

An aerial photograph of a city, likely Colombo, Sri Lanka, showing a river winding through the urban landscape. The buildings are densely packed, and the river is a prominent feature. The overall tone is sepia or brownish, giving it a historical or archival feel.

The rural poor live on earnings from their family members who work in Colombo. The rural rich make their money mostly by selling to Colombo or bringing back money earned in Colombo. There is no significant urban centre other than Colombo. Kandy and Jaffna are the only cities that have potential to develop any degree of autonomous existence in the near future.

Colombo gets from all of the rest of the country, among other things, a workforce. And the city in return provides them not only with money, but also with normative ideas, attitudes and fashions.

A significant proportion of the rural rich, middle class and poor spend a significant time living or working in the city. The movement between city and village is continuous and massive. Many travel daily long distances from rural home to city workplace. Large numbers travel home at weekends from city 'boardings' (hostels) where they reside to work or study. So much that is new is learnt in the city and instantly transferred to the village. Equally large numbers travel 'home' monthly or every two to three months. This is because they live in more distant villages or don't have breaks or leave on a weekly basis. They take home a larger amount of money along with their city training.

Patterns of expenditure and aspirations for life for the rural person are therefore strongly influenced by the same factors that influence the city dweller. Residence in a village is for many just a matter of having a home outside the city. Much of life is probably spent in the city by a fair number of those classified as rural dwellers.

# COLOMBO

An aerial, sepia-toned photograph of the Colombo city skyline. The image shows a dense urban landscape with numerous high-rise buildings and skyscrapers. The city is set against a backdrop of hazy hills and a bright sky. The overall tone is warm and historical.

COLOMBO IS WHERE EVERYTHING  
COMES TOGETHER

# Colombo

## An overcrowded residential setting I

### Our sources

The impressions from Colombo are derived from the reports of a few research assistants who sampled a cross section of city life, using both methodologies described in Chapter 2. One source is similar to that of the study on areas outside Colombo, where the field assistant obtained the broader picture through a key informant in an interview lasting several hours and then through nine other informants – also interviewed at depth. The interviews were tape-recorded and transferred into a hand-written text document on the same day. The community studied through this methodology was an urban under-serviced area (called by some a ‘slum’), described first.

The rest of the data was gathered using a somewhat different methodology. This methodology applied to all the settings other than the first setting described immediately following this paragraph. In the other settings we did not focus on a ‘geographically defined’ residential cluster of homes. That method alone, we realized, wasn’t adequate to get a complete feel of events and currents in Colombo. The second approach, described in the preceding chapter (on methodology) as the ‘informal entry’, was used therefore to supplement the first.

This village fits into what is commonly called an ‘urban slum community’, but this particular overcrowded setting is different from others. In this location, the whole of the community and life is dominated by a huge garbage dump. The village sits on the border of the dump. This alone makes this rather atypical amongst settings referred to as ‘slum communities’.

Our field assistant and coordinator report that one of their most striking experiences was the overpowering smell that hit them as they approached the village. It was unlike anything they had experienced before.

The smell came from the living, expanding and horribly ugly dump. The garbage collection is over 15 metres in height and about 1 km in length. Lorries bring garbage to the dump and bulldozers pile it up. People work on the dump, constantly flattening and spreading out the garbage heap. The smell is overpowering to a newcomer, as it was so to our field assistant. The local residents seem to have accepted it, or adjusted to it.

There is also a stagnant ‘lake’ along the railway line, which forms another ‘border’ for the village. This too is polluted and smelly and probably a good breeding ground for mosquitoes. The whole village seemed to be a breeding place for flies. There were many unhealthy looking stray dogs and many crows, but the flies dominate all. Flies are everywhere in large numbers.





It seems that there are no off peak hours for traffic in Colombo. Traffic jams, overflowing pavements and pollution all contribute to the milieu.

## Alcohol and Poverty

As one crosses the railway line and enters the village there is a boutique. It sells many food items and other provisions. Right next to it are a few storerooms, which store waste materials. Opposite those storerooms is a three-wheeler stand, and the drivers of these vehicles can constantly be seen standing around. They did not look very pleasant. They seemed to be ‘tough guys’ too, but the research assistant wondered whether this was put on, as a show.

Our field assistant saw a few young men smoking ganja (cannabis) in the shade of a tree by this lake. This was at around 10 o’clock in the morning.

### 3.3.1 Environment and facilities

There is a community centre in the village, and the preschool is held in this community centre. The surroundings of the preschool too were very dirty.

There are two public wells and a toilet. Most of the villagers use the public toilet. There are few public taps, and villagers use it for all purposes. Washed dishes and pots could be seen near those taps at any time of the day. The water does not get drained properly. Therefore stagnant polluted water could be seen collected near the taps. And more flies.

Most of the houses are made of wood, and there were usually two rooms in each house. One room is used for cooking. The houses are adjacent to each other, with no gaps in between. Only three houses were built in brick, bigger and better than the rest. These houses are walled or separated from their neighbour’s. Footpaths between

the rows of houses were not clean. The rail track was also polluted with dumped garbage and littered with empty cigarette packs.

Few houses have electricity, and the rest use oil lamps. There are a few houses, which are kept clean compared to others. The bigger houses even had carpeted floors. The members of those families looked healthier and cleaner than other families. In some houses the garden is kept clean. Most houses have televisions and radios. Car batteries power these. They frequently watch Tamil movies and TV channels like “Sirasa” and “Swarnavahini”. Walls of most houses were covered with pictures of film actors. Most of them are Indian actors.

There are about four houses that collect and sell ‘waste’ metals to the market.

There is a small ‘devala’ or shrine to a God, which is a small room built in wood. There were few boutiques in the village. These boutiques sell kasippu (illicit spirits) too. They also sell prepared snacks (‘vadey’), and there were many people in each of those boutiques.

Several societies and organizations function in the village. A ‘funeral assistance society’ (‘Maranadara Samithiya’), Community Development Society (‘Prajasanwardana Samithi’), and ‘FORUT’ are examples.

### 3.3.2 The people and their life style

The village has about 170 families, Sinhalese, Muslims and Tamils. Our field assistant couldn’t say confidently which



In a country where the majority depend on public transport, overcrowded buses and trains bring in hundreds of thousands into Colombo daily from the rest of the country. The city provides them not only with money, but also with normative ideas, attitudes and fashions.

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group was larger, but the Muslims appeared somewhat fewer. There were people who had been living in this village for 50-60 years. There were also people who had settled in that area recently.

### **General mood**

Our field assistant's overall general comment about the people is that they are mostly frustrated and angry. It is unlike the description of any other community. The general mood is described as one of unfriendliness, almost hostility.

The majority in this village were felt to be living their lives in fear and suspicion. The village was believed to be one that provided protection to certain powerful characters. They were said to control the village (eg. taking decisions concerning the people of the village). Some residents felt that these powerful persons may feel threatened if the people of the village become more educated or if the village develops further. They would see it as a threat to their activities or control.

Many see the powerful characters in a positive light. They are seen as 'heroes' who help them in their need. They have created an environment where no one can go against them, but, there are people who are 'waiting for their chance' to do so. At the same time, many youths in the village treat them as role models and try to follow their lead. The children in the village follow the youth.

Whether our informants spoke only of positive attributes of the powerful characters due to their genuine impression being positive is difficult to determine. People may not have trusted our

researchers enough to be confident of saying negative things about them. The equivalent of the word 'thugs' ('*chandiyo*') was sometimes used to describe the people who wielded power.

*"Say an underworld character passes by when we are playing, someone would say something nice about his body or his attitude etc. Being a thug is very helpful. You can always get what you want. Our guys too want to be thugs. But there is an element of suspicion and fear."*

Another feature of the general mood was that of low expectations. It was almost as if they don't care about their lives, according to our field assistant. Their lives have become hopeless. Interpersonal relationships too are at a low level. They wait for someone to come and help them. They think that you need to be wealthy to be happy in life, but not many have become wealthy. And not many think that they will ever become wealthy.

### **Insecurity**

Apart from the unfriendliness another striking feature was that of expressed insecurity about the permanence of their living here. People say they are not sure how long they will be allowed to live here, and this is given as a reason for not improving their houses or living conditions.

*"Only the first few houses are built in brick. We were told by the Oil Corporation that we would not be paid any compensation if we build our houses in brick. Most of the villagers want to leave this area. Most have bought land from outside."*





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The field assistant felt that their expectations were not very high. There was said to be little thought of tomorrow. Their households and they themselves, the field assistant found, are not very clean. They don't think of their homes as their own. They live in a world of uncertainty, almost as if they expect their homes to be broken down tomorrow. They believe that someone will give them a new house in place of their current one. This is probably the only way to survive the insecurity, as nobody has the necessary funds to build a house on their own, and no family has even a plan to build a house of their own.

*"This house is not our own. We don't have homes. These were given to us for temporary residence. If these are broken, we have no place to go. That is what we are thinking about right now."*

It is not very clear whether they really believe that they can be just evicted by the authorities. Or they may be saying that they are insecure. This may allow them to continue in the current way of life with no attempt to 'improve themselves' – especially with regard to getting a house of their own to live in. Whether the feeling of insecurity is a way of protecting themselves from having to make unrewarding efforts to progress is difficult to surmise.

### 3.3.3 Freedom

Powerful and big businessmen in and around the village provide jobs and help at times of need. In return, the village provides them with people to work in their different tasks at a relatively low cost. This was seen by some as taking advantage of the village and the villagers.

Some felt that having a community that is very submissive suits the purpose of these powerful individuals. These people do help people in times of difficulty too. Our field assistant felt that this too may have contributed to making the villagers lethargic and rather low in their expectations. Some villagers believed that there is a relationship between the underworld gang members and the big businessmen. They feel that the underworld gang members run the village according to the needs of these businessmen.

*"One businessman helps the villagers a lot. He gives out about one thousand rupees a month for the poor. Before he came, this place was not like as it is right now. The houses were different. He came and started managing the garbage dump and built new temporary houses along the rail track. Although they say it is temporary, we have lived here about five years. Once the underworld gang leader came to this village he asked the businessman to build better houses. And he immediately responded and built better houses in a better part of the village, in place of the temporary houses. It happened because of the boy ('Lamaya' or underworld gang leader)".*

There are said to be underworld gang members, and their brokers, who do most of the illegal work in the village. They are said to control the sale of illicit alcohol ('kasippu') and illegal drugs. They also get other people in the village involved in their work by providing jobs for the unemployed. The youths who leave school are the primary recipients. Other people join the 'underworld' groups, just to 'build their image'. Some school-children try to



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follow their lead. It was suggested that the enthusiasm among youths to get involved with this type of work may come from their movie idols too.

*“I take the lead in all activities of our village. Nobody can do anything without my knowledge. I get to know those things if someone hides them. Then I go and look for it and decide whether it is a good or a bad thing. If it is a bad thing, I make sure that they do not do it.”*

*“There is a guy in this village who was involved in underworld acts. He is not in the village these days. He is a leader in our village. All villagers respect him, and he also loves the village. He helps the villages very often. Ten months back, he donated white clothes to all the children in our village. There are a few men who work for him. They also contact me before they do something.”*

### **Privacy**

People appear to move in and out of others' houses with little regard for privacy. But it did appear that the few rich people (two or three families) in the village were a little more isolated from the rest of the community. So people in the community didn't all walk into the slightly wealthier house as freely as they do the other, less affluent, houses. There was at least a fence surrounding the wealthier person's property, and they had a gate that could be shut. Others could walk into anybody's house and talk to the householders freely. There were no walls or fences with gates separating the houses.

### **Racism**

Although people are not particularly friendly towards each other, there is hardly any 'racial' antagonisms.

*‘There are no problems among different ethnic groups in our village’.*

### **Pace of life**

People move at a strange pace. Even after 9 o'clock in the morning many young men and women were seen still brushing their teeth and talking to others. Children aged 6-7 years were seen defecating along the railway track at this time. The children looked dirty. Most children carried sticks in their hands and they were crying or shouting most of time. Some children had wounds all over the body. Some were scratching their bodies all the time. Children 4-5 years old often used words like 'maranawa' (I'll kill you). They seemed to be neglected too. No adults were around to look after them. Young adults were also seen among them, and they used obscene language towards the children. Even the adults passing by addressed them in unfriendly or nasty names. ('ado', 'bada').

### **Children, men and women**

Some mothers seemed to be angry with their children. This was evident even by the way they carried their children and the way they spoke to them. Children and adults looked wasted.

The men in the village, our field assistant concluded, have largely abandoned their responsibilities. It seemed to him that they were 'lifeless'. The women were more active.



Most of the structures were make- shift such as the house in the top photograph. There were a few houses built in bricks, bigger and better than the rest.



## Alcohol and Poverty

Most of the men in the village carry cigarettes or rolls of ganja (cannabis). There is a small house in the midst of the village, and there were men who were drinking kassippu. They were shouting loudly, drunk even at 11 am. Other villagers showed no concern about it.

Most of the villagers looked very rough, and the women also looked very domineering. Many youngsters gather along the railway line, and most of them have a cigarette in their hands. Some of them are smartly dressed. There are a few other young men who look wasted. Some of them were carrying metal pieces or poles in their hands. Some young men leave early in the morning, for work. They are to be seen in the afternoon. Several were said to work in the fish market. When they go out of the village, they dress nicely and fashionably.

The women were more active in the village, but most of them, our field assistant felt, were tired and exhausted. They get married at a very young age and have troubled marriages. The basic needs of the children of the village are not well met. As a consequence the level of nutrition, health and education is at a very low level.

*“I have four children. Two are in a children’s home. The other two are at home. One is a eleven-year-old girl and the other is a boy. It is very difficult to find someone who has schooled up to grade 8 in this village.”*

Women in the village are more active and they are involved in maintaining social relationships. Some women are fashionable. Most women hang around the public tap and the well. They observe what

is happening in the surroundings. Women too make obscene jokes and use bad language. Most women do their cooking at the main door of their house, so they can observe what is happening in the surrounding. Once their work is over, they sit at their doorstep and chat with their neighbours. It is the women who are mostly involved in various societies in the village.

There are unmarried women who have two or three children. Husbands are generally suspicious about their wives, and if the wife is late in getting home after work, the husband suspects that the wife is selling sex. ‘Everything ends up in a fight’. There are about 2 or 3 families in the village where the women are known to be ‘prostitutes’.

The woman who sells kassippu was very talkative, and she frequently argued with her clients. There were also mothers carrying their children among them.

### **Education**

Some adults were not educated, meaning that they had little formal schooling. Most children quit school when they reach grade 6-7. Some start working in garages while some join tea shops or stores.

*“There are children who have studied up to O/L. Most of them are not employed because the salary is not adequate. Some are not motivated to look for a job. They just stay at home. There is a sister who helps the villagers to find jobs. I have helped most young men to find jobs, but they are not keen.”*

### **Leisure**

A good part of leisure time is spent on watching television, mainly 'Swarnavahini' and 'Sun TV'. These channels show Tamil films, and most of these are telecast during the morning or afternoon. There are television sets in most houses, and those who do not have one, go to a friend's house to watch movies. Many of the residents speak both Sinhala and Tamil.

*"Since many people gather, we are not bored. Time flies. We just have fun. This is our life."*

*"During leisure we get together and play cricket, either in the ground or the road alongside the rail track."*

Several young men can be seen reading the results of previous days horse races. They are usually disappointed with their defeats.

### **Hostility and solidarity**

People quarrel with each other even for small misunderstandings. Sometimes those arguments go on for a long time. These problems are usually among women. The husbands usually do not get involved in such disputes.

Despite the lack of cooperation and the quarrelling, there are things on which people do get together. If there is a death in the village, all villagers get together and help with the funeral. This may cost about Rs. 7000. Similarly, parents contribute to run the Montessori school. The sister at the church started a Montessori for the kids, employing two teachers. Now they

have to be paid with what ever is collected from the children. In the past she used to help financially, but now she doesn't do so as much.

*"It's the fault of the people. They started making up various stories. It's not like those days. People are different. This is why the sister stopped helping."*

### **Envy**

Our field assistant did report that all in all the social relationship between the people of the village is neither pleasant nor refreshing. This he attributes to envy of one another and jealousy and suspiciousness of others.

*"The people said, thanks to Priyanthi that child found a children's home and that the child is happy to be there. Probably this made that woman feel a bit inferior. She said that it wasn't Priyanthi who did it; it was I who found the home for the child. When I went to question this we got into a quarrel."*

### 3.3.4 The economy

There are several people who work in the Colombo Municipal Council. Some work on a temporary basis, and in about ten families there are people with permanent jobs. Some are masons, and some work in tea stores. There are carpenters and people involved in different businesses (selling vegetables etc.). Some are daily earners, some get their salary monthly and people who work in private “Cleaning services” get their salary weekly.

People spend their money on different things. Some deposit it in “FORUT” related credit schemes. Some spend their money daily without saving it. Some people give the money to a ‘seettu’. This is a system of people getting together to contribute a sum of money every month. One person collects money from all the members of the seettu, and the collection goes to each contributor in turn.

*“There is no permanent job for most people in this village to lead a good family life. Therefore life is difficult. There isn’t enough income even to repair or improve our homes. This house is not mine. It belongs to my wife’s parents. They have two houses, the one in which they live and this one. My father- in-law works in a company and the mother- in-law works at Kotahena. They understand our difficulties and they help us.*

*“I have joined a seettu. I collect fifty rupees a day to pool for it. It’s five hundred rupees a month. I recently found some work and earned five hundred rupees. I have already spent one hundred. We buy things on credit. If I’m unable to, my father- in- law pays.*

*In case of an emergency we borrow money from some one. This is a loan, but we don’t have to pay interest for it if it is from a friend. We don’t borrow from moneylenders. If we do we will fall into trouble.”*

When people are unable to pay back their loans, they have to mortgage their jewellery to pay their debts. There are pawnbrokers in the village itself, but the villagers are reluctant to go to them because they expect a large return.

There is a powerful businessman behind the scenes. He donates about ten thousand rupees when there is a funeral. He gives thousand rupees a month for any elderly person in the village.

*‘He helps the villagers, but at the same time he earns from them’.*

*“There used to be big houses with large land areas. He built small houses in that land. That way he earned a lot. He is the one who helps the villagers in any need.”*

A lot of money is said to drain out of the village through the use of drugs. Heroin users spend all they earn to buy drugs. The dealers in turn spend their money on arrack, cigarettes, to pay off the police, and for court cases. People spend much money gambling. This has become a fashion and is catching on among some of the youth in the village too.

*“There is another lot who gamble with cards. Everyday they play cards before coming home and lose all their money. If there is no-one playing, they get hold of two to play and initiate on their own. They lose all the money they earn. There*



The income of many workers was clearly higher than that of the staff in the shop, but they seem somehow to be unable to escape poverty.



*is no food for the wife and the children. They also bet on horse racing. It's mostly the elderly who are addicted to this. Usually the young people are not into this, but most of them don't have jobs either. God knows how they find money to bet."*

Our field assistant reports, 'It is difficult for me to understand the way money enters this village. The majority of people do not have permanent jobs. I feel that there is a hidden way of earning apart from the normal way we see from outside, but the money that this village earns, does not stay here for long'.

*"Most of those who earn are daily paid workers. Some of them work in tea stores. Some work as helpers at various building sites. Some people do various kinds of small-scale business. Some women work as labourers at a cleaning agency and some others work as domestic helps."*

Our field assistant continues to speculate, 'There must be ways in which more money flows into the village. But due to the lack of proper management, the funds do not stay in the village. They drain at the rate of entry or even faster'.

The moneylenders and pawnbrokers probably take quite a bit of money from the people in times of need. These are the few rich men in the village. They live in the well-built houses and lead middle class lives.

### **3.3.5 Alcohol and other substance use**

There are several places in the village, which sell illicit arrack and ganja.

The majority of those who drink daily say that they do so because it helps them to get rid of the exhaustion after a hard day's work. They normally do not drink alone. One person buys a quarter bottle and another may buy half a bottle, and they all drink together. Those who consume alcohol regularly are said to be those with various 'problems'. The common perception is that these people are often reminded of their problems, even at work, and this drives them towards alcohol.

There are many people who use illicit drugs too on a daily basis. The informants claimed that heroin users spend about Rs. 1000 per day. This is not to say that the illicit drug users on average earn over Rs 1,000 a day for drugs. They get their money for drugs from their parents or spouses who earn money with great difficulty. Earlier they robbed other houses, but the villagers has taken actions against this, so now they do not do it anymore. People are not so ready to say that these daily drug users are using these substances because of 'problems'. This may be stated by those who consume the drugs, but others do not offer this as an explanation, which they do in the case of the regular alcohol users.

Nobody could guess the amount of money spent on alcohol, in relation to that spent on heroin.



Although men are traditionally regarded as breadwinners many families depend on the income earned by women. This was especially so in families where the males regularly use alcohol or other drugs.

Daily use of heroin is seen to serve a different function, or to be due to a different reason, from daily use of alcohol. And celebratory use of alcohol serves a different function from daily use.

Alcohol is, for example, an essential item for a wedding. In fact some people judge the quality of the wedding by the alcohol served. If alcohol is not served, it is a poor quality event. Alcohol is served at all functions of this village. People create trouble if alcohol is not served. Usually people have their weddings in reception halls because their houses are too small. People drink and dance and enjoy the event. If alcohol is not served in a wedding, they will bring it from outside. There are no parties without alcohol. If arrack is not served, they regard that family as very poor.

*“The villagers usually have their weddings at a reception hall. It costs around five hundred rupees to book a hall. We go the previous night to help. The guys usually have a drink when they go for it. At the wedding itself alcohol is served at a separate table. Sometimes it is served at the dining table as well. There are no Kasippu dealers around here, but there are a few further down the road.”*

*“From what I earned working abroad, I built a house for my mother and celebrated the weddings of my brother and sister. I have spent all what I have earned.”*

*“I celebrated the wedding very simply. Since there wasn't enough room in the house we had to book a hall. I had to pay for alcohol, cigarettes, the cook etc. This is how all the money went”*

### 3.3.6 Symbolism of alcohol

The people in the village seem to look at the use of alcohol as sign of prestige. They also see it as a part of life. The number of bottles served in a party or any other occasion, for instance, is used to weigh the prestige of the occasion. A major part of the money spent on celebration, which is usually borrowed, is reportedly for alcohol, and much of the motivation for this expenditure is the image surrounding how much alcohol is served at the function.

*“We celebrated my sister's attainment very well. No-one in the village celebrated such an occasion in similar manner. We hired a cook. We also bought around sixty bottles of arrack and about seventy bottles of beer. People couldn't drink so much. It was too much for them. They started to pour the arrack on themselves. Some people slept throughout the whole night because they were so drunk. They left the following morning.”*

Our field assistant claims that nearly all youth in the village see this alcohol use as a sign of strength and status, almost a heroic thing. So they soon get into drinking. The field assistant thought that the villagers consider beating up the wife under the influence of alcohol as quite a normal occurrence. They sometimes reported such beatings in a way that suggested that it was an act to be proud of. The abuse sometimes led to marriages breaking up too.

### Consequences of alcohol and other substance use

*“Those who drink come home and start fighting with the wife and children. After all he is drunk isn't he? That's their nature when they are drunk.”*

The breaking up of marriages was referred to above. Children of these marriages may often end up in children's homes. This is not such a commonplace solution in any of the other settings that we sampled. A tendency to accept the 'dumping' of children in a children's home seems to prevail. In other settings members of the 'extended family' would more likely take on the upbringing of these children, most often the grandparents would provide shelter and care. Why this is less common in this community is not clear. It may simply be that the children of one broken family went in to a children's home and others in the community learnt of this option.

The economic burden from alcohol use is large. Other substances too compete with alcohol for significance of the economic burden. The majority of the villagers smoke cigarettes too, for example. Some claim they smoke as many as fifty cigarettes a day. Heroin use seems to have taken control of some people's lives even more than alcohol, and the economic drain from this is considered much more severe than that due to alcohol or tobacco.

*"My husband is a drug addict. He earns about four hundred rupees a day. He gives about fifty to hundred rupees a day for household expenses. The rest he spends on drugs."*

*"When I'm with friends I don't realize how much I smoke. We usually smoke a few packets when we get together. It's almost impossible to keep count."*

*"When we smoke a cigarette, we always wonder how we are going to smoke another. But those who are addicted to heroin are not like that. They don't care*

*about their wife and children. They don't think about providing for them. They even steal from the wife to buy drugs. They comb garbage dumps or steal a gold chain or something to find money to buy drugs."*

Alcohol users said they drank to enjoy. They confirmed that it was indeed enjoyable when asked whether drinking alcohol was really enjoyable.

### **Changes over last few years**

Despite the unpleasantness and problems that are seen and reported, there is still a feeling that the life in this community has changed for the better.

*"People used to come to our village after doing an illegal thing or taking alcohol. Our village was a good place only for wrongdoers to hide, but things have changed. It is not like that now. Drug addicts are sent to different rehabilitation centres. Smoking is not a big problem. It is mainly heroin abuse."*



### 3.4 An overcrowded residential setting II

The entry for data gathering in this setting, an urban community adjacent to Colombo, was different from that used in the overcrowded city setting described in the preceding section. Our field assistant used the ‘informal entry’ described at the beginning of this chapter and in the chapter on methodology. The same approach was used for the subsequent settings that are described in this chapter.

The overcrowded setting in Moratuwa is very different from that described previously. The environment is less obviously polluted. The air is cleaner and there are less flies and garbage. The municipality removes the garbage more often than in the other setting (where the

garbage from elsewhere is dumped right beside the households!)

There is less fear of a sense of control by an unseen authority. The thugs or tough guys who control the cluster of houses (‘village’) are there to be seen. They get together and do things in a way that gives them attention. They don’t often fight or interfere with other people’s lives. Most of the time their social activity is to drink and make a noise among themselves. This can be in a small cul-de-sac where they will sit, but it is in a place where the others in the community can notice them and hear what they are discussing.

People share a lot of things. Our field assistant felt that even the idea of personal ownership of some things is very fluid.



This is mostly due to lack of basic needs. There is a sense that things are collectively owned, even if there is an 'official' owner. A shirt that a young man owns will be used by his brother when he needs it for a particular purpose. The brother does not ask his permission to wear it, but simply takes it when he needs it. Such 'borrowing' can be from a 'brother' in another house too. The person in need of a shirt may be able, in some instances, to go to the house next door and get a shirt of his friend simply by informing the friend's mother that he is taking the shirt today.

The field assistant in the previous setting did not report this as a striking feature there. Whether this is due to his not having been struck by this particular aspect or because the realities are different in the two settings is not clear, but the sharing of essentials in a setting of deprivation looks very much like a coping or adaptation to lack of basic needs. It is mostly an expression of social or interpersonal solidarity.

Sharing may be of many things. Clothes, a camera, chairs, plates and glasses, jewellery, wristwatches, music cassettes and books and magazines are examples of things that can readily be 'borrowed' and returned. The borrowing is accepted and understood. The actual owner may not need to be consulted. If someone doesn't like this arrangement, he will need to make his feelings known and actively take steps to prevent his possessions being shared.

In some instances, underneath this all there is also a tinge of envy or unhappiness about someone who has more possessions than others. This amounts almost to jealousy, in the sense that the others will be resentful

of this person's belongings. They may talk about it in a negative way. Sometimes the borrowing is a way of equalizing the possessions and not necessarily driven by a specific need or by sense of solidarity.

### 3.4.1 An example: Upali

Upali is in his forties, and he and his wife and two children are relatively happy. Their house is neat, but the things they have are not different from what the others have. They feel that others in the community don't like the fact that they have a relatively happy life.

*"Although we have to let people borrow something in a time of need, there are some who ask things deliberately because they are unhappy about what we have. A few things can get lost or a camera may get broken, but is returned without a repair. How to refuse to lend things, without making enemies, requires special skills."*

*"Those who are unhappy with our having something more than them, are always the ones who earn more than us and waste it on various things. But they don't like us to save and buy something. They will find some way to get us to spend the same money that we would spend on alcohol or heroin if we were like them. It is especially two or three older men who make sure that we do what they want. They are in the habit, when they are drinking of shouting obscene words and making ugly allegations about people. If my wife does not give his wife some jewellery to wear when they are going on some special visit, I can guarantee that we will be abused some time in the next three days, when he is drunk."*



*“She may even lose the jewellery. Once we lost a chain. It was not very expensive, but still it had some value. The woman next door borrowed it, and she came back very upset and explained how it had got lost. They promised to pay, but I dare not remind them. This kind of thing keeps happening. I sometimes think that they do this deliberately because they don’t like to see us better off than them. Everybody is jealous of us because we have no problems in our house and because I don’t spend all my money on alcohol or heroin.”*

### **3.4.2 Another example: Chandana**

Chandana is 24 years or so old. He lives in a crowded set of houses. He feels that there are ‘no rules’ about anything in his community. He is unmarried and lives with his parents.

*‘If you can get away with something, that is considered okay. Even to take something from your own household or your neighbour’s, to steal or grab something from an unsuspecting stranger is all made acceptable’.*

Chandana is clearly complaining about a feature that he recognized in his community. He is obviously unhappy. Whether his statement refers to real events or hypothetical ones, as illustrations, is not clear.

*‘I feel that every dirty thing begins in the alcohol setting. We allow people to say or do anything when they are drunk. Any dirty subject can be spoken openly, so it becomes part of accepted life in the community. For example someone will describe how an old lady’s possessions were grabbed off her by a youth who pushed her onto the side of the road and ran away. In the drinking scene nobody wants to criticize this act. Someone will*

*say, 'So, how much did he get?' Then they make a joke about the amount being very small and express sympathy for the youth who got so little for his efforts'.*

Here Chandana appears to be referring to an example from real life. The process he is referring to is probably not connected just with that particular event. A means of 'sanitizing' unacceptable behaviour by making it public appears to be at work. The perpetrator himself proclaims openly something he had done, which may well be against the norms in that particular setting or culture, but the uncritical acceptance of this 'confession' and the subsequent joking serves to make the act less unacceptable.

It is possible to see how the continued operation of this social dynamic can gradually make the previously unaccepted now accepted and later even admired. It is also possible to see how the process can apply to increasingly unacceptable behaviours. Such a process can hypothetically lead, given sufficient time, to a state where there may be nothing left that is considered unacceptable.

*'Certain people in the community promote this kind of attitude in the drinking scene. Others don't disagree with them because they can become aggressive if you argue too much. So we keep quiet. Without even our realizing it their attitude or viewpoint becomes our norm too. (It becomes a normal thing or accepted thing – "Meka apeth eka wenawa" ). Every nasty thing starts from or spreads from the drinking scene ("Hema jara ekakma enne bona thena indala patang arang"). From the drinking place these ideas and attitudes spread to the community's non-drinking life too'.*

The alcohol serving and selling in this place is not one where people spend time. Illicit alcohol is bought and immediately consumed – with no opportunity to spend time conversing. Or people can take away their illicit brew in little polythene bags. There is little 'fun' associated with illicit alcohol use here. Somehow the 'fun' aspect of alcohol is restricted to settings where licit alcohol is consumed.

Why illicit alcohol users are not afforded the privilege of making the drinking a merry occasion, is unclear, but the phenomenon is not limited to this setting. The previous urban setting that we discussed, many of the village settings in our report and the 'Thotalanga' community of Sri Lanka (described in 'Illicit Alcohol' - Abeyasinghe 2002 ) all seem not to allow 'fun' with illicit alcohol. People come, buy their kasippu and quickly drink it or carry it away.



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What are the ingredients of 'enjoyment' in the alcohol setting? Is it simply that the poorest alcohol users drink 'kasippu', to cheaply fight off withdrawal symptoms? It is unlikely that enjoyment of alcohol is only a privilege of the rich. The poor too are allowed to drink and become noisy at community events where (licit) alcohol is served to the guests. They too become 'disinhibited' after alcohol use in these festivities.

The kasippu drinker too, even if he does not linger at the drinking setting, can shout abuse at people when he walks home drunk on alcohol. Perhaps the difference between licit and illicit alcohol effects on the 'fun' of drinking is that the seller does not provide facilities for people to sit around and 'enjoy' the drink. His business is, after all, illegal. When the setting does not provide facilities and cues for displaying 'enjoyment' the joy somehow disappears, it would seem.

Among young alcohol users there was the report that they did not drink daily and only used it to enjoy. When asked whether using alcohol was really enjoyable, nearly half of the informants here did not readily say it was. This is a great contrast with the previous urban overcrowded tenement that was described. Some of those here smiled in a slightly embarrassed way and said nothing. Others said it wasn't really so special. In the earlier urban tenement, on the other hand, nearly every male said alcohol was great and highly enjoyable.

The great similarity between this setting in Moratuwa and the previous overcrowded city community is in how people consume illicit alcohol. There is no expectation of social interaction around a bottle of kasippu. In fact most of it is sold in little

polythene bags not bottles. No 'fun' is expected or achieved with illicit alcohol use.

Another similarity, striking and important, is the tendency to use the alcohol drinking occasion to weaken the power of social norms and feelings of right and wrong and of morality and decency. The open disclosure, sometimes with pride, of so called anti-social activities allows them eventually to be acceptable and permissible even in the non-drinking situation.

Equally striking is the difference in the way the alcohol experience was evaluated by younger persons in the two communities. In the first, alcohol use is rated universally to be highly enjoyable. In the second community, younger users are not all so convinced that it is indeed an enjoyable experience.



## A commercial centre - Pettah

**P**ettah is the passenger transportation hub of Colombo. Buses to all parts of the country leave from here and so do trains. It is also a major commercial centre. Our field assistant says, 'There are three different worlds in this small area'.

Early morning is a bustle of getting organized for the day. People go to work early. Most of them are very active, alive and industrious. 'Nobody is spoilt (narak wela)'.

Daytime is a hive of tens of thousands in transit. A few workers who finish work by noon or so come to loiter in the 'crevices'. They spend time smoking, drinking and talking. Towards evening all the 'decent' folks rapidly disappear and get out – heading for home.

Night is a very different world. All the 'dredges' of society are left loitering. *'There is hardly anybody who is good, other than those waiting for the next available bus'*

Our field assistant spent time in Pettah sampling all of these 'worlds'. Much the largest amount of time (over ten days or so) was spent with the 'night world' of Pettah. He had no difficulty integrating with the setting. There are hardly any permanent people to talk to in Pettah, so our field assistant was immediately part of the setting as soon as he set foot there.

In the morning and daytime there are regulars – but they are all attending to their work and business, carrying things, setting things up for sale and trying hard to entice customers. They have little time to engage

in 'small talk' with our field assistant, so conversation with them was limited to a few minutes each at most. It was not easy to get beyond issues of price of commodities on sale and times at which buses operated. Everybody was busy or on the move.

The night world was completely different. People were all ready to talk and eager to do so. Some of those who were around had finished work, but were hanging around waiting for the last bus instead of taking one that was immediately available. Many were openly consuming alcohol. This was done just standing around outside the bars. The bars had an equally heavy trade during the daytime, but the customers drank quickly and moved on. At night the customers hung around, walked about and kept coming back to base at the bar. Groups sat on the ground or road drinking alcohol – usually the cheapest arrack and not illegal alcohol. There were side settings that dispensed illegal alcohol to known regular customers, but they didn't sell in an obvious way.

The people who are around at night are very different from those seen during the day. They are 'down and out', not involved with anything productive, just walking the street and spending their time smoking and drinking alcohol with their regular clique or with any similar newcomer that they happen to meet. Gunapala is a clerk who works in a government department. He was at Pettah at 10.30 pm and was clearly after a few drinks – but he was not heavily intoxicated.

### 3.5.1 Example: Gunapala

*'The last bus leaves at 11.30 so I will wait for that. There are more buses now, but I am not in a hurry to get home today. If I miss the last bus, I can sleep at the bus stand and go home tomorrow morning. I may just walk around and go home tomorrow morning, because I am not working tomorrow.'*

Gunapala is not explicit about why he wants to loiter here. He is not forthcoming on whether home is so unpleasant that he has no wish to get there. Nor does he say that he finds the 'freedom' of just walking around the bus station and surroundings, doing anything he pleases and not answering to anybody a pleasant experience.

Among the people that Gunapala will see and mix with are lots of others who are waiting to get somewhere, but don't have a bus for some time. There are families and groups of girls too among those waiting. Gunapala can exchange a few words with them, loiter a little as someone himself waiting for a bus and rest his head somewhere briefly for a break.

Our field assistant judges that all of the regular folks who spend their late evenings and night at the bus stop and its surroundings are poor. Some of them have clerical jobs, but most of them have lesser-paid jobs. He guesses that the homes that they have to go to are probably abjectly poor. They are not all drinking heavily but they have all consumed at least some alcohol.

Gunapala in his government job has opportunities to earn money from people who come there to get work done. The

work will get delayed if they don't pay someone something to make their job move. If Gunapala has a lucky day in the office, he may come to Pettah with an extra thousand rupees to spend.

*'I don't get a lot of gifts from people often. Some days I 'get a chance'. Then we can all spend the money together here. If somebody else gets any money like that 'without trouble' they will spend it with friends.'*

*'I give some money from my salary to the family, but these people here have bought me food and drink when they had money – so I must treat them well when I get the chance'.*

Gunapala has a wife and children, but prefers to spend the night walking the bus station than to go home. Somehow his home is not inviting enough.

He is a 'poor' man and has little money left in his pocket after alcohol expenses. Thus the deprived home setting may itself be a turn-off. Or he may be distanced from the family and able to find more convivial company among the 'friends' in Pettah. In Pettah he can remain anonymous even with the so-called friends, and he does not have to live up to a standard that may be expected in his home background. For example, he has to be the 'man' who provides the needs of the family, and when he is not able to deliver, there may be no way to show his masculinity through that criterion.

Even where the wife too does a job outside the home and earns money, the man is seen as the provider. The role of the man is to provide. A man who is unable to provide, may feel his masculine image a little under threat.



Pettah is the passenger transportation hub of Colombo. Buses to all parts of the country leave from here and so do trains. It is also a major commercial centre.

### 3.5.2 Example: Velu and Chaminda

Velu and Chaminda met our field assistant opposite the bar. They had their drinks and were now going home, and their train was due at around 7.15 p.m., they said. They started chatting to our field assistant at 7.00 p.m. and continued talking to him till 9.30 p.m., despite being reminded that they would miss the next train too. They have families, and one has a daughter too. Velu's sister is married to Chaminda and Chaminda's sister is married to Velu.

*'They live near each other so it is alright if we get late. They have each other for company. We have terrible economic problems, and it is impossible to get out of this on our salaries, so we might as well spend the little we get enjoying today. We don't meet people like you every day, so we might as well stay and chat with you. We got our salaries yesterday so we can buy you a few drinks too.'*

*'The money we get is not enough even to turn around in a circle (rawumak kerakenna wath madi)', so what is the point? We might as well spend what we get for today's fun and see what happens tomorrow. Tomorrow is going to be terrible anyway'*

Nearly everybody who takes alcohol in Pettah says they do it for enjoyment or relaxation, and they confirm that the experience is indeed enjoyable when questioned whether alcohol was really a pleasant experience for them.

Again we see a contrast between the reported subjective experience of alcohol in Pettah and that reported by several users in the overcrowded urban community in Moratuwa. In Pettah the users of all ages say that they feel good with alcohol. Their

subjective experience of being drunk is pleasant. This was the same as that reported from the first urban overcrowded setting described. The difference has something to do with the processing of alcohol use and its effects in these different settings rather than something to do with the research assistants. It was the same field assistant who got the positive report from Pettah and the negative from Moratuwa. The overcrowded tenement, where the experience of alcohol was rated as enjoyable by all, had a different field assistant.

Chaminda says,  
*'Well it's so good when we stay here and drink, because you can say or do what you like. Nobody to tell us that it is a bad thing or a sin. There are no rules'*

This may be what Chaminda finds enjoyable about alcohol and the alcohol setting or just Pettah at night. The rules that govern behaviour in the drinking setting in Pettah at night are different from what he recognizes as 'rules'. Perhaps the things that he calls rules are obligations. Here, with his friend and in-law Velu, he is not reminded of things that he has to do for his wife and children and others.

And Velu adds,  
*'We like to avoid unnecessary rules being put on us, even by our wives. We learn here how to live freely without rules. What we learn here we can remember at home also. If I see Velu in our home setting and we exchange a few words, then we remember something we discussed here and we act accordingly'*

*'My wife may want some money for something for our child, but we may have decided to keep some extra earnings that*



The night world in Pettah is completely different. Some who finish work wait for the last bus instead of taking one that was immediately available. Many just 'hang around' smoking and drinking alcohol.



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*we got, say from a bet, hidden from her. We may have planned to spend it with friends tomorrow, and I may be persuaded to part with some of this money when my wife asks and I see my child, but then I go to meet Chaminda and have a word with him. He strengthens my mind again and reminds me what we decided here in Pettah earlier. Then I am strong enough again to keep the money hidden from my wife'.*

The rules that Chaminda was complaining about become clearer with Velu's account. It is mostly to do with having to support the family, or being obliged to support the family. There is an undertone of not 'obeying' your wife. Once again this reflects the issue of masculinity and the role of the man in the family. Among the men in Pettah a different view of the man is propagated. The man does not do what the wife says or wants. He keeps out of her reach and keeps company with men and enjoys men's fun.

These appear to be men who cannot win in the struggle to show their masculinity by providing conspicuously – or even by providing adequately. They may be resorting to membership in a 'men's club' to reinforce the idea of their masculinity.

Here too, what happens in the alcohol setting appears to spill over to the non-drinking time. (This reflects in a different way what the man in Moratuwa said, (*'I feel that every dirty thing begins in the alcohol scene'*). Velu here is not giving an account of something that he feels is bad, but the values within the alcohol scene has clearly spilled over to the rest of his life, and the fact that it influences the quality of his family life too is evident.

Chaminda and Velu are not very complementary about the others in their community who do not consume alcohol.

*'All they care about is money. What is the point of carefully collecting money when you know that life is uncertain? They just want to show that they are superior. They love to show off their possessions. That is why they are so miserly about spending some money with friends or on enjoying life. People who don't drink are misers and only want to show that they are superior to the others, but only they think so. Everybody in the village knows that they are stingy misers.'*

*'If we have a problem and my wife asks for some support until I get some money, they will pretend that there is no money in the house. When I ask, they can find the money that was not there when my wife asks! We should not allow such misers to prosper.'*

The hostility to those who are less badly off than themselves is evident here, and there is almost a justification put forward to bring the better off persons down. *'We should not allow such misers to prosper'*. If they don't spend their money on alcohol as much as these two persons, they are misers and want to show that they are superior to others. Not only do Chaminda and Velu claim that the better off non-users of alcohol should not be allowed to prosper – they have even found a way to do so. When they ask for money from the people who told their wives that they don't have any, somehow the money appears.

We heard in previous accounts that in settings where there are many poor homes crowded together there is little scope for one family to rise above the rest. Most of these accounts appeared to be from the

point of view of people who would like to ‘develop’ but were unable to do so in their setting. Chaminda and Velu provide a different slant. They are close to the thinking that others should not be allowed to develop or to overtake them. They provide reasons to keep the others down and happily provide an example of how they make others who may prosper to part with money, probably unwillingly.

### The cooperative shop

An unusual source of data gathering emerged in this setting. Our regular field assistant linked up with an employee of this shop in order to get an introduction to the shop. But it wasn’t easy for a researcher to mingle for long in a shop, without buying something and leaving. As a result we eventually asked our first informant, who was an employee of the shop, to be the field assistant and gave him the necessary guidance for a while. So the account below is through a regular member of the community itself, operating also as our field assistant. A great deal of bias is therefore likely, despite the regular supervision.

#### 3.6.2 Example: Malinie

A lady, say ‘Malinie’, working in a ‘Cooperative shop’ in Colombo has a daughter who is 13 years old. When this daughter ‘attains age’, or has her first menstrual period, much has to be done in a hurry. The parents have to find a lot of money in one go, often quite suddenly. ‘We have to do our best for our daughter. She’s our only daughter’. The lady borrows a lot of money for the festivities and rituals. The amount usually exceeds

the annual salary. Malinie borrowed less, Rs 50,000, from her work colleagues and many others. They don’t charge an interest but give out of friendship – and they know that she will pay them back soon through a loan, against her salary, that she can get from her employer.

The staff working in this shop seem here to be showing a real sense of solidarity. In many instances money is given on interest and there are several avenues for doing so. The fact that Malinie’s workmates are willing to give money like this is therefore an expression of real or genuine solidarity. They can trust her to return the loan because they work together and she will find it hard to renege.

‘Cooperatives’ are stores that sell a wide variety of household provisions, rather like a supermarket. They are government owned and run. Most of the time these establishments fail to make a profit, but they continue to run because the government bears the loss.

Malinie’s husband takes as much responsibility as she does, or even more, to get the necessary funds for this event. This is probably true for the majority of husbands in families of this social group, whether the wife works in a job outside the home or not. For a few women though, the husband will not be a great support financially, but most of these husbands too would still help in the numerous things that have to be done.

We do not know how much Malinie’s husband raised, compared to what she did. Whatever the amount, the situation for the village wife is quite the opposite.

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A village woman whose daughter ‘attains age’ has to go through the same rituals and festivities. She has to engage her husband’s participation and cooperation with more effort. If she is lucky the husband will provide the money for the festivities. Far more often than in the city though, he will not, or will not be able to, provide. The things to be done are similar for both settings. Determining the correct time to bath the daughter (after which she re-emerges, having been kept out of sight of males) is, for instance, done by astrologers.

The lady in the village too has to borrow money. Since she has no friends who can loan money and no loans available from her employers, she pays interest, usually at 10 – 15 % per month or so. The same solidarity that Malinie had from her friends at the workplace is not usually enjoyed by the woman in the village, and she too has to celebrate the event as much as the city-woman – or maybe even more.

There has to be a party, whether the event happens in the city or the village. Malinie and her husband invite their friends and relations to it. Quite a large number of invitees are from their workplaces. Half of the money raised by Malinie (50,000 rupees) is spent on alcohol for the guests. “We don’t want people to laugh at us.”

The mother in the village is concerned that people will not even give the gifts they bring if there is not enough alcohol. This does not appear to be a great concern for Malinie. She has not heard of people taking back the money that they brought for a gift, on the ground that alcohol was not served or that the amount of alcohol served was inadequate.

The money Malinie borrowed is paid back to the friends at her workplace through a loan she gets from her employer (i.e., the government). She does not use the gifts given by friends who come to the party, to repay her loans. The gifts were mostly cash, and came to more than rupees 100,000. Part of that money is put into the daughter’s bank account (Rs 50,000), and the rest spent to buy a computer for the daughter and sons.

The monthly deduction from her salary is a significant reduction of income. They have great difficulty managing day to day expenses now. She does borrow money to meet monthly expenses, but again free of interest and to be paid back from the next salary. The small salary left after deduction of the loan repayment is further dwindled by repayment of that month’s borrowings from colleagues.

Malinie sees that her financial state is precarious. She has no regrets about the loan and the costs incurred. ‘At least my daughter has 50,000 rupees to call her own, and nobody can say we didn’t have a proper party for her coming of age’. If things get really bad, she’ll have to see how to manage – but she will not disturb the savings in her daughter’s account. She’ll have to borrow money on interest, as a last resort. Malinie is not too fearful that this may happen. She thinks her husband will come up with a solution. He is a government employee too, but there are ways for him to earn extra cash.

If she is really stuck, she still has some jewellery to pawn to a bank or a financing institution (pawning centre). The interest that the bank or the pawning centre charges is much less than that of the ‘sharks’.

Malinie, despite her loans and other financial difficulties appears to be better off than two other ladies in the shop. (But they still lend her money!) She has a bigger house than them and has good furniture. This appears to be a cause for discontent too. The other ladies are critical of her life and often say some nasty things about her in her absence. The impression is that the others are jealous of her higher economic status. There is less jealousy about her among the more junior grades than among the ones at her level. They often laugh at the sources of her income, and imply that her husband earns money by soliciting bribes from people who come to his office to get work done.

From the account of Malinie's daughter's event we can see that the undertone of envy is not completely absent even in this setting, where there appeared to be much greater solidarity and friendship than in some other settings that we studied. The shop as a whole offers a contrast with the more obviously poor and deprived groups that were focused upon in the other accounts. There are people in the shop whose earnings are much less than that of the village family, but they still appear to be less abjectly poor than the village person with the same or slightly higher income.

### 3.6.2 Example: Sanjeewa

Day-to-day life for 23 year old Sanjeewa, working in the same 'Cooperative Shop' as Malinie, has a pattern of life fixed by the job he does. He can tell us exactly what he will be doing on any day that we pick – even three months away. 'What will you be doing on Tuesday the 25<sup>th</sup> of March 2003?' we may ask him in January. He will say 'I shall get home at about 9.00

a.m. because my night shift is on Mondays. I will eat, wash and so on and sleep until about 4.00 p.m. Then, after eating something that my mother has cooked and left for me for lunch, I have to wash all my accumulated soiled clothes. I go to my friend Jagath's house almost every Tuesday because on other days I have no time. I will chat with him and a friend of his who is boarded in their house until about 8.30 or so. We will usually have a cup of tea that Jagath's younger sister serves us. We will watch TV together with Jagath's family. I will then go home and eat the dinner that my mother has prepared and immediately go to bed, because I have to leave for work early on Wednesday.

What he does on special holidays is relatively fixed too. These are holidays that happen about once a month. These are days for enjoyment. There is some official public holiday at least once a month, and there are often public events organized somewhere in the city. These events are well publicized through the media station that is usually a co-sponsor. Sanjeewa will always attend one of these open-air musical shows if it is within reasonable distance. Three colleagues from his workplace and Jagath and his friend all join him.

Whether Sanjeewa is really upset or unhappy about his highly regular life is not too clear, but the musical show is most likely a welcome break from routine. Ironically, the break is routinized too. Alcohol, with the social trappings implying freedom or 'time out' probably serves to add to the value of this event as a break from routine.

Sanjeewa is a 'minor employee' at the cooperative shop. He takes home about rupees 4,800 every month. The only

‘enjoyment’ that he believes he has is the one day of fun. Or rather, the one evening and night. So he spends whatever is necessary. Usually he and his friends each spend over Rs 1,000 on such an evening. Most of the costs are for alcohol. Beer is sold at the venue, so are cigarettes. More expensive items are spirits. ‘The best experience is with lemon gin. It gives a much greater euphoria (‘somyak’, ‘aathal ekak’). Lemon gin is much more expensive than the usual arrack. They buy it and drink outside or carry it to the premises of the musical show.

Consumption of ‘lemon gin’ has to be made visible to all. It highlights a month’s or year’s special evening, and a great deal of discussion of the cost and the kick of lemon gin occurs forever after. Conversation in the shop somehow reverts to the occasion when this particular alcohol was consumed.

For Sanjeewa the occasional day on a weekend like this is fun, an enjoyment of life. All other days are boring, monotonous and unpleasant, as he sees it.

Sanjeewa likes to have the right clothes for these events and is not very happy with what he can afford. Another man, Thilak, in the same shop knows the current fashions more than the others. He always buys the newest style shoes and the best jeans. Sanjeewa does not know how this guy is so well informed about fashions, but Thilak is from a wealthier family than the others. Thilak is a cashier and so earns more than them in the shop too. The cashier has a higher salary than Sanjeewa and has other ways of earning ‘extra’ on the side. This is most easily done by not issuing a receipt for customers who are in a hurry.

There are no strong norms about clothes. Most of the younger employees learn what to wear by copying each other, but they may not succeed in being ‘really’ fashionable the way Thilak is. It is not easy to conform to that level of fashionability. It is that of a slightly wealthier social class. Conformity with that group can more readily be achieved by drinking, even occasionally, special brands of alcohol.

Older ‘minor employees’ of the shop have to run a family on Sanjeewa’s income. It is less than that of most poor people in a village, but they still appear less poor than the poor village person, as long as they do not reside in a ‘slum’. This impression needs to be checked out more carefully. If it is indeed the case, how this comes about is worth investigating.

### 3.6.3 The setting in general

The twenty or so employees of the shop get on well with each other and the organization is not highly regimented. Higher rankers are called ‘Madam’ or ‘Sir’ but the first name is attached sometimes – ‘Malinie Madam’. In some settings the higher officials are not accessible to the lower grades, but here the structure is small and the lowest paid employee too gets to talk to the lady manager as a normal part of work. The chief is a woman not a man. This is not common.

### Money

All grades of employee depend almost entirely on their salary for survival. If the salary stopped, about three-fourths of the staff would have a hard time surviving even a month. When the salary comes, it comes already with a deduction of loan instalments. So most people already begin





When people are asked about the cost of the alcohol they consume, the answer is based on the actual amount they purchase and drink. Donations for others' alcohol is not usually added. Those who get alcohol free do not add this to the reported cost of their alcohol consumption either.

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the month 'behind' on their regular salary, and then there are loans to pay off to friends at the office itself and to others outside. These are settled on pay-day itself. About ten employees participate in a 'seettu' where each one puts in 500 rupees and the money goes to one person in rotation. The organizer of the seettu gets the option of taking the first month's collection.

People talk a lot about money matters and the cost of living. Money certainly is an important determinant of wellbeing and life for those earning the relatively low salaries of the shop. When financial difficulties arise, it is mostly the single men working at the shop who have to give loans to the married men, and sometimes to the women. Nobody has so far experienced a refusal, or significant delay, in getting their money back, but it is almost like a permanent loan, as the borrower comes back for a loan within a week or so. The 'chronic borrower' consumes alcohol rather heavily.

One of the men spends over half of his salary on tobacco and alcohol, but not on other drugs. He comes after a drink of alcohol in the morning too. Pilferage and stealing probably occurs, according to some of the staff, but not the majority. Nobody talks about who is stealing or making money on the side. There are no identified 'bad characters' who do not belong to the general staff community. If, say, a cashier is suspected of pocketing for himself the money from sales where a receipt is not issued, nobody talks about it. Nor does anybody else ask for a share of the spoils. The absence of open discussion of this possibility may reflect solidarity. On the other hand it may be due to uncertainty over who really does steal and who does not.

The lowest paid in the shop does not 'look' poorer than the highly paid, but they may be managing life precariously. The visible level of affluence of the different levels of staff at the shop doesn't really reflect any obvious difference based on their level of income. The life circumstances of the lowest income earners do not sound too deprived. People have visited each other's houses, and the homes of the lowest income earners are not described in a way suggestive of significant deprivation or overt 'poverty'.

### Conversation

After money matters, most conversation is about what happens in television dramas. Politics, cricket and gossip about each other all figure in conversation. Men, especially the single men, tend to talk about their fun experiences. Nearly all of these centre around alcohol consumption, and the most fun events are presented as those with the most alcohol. They occasionally brag about their sexual exploits, but not with specific details narrated. This kind of narration happens in men-only situations when some of them get together for some 'fun', and then take alcohol. To brag about sexual activities is probably a masculine norm generally, and not necessarily a feature limited to this setting.

### Alcohol

Alcohol use among the staff as a group is mainly in the event of a celebration or party in one of the homes of a staff member. In these events the amounts consumed by members of the office staff (other than by one individual) is not very large. Even the person who drinks a lot behaves in a very 'civilized' way during these events, but they do talk a lot after the event about the alcohol they consumed, even though it was

not a key event in the evening. The use of alcohol by the female members of staff is talked about much more than that of the males.

A much more significant part is played by alcohol in the lives of the members of the staff in their men-only drinking occasions. These are with people outside of the office, but rarely is there a report of aggression, violence or 'misbehaviour' after alcohol use, even from these events. The drain on people's earnings is mostly through parties, events or celebrations that they attend or have to host themselves.

When asked, very few of the occasional users said that they enjoyed alcohol intoxication. They all said that they drank to conform, but it wasn't clear how nearly all could claim to be drinking to conform, and not for enjoyment of the alcohol use *per se*. The field assistant was asked to raise this question. The answers were almost defensive. If nearly all find alcohol use not a really enjoyable experience and nearly all were drinking to conform, what was the force that made alcohol use the 'conformist' behaviour? Some appeared not to understand the question, but others said that it was the done or expected thing. The implied answer is that the feeling that one should take alcohol in fun situations came from the environment – not necessarily from among the members of the group.

One possible explanation for most occasional users reporting that they did not enjoy the effect of alcohol is that they felt that our informant 'wanted' that answer. This would be particularly likely if the informants were somehow giving cues that they did not approve alcohol use, but our informant in this case was not a complete

teetotaler, and not heavily biased against alcohol use. If at all his bias would have been in the opposite direction. This we would have needed to explore if the answers were in the opposite direction.

There are some unusual features of this setting, compared to others. Firstly there is only one person who definitely consumes much alcohol daily. A second person probably drinks daily. The 'negative' behaviours of overt aggression and abuse are not common in their drinking occasions, and poverty is not so obvious even among those who earn very small salaries.

This is a more 'middle class' story, it appears. The norms are of the middle class. In income, the average for the shop is probably close to the average income of 'poor' families that we described in relation to the others settings. Somehow, in identity, the people here appear to align themselves with the norms of the better off. Not making scenes of overt aggression and violence after alcohol use is an example. The quiet acceptance of the open sipping of alcoholic beverages by women folk, at parties, is another. The use of alcohol by women is almost a sign of 'not belonging to the village'.

## Boarding life

Our field assistant befriended several young men living in rented premises or ‘boardings’ through casual conversation, and follow up of such meetings. In several instances he asked for details of places where he could find lodging, in case he too may have to find alternative accommodation soon. He then continued to make visits to these boardings where he made closer linkages. He would have spent about twelve days (mostly late evenings) conversing and participating in the life of the persons of that particular boarding.

The ‘boarding’ is the village people’s home in the city. Those who are too far to travel to and from work daily must have a place to live within closer reach of the workplace. These boardings are of different sizes and varieties. There are two aspects of boarding life. On the one hand it is a home away from home, so there is the possibility of living by different norms from the village. A greater sense of freedom, an absence of social control, prevails. The other aspect is that boarding life is somehow not ‘real’. Life is suspended and really begins only when one sets foot on home soil, but a greater part of the month is spent in the less real reality.

Some boarders take a room in a house where the resident family rents out a part for extra income. Four persons, on average, share a small room. There is usually a toilet (outside the main house) and a place for washing and bathing. In other ‘boardings’ all the rooms are for lodgers and the person who owns the building visits to check things and to collect the rent. These houses may have 20 or more people living in them.

We even encountered a ‘boarding’ house with 80 men living in it, but could not obtain adequate access during the time available. This was run by the employer of the residents – who all worked in shifts in his sales outlets. Our field assistant did make friends with people in several other boardings and visited them daily in the evenings. There are differences between boardings, but the similarities are more striking.

### 3.7.1 Example: Gemunu

Gemunu is 19 and works as a ‘barber’ in a hairdressing saloon. His boarding has six others living in it. He is the youngest and most recent resident. Boarding ‘life’ really begins when the majority return from work each day. One of the six is much more influential than the others.

*‘Priyantha Aiya has been here for over two years now. The owners of the house expect him to make sure that we all behave properly – in a way that will not be a problem for them. Priyantha Aiya knows everybody in the locality. So it is very useful for us that he is here. He introduced me to the house from where he gets his meals and they give me my meals too. It is so convenient because the food is cheaper than at a hotel, cleaner and available every day even if I get a little late.’*

The culture of each boarding is dependent on the nature of the person or persons who are most influential. In some the ‘aiya’ (elder brother) is more strict and

demanding. Others have to do small favours for him. In others, the influential members are extremely helpful and look after the rest like they were members of their own family.

*'Luckily for us Priyantha Aiya is very helpful and looks after our interests. He advises us when we are out late. He doesn't smoke and doesn't allow anyone else to smoke in the room. Sometimes he joins us for a trip to a musical show, and he will drink just one beer. And we don't drink much when he is there'.*

The characterization of another senior in a boarding is very different.

### 3.7.2 Example: Thusitha

Thusitha lives in a boarding, which he found through Wickrama who works in the same factory. Wickrama told Thusitha when he came to work that he lived in a boarding very conveniently located for the workplace. He said that he would get a place there for Thusitha too, so Thusitha left the room he had and joined this boarding in one month. Thusitha's account contrasts a good deal with Gemunu's.

*"Wickrama Aiya is respected in the factory. He always speaks up about any issue in the factory. Other workers tend to listen to Wickrama Aiya. We don't have a trade union, but the management also talks to Wickrama Aiya when there is a small problem. He usually solves it for them, so I don't want to leave this boarding that Wickrama Aiya has found.*

*Often I have to buy cigarettes for him. He always runs out of money. Most times he forgets to give me the money*

*later. When we go out for an evening, the others contribute more than Wickrama. He pulls out all the his money in his pocket and gives it, but it is generally less than the cost of what he has consumed, and we have to bear the cost of his transport back too. Nobody complains about this system."*

The more senior persons in the boardings are usually married and have to send money home regularly. Wickrama has a wife and children to support. Younger men who are single have commitments to their parents and brothers and sisters who often depend on them. Even those who have to support families in this way are persuaded to contribute more than their share of expenses for shared 'entertainment' activities of the group.

*"They will say that I am not married and so can afford to spend more than them. This is not like a forceful demand – but I feel shy not to spend when they say that. They say that they spent on all their friends parties and alcohol before they got married."*

This theme of forcing or persuading others to subsidize the alcohol expenses of those who consume most is seen in many other settings. If a person is asked the cost of the alcohol he consumes, he gives the cost of the alcohol that he himself purchases and consumes. What others pay for is not accounted for in the calculation. Those who pay for others' alcohol do not add this to their reported 'alcohol expenses' either. A large part of alcohol expenditures is hidden in this way.

For some of the younger members the cost of subsidizing others entertainment (mostly alcohol) is large. They sometimes gladly



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pay the bill when the crowd goes out for fun, and most of the bill is for alcohol. Very few have expenses other than for food and clothes and travel. Not much is left for clothes. For some this can be a weekly expense. They like to support their parents if they can, but often the money is spent. They still go home once a month or so to see their family, and some have to get money from their home to get back to work.

*'Even if I was living at home my parents still had to spend to give me food. Now the only benefit of doing a job is that they don't have to pay for my needs. Sadly, I still have to take money from them to survive in Colombo, even while doing a job. Still I am less of a burden to them than when I was living unemployed at home.'*

Some of the young members have girl friends. Then they have to spend on them also. If they go out, the evening's (or day's) total cost can be considerable. There is no place with much privacy for a couple to spend time together. Sometimes they rent a room in a hotel, but this is in the range of 500 rupees or so even for a few hours.

*'Although I may not join the boarding friends to go out for fun on a day that my girl friend is free, I am still asked to join the group. If they are short of money for their evening, they will ask me to contribute a little, so I have to spend for all the things with my girlfriend and still give a little money to the friends who are going out drinking without me.'*

Not everybody gives money like this. They are not threatened to give money, but pressurized to do so. Some of those who

want to be 'popular' may be more prone to make contributions like this. Those who do not wish to contribute, are allowed to refrain from doing so, but they are made to feel that they are not good members of the group. They are 'unpopular', labelled misers and criticized in their absence. Any newcomer soon learns what he must do to avoid acquiring the same image as these unpopular members of the boarding.

*'It is as you get gradually more senior in the boarding that you start drinking alcohol or taking tobacco. When a newcomer arrives in some boardings, the others will assault him physically for a trivial reason. In such boardings the older group keeps a lot of authority, and this is the way they do it. Any word or remark that the person says is enough to provoke a more senior person or two to hit him, but they don't go on assaulting after that. The others teach the newcomer how he should behave and comfort him, but he learns that there are people in the boarding who should be 'respected'. He may never again be assaulted physically, and the person who hit him may even indicate that he is sorry. 'I shouldn't have been angry for the small thing you said' he may say.'*

Whether this ensures regular participation in group activities of the 'boarding' is not clear. It is almost like an 'initiation' in some boardings to be physically attacked for some trivial reason, at least once. This occurs soon after the person takes up residence, and is quickly brushed aside by the others who tell him not to take it too seriously. 'He's not always like that, but sometimes he loses his temper'.



Large numbers travel home at weekends from city 'boardings' (hostels) where they reside to work or study. So much that is learnt in the city and instantly transferred to the village.

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A system of compulsory savings occurs in some boardings. All those who contribute have to pay a fixed amount every month to this 'seettu'. The total is handed to one person each month based on the luck of a draw. The organizer of the seettu gets the first month's collection. This system, according to many, is the only way to save any money. If people try to save money in a bank or in some other way, there is no pressure to keep up the payments. In a seettu there is no hope of avoiding payment, so money gets automatically saved, but there are risks, because people can lose their job and move away. So 'seettus' are generally among long-term residents in stable jobs.

Seettu money can also go for a celebration, for alcohol and special activities, but most seettu money is utilized 'productively'. Some item of furniture for the house, repairing a roof or getting a TV set are examples of things done with seettu money. Nobody in the boardings visited had mobile telephones, which is surprising. Young people especially like mobile phones to show off as a sign of success. Boardings were perhaps too insecure to keep a mobile phone for long without losing it. A few at the boarding had wristwatches, and all of these were of less than four hundred rupees or so in value.

There was an impression among some that people invested in few such possessions not only because these could easily get lost. Nobody wanted to appear better off than the others. This they felt could invite jealousy and create problems for them from a few individuals in the boarding.

*'If they felt that I had more money than them, some would be unhappy. Especially Prasanna. And he will pass hints and be unpleasant then if I refused to make a*

*contribution to something. I save money in a savings account, but I don't keep the book here as they will all definitely study it carefully. The others who show they are friendly will also be jealous if they see that I have some savings'.*

The theme of envy and jealousy, even among the relative strangers that come together in a boarding is again visible. The image of even slightly greater affluence than the others will invite hostility. This idea had come up repeatedly. Whether the feeling of envy is a social characteristic of the entire nation or only of the relatively poorer segments of society that were mostly sampled here, is not clear.

## The three-wheeler stand

Three-wheelers are parked everywhere, but these parking places are really ‘stands’ where there is a cluster of regulars. A person with a three-wheeler cannot just go and park somewhere until a ‘hire’ comes along. He (our research assistant did not find a single woman among the three-wheeler drivers) has to belong to a particular spot. Newcomers have to get a place through the sponsorship of someone already a part of a particular stand.

Our field assistant found it easy to mix and get into conversation with the men at these stands. The drivers were completely unoccupied and had little to do between ‘hires’, so they readily spoke with the field assistant who was loitering with them.

The most striking feature that our field assistants report is that in many of the stands with which they engaged there were people with links to criminal, shady or ‘borderline’ activities. These were usually the larger stands in crowded centres.

Most of the drivers who park their vehicles (three-wheelers) had these on hire and paid the owner of the vehicle 250 to 300 rupees per day, they said. The driver had to meet the cost of fuel. His income after these expenses ranged from two to six hundred rupees per day. The average earnings of the majority are between eight to fifteen thousand rupees per month.

Not all drivers were at this level of earning. Some had other ‘side-businesses’ that earned them much more, but quite a few lived in relatively deprived home settings, as could be gathered from clues in their conversation. Even those who earned relatively large amounts felt that they could not emerge from poverty while they resided in the places in which they now lived. The explanation for this is not very clear.

A few three-wheeler drivers are rich. They need not waste their time driving people around for a hire, but they keep the job because it is their avenue for other ‘side’ income. Some of this side income is not quite legal or decent, according to their own description. There are drivers probably engaged in bigger criminal activities or networks.

*‘Peter’s gold chain and bracelet are more expensive than his new three-wheeler. He doesn’t need to sit here waiting for a fifty-rupee hire, but his other income is dependent on being in this business’.*

So there are individuals or groups who are part of some other money-making network. They may help a rich person find sexual partners and deliver these partners too. They may be lookouts or informants for criminals. They may even be transporting heroin or handguns or bombs. All of these require that they drive the three-wheeler as their job. These individuals have more power than others in the ‘stand’.

The powerful person in the stand is the person who has more criminal contacts or knows more ways of earning money. There will be one person who knows a foreign resident in the area, or a rich man. He provides services specially to this client.

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If the foreign gentleman wants something done, he will contact the driver whom he knows, and that driver's stature grows. He can provide a sex worker to a lucrative client and get favours in return. If he is unable to attend to a special client, he will entrust the client only to someone else from the stand, whom he picks carefully.

The economic status of all the drivers is similar except for an individual or two. They have become like that through some powerful connection or illegal business. Others don't criticize or get in the way of these 'aiyas' (elder brothers), but among the rest there is the feeling that all must be similar and one person can't 'overtake' the others.

*'Even though we are friends and support each other against outsiders, there is a lot of jealousy of each other too. I can save enough money if I manage things properly to buy my own three-wheeler in about two years, but I am never able to save. I don't know how it happens, but the others don't let me save. They make sure that I spend on the same things that they waste their money on.'*

The night-time stand and daytime stand are completely different. In the late evenings the daytime drivers are replaced by different individuals. There is less of a 'community' in the night setting. Several of the drivers sit in their own three-wheeler and do not mix with the others. In the daytime they rarely sit alone. This is partly because it is so hot in the daytime, our field assistant speculates. They have to go to a shade if the vehicle is parked in the hot sun. This forces people together. In the evenings and night, they can be comfortable sitting in their own vehicle.

The people who drive are also different. The daytime drivers live somewhere nearby and go home at night. Quite a few of the night drivers are people from 'outstations' (namely, people whose homes are elsewhere and who lodge in Colombo for employment). Several of them do a daytime job too and drive the three-wheeler at night, for additional income. There is less 'shady' business carried out by this group. The drivers are mostly from a different way of thinking, and the police too are more vigilant at night. A three-wheeler driver is more likely to be stopped and questioned by the police in the night than in the daytime.

There is a culture that evolves in each three-wheeler stand peculiar to itself, but our field assistants felt that the similarities were remarkable. And the 'three-wheeler stand' culture is more relevant to the daytime group than to the night group. It is they who mix with each other, socialize and share things, and often live in close proximity to each other. Their homes are close to the 'stand', so their social setting included the area of the stand even before they became three-wheeler drivers.

What happens in the three-wheeler stand is therefore a reflection of life in the communities from which those who drive these vehicles come. These are overcrowded poor communities. When something happens in anybody's home, the community is instantly aware of it, and the three-wheeler stand too becomes a place in which this can be discussed. How people behave and should behave is discussed and decided in the stand too.



Our research assistants found it easy to mix and get into conversation with the men at three wheeler stands. The drivers were completely unoccupied and had little to do between 'hires'



### 3.8.1 Example: Jayantha

Jayantha's daughter attained age recently. He is now in trouble trying to settle the expenses that were connected to the ceremony related to her coming of age. Jayantha thinks that the money could have been better spent, instead of being lavishly wasted at a party, but he acknowledges that he had no choice in the matter. He says privately that he would not have been allowed to avoid having a big party.

Not having a party for his daughter's 'attaining age' would have caused a stir in their community in which he lived. People would have, he feels, asked him or 'ordered' him to have one. This includes the friends he meets daily at work at the stand.

*'If I said I was not having a party, the others would have said that they would organize it for my daughter, so there would have been a party whether I wanted it or not, and my daughter would have been ashamed'.*

Who will 'not allow' not having a party? 'Everybody'.

It transpires that 'everybody' specially includes his wife's parents and a few vociferous individuals in the crowded neighbourhood in which he lives. There is one person in the three-wheeler stand too, who would have insisted that he throw a party. Jayantha points out one of his friends there.

*'If Peiris there realized that I was not going to have a big party, he would personally have almost ordered me to do so. He lives close to my home and knew about the event, so he and the*

*others automatically assume that we are hurriedly organizing every thing for the party, and they will offer help. I have no chance of refusing'.*

How can Peiris order Jayantha to have a big party for his daughter's event?

*"It's not just Peiris. He would have just taken the lead. All the others too would have agreed with him. He would have said to the others, 'Machan this guy is trying to avoid his responsibilities towards his family. Why don't we get together and give this sweet girl the celebration she deserves?' And they could have done it too. I of course did want to give a party, so they didn't have to do this. I am only guessing what they may have done. I was just trying to imagine what would have happened because you asked me."*

It transpires that Peiris also has the habit of shouting loudly and becoming abusive when he walks home heavily intoxicated. If he has felt some grudge against anybody, that person will be vilified by him in public abuse. He may make ugly allegations of sexual misconduct or stealing about the person that he is annoyed with. In the morning Peiris does not recall these events and does not have to feel embarrassed when he confronts the person that he abused the previous evening. He will greet and talk to the person as if nothing had happened.

Jayantha is not frightened that Peiris can physically abuse him, but he would not want to risk the verbal abuse that Peiris is capable of, when intoxicated. Not many people in the village would, either.

### 3.8.2 Poverty

Somehow, the majority of three-wheeler drivers are poor. They appear to live in difficult circumstances. This is partly because they have to earn daily and live on it. If they have a good day, the money goes in some way or another. Nothing remains for the next day. If they have a bad day, money has to be found from some source on the basis of repayment with tomorrow's earnings. It is usually possible to get this without payment of interest from another three-wheeler driver.

Opportunities or a 'chance' happens from time to time. Someone may forget a parcel or leave something of value. An inexperienced client may be unexpectedly generous. On days where good fortune strikes, the others feel entitled to a share. This means entertaining them at the end of the day. The lucky person doesn't always keep his good luck a secret. He seems to be happy to spend it all on the others that evening. It is almost a matter of pride. Such unexpected windfalls appear not to be regarded as 'real' income, so it is okay to spend it all in the evening. The easiest way to spend it is to celebrate with friends, and the commonest celebration is to drink lots of alcohol.

In several three-wheeler stands the group of drivers tend to socialize after work with one another, and with a few others who loiter with them at the stand. There may be more than one 'clique' like this, but there was no evidence of hostility between the different cliques. Our field assistants felt that the clique had a strong say on how a driver spent his leisure time. If the others wanted to quit, he would stop work too even if there were hires available.

### 3.8.3 Alcohol

Many of the cliques have members who wanted to take quite a bit of alcohol every day, before going home. Others too would be invited to join them. Some would join on special days even if they were not keen on drinking. A special day would be any day where a few would propose to have a party. There doesn't have to be a special reason for these regular events. If they haven't all gone out drinking for several days that means they'd go out today. If any member of the clique gets an unexpected sum of money, then they all have to go out in the evening. (It would often still be inadequate for all the evening's expenses, but the others would have to put in less than on the usual 'evening out'.

*'Let's get together for some fun this evening. (Why don't we get set this evening?) Sarath has got a good break today and he wants to give us a good time.'*

On such evenings all the members of the clique would join in 'having fun'. It would be different from the routine of the regular daily drinkers. They would not just drink some alcohol and go home, but would linger and spend time drinking and socializing together. There would be things to eat alongside the drinking. No member of the clique could avoid joining these special occasions, and they could be more than once a week. Thus all members were obliged to consume alcohol more than once a week.

They would have to consume alcohol whether they wished to or not. Nobody refused, and probably nobody wished not to consume either.

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*'If we go out for fun, then it means we also want to have fun like the others. So there is no reason for anybody to be forced to consume. If we did not like to drink, would we go out with these friends?'*

Other than relative newcomers to that place nearly all the members of a clique take alcohol in the evening. It is not easy to stay separate from this culture, and the newcomers too get into more frequent use rather quickly. Overall the economic impact of alcohol purchasing alone was very high for this group. Lost revenue due to stopping work early on days that were for 'enjoyment' was another form of economic drain. A member of the setting who is not a regular heavy drinker says,

*'These people earn 10,000 to 15,000 rupees a month and they have only about 4,000 to 5,000 rupees really to spend on their families'.*

In these drinking sessions they talk about the day's experiences. Some of these relate to unexpected opportunities that arose that day. Newcomers learn in these boasting sessions what is possible to do. They learn that some things are matters to be proud of.

*'A colleague will say how he noticed a girl who seemed to be waiting for somebody and not being sure what to do when the person does not turn up. The new guy has not even realized what has happened. This person goes up to the girl and starts talking to her and warns her not to loiter there too long as it is not a good place for a girl to be alone. 'During the drinking session he describes what happened with great pride'.*

It appears that the event that the man described is not a rare or isolated event. The drivers who are just waiting, doing nothing, until a hire arrives are constantly on the lookout. If they see a boy who looks as if he is not familiar with the area, one of them will go up to him and get talking. After he finds out a little, another will casually speak to the boy and they are only interested in whether something can be obtained from him.

The driver who spoke to the girl referred to earlier realized that she had made arrangements to go back home several hours later. Having missed her appointment she was not sure what to do with her time. The man then suggests that a girl should not be alone and offers to drop her off at his home where she can spend time with his mother and sister and go back later. She is grateful for his protection and goes with him and finds that his mother and sister have gone out and she has to wait till they return. Few girls are as gullible as this, but the less gullible too can be seduced to part with something or the other that the clever 'confidence trickster' wants.

These stories are exchanged with pride, and everybody learns how to use opportunities. The behaviour of the man with the least scruples is made acceptable in the drinking milieu, and the others learn to follow the easier set of rules and don't feel that it is so bad do some things that they may have earlier felt was nasty. Taking all the money off a village boy who had come looking for someone regarding a job and leaving him helpless becomes acceptable through the subsequent bragging about it in the drinking session. Any bad feeling he may have had about

the helplessness of his victim is converted to a feeling of pride when the others praise his cleverness. Soon he is able to say these things in the 'normal' setting to his crowd without having to wait for the drinking occasion.

### **3.8.4 Some contrasts**

The average income of the three-wheeler drivers is probably double that of those in the cooperative shop described earlier, but their lives are much poorer. Just as with the village poor who had higher income than the cooperative shop staff here too the income is not the single biggest factor that determines the poverty of the people's lives.

The cooperative shop is therefore important for comparison. One feature we found there was that those with small incomes too had to conform to standards of the 'middle classes'. Another was that few members consumed alcohol (or tobacco or other drugs) daily. The third feature on which the shop differed was in giving people a monthly income instead of one daily.

## Places of entertainment and leisure

### 3.9.1 Hotels

**O**ur field assistant had to enter this setting as a customer and later get to know the staff. The process required about seven visits, and these could not be done on consecutive days, but at intervals. Initially the field assistant was a single customer, but with time he learnt how readily he was accepted into drinking circles. Where alcohol was not being consumed, he could not with equal readiness pull up his own chair and gradually become part of the group.

What are called 'hotels' are mostly places where people come to get food and drink. These are what would be called 'restaurants' elsewhere. Bigger hotels attract a different clientele from the smaller. In the smaller hotels people come and eat quickly and then leave. Some may linger a few minutes after the meal to have a cup of tea with or without an accompanying cigarette.

The bigger hotels are more 'classy'. These are not the upper end expensive hotels, but places where a group can sit around a table the whole evening eating and drinking. People come here to spend their time 'enjoying' rather than just to fulfil a need for food.

Richer regular customers have their own special table or tables. They are usually a group of middle aged men. They order their drinks first, usually a 'quality' arrack, and various 'bites' to go with it. They chat around a bottle of alcohol for over an hour

and then order and have their food. The hotel staff know these customers, know their needs and routine and know how much of a 'tip' they will leave. They do not shout or make a lot of noise.

Not-so-rich groups too come to the hotel. These are usually a set of friends from the same workplace who want to enjoy themselves once a month or so. Unlike the regular, better-off customers these groups are very loud and conspicuous. They want attention, and want to demonstrate that they are having fun. They will order beer or arrack and are keen to show their drink to others. So they will stand up, walk up to another table as if looking for somebody, all the while holding their glass of alcohol high and visible and talking loudly from a distance to their friends still sitting at the table. Later in the evening they will walk with exaggerated unsteadiness and talk about being high.

Although they show that their usual inhibitions are not operative any more, they do not become violent or aggressive in this setting. This hotel is at a slightly higher status than their usual settings, and they somehow do not display the common tendency they have to become abusive after alcohol in other settings.

A group of six workers for example, working in a 'garment factory', all of them between 24 and 30, comes in at 7.00 p.m. or so. They too order 'bites', but not a lot of expensive ones (a sliced omelette rather than roasted meat). They have dinner and leave relatively early (work starts early the next day). Their conversation is stereotyped. Early in the evening the subject is people and incidents at the workplace and jokes about their bosses. Girls and women at the workplace are also



The association of 'fun', leisure and enjoyment is restricted to legal alcohol consumption. The same molecule - ethyl alcohol - in illicit alcohol cannot provide the same fun or enjoyment.



the subject. This is just to describe the attributes of different females. So there is merriment discussing the apparent ugliness of someone or vanity of another.

Later on the subject is usually sex. Each one describes some recent sexual incident and the details of the activity that took place, the reactions of the partner and so on. These conversations can be overheard by others, but not many are interested. Sexual activities with their regular girl friends are also discussed in this forum. Sometimes the girl friend is someone known to the others too, and the narrator takes delight in telling them how his girl behaves in bed, especially (it appears) because they too know her and see her everyday. Parts of her anatomy that they do not see are described along with how she responds sexually.

Some stories are about people and events in their home towns or villages. Even though the accounts appear rather fantastic, nobody is accused of making up and describing experiences that did not happen. The themes are nearly always sex, enjoying drinking occasions or getting into fights and assaults. The fighting is reported to be after alcohol, and they describe their own tendency to assault others when drunk. Remarkably none of them becomes aggressive in this setting.

By the time the meal is over all of the group are 'disinhibited' and jolly and loud. When the bill is brought, one person may loudly offer to pay it all. Someone else too then offers to share, but on all occasions the bill ends up being shared. Our field assistant too leaves with the group and gets more detail of their economic and other relevant particulars. Long conversations happen on the way back.

A later calculation shows that each person in the group gets a salary of about 4,000 to 5,500 rupees a month of which they spend about 2,500 to 3,500 on lodging and meals. This leaves each one about 1,000 to 2,000 or so 'spending money' per month for all needs, beyond day to day survival. They do send some money home to support their families too. Of the 1,000 to 2,000 that each person has available for a month, the evening's enjoyment usually costs about four to five hundred rupees.

The money is spent in a setting where more wealthy people 'enjoy', so the evening has some value beyond the alcohol and the food consumed. It gives them a subject to talk about with the friends who did not join in the evening's festivities, and it is not just a subject to talk about, it is also a way of showing who they are, or can be.

Hardly any families come in the evenings to these hotels and hardly any women. There are men who come alone too, to sit at a table and drink beer or arrack for about an hour and then leave after having dinner. These 'single' men do not look very wealthy either. Some of them come only on a weekend or holiday while there are others who come almost daily.

### 3.9.2 The shopping mall

Shopping malls are special in that they allow even the very poor to walk side by side with the very rich. They allow our research assistants too the same opportunity. After a time a 'culture' of the mall can be recognized. This is created by the regulars who linger. They don't all come every day or talk to every one of the other regulars, but they recognize and acknowledge each other. They know what happens in the mall.

Rich people come to the mall to buy things, to look at the shop windows and eat and drink. They do not realize that they are often being observed by another group, mostly poorer young men, who are studying their clothes, ornaments, style and behaviour. Some rich people come as a families or as mother and children. Some mothers like to come with their children dressed well and walk around to be seen. They may buy something they need or don't need.

Poorer folk too can come in, linger, look at windows and the food and drink, spend as much time as they wish and leave without spending any money. The poor get the opportunity to see what the rich do as well as to be physically near them, to see what they wear, how they talk and walk and the accessories they carry. The rich don't particularly notice the poor.

Celebrities too drop in. An athlete, sportsman or sportswoman or film star walk across and everybody points to them. Some are identified as sons of ministers or well known businessmen. Others with money come here as a convenient meeting place or rendezvous. Rich, young men come to the car park with their girls and stay inside with the engines running and air-conditioning on. The poorer youth who walk around see this too. They may walk into the car park as a part of their exploration or sightseeing.

A group of very attractive young men and women are regularly seen smoking. They sit and smoke in a way that displays their smoking as a sign of pride and to be displayed. Smoking inside the mall was previously not permitted, but these groups seem to have forcibly created 'spaces' where displays of smoking is now accepted. This group can be seen

frequently with 'Western' women who also smoke or walk around with beer cans. They are lavish with their money. Our assistant claimed that even a newcomer can get food or drink at their expense, if they link up with them.

There were a few 'foreign' girls in very short skirts, with beer cans in one hand and very ostentatiously shown cigarettes in the other, who came and spent time regularly. Our field assistant says that they were dressed in a way that 'attention was all on them'. They always sat or stood on the ground floor in the area where they could be seen from all the upper floors too. Our field assistant says,

*'They stood at this most prominent place almost on every day that I was doing the observations here. They come off and on, drink beer and smoke on occasion, talk loudly and draw attention to themselves – even though their skimpy clothes already do that enough. But they did not look as if they were looking for customers for sex. They always leave together in the same group'.*

Some malls have become settings where people come to meet other people, or hope to meet other people. These probably include encounters for sexual intimacy too. Several young men and women are seen just 'hanging around'. They are on the lookout for others who may pay attention to them. When they do pay attention they may casually happen to get into a short conversation, and they can then be seen leaving together.

Some of these persons were quite open about why they were spending time at the mall. They were willing to share information about themselves with little reticence.

## Alcohol and Poverty

### **Example: Sudath**

Sudath is 18, from a poor home. He comes to the mall after classes. He loves to look at new fashions, dancing and models. He is ready to go with a man who summons him for the evening, but only if he can get money. He goes also to the beach where he may meet a wealthier man who would like to take him away. He will not go with anybody who does not want to give him a gift. Other than this he is always looking out for girls who will go out with him, but spending time with girls costs money.

*'If I get five hundred rupees that is enough for me to live for a day or two. My father gets a small salary and all that he earns goes for alcohol. Nobody is interested in what I do. I can sleep at home or at a friend's house, and I don't have to tell beforehand whether I will come home. If I don't go home in time, I will have no dinner, but dinner is not very grand anyway.'*

Sudath and others like him want money to get the right clothes and other trimmings. This may be a particular wristband or cap. A handkerchief to tie around his forehead has to be of the type that is now used by others. If he meets a girl just to walk around with, he needs money. He gets ideas about what to wear from looking at 'Music TV', from film star magazines and by observing rich boys. All he likes to do is be with friends, walk around with them. The more friends he has the better. A gang of ten will be much better than just walking with two others.

Sudath and many others in the mall 'cut classes' and use the time to loiter in places like this. He is referring to tuition classes,

which are held in the afternoons. They try to show younger boys in the class that they are having great fun outside and get them too to join. A younger boy may come with more money than what Sudath has. Then he is able to cover some of the day's expenses from that boy's money.

### **Example: Srima**

Srma is about twenty-eight or so and has a young son whom she brings to school every morning. She drops in to the mall and spends time until 1.00 p.m., after which she has to take her son back home. Srma has great financial difficulties. One of the groups of rich young men who walk around the mall have met her before, and if they are there, they invite her to go out for a drive and then drop her back in time to pick up her son.

*'I don't drink alcohol, only a beer. These friends get offended if I don't have even a beer when they are drinking it in the car. We go out to some interesting place and they drop me back and it is better than just killing time here.'*

Srma is quite definite that people lose their inhibitions when they consume alcohol.

*'Actually I don't like beer very much, but, you know, after a beer you really don't care where you are or what you are doing.'*



Shopping malls are special in that they allow even the very poor to walk side by side with the very rich. Rich people do not realize that they are often being observed by another group, mostly poorer young men, who are studying their clothes, ornaments, style and behaviour.

### 3.9.3 Other leisure settings

#### Galle Face Green

This space of green facing the sea beach is used by many people to walk or to sit down on the grass and relax in the evenings. People come here to walk or jog for exercise in the mornings. They may come as a group or individually, but they do their exercise and leave. In the evenings it is quite a different matter. Many people come to spend their leisure here sitting around or promenading. Not many really wealthy people are seen spending their leisure here.

The green is a free space for anybody to enjoy without having to pay any money, so it is a poor man's leisure venue. We asked our field assistant to spend a few days in this setting for this reason. The shopping mall too is a setting in which someone can sit around without having to pay for the privilege, but it is not used by poor families, only poor youth. The green is used by poorer families too, to spend some time relaxing.

Poorer families, groups of not so well to do boys and couples come to Galle Face to spend the evening. Vendors of different kinds sell things to eat or drink and other trinkets. People generally sit in groups chatting to each other. In these groups they do what they have learnt to do for leisure.

Some years ago there were often fights and brawls too, because groups would consume alcohol and then become aggressive for the slightest provocation. A few months before our study commenced the authorities prohibited the consumption

of alcohol on the green. Now groups could be seen who were consuming alcohol surreptitiously. They would bring their alcohol in 'soft-drink' bottles and pretend they were not consuming alcohol, but they would still probably consume the amounts that they were previously using. Now it is with little fanfare and display.

Groups could be observed leaving after a few hours of drinking alcohol together. There would be some members who were unsteady because of their relatively higher intake, but they try hard not to let it be visible because it was no longer a 'drinking' venue. They were not provoked to be aggressive or boisterous as they were previously when they were intoxicated. There is hardly any fighting and aggression on Galle Face Green even though people are still drinking alcohol as before.

#### 'Walking' - pavements, junctions and crowded places

Young people with little money have to innovate leisure activities. Some of these youths that our field researchers met at the malls or at Galle Face Green, described what else they do for leisure. A common leisure activity was 'going walking' (*avidinna yanawa*). 'Going walking' in Sinhala means 'going out' too, but one form of going walking is in fact literally walking. These groups would walk along roads where there were shops and restaurants simply looking at whatever was going on, and looking for opportunities. Our field assistant joined in two of these walks for a few hours.

In such a walk they may stop at a junction and chat to each other, look at passers-by and see whether an opportunity existed to link up with someone interesting. They'd



The Galle face green is a free space for anybody to enjoy without having to pay any money, so it is a poor man's leisure venue. This space of green facing the sea beach is used by many people to walk or to sit down on the grass and relax in the evenings.



disperse in groups of two or three and meet together again as the larger group to walk on to the next 'spot'. In these places they will always be on the lookout for vulnerable persons who may be an easy target. It is a matter of skill as to what they can extract from each such individual 'victim'.

A small success will be to get free food using a person they just met. They'd invite a new-found friend to a restaurant and offer him snacks and tea, for instance. Then they'd pretend to want to go to the toilet and escape from the restaurant leaving the unsuspecting new friend to pay the bill for everybody. This kind of thing would be resorted to if the victim appeared not to have much money. Larger scale earnings are possible but rare. Trying to make friends with someone who will feel sorry and buy something for them is the commonest tactic. With longer-term contacts it is possible sometimes even to get a 'loan'.

When they do get some money through fair means or otherwise, it is spent mostly on clothes and other 'extras' to help them look like the rich young men. Imitation materials are available at low cost, to resemble what the rich youth have. If there is money left over, it is spent on eating and on drinking alcohol at more 'high class' settings. They too order 'lemon gin' and not arrack, and boast for weeks about the special effect they got with lemon gin, compared to arrack. People from their background haven't even heard about lemon gin and certainly can't afford to drink it at the places that these young men have visited.

The young men from the cooperative shop too bought lemon gin once a year and spoke about it for another year. Young and unemployed youths have discovered that the way of showing a really special experience is to spend money on lemon gin. The field assistants in the two settings were different and so neither was able to follow up on how 'lemon gin' had acquired this aura of class and sophistication among two widely different groups of poorer and less privileged young men living in the city.

The poorer youth encountered here seem to have worked out many different strategies to savour what they believe to be the pleasures that the city offers to those with money.

### **3.9.4 Role models and others of influence**

Less affluent young men learn about rich youth drinking lemon gin and aspire to experience it even once. Rich or wealthy young men are the most important role models for the poorer youth. How the model behaves, is picked up by constantly studying them, following them and perhaps even talking to them, if the opportunity arises. This is not readily possible.

Those who have opportunities to associate with the rich youth provide the link. They come back and tell the others how the rich guys spend their time, what they wear, where they get their clothes, the accessories that are currently fashionable, the kinds of alcohol and other drugs that they use and what they do for sexual pleasure. Our field assistant felt that some of these stories may not come from any real fraternisation with richer youth, but from imaginary associations created for better status.

There are some among the less affluent groups too who are better informed about such matters than the rest. They too are influential because they know more about things than the others. They take careful note of hairstyles, clothes and other fashions from TV programmes and film magazines. There are less affluent young men who travel to India to bring things to sell. These guys too are better informed about the styles and fashions in India and they wear something that is not freely available at present in the Sri Lankan shops. This makes them stand out. Most of this group are reported to be Muslim youths.

Perhaps the most influential within a group are the members who have a little more money than the rest. The other influential persons are those who know most about the subjects of interest – such as fashion, music, money-making and opportunities for sex.

Young men who work wearing a necktie are looked up to, whether they are rich or not. Only a certain category of office employee wears a necktie. A clerk does not wear a tie, so there is an implication of higher status of the man who wears a necktie, even though it is not strong proof that the person is rich. There are others who are not of the same status who too wear a tie, but they will not talk to each other in English. The ones who are to be copied are young, wear a necktie and speak to each other in English.

## **Poor lives in Colombo – final impressions**

**L**ives of many people are poor in Colombo. They are poor in the range of things to do and be involved in, poor in variety of interests, poor in aspirations to aim for and poor in comfort and opportunities to enjoy leisure. The lives of women are remarkably poorer than that of men.

How do the lives of the economically least privileged compare with those of 'middle class'? We have no comparative data.

The middle class woman probably has a more comfortable physical environment in which to live. She will probably sleep on a more comfortable bed, for example, and hardly ever sleep on the floor. She will probably be less likely a victim of violence or aggressive behaviour by the husband (of this we have no strong data). But she too will work at a full time job outside the home, do all of the cooking and housework, and watch television as the main, or only, leisure activity. Among men, the difference between those of 'middle class' and those economically least privileged is probably higher. The middle class man is less likely to smoke, he will read a little more, and he will have less threat of involvement in physical violence or aggression. The lives of children will likely differ considerably between the 'middle class' and the least privileged. The most striking difference will be in their aspirations. Middle class children will dream of becoming an engineer, teacher, doctor, or lawyer. None of the informants in our study ever mentioned any such aspirations for their children. This is despite 'free education' for all.

### 3.10.1 Lives of the economically deprived in Colombo

What are the most striking things we have found about poverty and life in the urban setting?

Firstly that the term 'poor' hides a great deal of intra-group differences. The poor are of many levels.

Many of the most poor in the city are crowded together. Much of the character of their lives is derived from this one fact. They are unable to 'wall themselves off', for example as a family, from what happens in their community. The poor in the village and the not-so-poor in the city have a slightly better defined space, a boundary.

### 3.10.2 'Porosity'

Because of not having a boundary beyond which the rest of the world or community cannot intrude (or 'porosity' of the living space), the poor in the city will find it difficult to improve economically. A slight growth in income or wealth will be recognized, and demands made on the slightly better off, at times of hardship or crisis, will be greater.

The people who appear to be able to improve their physical circumstances, whilst still residing in the crowded community, appear to be those who somehow managed to wall-off or separate their compound physically. To build a wall or fence around your house in an overcrowded setting requires a good deal of power and a certain lack of concern for what other people may feel or say. To have a gate which can be shut or locked is quite unusual.

The 'porosity' affects even family and sex life. Privacy is difficult. At the same time there is, paradoxically, more opportunity for sexual liaisons outside of marriage. To 'jump the fence' when a moment's opportunity arises is part of common parlance. Poverty in the city goes hand in hand with becoming part of a crowd, even at home. Severe poverty entails a loss of physical boundaries for the self and the family.

### 3.10.3 'Jealousy'

Combined with a feeling of envy for anybody who rises above the rest, the forced sharing of all life and life circumstances is a further hindrance to any family moving up, economically. Whether this tendency, to want to keep all others no better than oneself, is a feature outside this kind of community has to be studied. But it certainly is a strong element in these communities. Many of our informants have referred to this as 'jealousy'.

Jealousy is most evident in relation to money and material possessions. So anybody getting some unexpected windfall will be forced to spend it all in celebration. This is a legitimate way of getting them to squander what they have got. After a time this becomes the norm or 'natural' thing to do with all extra income. We saw the same tendency reflected in the rural areas too.

Physical improvement in the household or appliances will similarly draw attention to the family, if the 'level' of these exceeds the norm. More subtle improvements are hindered too. A couple that is happy together will be envied. Once noticed there will be small attempts to undermine their

joy. A man who does not consume alcohol daily with the crowd can be targeted in the same way. He can be asked to contribute to celebrations or events or some other community need and a measure of pressure can be applied to make him do so.

Alcohol was said to afford a unique opportunity for the 'jealous' to ensure that others don't surpass them. This is because alcohol use is associated with social interaction without inhibitions. People who are to be targeted can be readily singled out and harassed with no impediments at all. They can be pressed or persuaded, in the drinking setting, to comply with what the group wants. The most vociferous few strongly influence what the group as a whole wants. Compliance includes behaviour outside the drinking setting too. What someone did this morning can be brought up at the drinking session, and the person criticized, condemned or attacked. People can similarly be told how they should behave in their day to day lives, and their failure to comply can be brought up for comment at the next drinking session.

#### **3.10.4 'Powerful individuals'**

Another feature of the life of the poor in the city is the presence and influence of 'powerful' groups or individuals. Significant control is exerted by vested interest groups on how the poor live day to day. These influences are really a manifestation of powers outside the community. A 'big person' outside determines the limits of some things that people may do. How much freedom a visiting researcher may be given too is probably regulated by agents representing the 'authorities'.

This constitutes a major compromise of autonomy, but it is not felt as an imposition by people there. They have probably always learnt to keep within given limits. There are some people within the community whom others do not challenge. They do not intrude too much into people's private affairs but the fact that they can, if they want to, is felt.

#### **Lack of control**

The most striking factor of the way that the poor spend money is that they seem to be governed even more than the rich by how others think they should spend money. The poor spend money on things that will give them social credit. So do the rich, but the rich seem to have less direct pressure than the poor on how they should live. Others don't accost the rich man and abuse or criticize him if he does not conform. The rich man may like to impress his peers, but he is not subjugated by them. The poor man in the city is rather less free to do as he chooses.

If a poor family does not wish to have a party when their daughter reaches menarche, it will have to explain why it did not. A middle class family may decide not to have a party for this event. They may be criticized out of their hearing, but in a poor family the parents will be asked directly why they are not doing their duty by their daughter.

Others in the community will feel that they have a right to demand an explanation. They may even be able to reject and overrule this explanation. Somebody else may come forward to hold the party! The same goes for funerals and weddings (other than secret weddings resorted to for some presumably embarrassing reason).

### **Impossibility of overcoming poverty**

A comment that struck us was that people could not emerge from poverty as long as they lived in that setting, irrespective of the income they were able to earn. One factor underlying this is the ‘porosity’ of living arrangements that we referred to earlier. There is no room for slow growth or development out of sight of others, and others are not necessarily all happy to see one family prosper.

The factors underlying this include alcohol.

### **3.10.5 Alcohol and other substance use**

The centrality of alcohol or heroin use for the majority of adult men is another visible feature in the most underprivileged settings. Tobacco too is consumed heavily. Everybody knows that the trade and use of illicit drugs and illicit alcohol is not to be challenged, beyond a certain point. Tobacco may be an equally pervasive and harmful influence on the lives of the poor in the village, but the freedom to criticize it, to challenge it and to try to reverse its grip on the community has not been taken away.

The effect of alcohol on the community is enormous. It is not just the money that is spent on alcohol., but that money too is considerable.

There are means by which the heavier drinkers make others pay for their alcohol. Forcing every occasion to be an ‘alcohol occasion’ is one of these. Then creating the feeling that much alcohol must be served for a ‘proper’ party or occasion is another.

People who are new to the group or junior have to take up more of the bill when they go out. Collecting money from light alcohol users and non-users too, when events or celebrations are organized, is common. In all of these, the cost for alcohol is not registered by either party as a alcohol expense, should someone try to compute the money spent on alcohol.

Newcomers to the city are made to contribute to the ‘fun’ and alcohol use of their seniors – urban and rural. There are experts at siphoning out money from the pockets of recent arrivals from the village. Some older hands manage to utilise their own earnings for themselves and their families whilst using the money of others to have ‘fun’. Those who have to contribute most for this are rural young persons working on their first job in Colombo. More senior people in their workplace and boarding have perfected the art of withdrawing money from their pockets.

### **Behaviour in drinking settings**

What the poor say and do in their drinking settings is very different from what the rich do. The behaviour that people learn to display in drinking settings spills over to the rest of life. In the drinking setting, poor people are allowed to transgress personal boundaries to any extent they wish. Those who want to control what others say and do are able in the drinking setting to tell them what they should do. They can also question anybody on whatever subject they choose.

No question is out of order. A stronger person in the drinking group can ask another anything he wishes, and the other

is obliged to answer. The stronger person gets the right during the drinking event to comment and criticize the conduct of others in the community. He can also tell them how they should conduct themselves in future.

Striking differences are visible in the way that alcohol affects behaviour. A wealthier group consumes alcohol at the same hotel as group of poorer workers who have come there to drink as a special treat, but only the poorer drinkers become noisy and conspicuous. When alcohol is used surreptitiously in places where it is prohibited, people who have consumed enough to make them unsteady still do not become loud and aggressive – although they did when it was not prohibited and therefore openly consumed.

### **Other substance use**

Alcohol and heroin are an integral part of the lives of many people in poor communities. Tobacco use is too, but it is somehow less noticed or commented upon. The total amount spent by the community on tobacco will probably not be that much less than what is spent on alcohol, but alcohol and heroin receive much more attention than tobacco does.

### **Alcohol, poverty and crime**

Criminal acts and violence appeared rather close to the surface in the poorest communities. Whether similar degrees of violence and criminality in richer communities are somehow hidden is debatable. The overall impression is that violent and aggressive behaviour is always lurking somewhere behind the scenes, and it is as if this tendency influences and controls much of life in the poorest communities.

The impact of alcohol on public norms about morality was described and highlighted repeatedly. This issue is taken up in the general discussion later. The ‘license’ afforded by alcohol to say and do things without too much worry about the consequences has many impacts. It certainly assists the physically strong or aggressive to dominate others, and we learnt that alcohol was used as a means of keeping people within the community developing beyond the level of their neighbours.