

# Introduction and methodology

## Introduction

**W**hat is the role of alcohol in different social settings in Sri Lanka? To what extent does alcohol contribute to creating, perpetuating or worsening poverty, and to what extent is alcohol a hindrance to development? The main intention of the study reported here, is to try to address questions such as these.

In answering these questions, we shall describe every day life in different social settings in Sri Lanka, settings that seem to have only one aspect in common, poverty. We shall describe urban settings, in the so called slum communities and other localities of Colombo. In rural areas, we shall describe the situation in several agricultural villages, both in the dry zone and the wet zone, scattered over the country. We also report the situation in a fishing village, a tea estate, and settlements of internally displaced persons.

The villages are not chosen on basis of their position on any kind of poverty index. As far as we know, no such index exists. The villages are selected to cover different social settings, different parts of the country and different ethnic and religious groups. Due to limited resources, one criterion added was that it should be possible for our field assistants to visit and to stay there for ten days.

Even though the main interests of our study were alcohol and poverty, the approach in the villages was to study the everyday life of the people who lived there. Through their stories came also their descriptions of poverty, and of how they coped with their situations. The focus on everyday life also functioned to reveal what we could call the poverty culture of these villages. Anthony Giddens has pointed out how people are 'products' of a culture, which they also constantly 'reproduce' as well as change. People are shaped by their culture, but they also influence and shape their culture (Giddens 1984). One important intention of our study is to describe how this happens and the extent to which people have the capability to 'shape their culture', or maybe to escape it.

In this study we look at what could be called two cultural elements, two elements that interact strongly with each other. One is the poverty culture already mentioned, which also includes people's coping strategies and their handling of their situation. The other is the alcohol culture - how people behave when they drink and the norms and the attitudes that surround different drinking situations.

The cultural approach recognises the importance of the relations between drinking and daily life, and of the normative structures relating to drinking, in understanding differences in drinking practices and in rates of problems related to drinking (cf. Room 2002:81). Our discussion of the cultural status or role of

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drinking is also related to the tendency in the ethnographic literature to interpret differences in drunken comportment as cultural differences. One of the basic studies here was done by MacAndrew and Edgerton in 1969. The authors argued that cultures differ greatly in the extent to which drunkenness results in “drunken changes-for-the-worse”, i.e. violent and other deviant behaviour. Implicit in MacAndrew and Edgerton’s discussion was a continuum, with societies in which drunken behaviour did not differ at all from sober behaviour at one end, and societies in which serious violence was expected and seen at the other end (cf. Room 2001).

In many cultures drunkenness is used as an excuse for behaviour that is otherwise disapproved of in society, and which is normally controlled in most social contexts (Rossow 1999). But the extent to which this happens and the manner in which it occurs can vary between settings. This is to be expected even today despite the greater unification of cultures across the globe, evident even during the short span since Mac Andrew and Edgerton published their findings.

In our study we look at the norms and the attitudes regarding drunken behaviour in different social settings. We show how these norms become visible through the behaviour of those who drink, through the way they talk about their drinking, and in the way non-drinkers act towards drinking and drunken behaviour.

An overall intention of our study is to show the role of alcohol in everyday life in deprived settings. As a background we also describe these settings, and how the insecure income sources of poor people influence their life style and their coping strategies.

The concept of poverty is also an important focus for us. There are many definitions of poverty. As Dale (2000:26) spells out, the term can be used in a fairly specific and narrow sense or with wider connotations. In its narrow sense, it is usually taken to denote the basic material conditions of households in terms of

- Few and simple assets (for production and consumption)
- Low income (in cash or in kind)
- Low consumption

Households with these characteristics commonly have a problem with the regularity of supply of income and food as well. Dale (op.cit.) therefore also incorporates:

- Variable supply of cash and food

In national and international statistics on poverty, the emphasis is usually on income and consumption. In Sri Lanka, the Central Bank (1987) defines poverty as the lack of income to buy the basic minimum of food caloric energy . Based on what Yapa (1998)calls a substantive approach to poverty, we would expect that scarcity and insecurity regarding the supply of cash and food to be associated. Unemployment or underemployment is a common element or association of poverty. Kliksberg (1997) states, “prolonged unemployment leads to...increased apathy, a serious loss of interest in socialising and a gradual withdrawal from the labour force. Loss of self-esteem is a defining element.” This too we should expect to find among our informants, particularly among the youngest. A study of Sri Lankan youth showed very high rates of unemployment:

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59 % in the 15-19 age group, 50 % in the 20-25 group, and 26 % in the 26-29 group. The overall rate for youth unemployment according to a recent survey was 50 % (Lakshman 2000:62).

Concepts of absolute and relative poverty are commonly used in literature about social welfare in Western countries. In the West, the number whose basic needs are not met is small, but the share of relative poverty can be large and give rise to concern. In Sri Lanka too, and in the social settings that we have data from, the difference between absolute and relative poverty is relevant in understanding the context. The descriptions below are based on Dale (2000:28).

Absolute poverty means that the minimum material requirements for sustaining a decent life are not fulfilled; in other words basic material needs are not met. The usual question posed is whether a household has sufficient income to purchase a “basket” of basic commodities for consumption, or alternatively, produces these commodities itself. The level at which basic material needs are considered to be just met, is commonly referred to as the poverty line. Poor people are those who fall below that line.

Relative poverty denotes the material living conditions of individuals or households in a society compared to the condition of other individuals or households in that society or compared to some subjective judgement of what is “adequate”. Thus the relative poverty line for households in a country may be set at one half of the average income of households in that country.

The terms absolute and relative poverty draws attention to the social and the cultural context of poor people. People living in a context where everybody else has the same low income and faces the same problems arising from low consumption and few assets, will probably experience their situation differently from such people living in a more heterogeneous context. Some persons with even a higher income and more available cash may still be constantly reminded that they have less than others in the same social setting or in social settings close to them. Sri Lankan society has big and visible income disparities and highly unequal salary structures. Unskilled workers get subsistence wages while those high in management are given much higher salaries and incentives.

It may sometimes be useful to draw a line between subjective and objective poverty. Some people are poor in the narrow meaning of the word – their existence is below the poverty line. However we met people who insist that they are poor, or even the poorest of the poor, when they clearly have sufficient food, clothing and shelter<sup>1</sup>. Poverty is not only a question of income. Just as important are the local norms or attitudes and the culture and its influence on the way people spend their meagre incomes. We should look also at how poverty is also a question of social capital<sup>2</sup>.

We spoke to development workers and other officers who explained this by arguing that it can be profitable for villagers to be defined as poor. We had heard stories about families who do not mend their roof because a new or improved roof would be a visible proof that they are not so poor, and that would mean

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that they would lose their Samurdhi benefit. This can be regarded as a strategic action. Of course we do not know whether such ideas are widespread, or whether this is just a rumour that exists among such officers and development workers. In “our” social settings we looked for indicators not only on objective and absolute poverty, but also on relative and subjective poverty, and examined how they are related to alcohol consumption.

Identification of one’s household as poor, can also be viewed in the light of theories of relative deprivation. Deprivation is felt when people compare themselves with others and believe that they should have as much as those others have. Sociology texts refer similarly to the situation of women’s liberationists who compare the situation of women to men, and to African Americans who are aware that they receive less income than whites with a comparable educational background<sup>3</sup>. There is no absolute standard for comparison, only the conviction among certain people that they have less than some specific others have. Some of these convictions influence the self-perception and coping strategies of poorer people.

Poverty is therefore not simply a matter of low income. As Hettige (1995:27) points out, social and cultural traditions prevailing in a country may create conditions of poverty even in households with one person or more gainfully employed and earning a reasonably high income. Hettige refers to the widespread tendency of sharing resources among family members and close kin. For instance, in the absence of comprehensive income support schemes such as unemployment benefit, child endowments and old age pensions, the burden of the

young and old dependants fall on the employed members of the family. The result of such dependency is that even an income which is adequate to provide a decent standard of living for those who earn it, is no defence against poverty because it is spread too thinly among a large number of persons. While such a social practice prevents starvation and total neglect of the vulnerable groups such as the aged, the disabled and the unemployed, it also ensures that nobody rises above a bare minimum existence, argues Hettige. As a consequence, where there is a strong tradition of sharing and caring, it is not only those who have no access to income sources of their own who suffer from poverty, but also those who are gainfully employed. Such a pervasive social practice acts as a form of social insurance against widespread neglect and abandonment of the weak and the vulnerable. But it may also produce negative outcomes such as the discouragement of individual initiative and enterprise, the shirking of state responsibility towards those so dependent and the reinforcement of subsistence orientation.

Hettige describes the sharing and caring as something positive, as an indication of poor people’s tendency to help each other. But this normative structure can also function as a mechanism that keeps people down, and prevents them from escaping their poor living conditions.

What appears through the studies of poverty that we have referred to so far, is a complex picture. Poverty is not just one thing. A more comprehensive approach should not only cover economic and material poverty, but also several kinds of social poverty. This is particularly important when the intention is to examine

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how alcohol consumption and poverty are connected. Of course, “everybody” knows that there is a strong connection between alcohol and poverty. The important question for us to answer is how and to what extent alcohol contributes to poverty. This must be connected to the social functions of alcohol in different groups and to what could be called different poverty cultures.

We also focus on the availability of alcohol in different contexts, legal and illegal. Various sources claim that 50 – 70 % of the alcohol consumed is illicit. Similar numbers are given in a study by R. Abeyasinghe, who finds that 60 % of the alcohol consumed in a slum area in Colombo, is illicit (Abeyasinghe 2002:125).

The main focus of our study too is not numbers but the “thicker” descriptions of the social constructions of alcohol, and the consequences of alcohol use. As Skjelmerud reports, in her study from Namibia, alcohol consumption is given different, and rather contradictory, meanings (Skjelmerud 1999:2). One is the meaning of togetherness – drinking brings people together in an ad hoc fellowship. Another is the symbol of difference, of class – drinking is used to mark distinction. Skjelmerud shows how different aspects give a vertical and a horizontal dimension of the meanings of alcohol, as it serves to integrate as well as to separate people. Based on the drinking patterns that we identify, the meanings people ascribe to alcohol can be linked to status along the vertical and horizontal dimensions.

On the vertical dimension inequality, power relations, social mobility, and ambition can be considered. Vertically, alcohol may be related to both power and powerlessness.

To drink, and to get drunk, may be rights reserved for certain groups. Alcohol may indicate suppression. Disobedience and resistance may also be communicated through drinking. Alcohol can serve as a separation, as a marker of class and superiority. Where there are possibilities of upward social mobility, alcohol may be a way of expressing ambitions of social climbing.

On the horizontal dimension, a person’s status can be linked to roles, group membership, communality, and sense of belonging. Horizontally alcohol often functions as a tool in creating a place of communality, of solidarity, where social differences are wiped out.

Drinking can be seen as a response to external influences, as well as to personal priorities and aspirations (cf. Skjelmerud 1999:19). Alcohol can be seen as a case study for social positioning and carrying out different social scripts. What different people seek in life may be reflected in their relationship to alcohol drinking, and in the symbols and meanings they ascribe to drinking. Alcohol can be seen as a symbol, which gives meaning to how people construct their realities.

In our study we follow up this approach when we ask questions about how alcohol consumption is connected to or incorporated into the poverty culture. After this introduction there is a chapter on research methodology, where we describe how data were collected. This chapter should answer the question ‘How do we know?’ Chapter 2 gives the findings from the urban setting, where we have data from so-called slum areas and from less deprived settings in the city. Chapter 3 describes the situation in rural settings, from the dry

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zone, which is characterized by poverty and vulnerability, the wet zone which is less vulnerable, the fishing community with mainly Roman Catholic inhabitants, the tea estate with Tamil workers, and two rather different communities of displaced persons.

As a part of our study we also conducted a brief survey. The results and the quantitative analysis are given in chapter 4. The last chapter concludes, places our findings in a theoretical context and relates them to other findings in the field.

### Notes

1. Based on B. Baklien's experience from field work in Moneragala in connection with another research project.
2. For a discussion of the concept of social capital, see Johnston and Percy-Smith 2003.
3. Cf for ex Shephard, Jon M. (1990).

# Methodology

## 1.2.1 A qualitative approach in several field sites

The study uses a combination of data sources and methods. The main method, however, is qualitative. Qualitative methods are more appropriate when the intention is to bring out the perspectives and constructions of the informants.

Qualitative methods are generally based on two kinds of data collection:

- In-depth, open-ended interviews. Data will consist of direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge.
- Direct observations. Data will consist of detailed descriptions of people's activities, behaviours, actions, and the full range of interpersonal interactions that are part of observable human experience.

Both qualitative data collection methods are used in this study, and the findings and conclusions in this report are based on both types of data.

Because the intention was to find the meaning of alcohol in everyday lives of poor people, a qualitative approach was regarded as the most fruitful method of data collection. The intention was to understand why people behave as they do, and to get people's own perception of their situation, of their attitudes and actions regarding alcohol use. Our intention was to get the actors' perspectives, their own definitions of the situation. This is expressed by William I. Thomas: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Cuff et al. 1992:152).

We also wanted to know something about their background, not only what they could tell us when we talked to them, but what it looked like to an outsider, a person who did not take for granted the things that the villagers themselves did or maybe had stopped noticing. Therefore the interviews were supplemented by observation. Our data collection methods are influenced by what Robin Room calls the ethnographic, "holocultural" approach to the analysis of drinking patterns (Room et al. 2002:80). He argues that this approach is useful in at least two ways:

- Even in preliterate societies, social control and social and political power relationships are important factors to consider in the study of drinking customs and the level of alcohol consumption.
- The drinking customs in every society are bound up with its overall cultural dynamics. These special features of culture and interaction probably have an autonomous impact on drinking patterns that cannot be explained by the material structure of the society.

We used different qualitative methods, and all of them will be presented and discussed here. The main approach however, was ten days each of observation and interviews, in nine different social settings:

- An over-crowded urban setting in Colombo, in a community that would commonly, and often slightly pejoratively, be named a 'slum'

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- A dry zone village in Katharagama
- A dry zone village in Mihintale
- A dry zone village in Polonnaruwa
- A wet zone village in Avissawella
- A fishing village in Negombo
- A tea estate community in Kandy
- A village in Vavuniya with both native inhabitants and resettled internally displaced persons, (all Tamils and Hindus)
- A village of relocated, internally displaced Muslims in Puttalam

The settings were selected to cover different types of communities, from different parts of the country, people from different ethnic backgrounds and with different income sources. As the rural dry zone consists of very different economic features, we picked three different dry zone communities. In Polonnaruwa in the north we found a village where the economy was based on paddy cultivation. In Mihintale we found a poorer community, where the income came from chena cultivation and some paddy. The Katharagama village was situated close to the sacred town, where visiting pilgrims provide some income opportunities. This is combined with gem mining and chena cultivation. All these income sources are very unstable. The wet zone was represented by a village in Avissawella, in Ratnapura district. As the larger source of income was a rubber estate, this might not be representative of the wet zone.

The selection of villages within these different types of settings was done on basically a pragmatic basis. We followed the advice given in literature and selected

settings where field work could be carried out with as few problems as possible (cf. Ryan 2002:80, Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). Even then, it turned out that several hardships had to be endured during the field work. As in most qualitative studies, many villages could be found that could fill our criteria for covering different types of social settings.

There were ten days field work in each village, with ten in-depth interviews, one each day. Decisions about the duration of field work are always difficult. In our study we wanted to stay long enough to get to know the village and the people, but because comparison was an intention, we had to give priority to visiting several villages instead of spending all the time at one place. The information that could be added by staying for example 20 days instead of 10, was probably relatively small (cf. Patton 1990:214)<sup>4</sup>

### 1.2.2 Field assistants for observation and interviews

Our research questions could have been addressed through a traditional anthropological approach. One way of doing this would have been to pick one village and to live there and stay there for a longer time, at least some months. However, “research, like diplomacy, is the art of the possible” (Patton 1990:13). In our study, it was impossible for the two researchers themselves to settle in the settings under study, for at least two reasons:

- It would have demanded resources far beyond what was available to us



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- Even with greater resources it would still have been improbable that we could get completely valid information.

In our study the data collection was done by field assistants, trained for the purpose, and the data interpretation was done by the researchers. This could be a disadvantage, but it also adds some benefits. Literature on qualitative research usually underlines that the data for qualitative analysis typically come from fieldwork, where the researcher herself spends time in the setting under study. The researcher makes firsthand observations of activities and interactions, and talks to people about their experiences and perceptions. In traditional qualitative inquiries the researcher is the instrument (cf. Guba and Lincoln 1981:113).

The validity and reliability of qualitative data depend to a great extent on the methodological skill, sensitivity, and integrity of the researcher (Patton 1990:11). We had to depend on the skills and the sensitivity of our field assistants, based on what we experienced in the training sessions before they went to the field, and on the regular feedback sessions we had with them during their fieldwork.

In our study the field assistants were the instruments. So the guidelines for both the observation and the interviewing had to be far more explicit than usual. Actions and questions that would have been taken for granted by an experienced researcher in the field, had to be formulated and expressed. A common criticism of qualitative methods is that what is seen and heard by the researcher is filtered through his or her opinions and attitudes. We also took the opportunity to follow up and to probe regularly the findings of our

field assistants. They had to explain for example why they found the living conditions miserable in a given community, and why they had asked certain questions from particular informants.

The field assistants were selected on basis of their communication skills, and trained by the researchers. The main requirement was that they should be able to communicate with people in the villages, and we chose not to use students in sociology or anthropology. The training involved role play, and also involved a focus on empathy, as that is an important aspect developing from personal contact with people interviewed and observed during fieldwork. Empathy involves being able to take and understand the stance, position, feelings, experiences and world view of others. Traditionally the role of the researcher is to have an open mind about what to look for. One of the major aspects in our training of field assistants, had to do with this open-mindedness. They should be open to whatever they experienced in the villages, and to whatever their informants wanted to tell them. Interviewers are not in the field to judge or change values and norms. They are there to understand the perspectives of others. Getting valid, reliable, meaningful information requires sensitivity to and respect for differences. On the other hand dialogue oriented interviews affect people. They lay open thoughts, feelings, knowledge and experience not only to the interviewer, but also to the informant. For some informants, our questions may have affected their attitudes and behaviour, particularly towards alcohol.

Studying alcohol and meanings related to alcohol use, poses many challenges. In many cultures, norms dictate the attitudes

towards drinking, negative in some settings and situations, positive in others. People may in such a situation answer in a way that keeps them in line with the norms, rather than disclose their own experiences (cf. Skjelmerud 1999:40). They may want to tell the researcher what they assume the researcher wants to hear. It is often not easy to explain drinking, nor is it always easy to remember clearly what happened when drinking. In the interaction with our informants, our study was initially introduced as a research on the everyday life of poor people. The field assistants were trained to allow the informants themselves to put the question of alcohol use on the agenda. The interviews were open ended, and after a conversation about income sources and everyday life in the village, the assistants asked the informant to tell about the last wedding or funeral the informant had attended. This question almost always introduced the alcohol theme, and gave the field assistant the opportunity to follow up by other questions about the informant's experiences, both with his or her own alcohol consumption, and with the drinking habits of relatives and other villagers.

The field assistants were also trained to do active interviewing, to invite and assist narrative production and to regard the interview as a meaning-making process, with the informant as a storyteller (cf. Holstein and Gubrium 1995:29). The interviews were not so much dictated by a pre-designed set of specific questions, but loosely directed and constrained by the interviewer's topical agenda, objectives and queries.

All interviews, which lasted 1-2 hours, were taped, transcribed, and later translated into English. The tape recording was

carried out with the informants' consent, and did not generally lead to any problems. The day-to-day follow up of the field assistants was done by three field coordinators.

### **1.2.3 Individual information about social activities**

As drinking is a social activity, a group oriented approach might have been natural. The reason we chose to focus on individuals, was that a group approach is more complicated and more demanding for the person who is collecting the data, in our case the field assistant without any formal social science research background. To counteract the methodologically individualistic bias, where an isolated individual is being interviewed personally about his or her attitudes, behaviour and experiences, we deliberately asked the informants about their relationship to others, and we often collected information from people who knew each other well.

The individual interviews were supplemented by observation. The field assistants were to report what the place looked like, whether it looked clean and tidy, and to describe the water supply and the sanitary conditions. They also reported what the people looked like, whether they looked healthy, happy and content, and they were to observe people, including the children - whether the children looked healthy and clean, and how they were looked after. For information on our main theme, alcohol and drinking, the field assistants reported whether they could see people who appeared 'drunk', and at what time of day. They also observed and noted how other people reacted toward drunken behaviour - with acceptance, with a smile, or with open displeasure? And they

observed the availability of alcohol, legal and illicit. The observation report turned out to be very useful, full of details not only about the issues mentioned above, but also about smells and flies, about friendliness and about the field assistants' feelings and personal experiences. Even if the researchers did not get the opportunity to visit the field sites themselves, these reports gave a very vivid and good impression of the villages and the people living there.

However, although the field assistants lived in each community for ten days, our observation was not participatory in the strict meaning, unlike what happened in a previous study (Abeyasinghe 2002: 22 and 148). This restricted our information of drinking groups and drinking situations.

The selection of informants in a village always started by finding a key informant<sup>5</sup>. He or she had to be able to give information about the village and village life, and to introduce the assistant to nine other informants in the village. The assistants were instructed to look for someone such as the school teacher, the midwife or someone in a similar position, as key informant.

The other nine informants in each village were selected partly at random, to cover different age groups and both men and women. We also included an element of 'purposeful sampling', that is to select information-rich instances which could illuminate the questions under study (cf. Patton 1990:169)<sup>6</sup>. For example, if the opportunity was there, the assistant should try to get an interview with the kasippu seller in the village.

### 1.2.4 Some experiences from the field work

#### A murder in Katharagama

We describe here some experiences from the field assistants' stay in their villages. In the village in Kataragama, the field work in the setting was done by a young female field assistant, initially accompanied by a field co-ordinator. She had a hard time, first to convince her family that it was safe for her to go there on her own, and then during the field work. Neither her family nor we were able to predict that there was going to be a murder in the village during her stay there. On her fourth day, at around 10 in the night a man 'drunk on kasippu' had gone to a nearby village house. He had an argument with the woman there, hit her head with a pole and hacked her to death.

It seemed to the field assistant that this incident was just one of many for the villagers. One of the informants who were not greatly surprised, commented on the murder like this: "*It would have been strange if some deed like this had not been committed by him.*" After the murder, people seemed to be afraid to give information to our researcher too. Some informants prepared one of their bedrooms for the field assistant to sit and talk so that they were not seen from the road. In spite of these problems, the field assistant went through with her interviews and spent her ten days in the village. The informants, five men and five women, all described the life in the village from their perspective.

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*The beauty of Mihintale compared to the polluted slum in Colombo*

We also experienced that the succession of the different field work settings might produce a bias. One of our field assistants first spent ten days in a 'slum' community in Colombo, in a village literally situated on a garbage heap, a place with a foul odour, filled with flies and containing relatively unfriendly people. The same assistant went next to a village in Mihintale, a community that was very different. In one of the first sentences of the field report, he describes it as, "*a beautiful village covered with greenery and surrounded by a couple of dams*". He goes on to say,

*"a very quiet village completely different from the hassle of the towns I passed. The sounds and songs of the birds, which live in large numbers, magnify the beauty of the village. These sounds were heard during day and night. The breathtaking sight of the rock of Mihintalaya seen in the far distance is a gift for this village. The large "Nuga" trees have spread their roots and branches all over the area confirming their rights to this land. Not only these trees, but also the many "Mee", "Atamba" and "Asatu" trees all show the newcomer how ancient and proud this village is."*

Apart from being a good description of the village, this might also be an indicator of the fact that the field assistant somehow fell in love with this village, and that this may have coloured his perception of what he experienced there.

It also seems that he was rather taken by the hospitality of the villagers:

*"There was one thing common to all the houses I visited. As soon as you enter, the hosts would ask, in a very soft voice, whether you would like to drink a glass of water and immediately serve one. After that they would serve you food or tea. If you reject it, they will feel very upset and disappointed, but if you accept it they would be overjoyed."*

Maybe our data from the village in Minhintale would have been slightly different if the field assistant had started his work here, and gone to the Colombo tenement later.

### **Harvesting season in Polonnaruwa**

When the field work was restricted to ten days, the time of the year could also influence our findings. In the village in Polonnaruwa the data collection took place in what was a very busy time for the villagers. That could have influenced the field assistant's observations and the answers he got on his questions. The field assistant felt that the villagers were thinking a lot:

*"It was as if they were always carrying some heavy weight in their heads. The rushing nature of the villagers disturbed the peacefulness and the calmness of the village. I think that this rush was because this was the Maha season and everybody was occupied in the paddy cultivation"*.

### **Christmas time in Negombo**

Christmas was celebrated while our field assistant was in the fishing village in Negombo. Because this was a Christian village<sup>7</sup>, the timing probably created bias in what he saw and heard<sup>8</sup>. He describes his experiences on Christmas day like this:

*“On the 25<sup>th</sup> I felt that I was lost in a war field. The sound of the firecrackers and the cries of the crows with shouts and laughter of the children all blend together to show how the villagers were celebrating Christmas. The small children were running here and there. Among them were few who were wearing new clothes. The Church was getting ready for the singing of Carols. It was to start at 9 p.m.*

*The roads were covered with small pieces of paper. These were the leftovers of the hundreds of firecrackers lit. I hoped that someone would invite me for Christmas, but I was not so lucky. Drunken people were everywhere I looked. People were talking loudly and enjoying Christmas. Once in a while the sound of a fight was heard, but it disappeared with the sound of the firecrackers”.*

### **Hardship in the villages of internally displaced persons**

The field assistant in our village of internally displaced persons in Puttalam had several problems, adding to the fact that he experienced the village as a rather depressing place to stay. Most of the methodological problems are actually indicators of the situation in each village. The difficulty in finding a key informant is maybe the best example. The field assistant found no one who stood out in the community in terms of education, employment, money or indeed authority. Even to find an ‘Advanced Level’ educated person was quite difficult. He noted that there are none in any stable government or private sector employment. Leaders change frequently and all that the current so-called leaders can do is to pitifully complain or despair.

Another 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. “Ah, so 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. This invariably required an explanation from the outsider such as the field assistant explaining that we are just trying to understand the situation, and this may or may not lead to material help for this place.

It was also difficult to secure an interview alone with the informants. Even when an informant was isolated and sitting at the front of the house, he would keep turning every few minutes towards where the females were, for confirmation of what he was saying.

In the village with internally displaced Tamil persons in Vavuniya, a different field assistant did the data collection. Due to practical problems (security, transport, facilities etc), he was not able to spend the nights in the village. He went through with his interviews, but his observations were limited to what he could see during daytime. That means that the data in this village is maybe less reliable than from other villages. For some reason the data also give little information on alcohol use.

### 1.2.5 Supplementary data from the urban setting

One part of this report focuses on the situation in the capital city, Colombo. The data for this section is gathered through the use of two methodologies. One source is similar to that of the study of areas outside Colombo – namely, the use of in-depth interviews with a key informant and nine others from the same community.

In the second methodology too, data was gathered through interviews with persons from selected communities or ‘settings’. But in this component a setting was not a cluster of residences or homes. The residential community wasn’t adequate to cover the different nuances of city life.

#### The ‘informal entry’

What happens in a ‘three-wheeler stand’, a workplace or office, a bar cum restaurant or a shopping mall is as relevant to the subject under study, as what happens in a given residential commune. Some research assistants were consequently engaged to integrate with and study these non-residential *settings*. Since these are not ‘residential’, the location does not ‘belong’ to anybody, and the membership of the location is ‘fluid’. In such instances there was less sense in, and possibility of, linking to a key person to introduce us to the setting. So a slightly different entry was used.

In these locations, initial discussions were with individuals engaged ‘naturally’. The research assistant spent time in the place and gradually approached individuals there and engaged them in conversation. All the field assistants eventually selected for this component of the study were male. As little as possible of personal details of

the research assistant were initially disclosed. Disclosure about what he ‘did’ was limited to the information that he had no permanent employment, which was true. Sometimes the field assistant said that he was currently working in collecting data for a research study.

The assistant had to spend as much time as required initially to integrate with the given setting and to develop links with key individuals there. At a restaurant, for example, the research assistant would visit as a customer a few times and make friends with some of the restaurant staff. In a few days he would be a known person in that setting and had opportunity to mix and talk to customers who came as individuals or as groups. He would sometimes be invited to sit with the group and participate in the conversation and the food and drink. He would have to pay for part of the expenses too.

Where a longer, or more focussed, interview with a particular person was felt likely to be useful the assistant indicated the nature of the research interest. Those selected were asked whether they would agree to provide more details. In the restaurant such a person could, for example, be someone serving customers there.

The persons selected as research assistants were those who succeeded in making links readily and easily with the selected settings. Potential field assistants were asked to make an initial ‘trial’ visit and provide feedback, after a brief introduction on how they should proceed. This allowed us to take on for training only those who showed capability in the real life activity.

Previous training in qualitative research methodology was not a selection criterion.

The advantage of this was that the assistants eventually selected were remarkably good at integrating with, and reflecting what prevailed within, the communities or settings selected. A disadvantage was that they did not have training in critical or objective analysis and reflection on 'superficial' reports or observations. This weakness was somewhat counteracted through regular and frequent discussions with and guidance from one of the researchers. The four individuals selected in this way had hardly any difficulty understanding and applying the ideas on critical analysis and follow up of informants' statements. A second disadvantage of this method was that it required rather a large investment of the researcher's time. This extra investment of time was felt to be justified because the innovation of using relatively less experienced (but more 'naturally' integrated) assistants required this. Thus they were debriefed by one of the researchers rather than a field coordinator.

In this method of data-gathering no tape recordings were used. The field assistant made detailed notes from memory immediately after the field visit. He later had to discuss his report and complete aspects of the notes that were incomplete or were found to be worthy of expansion. This was done before going out on the next day. In each of these sessions the field assistant would be brought back into line with the objectives of the study. They were told at each debriefing what material they brought had greater relevance to the study's objectives. Soon they learnt to focus increasingly on issues relevant to poverty and to alcohol.

The field assistants in this informal component were more intensively supervised than those in the other. One of the researchers (DS) had direct debriefings with each of them, initially every third day or so. He cross-questioned them on every aspect and then made suggestions to get them into line with the objectives of the study. The need to find out the existing reality rather than attempt to provide an image or idea of it that the field assistant believed would please the researchers was constantly emphasized. They were quite aware that a particular finding would not be more 'popular' with the researchers than another. All of the field assistants understood that only inaccurate findings were unacceptable.

### **1.2.6 Quantitative study**

The major part of this study was on a qualitative investigation in several selected settings. We supplemented this with a small quantitative study conducted in each setting at the end of the in-depth qualitative component.

The quantitative study was not intended as a representative sampling of a particular universe. It was meant mostly to be a check on, and a broader sampling of, the same settings that were looked at in the qualitative phase.

Up to twenty informants were questioned from each setting where the qualitative study was conducted. The exact number questioned was based on a rough estimate of the relative size of the village or community sampled. In some settings a larger sample was taken to keep the total number of questionnaires roughly in proportion with ratios of particular population sub-groups. The data was

gathered on an interviewer administered questionnaire (see appendix) asking about alcohol use, details of type, quantity and cost, alcohol-related behaviour and experiences, and perceptions of alcohol users as well as demographic details including income, debts and savings. The questionnaires were in Sinhala and Tamil and none were in English.

A total of 306 questionnaires were administered. The questionnaire was administered only on the last day of the field assistant's stay in a given setting. The interviewer was by then familiar to the community. The interviewer followed a prescribed schedule for selecting subjects. The proportion of male or female subjects selected from each setting was not allowed to be less than one third. Anonymity was assured. Names were not recorded.

### 1.2.7 Ethical considerations

Ethical standards followed are in compliance with the Norwegian Research Council's ethical guidelines for carrying out social science research (See *Norwegian Social Science Data Service's* guidelines for Protection of Privacy: [www.nsd.uib.no/english](http://www.nsd.uib.no/english)) Names of people have all been deliberately changed so that confidentiality can be maintained, and names of villages are concealed.

Photographs are intended to provide a flavour of the physical settings described. They have been taken from locations other than the actual setting described in the text. This has been done to maintain anonymity of individuals concerned. But the photographs have been selected from locations very similar to the actual study areas, so they do give an accurate image of the locality.

### Notes

4. Patton's advice is both simple and pragmatic: "Fieldwork should last long enough to get the job done - to answer the research question being asked and to fulfil the purpose of the study."
5. A key informant is a person who is supposed to give information not only about him/herself, but also about the community that he or she is a part of. (Cf. Löfgren 1996).
6. Cf. Miles and Huberman who recommend the researcher to "go to the meatiest, most study-relevant sources" (1984:42).
7. There are both Tamils and Sinhalese living in the village, but all are Christians
8. Cf. Abeyasinghe (2002:61) who found that "the alcohol trade was doing a brisk business on Christmas day", in his study in the Colombo slum.