

Standard of Living of the Indian Origin Tamils in the Sri Lankan Estate sector

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Abstract- This paper examines the basic aspects of standard of living of the Indian origin estate sector Tamil society, which is a very unique social group living in the central highlands of Sri Lanka. The Indian origin estate sector Tamils are the people, who were brought by the colonial British from South India with the purpose of satisfying the increasing labour needs in the nineteenth century Sri Lankan plantations. Even after spending nearly two centuries in the island, this group of people still lives in a poor condition with many unchanged socio-economic structures of life. Trying to understand the living condition of this distinct social group, this work has been done by referring to their all socio-economic performances through an in depth analysis.

Index Terms- Standard of living, Indian origin estate sector Tamil in Sri Lanka, Sri Lankan

I. INTRODUCTION

The unique socio-cultural and historical identities and characteristics of the Indian origin Tamils working in the Sri Lankan plantation sector always necessitate socio-anthropological studies on overall aspects of their life. Most of these unchanged socio-cultural and economic identities of these people have been strengthened throughout the historical periods by the limitations for their outer world contacts. Mainly, the provision of basic facilities such as housing, health care and education within the boundaries of estates has been the major reason for the limited social opportunities for them to intermingle with the neighboring communities (Aheeyar: 2006, CEPA: 2005). Among the unique identities of this community, its economic condition which gives also an overall image of the community is identified by many people as an area that can be studied broadly.

When reviewing the economic condition of these people, whereas, the poor economic state of them is mostly criticized by many just as a social vulnerable condition, some people explain this as a condition created by some external influences such as the changing tactics occupied in politics and system of economy at different periods in the country that reflect in adverse conditions such as decreasing job opportunities within estates and political marginalization (CEPA: 2005, Fernando: 2007). Similarly, some people may give completely a different explanation that the cultural barriers of these people are the reason for the poor economic condition of this community. Considering all such different factors, this study aims at understanding the complexity of actual factors underlying socio-economic conditions that decide standard of living of estate sector Indian origin Tamil in Sri Lanka.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study employed qualitative data collection tools to extract the needed primary data. Especially, it engaged number of case studies and in-depth interviews to collect data from various individuals representing both genders in the study area, Sogama Estate, Pussellawa, Sri Lanka. Beside the primary data, the study used enormous amount of secondary data, too, received from many previous studies and national level statistics to support the present arguments.

III. STANDARD OF LIVING

When it comes to the concept 'standard of living', which is the core aspect generating the major thoughts of this study, though it has links with number of socio-cultural and (at sometimes, even) psychological platforms of a society, it is broadly accepted that at most of the times it essentially has an economic dimension (Sen, 1985:1). However, still there are many controversies in finalizing the criteria to assess the standard of living as it involves number of other aspects along with economic improvement. For example, the following quote clarifies the difficulty in giving a precised definition to the concept 'standard of living'.

"There are many fundamentally different ways of seeing the quality of living, and a quite a few of them have some immediate plausibility. You could be well off, without being well. You could be well, without being able to

lead the life you wanted. You could have got the life you wanted, without being happy. You could be happy, without having much freedom. You could have a good deal of freedom, without achieving much..." (Sen, 1985:1)

Therefore, it is now clear that measuring a group of people's standard of living should be a deal to ensure the evaluation of all such life aspects, especially of income, happiness, freedom and achievement. Even though this type of an assumption has a great deal of recognition from a sociological point of view, the importance of economic phenomena should not be under-estimated as it is the dominant factor that ensures the above mentioned many qualitative, social prerequisites of standard of living at most of the times.

For instance, to explain the concept 'standard of living', Adam Smith employed a link to the condition where people '*do not feel ashamed to appear in public*' and explained how the fulfillment of economic (and/or commodity) requirements help attaining happiness and life achievements, which are integral aspects in evaluating standard of living (Smith, 1910:351-3).

Therefore, it is possible to say that even though happiness and social recognition are most significant two qualitative social aspects of standard of living that do not maintain any direct relationships with economy or possession of commodities by people, still the achievement of these qualitative social targets are not possible without economic possession and monetary investments. For example, things like nutritious food, good cloths, foot wares, good education are the factors that help people to feel happy about themselves and to be confident to appear in public. However, it should be kept in mind that these things need economic possession and economic investment in quality education at childhood.

IV. LIVING CONDITION OF THE INDIAN ORIGIN TAMILS IN THE SRI LANKAN ESTATE SECTOR

While discussing the living condition of Tamils in the Sri Lankan estate sector, both economic and non-economic factors get importance as they both maintain to play integral roles in determining the living condition of these people. Firstly, in terms of economic factors, the study findings prove that the estate sector households are very vulnerable in terms of increasing cost of living. In this regard, only a very few households are there that succeed in reaching higher standard of living through regular income from the estate employment and external income sources. Anyhow, the generalized facts from the overall study notifies that most people working in the estates, both men and women, are not well-educated and are employed in the estates just to provide their unskilled labour and thereby enabled to get only a poor earning.

Secondly, when it comes to the non-economic aspects that have an effect on their living standard, it is important to state that the structure of plantation system is the key factor that creates number of non-economic forms of poverty, which in turn has impacts on economic aspects of their day-to-day life. For instance, poor investment in good education and health hinder the overall socio-economic wellbeing of these people.

In this manner, the situation of poverty in the Sri Lankan estate sector can be connected not only to economic factors that can be directly linked to income and expenditure levels, but also to the non-economic aspects of daily life of these people. This is because, the poor economic condition of these people often closely linked to their health, education, poor social links and many other personal attributes (Fernando: 2007). Similarly, many of the deep rooted issues related to economic vulnerability and poor condition of standard of living are closely connected to many non-economic factors that are usually set apart from economic aspects, especially such as social and cultural marginalization (Aheeyar, 2006).

As a result, in analyzing the standard of living and addressing related issues of the Indian origin Tamils in the Sri Lankan estate sector, this study attempts to investigate both the economic life and social attributes of these people as it will help getting clear account of all the aspects of standard of living such as income, expenditure, savings, health, education, happiness, higher achievements and social links among these people.

A. Income

In assessing the standard of life of a particular society the concept of level of income plays a very important role as that connects with many other attributes of its social domains. When assessing income levels in order to get an idea about living condition, it is important to pay attention to make sure whether the particular society, as a whole, gets a satisfactory average amount of living wage. Living wage is commonly understood as the means that secures a persons' and his or her family's decent living standard and therefore it is being a major source that secures a household from falling into the 'poor' category in a country. When it comes to the Sri Lankan context, the ever remaining question is that how many of the estate sector workers in this country are paid with a living wage that is enough to carry out a poverty-free life.

This increases the need to study about another related concept ‘minimum standard of income’ here as to link the living wages with the living standard of these people. Because, minimum standard of real income that is a must in any country, can tell us many stories about people’s living condition, as it helps people to maintain at least a normal decent life.

In defining national minimum standard of real income, Pigou highlights the ability for commodity possession by people. He puts this in the following manner:

“The minimum includes some defined quantity and quality of house accommodation, of medical care, of education, of food, of leisure, of the apparatus of sanitary convenience and safety where work is carried on, and so on” (1952:759)

To understand the level of minimum wages of the workers in the Sri Lankan plantation sector it is important to get a comparative analysis with the minimum wages of the other sectors in the country. The following table gives such a comparative view of the minimum wage levels of different sectors in Sri Lanka, for the year 2013.

Table 1: Minimum wage levels of different sectors in Sri Lanka-2013

Industry	Worker Category	Minimum wages (in LKR)
Plantation Sector		380 per day
	plus Attendance Bonus	105 per day
	plus productivity incentive	30 per day
Industrial Sector	Unskilled	6500-7500 per month
	Semi-Skilled	7000-8000 per month
	Skilled	7500-9500 per month
Service Sector	Unskilled	6500-7500 per month
	Semi-Skilled	7500-8000 per month
	Skilled	8400-9500 per month

Source: <http://www.salary.lk/home/salary/minimum-wage>

NOTE:

1. Overtime is paid at one and half times the normal hourly rate of wage.
2. Holiday pay for work on weekends (Sundays) and public holidays is paid for at a higher rate 1 1/2 times the daily rate or double the rate of remuneration.
3. Bonuses e.g. project, attendance, festival would vary from company to company.

Even though, the above table shows that the amount of minimum wage per day of plantation sector worker exceeds the minimum wage level of other sector workers in an overall manner, the reality is that the plantation sector workers get a very less monthly income comparing to other sectors mainly because of the relatively less number of working days they get in a month. The following table from the report of Department of Census and Statistics (2009/10) also serves to prove the relative income poverty of estate sector Tamils in the country.

Table 2: Mean and median household income (average monthly) by sector

Sector/ Province	Mean Income (LKR)	Median Income (LKR)
Sri Lanka	36, 451	23, 746
Urban	47, 783	31, 000
Rural	35, 228	23, 126
Estate	24, 162	17, 366

Source: Department of Census and Statistics, 2009/10, Household Income and Expenditure Survey

In addition, taking random examples from the study area, Sogama Estate, Pussellawa, it is possible to say that even though some individuals get Rs. 620 (if men) and Rs. 600 (if women) as the per day wage, most of their monthly total income certainly does not exceed Rs. 12000, as a result of less number of working days available to them. The most important fact that should be noted here is that the above mentioned per day salary amount is even reduced in to an amount falls between Rs. 450 – Rs. 550 if the number of working days is less than 22.

In addition, some case studies under this research prove that there are few families from which no member is employed in the estate anymore, manage total monthly expenses of whole family in a way not exceeding Rs. 5000. This fact increases the doubt whether

many families in the plantation sector get an enough amount of monthly income, which is not less than the standard amount of minimum wage.

Whereas the minimum wage should be about twice the poverty line, according to the Department of Census and Statistics (2011), in Sri Lanka the official poverty line at national level for June 2011 is Rs. 3239. That means Rs. 6478 or above should be the minimum

wage to maintain a quality life in Sri Lanka. However this is seriously questioned as many of the plantation people run their life only within an amount that is most probably less than the above mentioned amount.

Anyhow, there are few families that have more than one income sources and have a monthly income that is far more than the minimum wage. For these families, whereas working in the estate makes the major contribution in their economic life, they have many other income sources too via which they earn a considerable amount of money to support their daily expenditures. For example, men in the estate sector work as construction workers, three wheeler drivers, small shop keepers and labourers in road construction and so on, females are employed mainly as housemaids in urban areas. In addition, many women engage in animal husbandry, road construction works and few of them work also as attendants in estate crèche where they look after the children of estate workers.

Most of the women whose husbands are working outside the estate are almost abandoned by their husbands. Such men working in cities (mostly in Colombo) are earning more than Rs.25000 monthly, but their contribution to their families in the estates are relatively lower than that of the women. Importantly, girls working in the garment factories in Colombo economically contribute more to their families in the estates, in a constant way.

Whatever the income sources, it is important to note here that the expenses of these people almost always exceed the amount of income, and this never promotes them to save any money for their future. The expenditures for household items, health, education, transport, dress, housing repairs, visiting friends and relatives, contributing the estate level societies and associations, arranging and attending ceremonies are questioning the fulfillment of the basic needs of these people even in an ordinary manner. This situation is common for almost all the estate sector Tamil workers in the island and it leads them to be indebted for generations.

B. Indebtedness and Savings

Recent studies show that comparing to other sectors in Sri Lanka the estate sector has an increasing rate of debt and thereby negative saving. The following table of Central Bank of Sri Lanka gives a comparative view on the saving rates among different sectors in the island and notably it indicates that estate sector people never save any amount of money since their monthly expenditure exceeds monthly household income.

Table 3: Monthly income, expenditures and savings (2003/04)

Sector	Monthly Household Income (LKR)	Monthly Household Expenditure (LKR)	Savings (LKR)
Urban	30,091	27,860	2,231
Rural	15,611	15,382	229
Estate	9,180	10,712	-1533
All sectors	17,109	16,717	392

Source: Central Bank of Sri Lanka, 2005

In the study area, no body among the study sample has saving as a habit and some of them do not have even a savings account in any bank. Another bitter fact is that even the people, who have bank accounts, do not use them for saving purposes, but just for transection purposes. However, one important positive feature of their economic life is that the prevalence of Seetu system, which is being the most common and significant saving mechanism for most of the households coming under the study area.

Speaking about the major reasons behind the poor savings and condition of poverty in the study area, it is important to mention that very poor financial management is the most important factor that does not let these people to save any money. For example, they get salary advances and loans varying amounts from Rs. 3500 to Rs.5000 during the ceremonial periods and this decreases the amount of their salary throughout the upcoming one year of repayment period and decrease the happiness and life satisfaction as there is not enough money to cover daily expenditures. However, provision of very less amount of wages that does not match in anyway the endless, intensified rise in the living costs is also identified in recent studies as a major reason for increasing indebtedness and very poor savings among the plantation sector workers (CEPA, 2005).

Along with these factors, over expenditure on household luxury items, spending on alcohol consumption are also prevailing as the major causes that increases the negative saving rate among these people. This type of a situation is continued as a cycle over and over there in the estate sector and this leads this community to be in a chronic poverty condition throughout the lifetime.

C. Health

When it comes to the health condition, it is a common feature that most people of the study population have some diseases after forties, and their bodies are not cooperative to work in the estates any more. However, such people are also still working in the estates since they have no other income sources to run their life. Also, some of the people in their forties and fifties are unemployed as their health condition is too bad.

Unhealthy living conditions including poor housing, diet and unsafe workplace increase the chances of plantation sector people to be diseased throughout the year and this has adverse influence even in their economic wellbeing in the forms of loss of working days and increased expenditure on medicine.

In addition, most of the estate workers' increased liquor consumption also questions healthy life of the overall family units. This happens in two major ways: firstly, increased alcohol intake severely affects the health of the first persons; secondly, increased spending over alcohol reduces the amount of expenditure on healthy diet and safe household environment, which cause malnutrition and numberless diseases among the family members.

Unavailability and poor access to good healthcare services are other factors to be paid much attention as they are becoming major problems in many of the estates including the study area, Sogama Estate, Pussellawa. Despite the fact that the plantation sector has been assigned with number of hospitals, people in the estates are not well served by these hospitals as they are not well equipped both with quality drugs and qualified personnel.

These conditions tempt the people in the study area to search for better medical services available in the private sector. In this kind of a situation, their expenditures are increased not only by expensive healthcare services and drugs, but also by private transports services they use to go to nearby towns to get private medical services as their line rooms are located far more than a kilometer from the main road. Therefore, just a single trip to the nearest town for getting private medical services altogether cost more than Rs. 1500, which is, for most of the families in the study area, nearly one fourth of the overall monthly earning.

D. Education

In comparison with other sectors within the country, the Sri Lankan estate sector shows poor educational attainments, especially among girls in the estates (Aheeyar, 2006). Although, earlier mentioned poor economic and health conditions play a major role in creating social circumstances that are not favourable for active education, many cultural characteristics of these communities also can be pointed out as the significant factors causing drawback in the educational progresses. For instance, the following quote elaborates how some socio-cultural features of estate communities affect women's education in the sector:

"There is more employment for females as pluckers. Yet the household duties fall on them as well. So it is much easier for the mother to go to work and leave the household chores in charge of the daughter. The practice of not sending daughter to school after puberty is prevalent because it eases the burden on the mother. Once the girl is 16 she too can become a plucker and an additional income earner for the family"
(Samaraweera, 2001)

Many children among the now younger generation are educated only up to grade 7, 8, or 9 and most of them drop out in the middle of the school education for many reasons. Even though, such children are interested in getting some vocational training they are not adequately supported economically by the family.

Lack of educational facilities both at pre-school and school levels, lack of secondary schools within estates and increasing cost of education today intensifies the educational vulnerability of these people. For example, even providing everyday bus fare for children to go to schools located in near towns seems to be an economic burden for many families in the study area.

A good many schools in the Sri Lankan estate sector to which estate children predominantly attend are academically not well-supported as enough number of qualified and graduate teachers are not appointed to cater the increasing needs of students. Importantly, these schools do not employ competent English and Math teachers. These conditions have long-lasting adverse impacts on today's young generation and this necessarily work for the reduction of quality of life throughout generations. However, despite all these conditions, there is a raise of an educated new generation noticed in this community, which tries to alter the traditional identities of life of the Indian origin estate sector Tamils in the island.

E. Infrastructure

It is obvious that most of the line rooms, which are usually 10X12 feet in size, of these people are still has the same condition they did many decades before. However, very few line rooms have been constructed or modernized in their own by the estate people throughout the last few years. Most of the interviewed people's sole complaint was that their political representatives are not concerning anything about their development and they openly blame that even though many of the present politicians' election time promises were to reconstruct their line rooms, nobody of them did so after they were elected.

The most common problems regarding infrastructures are lack of space for a normal social life, hazardous condition of line rooms with leaking roofs and weaken walls and poor sanitation facilities including absence of clean, piped drinking water and proper toilet facilities. According to the statistics of Central Bank of Sri Lanka (2005) more than a half of the plantation sector households (57%) rely on public/street tap for their water needs. Similarly, year 2000 estimates of the Department of Census and Statistics reveal that plantation sector households, especially in the districts of Nuwara Eliya and Badulla are lacking access to safe sanitation. These deficiencies and poor condition of very basic infrastructure facilities in the plantations necessarily leads these people to experience lack of standard in their living condition.

However, progress in the provision of infrastructure facilities also have been observed in the estate sector, initiated or/and supported by number of Non-Governmental Organizations. Especially, in the study area water facilities and sanitary facilities have been provided by some prominent NGOs, where the tanks and pipelines have been provided by Sathyodhaya and toilets have been constructed and handed over by TRUST.

V. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Standard of living is not just an aspect that is determined solely by income or income poverty. Beyond that there are good many factors that have an effect on a group of people's standard of living, such as health, education and infrastructure facilities etc. However, we should accept that such different factors are also at most of the times repeatedly determined by economic aspects in almost all the societies.

Discussing about the standard of living of the estate sector Indian origin Tamils in Sri Lanka, this very fact seems to be largely applicable, since these people's number of social aspects that can be linked to the living condition are directly or indirectly determined by their economic condition. This paper through its investigations proves that the standard of living of the Indian origin estate sector people is still in a poor condition in terms of income level, quality of education, savings and infrastructure facilities and thereby happiness and life satisfaction, too. Even though, they might be capable to progress their many of the social aspects of life, the major factor that hinder such developments is the economic poverty promoted by poor management of money and poor wages that never fit to the increasing cost of living. Thus desirable policy level changes to increase the wages and necessary measures to enhance knowledge in management of monthly salary among these people can be expected to help upgrading the standard of living of this community at least in the future

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