohol, but this is broken with impunity. Alcohol is sold in small glasses - not the "special" alcohol glasses, but the glasses which are used in the small eateries in Sri Lanka to sell tea - for amounts starting from Rs 20.

As far as the field assistant could observe, there are no rituals in the way these people consume the alcohol at this location. They come in hurriedly, either alone or in small groups, order while standing, pay the money and then gulp the drink down, while standing, with grimaces on their faces. They then quickly make their exit. It is more similar to the drinking of medicinal substance rather than a substance supposedly giving pleasure.

Kasippu sold within the village seems to be made in the surrounding villages or in the jungles. Alcohol consumption and its consequences seem to run from generation

to generation. An example is Thiruchelvi, one of our informants. Her father died at the age of 40 due to drinking. Her mother has still not got his EPF money because they have not yet received his death certificate. She claims her husband also drinks toddy, kasippu and beer. Even though he barely works he joins with friends and drinks:

*Sometimes I give him money to drink because I don't want him to cause any trouble. Since I have chosen to live with him, I have to bear up whatever is dished out. Drinking in the bar is ok, but sometimes he brings kasippu home and drinks it. I hate that, but what to do? I am unable to do anything about it.*

Another of our informants is Punchi Mahaththaya. He smelled of alcohol while he was being interviewed in the daytime, but claimed to drink only twice or thrice a week. Normally he spends all his earning on drinking. It seems that he feels ashamed about his drinking habits. The excuse that he gives is that some months ago, his wife's jewellery was stolen, and after that he started to drink heavily. It was too much for him to handle emotionally. It seems that he does not worry about the feelings of his wife, who will return from abroad to find that her jewellery has disappeared, and the money she has sent home has been spent on alcohol.

Punchi Mahaththaya also drinks on credit. The bar owner knows that his wife is abroad and the money can be claimed. According to him when Punchi comes after work and sees some of his friends drinking, he automatically joins them, otherwise they might misunderstand. He claims that the bar is the cause of many social problems including his own:

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*If there was no bar here, certainly I would not drink. I can forget drinking and the people will also have less trouble. For example if I come back having earned 100 rupees, then on the way I see our boys drinking some beer there. Then I think why don't I also drink some beer. If I go for 30 days it will be 30 bottles of beer.*

Not all women were reluctant to speak of the alcohol habits of their husbands. One of them said:

*During the daytime he is like a cat and very quiet. But after 6 he drinks and comes home and starts shouting. I have even told him to stop at least for the children's sake because they might get spoilt, but he does not listen. Even though he makes money, most of the time he does not give me anything, and I have to forcibly take it from him. He seems to want to spend all the money on drinks.*

It might be an indicator of the norms surrounding alcohol consumption that her husband was present during the interview, but he did not try to dispute these allegations. Instead he was very quiet.

In three villages the field assistant was unable to speak with a kasippu seller. The key informants were reluctant to introduce him to them. But in the fishing village the situation was different. It was easy to get in contact with people who sold kasippu. Furthermore, out of the ten informants three females did not drink alcohol. Out of the three women one sold kasippu and vegetables. The field assistant found that she talked as freely about her vegetable sales as about her kasippu sales, although she did try to give excuses for her kasippu business. This lady described her business like this:

*“When we tell them how much we need, they bring it. I don't sell in the house as men come. There is a special room covered with wooden planks for this. If I bring 50 bottles I can get a profit of about 700 rupees. But I don't get the money at once. Some drink on credit. I have to allow this. My husband earns by cutting fish. He does not give one cent to me. Some times the police come. Last week they came. I had to pay 5000 rupees as fine. I pawned my chain to get the money. After 9 pm I do not sell. My husband also drinks from me. The villagers are not against my selling kasippu. I have about 10 to 15 regular customers. The sales increase around lunchtime. I don't sell to people who cause trouble after drinking. I have warned everyone that they should drink and then leave and not cause any problems for me. We have to be firm. Women do not come and scold me. They know that I do not force people to drink, and the men come because they want to. People might talk behind my back. But I know what I'm doing and I don't take men into the house.*

From Friday afternoon the fishermen stay on land. Their work starts again on Sunday afternoon. These two days are their holiday and it is common to use alcohol to enjoy their holiday. Some drink on the beach. Some go to restaurants. For them, drinking alcohol is a great thing and a topic to talk about.

For these villagers alcohol is very much an integral part of their lives. This has been reported earlier too (Leitan 1995:26). According to her research, it is an accepted norm in these communities that men are entitled to relaxation through consumption of liquor. For it is felt by men as well as by women, that after being

confined to a boat at sea for maybe days, and considering the hardships they are called upon to endure, drinking is permissible. One of our informants, a woman who is a small scale fish seller, put it like this:

“A fisherman will always drink. According to the amount of work they do, they must drink. They do heavy work.”

In the Tamil village in Vavuniya, with displaced persons and natives, females are mainly involved in selling kasippu while males are primarily concerned with brewing. Our field assistant observed five places where women were selling kasippu, which is known by the name of “Kfir” in this area. Kasippu is a good trade with daily sales of around 100 – 125 bottles, which reach up to 600 – 700 bottles on festive occasions such as Deepavali. The price of a bottle is 100 rupees (compared to 120 rupees in neighbouring villages). One of the shops near the school is also selling “sealed arrack” on the sly.

The only setting where we did not experience any signs of alcohol consumption, was among the displaced Muslim population in Puttalam. There are no legal or illegal points of alcohol sale within the area. The Sinhala community neighbouring the area has the only known illicit alcohol selling stall. The Muslim residents usually do not go to that area. There were no individuals to be seen exhibiting behaviour usually associated with alcohol such as shouting obscenities, walking in staggered fashion etc. No-one certainly consumes alcohol in public in the area though there are several individuals who are known to consume alcohol in their homes.

### **Alcohol consumption on special occasions**

Most of the negative norms about drinking seem to be connected to those few who use kasippu as a part of their daily life. Drinking on special occasions, like a wedding, is much more accepted. In a village wedding alcohol and meat are the essential items. People expect liquor to be served at a wedding. Most of the expenses of a wedding are for alcohol (arrack and kasippu), cigarettes and meat. All this will cost around 20,000 to 25,000 rupees. One informant suggested that nearly 25,000 rupees is spent on alcohol.

Several informants said that if there is no liquor at a wedding, the participation will be poor, and that there are people who do not go to a wedding if alcohol is not to be served. If there is no liquor, the value of the present, which is normally money, will be reduced. We were also told that some men will bring alcohol from outside and drink. They spend the money brought to give as the gift to buy arrack. A bottle costs about 300 rupees:

*If 200 are invited they bring about 50 bottles of arrack. It costs them around 14,000 rupees. At some weddings if the hosts think it would be difficult to control the drinking they would avoid serving it. If a wedding is arranged with great financial difficulty they would serve kasippu instead of arrack.*

Some might even eat, drink and enjoy and finally give an empty envelope and disappear. We even heard about someone who put an old lottery ticket in the envelope and gave it in a wedding where no alcohol was served.

When the field assistant in the fishing village asked his informants about a wedding without alcohol, they gave a sarcastic laugh at him. For them it was just a fantasy and something they had never heard of. They wondered whether it was even possible.

*“If there’s no alcohol, they will naturally be blamed. People might cause trouble. Normally people go to a wedding to drink. So it will be a big problem.”*

In several villages, alcohol consumption is also an integrated part of funerals. If the funeral society provides Rs. 5,000/= in assistance, most of it is spent on providing alcohol and other facilities for the supposed mourners who enjoy themselves at night by playing cards and gambling.

In the Tamil village in Vavuniya, drinking is also an integrated part of all special occasions, to such extent that even non-drinkers are socially influenced into drinking. Legal alcohol is bought for almost all special occasions. Some people, especially new settlers, run into debt by buying alcohol for such occasions.

Another special occasion that seems to include heavy alcohol consumption, is the Sinhala and Tamil New Year. In the Mihintale village we were told that during the months of February and March money circulation in the village is good. Therefore they celebrate New Year grandly. Whatever they save is spent on it. A large amount of the savings is spent on alcohol. Some more is spent on gambling, which is done there only for the New Year. Alcohol seems to be an unquestionable part of the celebration.

## **Norms about drinking and alcohol use**

**N**orms and attitudes reside in the way people behave, and they can be expressed in interviews and conversations. In this section we will first describe the reasons that alcohol consumers give for their drinking. Then we look at the behaviour of the drinkers, and finally we describe how they are looked upon by the fellow villagers.

### **4.9.1 Excuses of people drinking**

In most of our social settings the drinkers offered reasons or ‘excuses’ for drinking. One exception was the fishing village, where drinking alcohol was so obvious and natural that no excuses were needed.

One very common comment was that people regarded alcohol as a kind of medicine. The school teacher in the village in Vavuniya commented that people drink kasippu for any difficulty or illness. They say that in case of a headache if one drinks some kasippu and sleeps, he will be OK. In other villages we were told that some drink as a habit, some to forget their worries and some because there is nothing else to do. Several informants mentioned that people drink to get rid of their body aches after the days work. Relief from mental problems, was commonly mentioned as an excuse.

Several of our informants among the tea estate workers, also said that they work hard and it is good to drink alcohol for the tiredness of the body. One case is Ponnuchami the Laundry man, who says he is addicted to toddy. He says that his work is really hard and he drinks about

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two bottles every day to suppress the body pain and to sleep well. According to him he took up this habit only after starting this job. He sometimes borrows from the resthouse owner, and spends on average about Rs.50 per day on drinks.

Other heavy drinkers in the estate community gave more specific excuses for their drinking: the first born son died, a robber took the wife's jewellery etc. We have also seen that drinkers blame their situation on the existence of the bar. None of these excuses are very convincing, but they are still important as they reveal the norm structure. When excuses are needed, at least to an interviewer from outside, it is an indicator that the norms are not totally permissive.

Spending money on alcohol, can also be regarded as one form of conspicuous consumption. This concerns alcohol consumption both on special occasions as well as in everyday life. Of course none of our informant explicitly expressed it in this way, but for example in the village in Mihintale the field assistant found that most of the youths find the occasional use of alcohol as a way of showing you are a hero. They have learnt this by seeing how the youths in the forces or in the police or in private firms behave. When these young men come home for a vacation, they get together with their friends and share a bottle or two near the dam 'bunds'. The villagers accept it and see it as a way of recreation. Even the youths who work as labourers or who do farming, spend money on alcohol and cigarettes, when they do get money.

In most of our social settings, alcohol use also serves as a way of showing masculinity and ability. "*Nobody*

*recognizes me, I have no place in this society. If I smoke and drink, people will see me as a man*", said one of our informants in Katharagama. We were told that some people who drink want to show that there is nobody better than them in the village:

*"I can do this and that. Who's there to go against me, I'm not afraid of anybody" is what they say.*

*"Once drunk they try to show how powerful they are"*, said one informant. In other words, alcohol seems to be an excuse for expressing position and strength. If a villager talks against a man who has drunk and is shouting, "*Why should you care whether I drink or not, who are you to tell me, mind your own business*" are the remarks he would get according to our informants in Katharagama.

### 4.9.2 Drunken behaviour

In several of our villages it was clear that the kasippu drinkers were somewhat ashamed of their habit. When they met strangers on the roadside they often behaved in a guilty fashion with some of them covering their mouths in an effort to stem the odour. It was also observed that the villagers look at them in an unfriendly manner with dislike and usually do not converse with them. Especially females avoid interaction with them when they are drunk.

The fact that the kasippu-drinkers avoid being noticed by others, can be seen as an indicator that there are social norms condemning their drinking. We were told that people drink alcohol from the places that sell it. They go in quietly and come

out trying not to be noticed by others. There are though some instances where people who are intoxicated on kasippu use the fact to make a noise.

We have earlier mentioned that intoxication is used as an excuse for distancing oneself from a powerless and suppressed situation. This is also confirmed by the behaviour of the drunkards. It is revealed that they sometimes pretend to be more drunk than they actually are, at least it seemed they controlled their drunken behaviour. We were told that some drunkards keep quiet while passing a sacred or important place but start shouting again once it is passed. They shout not because they are drunk but to show that they have drunk. Another informant told how the shouting drunkards shut up for just a couple of minutes when they pass a house owned by a village leader.

### 4.9.3 Norms surrounding alcohol consumption

In the fishing village the norms surrounding alcohol consumption seemed to be very permissive. When the field assistant questioned his informants ‘Is it essential to drink alcohol when you are a boy?’ they replied that ‘*When you are a fisherman you have to drink alcohol*’. In the fishing village people do not give information to the police about kasippu but they give information about other drugs being sold. According to the villagers this is also not so much to reduce drugs from the village but to go against a rival.

Among the tea estate workers there seemed to be norms expressing that consuming alcohol is part of the male role. One of

our informants said that if his friends were drinking, he had to join them, or they would “misunderstand”.

There is also a certain minority on the tea estate which does not consume alcohol. They argue that alcohol is the root cause of many evils that characterize life on the estate. However, the person who does not drink is affected by it because he has to serve alcohol during special occasions whether he likes it or not, because of tradition. They put up with it and prefer to leave things as they are, for what they say is the fear of unnecessary quarrels. One of our informants at the estate who never tasted alcohol himself, told us that when very close relatives come visiting, he entertains them with drinks.

Villagers have a habit of giving excuses for the things done and said after drinking alcohol, and this goes for most of our villages. There also seems to be a strong and clear acceptance regarding alcohol use. Behaviour that would never be accepted by a sober man, is ignored or laughed at if the person is drunk. Very often even the non-drinkers try to find an excuse for the ones who drink. There are many who do not drink or are against alcohol. The villagers respect them, but when compared to those who drink, they are less spoken about. This had led to the impression that drinking alcohol is a way of earning some credit (‘marks’) or status. Another informant said:

*Drinking and shouting is his habit. So we should look at it in a very delicate way and forgive him.*

In Katharagama there seemed to be different and rather contradictory norms about alcohol use in the villages we visited.

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Many villagers say drunkards are seen as useless and foolish, both because their behaviour is foolish, and because it is a foolish way to spend their money. The image seems particularly strong regarding the few who drink kasippu more or less daily:

*Twenty to twenty-five villagers get together at these places in the evenings to drink. When they are drunk they search for trouble. They bring up long lost misunderstandings and start fights. When they are drunk they cannot even recognize their parents. They think of themselves as thugs. The villagers regard them as fools and avoid interactions with them.*

It also appears that the norms and the reactions operate mainly against the uncontrolled drinking and especially the annoying behaviour. It is not the alcohol use as such the villagers react against. At the same time some people seem to think that if you do not smoke a cigarette or drink alcohol you will not be respected by their society:

*If you don't smoke or if you don't drink and if you don't enjoy life the society will think you are useless. Therefore I must behave like them.*

Similar norms were revealed by the fact that people were reluctant to react against the illicit alcohol outlets. When asked whether they tried to do anything regarding this, one informant replied:

*No need. Why do we want unnecessary problems? Let's assume that we start a campaign to collect signatures to remove the bar. They will put the signature here and go and tell the bar owner what is happening. This will lead to unnecessary*

*problems. It is better if the government or someone like that does it. As for the resthouse, there is not much of a problem. There is an order that says that they can sell only after 2 pm<sup>11</sup>.*

The permissive norms about alcohol use, can also be seen in the fact that alcohol is used as a lubricant to get things done. Particularly among the workers at the tea estate, we heard several stories about this. If there is a funeral, alcohol has to be given to the grave-diggers. It has also been used as a kind of bribe. Our key informant told this story:

*If we give the kangani some alcohol, then he will write our name as having worked in the estate. If one gives the field officer a quarter to half a bottle, then when he records the tea leaves he will increase it by 5 or 10 kg. Mostly in this country everything happens with alcohol.*

Alcohol is also used as an incentive by the political parties during the election times.

*During election times they take people to tie up flags and banners and to put up posters. Mostly people go for alcohol and food only. I have also gone like that. I have taken people as well. If they are given alcohol then the people are very happy. Before drinking they will be alright. After they drink they will tear the posters of others and problem will arise.*

To sum up, it seems that the norms about alcohol consumption are rather permissive in most of our villages. The drunkards are tolerated, and so are the kasippu sellers.

If the drunkards drink and shout, the villagers generally stay quiet. And the people who sell kasippu are not openly condemned. One informant told us:

*What they are doing is wrong, but even though the majority of society are badly affected by this, he tries to look after his family from it. So we must look at the issue sympathetically.*

## **Economic consequences of alcohol use**

**A**s documented in the chapter based on quantitative data, some men spend all their earnings, and occasionally even more, on alcohol. Also in our village studies we heard stories about how very little money was left for the wife and children of daily drinkers.

In the village in Mihintale our field assistant noticed that when he asked ‘whether you are drinking alcohol’, all of a sudden there was a change in their behaviour and a smile came to their face. The use of alcohol and the positive attitudes towards it have caused most of the money of the village to be spent on it. This is a major reason for the poverty of the village, the field assistant concluded. To some extent this seems to be a consequence of modernization and of the increase in the number of youths leaving the village and clustering in the towns. This has led to an increase also in the number of villagers who think highly of the use of beer and arrack and of smoking cigarettes. There is an increase in the number of occasions when alcohol is used as a way of saying thank you and as a way of showing happiness.

In the Tamil village in Vavuniya, with displaced persons and natives, the consequences of alcohol use can be seen on the economy of the villagers, and on the life conditions of children and women. In other social settings we have seen that family fathers and providers spend on alcohol a large part of their small earnings. In this village the dry rations from the government is an important part of survival for many families. When our field assistant observed the handing out of the

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rations, he saw that in a short period of around an hour at least five individuals who collected the 'dry ration' sold their goods at low prices to the grocery shop owners. When queried as to what they will do with the money, bystanders replied,

*“Wait a little, will you! You will see those people coming back after consuming kasippu”.*

The impression of our field assistant in Vavuniya was that most of the money earned or saved is spent on alcohol. The reason for this is the various habits and the various norms created for the benefit of the drinkers. Even though people think that alcohol drinking is a popular and great thing they show some dislike of the people who sell it. They think that the seller or producer is doing wrong. Some of the villagers wish that kasippu was no more in the village but at the same time they are proud to say that it is from their village that alcohol is sent to the nearby villages. Even if they are opposed to the kasippu sale, they are happy that they have the leading position compared to the other villages, and they were rather proud in saying that everybody, even those from other villages, knew “their” kasippu-selling woman.

In the village in Katharagama, as in several other places, we were also told that some go straight after work to drink kasippu. They spend all of the day's earning on kasippu and go home 'when the pocket is empty'. Thus the economic consequences of alcohol use are intolerably heavy for the minority that drinks kasippu every day.

The amount of money spent on alcohol in weddings and other occasions, also effects poverty and development. As we have

already mentioned, most of the villagers borrow money for weddings planning to pay back with the money they receive as gifts, but the amount collected is often not enough. Sometimes the lender takes over land owned by the debtor.

So even people who are not so well off financially, take loans and have a grand wedding. To get the goodwill of the villagers they serve at least kasippu. Some serve legal alcohol. If they are financially well off, they bring a large number of bottles. We were told that there are some, even if they do not have money, who want to show that they are rich. They are mainly uneducated people, we were told. They have their weddings grandly and make it a point to serve much alcohol at it.

Production and sale of illicit alcohol is a source of income for some villagers. We were told that as the people have no other way of earning a living they get involved in this sort of business: *“We need to survive. We can't rob so we sell kasippu and live”*. Even if it is the women of the village that are the main victims of the men's drinking, women are also involved in the kasippu business. At least in some of the outlets, it was the woman of the house who sold kasippu.

### **Social consequences of alcohol use**

**F**rom other parts of the world we know that many accidents such as drowning result from alcohol use. This is also the case in the village of Awissawella. In the valley that borders the village runs a moderate sized waterway. At one point it deepens to a large pool



The pool recently claimed another victim. Despite its deadliness it continues to remain a favourite location for people to travel from far, take alcohol and swim.

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known as “Leel wala”. This spot has claimed the lives of at least seven people in the recent past as stated by the locals. In the month of August alone three youths died at the same spot. During the time that the field assistant was staying in the village this pool claimed another victim, a 21 year old male. Despite its obvious deadliness it continues to remain a favourite location for travellers from far to come and consume alcohol and bathe. All those who drowned at this spot, in the opinion of the villagers, were those who had consumed large amounts of alcohol. They further claimed that the reason why they could not come ashore was because they were “drunk”. Of course despite this the large majority of people who come there do consume alcohol and return home unharmed!

We have already shown how alcohol use has economic consequences, and how it complicates the already very difficult situation of women. Unpleasant behaviour in public places was a repeated theme in several interviews in most social settings:

*Women cannot go out alone here at night. After drinking, the villagers create trouble and mischief. They will pick fights with those who walk on the roads and assault them.*

Fathers’ drunkenness also has consequences for the school attendance of the children. The principal and the teachers at the village school in Vavuniya referred to children who did not go to school because the parents were fighting due to alcohol use. Children said that due to the fighting there was no cooking, so they could not come to school. Other children

had told people that their drunken father had assaulted and chased their mother. “*We were scared, so we couldn’t sleep*”, the children had said.

One consequence of alcohol consumption in the wet zone use was that young females were excluded from funerals. Males stay awake at the funeral through the night, and heavy alcohol consumption is often an accompaniment. Many outsiders are said to come to the village during funerals, and frequently fights take place during these events, after consuming alcohol.

In the fishing village that we mentioned earlier that alcohol drinking was regarded a normal issue and not something to be ashamed of. But even there we met a few who think this is a problem for society. Most people regard alcohol as something which leads to fights, conflicts, and hostility among villagers. Smoking cannabis is believed to cause calmness, quietness, and understanding. The field assistant thought that this village has more fights and conflicts due to alcohol compared to other rural villages.

The fact that the heavy drinkers represent a nuisance both to their families and to the village, is described in several settings and in various ways:

*It is not difficult to walk on the streets alone, but after 8 at night it is not safe as there are drunkards on the roads.*

*There are families who have been mentally suppressed due to the drunkenness of the husband. Some wives tolerate it while others cannot and they have divorced. There are a lot of family conflicts due to this. There have also been several murders due to the drunkenness.*

Murder is of course the most extreme form of violence. But even in cases that are less dramatic, those who drink are generally seen as a nuisance to their homes. Again and again we were told that there is no harmony among the members of the families with men who drink. Their drinking is a problem both to the wife and the children.

According to our informants, husbands with their wives abroad are particularly vulnerable to problematic alcohol use. This is generally attributed to the fact that they receive money from the Middle East, and that they are no longer subject to the social control that the wife represents.

### Domestic violence

**A** frequent accompaniment of alcohol consumption that we have mentioned already, and that we heard of in all our villages other than the Muslim settlement in Puttalam, is violence against women and children. Gender based violence should of course not be regarded as only a result of drinking, but also as a problem in itself.

#### 4.12.1 A case story from Vavuniya

The most dramatic evidence of such violence in our data is from the village in Vavuniya. One particular incident happened while our field assistant was visiting the village. Nallamma was 28 years old and the mother of five children. One night as her husband came home drunk and attacked his wife severely in front of the children. When one of the children attempted to shout, this child was banged against the wall. When the other

children looked scared, he had told all the children to stand against the wall, then put his hands around Nallamma's neck and tried to strangle her. She fainted and the husband assumed she was dead. He then took the body and threw it into jungle behind the house. After that he left and the children started shouting. People came running and found out that Nallamma was still alive and took her to the hospital.

Our field assistant was rather surprised that no one, neither the neighbours nor Nallamma herself, complained to the police. The field assistant heard that she made others promise that they would not report this to the police. The reason she gave was that she was worried about what would happen to the children if something happened to her and her husband too was sent to jail. At the end of his stay the field assistant heard it said that Nallamma had died in hospital.

#### 4.12.2 High prevalence of domestic violence

This could be seen as a rare and special incident if it was not for the fact that similar, although less dramatic stories were recounted by all our field assistants. The prevalence of domestic violence is clearly very high. This is also documented in other studies. According to International Planned Parenthood Foundation, violence against women is increasing in Sri Lanka<sup>12</sup>. As the number of battered women has become increasingly high, a project was set up called 'Media Watch'. From January to June 1998 'Media Watch' carried out a survey based on monitoring newspapers and analysing the number of cases related on violence perpetrated by a family member or within the home and then

comparing these numbers with general violence cases not based on domestic matters. The purpose of this exercise was to monitor the number of Sri Lankan women subjected to domestic violence. Of course such a study only reveals what is called the tip of the iceberg, but during these five months the newspapers reported 52 cases where a woman was murdered by a domestic perpetrator, and 44 cases of domestic assault.

According to a WHO report, among women aged 15-44 years gender based violence accounts for more death and disability than, cancer, malaria, traffic injuries or war put together. Evidence from Sri Lanka showed that 60 % of 200 women interviewed said they were beaten by their partners, 51 of the women said their partner used a weapon during the physical assault (Sonali 1990). In a report published by WHO, no other county showed a higher percentage of beaten wives.

But since mild forms of wife-beating appear commonplace, there is reason to believe that there is much underreporting, that the number may even be higher than 60%. In a study from south India, an anthropologist encountered several cases of domestic violence during her stay in the villages (Rao 1997). Many men and women admitted to it in informal conversations, often claiming that it was justified if the wife did not “behave”. However, in the context of the survey interview, only 22% of the women admitted to having been physically assaulted by their husbands. In that study it was evident that only the women for whom beating was a serious and chronic problem admitted it. Thus, while wife-beating is an everyday affair for many women, they do not consider it a “problem” worthy of being characterized as assault unless it is severe.

### 4.12.3 Violence and masculinity

Violence against women was found in almost all the social settings from which we gathered data in our study. For instance in the fishing village, our field assistant reported that women seemed to have the opportunity to think and live independently. Even if her husband does not earn anything, the wife is capable of finding money somehow. But this is sometimes a problem for the men. They try to suppress women and because of this there are numerous family conflicts. There also seemed to be a widespread acceptance of domestic violence. Together with talk about sex, this is a hot topic in the alcohol drinking settings of the village, and the men even boasted about hitting women. As we noticed in Colombo this seemed to be a way of expressing masculine norms and identity.

As mentioned earlier, in the fishing village people live very close together. The houses are small, usually with only one room. The effect of what we could call the porosity of a life in poverty is clearly visible. The field assistant noted that small children are exposed frequently to an environment where parents both fight and have sex.

That this is problem not only for the women, but also for the children, was evident from our data from the village in Awissawella. There a mother was standing on the roadside with her two school-going children after having been chased out by her husband who had consumed alcohol. She complained that he had burnt all the school equipment of the children.

In Awissawella it seemed that most men, having consumed alcohol before reaching home, initiate disputes with their family members. This usually involves physical altercations with their wives and on some

occasions their parents (there was one instance of a father and son assaulting each other after consuming alcohol). We also found that the attitudes surrounding men's alcohol use are connected to norms about masculinity and femininity. The school teacher of this village told us:

*“Most of the women in the village do everything for their men. If they don't do so, the men will hit them. Even if they hit and wound them, still they do all the work. They do not oppose them”.*

#### 4.12.4 Norms about non interference

There are also strong norms about non interference in domestic violence. *‘This is their issue and problem’*, one informant said. The field assistant noted that from several houses the loud noises of quarrels, disputes, crying and wailing emanate after nightfall. No outsiders attempt to interfere. As one informant put it the cause for most of the night fights are due to either the dinner being not ready when the husband returns or a delay in preparing hot water for a wash.

Similar norms and attitudes were found among the estate workers. In our data from the estate community, we have the story of Ramiah. He was said to be in his late thirties but appeared much older. Having been pointed out by the key informant as a heavy consumer of alcohol, the field assistant scheduled an interview with him. The interview never took place, because Ramiah passed away suddenly on the night before the appointment. He had come home drunk as usual but had suddenly collapsed. The family and others being used to his actions had shrugged it off as due to the effects of alcohol. Later realizing

he was in real difficulty, they took him to the Estate Medical Officer who ordered that he be immediately taken to the hospital. However he was dead on admission.

A few days after her husband's funeral the field assistant had a chance to speak to the widow. She said her husband was a nice man and a hard working guy. She had married him when she was just 17 and without her parents' knowledge. She excused her late husband saying that their first born was a son and he had died. Ramiah had started drinking partly due to this and partly due to his friends. He was a character who liked to impress people. Everybody who spoke about him said that he was a nice man despite his drinking. He would help anyone in need said the widow, but she also mentioned the fighting and violence:

*My husband used to fight with me and assault me after drinking. He listened to something somebody said and hit me on the head. I once had a “split” head. I had to have seven stitches. I went to the police and they made peace between us and sent me back. I have two children. What to do? Where to go? I thought about that and just lived like that. I couldn't go back to my parents. I married him according to my wish.*

According to his wife even though he spent most of his money drinking they had never starved. He somehow went to work and brought stuff, but never money because of his drinking. He never gave money to his wife and she always had to take it from his pocket. He used to beat up his wife quite often and even his kids. His daughter is prone to fits, and his wife claimed she has constant chest pain because of his

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beatings. He had even broken her head with the coconut scrapper once and the case had been reported to the police<sup>13</sup>. His relations had forsaken him because he was a drunkard. 'Even though this man was a good person, he turned into a monster after drinking'. The field assistant found it amazing to hear such a person still being called a good person. But the family and community had decided that all he did was beyond him and was due purely to the alcohol. Ramiah was considered to be the victim rather than the abuser.

But Ramiah was not the only man beating his wife in this community. Another informant was Ponnuchami the Laundry man, who says he is an addict to toddy. He says that his work is really hard and he drinks about two bottles every day to suppress the body pain and to sleep well. Ponnuchami's story is also illustrative of the norms regarding domestic violence<sup>14</sup>, and what some estate workers feel regarding beating their wives when they confront the men about the way money is spent. Ponnuchami's wife often confronts him often about his drinking. He did not seem ashamed when he reported that he had beaten her several times. Proudly he claimed that he did not like people telling him what to do. He says people at the village say that Ponnuchami is a nice guy only his family is spoilt. He appears not to care about the fact that he beats his wife and says that he can do whatever he wants with his life. According to him it was his wife that was to blame when she was beaten.

There is also a certain minority among the estate workers who do not consume alcohol. They argue that alcohol is a root cause of many evils that characterize life in the estate. But even the person who

does not drink avoids interfering with the drunken behaviour and the domestic violence in his neighbourhood. One such person told us:

*There are people who drink, beat their wives and shout. But we do not interfere in their issues because we will never be able to live in peace after that. A war will break out if we say something against it. So we have to tolerate it, but it is so bad that we can't sleep in the nights sometimes.*

Similar views were expressed by other informants:

*Some people shout a lot after drinking. If we ask why they are shouting, there will be a big problem. Therefore we think, let him shout and we close our doors and wait. Sometimes we can't sleep at night. They assault their wife and children. Nobody goes and asks what is your problem. If we tell them that we have to sleep at night, they reply that we put the TV and radio through the night, and doesn't that too make noise.*

What we see here are strong norms of non-interference in other people's lives, their drinking, and their behaviour inside and outside their homes. Violence is common, and it is accepted. Physical and psychological abuse, which if it occurred in a public place would be condemned, is tolerated by society merely because it takes place within a family or domestic setting. The existence of a family or domestic relationship has given perpetrators the 'right' to abuse others, whether it be a spouse, a partner, elderly relative or child. This is almost a social right. And alcohol allows the violent expression of this right with little personal misgivings or guilt.

#### 4.12.5 Alcohol and violence

In our own study, as in several others, women see the connection between men's drinking and their violence very clearly. Also in the Indian study mentioned earlier, most women who were beaten complained that the problem was exacerbated by the drunken fits of their husbands. Sometimes drunkenness acted as a catalyst, in the sense that arguments that would otherwise have passed uneventfully would turn violent if the husband was drunk. Drunken husbands would also assault their wives without any provocation. One middle-aged woman quoted in this study compared having an alcoholic husband to "being in jail", where "you cannot do anything freely because anything you do may provoke your husband into beating you".

Another study from South India is examining the prevalence of domestic violence in a fishing community in Kerala, a community that seems to have much in common with our own fishing village in Gampaha (cf. Busby 1999). Violence there seems inevitable and men are not usually seen as to blame. In that study too, the role of alcohol is evident. The author of that study, an anthropologist, is critical of the local understanding – which has led to a focus on alcohol as the root of the problem, with men still perceived to be personally not at fault.

In that study, like in our own, when the women described their husbands' violence, there was a sense in which the violence seemed almost detached from his person. It was seen as a force of nature, something about which you could do nothing. And in the community, the blame for a man's violent behaviour towards his wife went very frequently not to him at all but to her.

This study also confirms the finding in our own study, that people usually don't interfere with marital quarrels. Even female neighbours would stand against the beaten woman, and say, 'well she must have deserved it, she had a bad tongue' and so on. In our own study we found people saying about a woman who was beaten almost to death by her husband, that she had been spoilt in her childhood.

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## Notes

1. We were told that about 30% had received Swarnabhumi Deeds by President Premadasa.
2. This is confirmed by a study of two fishing villages in the Negombo area (Leitan 1995:32-34). In her study Tressie Leitan found a marked lack of interest in education, which seemed to contrast strangely with the situation in the urban sector as well as in the rural agricultural sector. She found around half of the villagers had studied up to grade 5, and 8% had no schooling at all
3. According to a study done by FAO, 25% of all women in Negombo, Chilaw and Kalpitya on the West coast are estimated to be engaged in fishing-related activities. Source: <http://www.fao.org/sd/WPdirect/WPre0112.htm>
4. Cf. Leitan (1995:27) who found a pattern of spending and a lack of interest in saving that could be attributed to observable attitudes in the fishing villages. She describes a tendency to spend the day's earnings, for after all, there is so much fish in the sea which could be caught tomorrow. According to her, this attitude could also be tied up with the Christian belief in God's providence and faith in what tomorrow can bring.
5. According to an article in the Indian magazine Frontline, the literacy rate in the estate sector in Sri Lanka is only 76.9 percent. The article describes how previous generations of estate workers grew up illiterate, as education was systematically denied them. Some estates had schools, but only up to the primary level. It was only from 1977 that high schools were introduced in the estates. Today these schools are seen as departure lounges to the world outside. Source: Subramania, N. (2001).
6. A Dutch study of the situation on the tea estates, shows that women from 16 years do the hard physical labour of plucking tea from 8 a.m. until 5 p.m. daily and are responsible, before and after work, for all domestic tasks. Men working on the estate do not pluck tea (considered women's work), but instead prepare the land, apply fertilizer, spray pesticides, prune, work in the factory, act as drivers, or are field supervisors of groups of pluckers. Most of this work is done in the morning and after lunch men are free. Men never help with domestic chores although women and girls, already burdened with a heavy work load, spend 4-6 hours per day fetching water. Men earn the same amount for half a day's work as women earn for tea plucking. Source: Van der Laan, Anita (1998). Other studies have found that when men collect the family's estate income and find it getting larger, they feel less need to work and so they labour less on the estate. But women, on the other hand, continue to be engaged in plantations. Source: <http://www.fao.org/sd/WPdirect/WPre0112.htm>
7. Employer Provident Fund is based on compulsory contributions from the employers. When the employer retires, the whole sum is paid out at once in one sum.
8. Subramanian (op.cit.) describes how it earlier was unthinkable for a young boy, or especially a young woman, to venture outside the tea estate on which they were born, to make a living. Today, teenage girls commute considerable distances to garment factories, to exchange the drudgery of plucking tea leaves and a bud from the tea bushes for the monotony of sewing buttons on to shirts.
9. The village is also described in a study done by D. Abeyssekera of IDPs in Sri Lanka (Abeyssekera 2002:27). There it is categorized as a temporary relocated village. According to Abeyssekera there are 186 temporary relocated families living in the village together with about 100 families who are the native residents as well as another 100 internally displaced families who are living with friends or relatives. Most of the relocated families are from the very next villages only a few kilometres away.
10. This impression is confirmed by the findings of Tressie Leitan (Leitan 1995:24-25). She found that much was spent on expensive clothes, for children as well as for adults. Her interviewees came across a family which had just spent Rs. 2000/- for a dress for a six year old child. Another major item of expenditure described in her study of two fishing villages, was tobacco and alcohol for the men. Around half of the men spent more than Rs. 1000/- for these items.
11. According to the field assistant this rule imposed by the estate management is disregarded.
12. Source: [http://www.ippf.org/resource/gbv/ma98/2.htm#2\\_6](http://www.ippf.org/resource/gbv/ma98/2.htm#2_6)
13. Sri Lanka currently has no single law on domestic violence. A victim of domestic abuse would need to make use of the criminal law or make a creative use of the fundamental rights provisions to seek relief. So far the fundamental rights provisions have not been used to deal with domestic violence. Source: <http://www.lawandsocietytrust.org/LSTReview.asp?VolNo=17&List=True>
14. The term 'domestic violence' has been heavily criticized, because it tends to neutralize and hide both who is assaulting whom, and the harsh impact of this form of abuse. Other terms used in international literature, are 'violence against women' and 'gender-based violence'.