

Just Unchanged or Worse?

– Household livelihood of Estate Tamils in the tea plantations of the Upcountry Sri Lanka–

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Introduction

Sri Lanka's Tea industry has been developed as a cash crop for the British colonial economy and later for Sri Lanka's one of the largest foreign exchange earners, from the beginning of the industry in the 19th century to date. Its production system has unchanged as the conventional plantation, but the social status of Estate Tamils¹, who have been plantation labors originally from South India to Sri Lanka², has drastically changed – first as indenture labor to Sri Lankan citizen just like any other citizens on the island since 2003³.

Originally, Estate Tamils were all settled in enclave of the tea plantation estates. There was not a drastic change in their life style as labors until Sri Lanka became independent as Dominion of Ceylon in 1948. Upon independence of Sri Lanka, Estate Tamils' social status became unsure and unrecognized. Estate Tamils' living environment has unchanged either, as one of the worst and poorest areas in the country.

To the extent that Estate Tamils are now fully entitled Sri Lankan citizen, it is crucial to examine whether their household livelihood situation has become better or just unchanged as before, in terms of their socio-economic situation. This paper, thus, intends to illustrate the overall situation of Estate Tamils' household livelihood situation to date, based on the field survey conducted with 100 tea estate residents on 7 estates of Nuwara Eliya District. It also examines and analyzes the causes for the current situation.

The survey reveals that Estate Tamils' socio-economic situation has not changed much, compared to the period that they were still stateless until 2003, when all the Estate Tamils became Sri Lankan citizen.

Any index to measure poverty for the estate sector still remains in the third place among Sri Lanka's all three sectors such as urban and rural sector.

The paper finally states its conclusion that Estate Tamils' household livelihood situation still remains the worst, even after becoming Sri Lankan citizen. It also presents the further studies to conduct at the end of the paper, for seeking the root causes for the current situation.

I. Context: Tea plantation estates and Estate Tamils

1. Estate Tamils in the tea plantations

As Sri Lanka's tea, known as Ceylon Tea, has tremendous influence over the world's tea market, it is considered as one of the most important export products for the nation as well as the world's tea market. However, the living conditions of the tea plantations for Estate Tamils have never changed either, just like the British colonial period, except for some minor improvement of residential facilities such as electricity.

Currently, there are more than 470 estates⁴ of tea, rubber and coconuts as well as spices. The plantation system was introduced to Sri Lanka by British in the 19th century, first with coffee. One of the significant characteristics of the plantation system is its labors residing within plantation estates. Sri Lanka's plantation estates are not an exception that had their labors live and work in the same premises. In tradition, the plantation labors' children usually take over the labor work on the same estates for generations, working on a daily wage basis.

The labors pluck tea leaves by hand and

manufacturing tea with old fashioned machineries, which is said to be a forthcoming issue for modernization of the tea industry as well.

Estate residents' living conditions are also considered as one of the serious issues for the country these days.

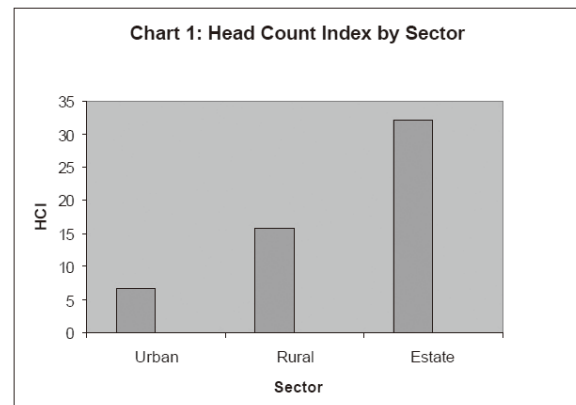
Estate Tamils mostly live in the plantation estates under the holistic control of their life by the plantation management. Thus, Estate Tamils have been isolated geographically, socially, economically and politically from the rest of part of Sri Lanka over a hundred and fifty years.

Especially in Nuwara Eliya District, located in the mountainous area where no natural villages existed before plantations were introduced, Estate Tamils have been more isolated than any other plantation areas. Currently, more than 100 tea estates are located in Nuwara Eliya district.

Estate Tamils' accommodation on the tea estates, called "Line Rooms" have unchanged in its facility and infrastructure. One estate is usually divided into three to five divisions, each of which has a residential area, elementary school (junior high schools also on some estates) and a day-care facility for labors' children called *Creche*, with the estate office and a dispensary in the central place of the estate. The overall system of the tea plantation industry as well as resident labor complex have never changed even nowadays.

2. Economic and structural poverty in the enclave society

Although the overall poverty situation is getting improved, there is a gap between the estate population and the others in Sri Lanka (Kurihara 2014). Poverty situation of the estate sector is quite critical, compared to the other two sectors of urban and even rural sectors of the country. It is essential to pay extra attention to the figure that the estate sector's Head Count Index (HCI) is much higher than that of rural sector (Chart 1).



Socio-economic situation of Estate Tamils in the tea plantations has been the worst in the country ever. Sri Lanka's plantations were privatized in 1992, except for a few plantation estates due to profitability. Upon privatization, tremendous assistances came into the plantation sector such as the UNs and International NGOs (Kurihara 2014). However, it has been 20 years since the privatization, but Estate Tamils' poverty situation has basically remained same as before in the way that the estate sector is the poorest in the country in many ways.

While the poverty issue is serious in the estate sector, Sri Lankan government also faces a challenge in their service provision to the estate population. At the field level, the local government officers are struggling with practical, operational problems of serving the estate residents. The local government officers, such as *Grama Niladhari*, grass-root community development officers, and *Samurdhi* Program, are assigned to cover unfeasible size of areas to serve in the tea estate areas, compared to the off-estate areas. The most of the estates, therefore, face the reality of the gap in service provision that the local government serves only off-estate communities. This is because the conventional plantation system did not have a responsibility to serve the estate population, since they were not Sri Lankan citizen until 1988, when Indo-Lanka accord was made⁵ and this became a serious issue when all the Estate Tamils were granted for citizenship without any paperwork in 2003. Accordingly, there was a duty borne for the government when Estate Tamils became Sri Lankan citizen, but the government was not ready

for expanding their service to the plantation estates in the budget and human resource. This situation still remains same even today, and it is critically essential that there should be improvement in proper service provision by the government for Estate Tamils. Lack of service provision in the tea estates is one of the root causes for lasting poverty among Estate Tamils.

II. From the survey

1. Survey outlook

The survey was conducted from October to December, 2015 for 100 Estate Tamils who live on 7 estates⁶ of Nuwara Eliya District detailed in the Chart 2.

	male	female	total
Worker	44	28	72
Agriculture	4	0	4
Self-employed	1	2	3
Teacher	0	4	4
Unemployed	0	7	7
On pension	2	1	3
Other	2	3	5
N/A	1	1	2
total	54	46	100

Chart 2: Respondents' outlook (2015), developed by the author

The survey was developed in English and translated into Tamil. In the field, the respondents were interviewed in Tamil by the enumerators. In order for the respondents to feel safe with answering the survey questions, it was explained to each respondent that the names of respondents as well as estates are anonymous or not disclosed in publicity, due to the unique context of society under conventional plantation management.

The survey is two-fold; 1) questions on livelihood - living condition of the tea plantation estate and 2) questions on perception toward life on the tea estate. This paper presents the first part of the survey for livelihood analysis.

Outline of the respondents show the typical mix of the tea estate community in the Upcountry Sri Lanka such as Nuwara Eliya and Kandy. The majority of the respondents are estate workers. The remarkable in its characteristic of the tea estate community is that unemployed is in the second place, though large gap in number between the estate workers and the unemployed.

Another characteristic of the respondents is their less variety of occupations. Although Estate Tamils in the tea estate community are now Sri Lankan citizen, their occupation has a great density on the estate work. The other occupations are mostly unskilled or less-skilled work, except for teachers. Unskilled or less skilled work includes agriculture labor, shop keepers in the nearby villages, and tuk-tuk drivers. Their wage is also lower than the average income in Sri Lanka. Self-employed includes the ones that open shops within or near their tea estate on their own. There is a minor number of Estate Tamils that run tailor shops on their tea estate as well, categorized as self-employed.

In the tea estate community, there is always a certain number of teachers, because Tamil teachers are in shortage and the Sri Lankan government has set up a teacher training school in the tea estate area in order to fulfill the needs for teachers in the area. Sri Pada College is the only Tamil teacher school in the area that foster teachers for the tea plantation area in the up-country. There are few Tamil teacher schools in Colombo and the north and east areas of the country, but those Tamils from the north and east are reluctant to work in the up-country areas due to its remote location. It is, therefore, crucial to increase the number of Tamil teachers in the tea plantation area.

As for estate workers of the respondents, most of the female workers are tea pluckers, while the male workers are working at tea factories or sundry workers on the tea estates, driving tractors, weeding or doing minor construction within the premises of tea estate.

The respondents' age range is from 16 to 69 years old with the large volume of age 20 to 49, which represents the majority of working population on the tea estates (Chart 3).

age	male	female	total
10~19		1	1
20~29	3	18	21
30~39	23	16	39
40~49	21	10	31
50~59	6	1	7
60~69	1		1
total	54	46	100

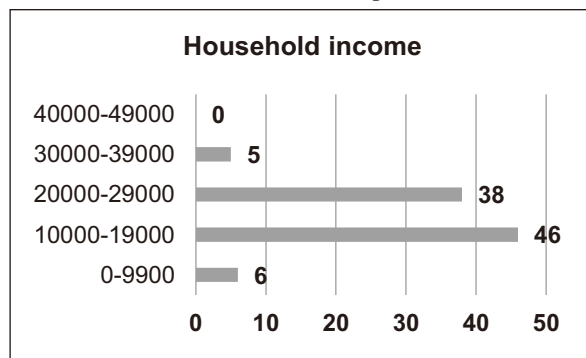
Chart 3: age range of the respondents (2015), developed by the author

It is safe to say that the mix of the survey respondents well represents the tea plantation community in the up-country Sri Lanka.

2. Household livelihood situation

The overall household livelihood situation of Estate Tamils is revealed as their recent monthly household income is around 10,000 rupees to 29,000 rupees (Graph 1).

Unit: Sri Lankan Rupees

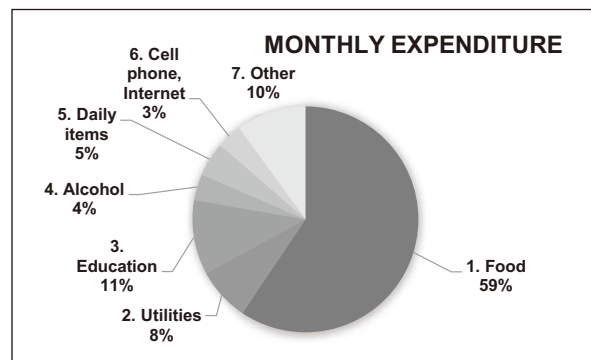


Graph 1: Monthly household income (unit: Sri Lanka rupees), number of respondents among 100 (2015), developed by the author

In comparison with the national average of monthly income per capita of 11,932 rupees (Department of Census and Statistics, 2013), the Estate Tamils' income do not look too advantaged. However, considering the fact that both of husband and wife work at each household in the estate community, the Estate Tamils' per capita income still remains lower than the national average. The daily wage of estate labor is 620 rupees (The Economist 2015). A labor of tea estate would have to work for 24 days or more to earn the national average for a household. It is also quite essential to understand the tea estate context that the plantation labors are working on a daily wage basis with the basic social welfare, as opposed to the regular employment in the private sector of Sri Lanka. The estate labors of Sri Lanka's plantation sectors are, thus, disadvantaged, compared to the regular employment in general of the country.

To be consistent, the data from only workers are extracted to see the mix of expenditure. It is observed that the Estate Tamils spend a quite large share of their income on food, followed by utilities and education

(Graph 2).



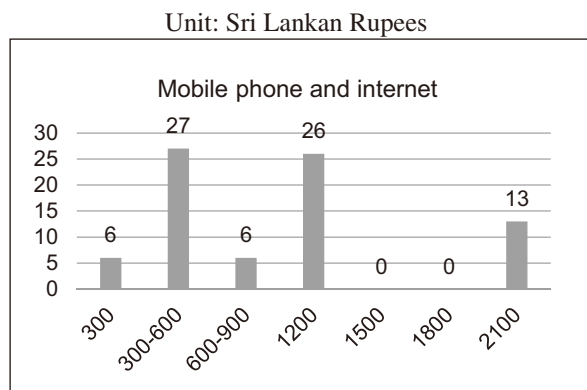
Graph 2: Monthly Expenditure, average % of their expenditure by item, of 72 workers (2015), developed by the author

The remarkable result among others is that the tea estate workers spend quite an amount of income on education for their children, ranked on the second. It is popular to send their children to tuition class on the weekend or after school on weekdays. In Sri Lanka, there are Sunday schools by religion. Tuition class is thought to be developed or evolved from the Sunday schools. What is interesting is the fact that the Estate Tamils of tea estates also care for their children's education.

Food shares more than a half of the total expenditure. There is usually no refrigerator at worker's accommodation, and the estate residents usually cook every day. Utilities are also high, but it is mostly for fire woods to cook, since there is no gas, and electricity. It means that most of the Estate Tamils in the tea estate community spend quite amount of time on cooking as well, which is not efficient. Furthermore, this practice in the tea estate is one of the causes for women's large workload.

Another serious issue seen from the survey results is alcohol consumption. In general, having alcohol beverage is considered as a bad habit in Sri Lanka, regardless their region. The respondent workers spend 4 % of their income on alcohol in monthly average. In practice, some female workers have alcohol such as *Arrack* (distilled alcohol made of coconuts), which is rarely observed in the off-estate society. Some of the NGOs committed to the tea estate community work especially on this issue.

In terms of expenditure on communication, what is notable is the rate of mobile phone holders as well as internet connection⁷. There is rarely landline facility of telephones in the tea estates except for estate offices and tea factories. Therefore, Sri Lanka government is promoting mobile phone facility in the tea estate areas, rather than setting up the landline facilities. Accordingly, having a mobile phone is relatively accessible to Estate Tamils on the tea estates. However, it is costly for the estate community people to maintain a mobile phone, considering their income level. The survey shows two major ranges of monthly expenditure on mobile phones and internet (Graph 3).



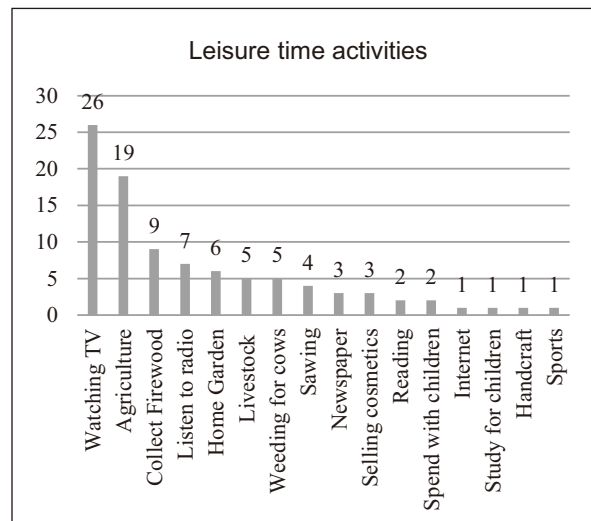
Graph 3: Monthly expenditure on mobile phone and internet (2015), developed by the author

There is a respondent group of 27 that spend Rs. 300 – 600 monthly, while there is the other group of 26 for Rs. 1,200. In comparison with the national average of Rs. 894 monthly, it is a high rate (Department of Census and Statistics 2012).

Communication cost is not expensive in Sri Lanka, as the national average indicates. The possible reasons for Estate Tamils in the tea estates to spend more than the national average are mainly for remote location of their resident areas. It takes an hour to two to reach the nearby communication shop to settle the bill. Since estate labors are fully occupied with their daily work every day, they cannot come out of their estate on the weekdays, which causes delay for settlement with penalty. Another possible reason is lack of knowledge about communication package fee. There are various package fee of mobile phones and internet. However, the respondents might have not known the reasonable

rates and packages for mobile phone and internet, due to inaccessibility to the relevant communication shops under the limited time and remote location. It represents that household expenditure could be more managed and saved, if the tea estate people are more sensible with proper knowledge.

On the other hand, Estate Tamils leisure time is asked and the respondents' answers are not so various, with heavy density on the limited number of activities such as watching TV and agriculture work (Graph 4).



Graph 4: Leisure time activities (2015), developed by the author

Tea estates are located in the remote areas where Estate Tamils have a difficulty to access to the major cities such as Nuwara Eliya and Kandy. So that, the population living on the tea estates tend to stay at home and spend their leisure time on the weekend. There is an activity that should draw attention. Quite a large number of the respondents spend their leisure time on house work or part time work.

On the tea estates, no one has gas cookers and cooking is prepared with firewood. Estate Tamils' one of the main housework activities is collecting firewood for cooking, but they can work on firewood collection only during off-working hours, which ends up with leisure time on the weekends. This is because both of husband and wife are working for tea estates among most of the households. The activity of agriculture is referred to as labor work in the vegetable fields. To support household income, the tea estate people go to

the nearby field to earn extra income. Likewise, the other respondents answering home garden, livestock, weeding for cows and sawing are doing them for the same purpose. It means that estate labor work itself is not enough to provide household.

Most of the respondents do not enough time to enjoy their leisure time in the real sense.

Looking into the results of the survey, it surfaces the outlook of the Estate Tamils life on tea estates. In a household, they earn the average income by both of wife and husband. Out of the income, they spend a quite large amount on food, because they have to cook every day, with firewood, due to no availability of enough electricity and refrigerator. These days, the Estate Tamils, too, have mobile phones, but it is a burden financially on their household expenditure.

The Estate Tamils, however, spend their income on alcohol as well, which has been considered as a serious issue. Alcohol consumption makes Estate Tamils' household economy tighter.

Overall, Estate Tamils' life on the tea estates still requires extra workload and extra income in addition to the regular estate work. The plantation system has basically unchanged since its establishment in the 19th century. Originally, the plantations were set in such a way that cash crop was effectively produced and plantation labors were allocated within the premises of the plantation estate, which did not consider the labors' life of human being not as much as the colonial ruler. The environment of human rights have improved and awareness of the sense have become more sensitive in the 21st century. The system of plantations itself, however, have unchanged in the sense of protection of people's life.

In the following section, livelihood household situation is analyzed in comparison with the data of national average and off-estate areas, to surface the characteristics of issues Estate Tamils are still facing.

III. Unchanged livelihood situation or worse?

In general, Estate Tamils on the tea plantation estates earn the better wage than before. However,

the household income is still less than that of the off-estates. Their daily wage is currently over Rs. 600. Upon working for 20 days, it sums up to more than Rs. 10,000. At a household, it accumulates up to Rs. 20,000 since both of husband and wife are working. However, this is still lower than the regular income at the national level.

Sri Lanka's economic development is quite fast recently, especially after the civil war was ended in 2009. Overall household income of Sri Lanka's major three sectors have proceeded more than double in its amount for the last ten years from 2002 to 2012 (Chart 4).

Chart 4: Monthly mean and median household income by sector – 2002 and 2012

Unit: Sri Lankan Rupees (Rs.)				
Sector	Mean Income		Median Income	
	2002	2012	2002	2012
All island	13,038	46,207	8,387	30,400
Urban	23,436	68,336	13,762	41,958
Rural	11,819	42,184	8,012	28,921
Estate	7,346	31,895	6,270	25,664

Source: Household Income and Expenditure Survey – 2012/13 and 2002, Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka, edited by the author

For the estate sector, their mean income raised from Rs. 7,346 to Rs. 31,895. The rate of increase is as high as 334%, which is higher than the national average.

On the other hand, expenditure of the estate sector increased tremendously, even compared with the national average and the other two sectors. While the national average of expenditure increase rate for the past 10 years is 198%, the estate sector's 228% goes beyond even the other two sectors, respectively 148% and 200% (Chart 5).

Chart 5: Average monthly household expenditure – 2002 and 2012

Unit: Sri Lankan Rupees			
Sector	Mean expenditure		%
	2002	2012	
All island	13,733	40,887	198
Urban	23,763	59,001	148
Rural	12,507	37,561	200
Estate	9,075	29,779	228

Source: Household Income and Expenditure Survey – 2012/13 and 2002, Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka, edited by the author

It is analyzed as a negative factor that Estate Tamils are still facing the issue around household income and expenditure. Although their household income has increased tremendously, their amount of income is still below the nationwide cost of living. Therefore, Estate Tamils' increase in expenditure has occurred. It is, again, noteworthy to pay attention that most of the Estate Tamils have double income from both of husband and wife as estate labors, but the total household income is the lowest in the country. In addition, it is easier to imagine that Estate Tamils find it difficult to leave the tea estate due to the lower income and their occupational background as simple labors.

Looking into the tea estate community from the household income point of view, it is examined that Estate Tamils household income has increased, but the cost of living in Sri Lanka has also increased.

Alcohol issue is also still serious. Some of the tea estate community members consume alcohol, unusually in Sri Lanka, which pressures their household economy. Finally, it is safe to say that Estate Tamils' life on the tea estates have unchanged even after becoming Sri Lankan citizen.

Furthermore, it is even worse in the sense that Estate Tamils are now able to travel freely to the off-estate areas, and they have more knowledge of outside of the tea estates. In getting to know more of the outside, Estate Tamils feel that their life on tea estates is different from the rest of part of Sri Lanka in a negative sense. There are so many kinds of jobs. There are different types of educational institutes. Not every wife is working fulltime, but they have a choice. Estate Tamils are now at the stage of learning about opportunities and choice as citizens. In this respect, their life on tea estate is worse, rather than being simply poor.

Conclusion

Estate Tamils became Sri Lankan citizen since 1988, but their citizenship issuance rate had been lower till 2003, when all Estate Tamils became Sri Lankan citizens without any paperwork. They are

now fully entitled for the social services and any other entitlements just like other Sri Lankans on the island.

However, the reality is different. Estate Tamils' life on the tea estates still has many issues around their livelihood. Their household income has increased, but expenditure has also raised. A gap in household income between the urban sector and estate sector still remains, even larger.

Furthermore, alcohol consumption is another serious issue among the Estate Tamils, which even affects not only behavioral practice, but household economy as well. In Sri Lanka, alcohol is considered as not a good practice even for males due to their religious belief of Buddhism and Hinduism. Liquor stores are usually located behind the street. Sri Lankans do not usually drink openly even at home. However, Estate Tamils have a habit of consuming alcohol publicly, even females. They do not have a place to drink behind public or home due to poor accommodation facility. What makes them drink though it is recognized as a bad habit in the country or by their religion? Estate Tamils' unique social setting might affect community's behavior, but it is worth it study further.

To examine and identify why Estate Tamils are still struggling with their household livelihood, it is crucial to dig more into the behavioral aspects such as perceptions toward work in the tea estates as well as the social setting or structure where Estate Tamils have been set in over 150 years.

It is the 150th anniversary for Ceylon Tea in 2017, since the first tea plantation estate opened up its operation regularly. There are various events in Sri Lanka to celebrate the 150th birthday of Ceylon tea, but not much attention is drawn to the people who are plucking tea leaves and making tea every day still under the conventional plantation system even in the 21st century.

¹ Estate Tamils referred in this paper is the population that live in premises of the tea plantation estates.

² It was named Ceylon under the British colonial period, and renamed as Sri Lanka upon independence. Sri Lanka is used in this paper, unless so mentioned as Ceylon.

- ³ Estate Tamils' stateless issue was first solved in such a way that Indo-Lanka act was passed in 1988, but the paperwork and all complicated procedure resulted in the only limited number of Estate Tamils becoming Sri Lankans. In 2003, all the Estate Tamils became Sri Lankan citizen
- ⁴ . The number of plantation estates is varied by the plantation companies' integration of the estates and is decreasing lately.
- ⁵ The accord was made between Sri Lanka and India, and Estate Tamils' stateless issue was solved by law. Estate Tamils finally became Sri Lankan citizen without any procedure or paperwork in 2003. The majority of Estate Tamils did not obtain the Sri Lankan citizenship till 2003, even after 1988, due to the complicated procedure for application.
- ⁶ Name of the estates are not disclosed due to sensitivity of the plantation context
- ⁷ Internet is counted in the survey as a part of mobile phone expenditure, since there are the residents that have tablets

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Annex 1.

Field Survey Part I

Household Livelihood Assessment

Questionnaire**1. Basic Information**

1.1. Name

1.2. Gender 1. M 2. F

1.3. Age

1.4. Religion

1. Hindu 2. Catholic 3. Islam 4. Buddhism

1.5. Division/ Estate

Estate Division

1.6. Occupation

1.7. Family members

2. Questions on livelihood

2.1. Main source of income + monthly income

2.2. Number of family members working and total income

2.3. Expenditure - amount of items per month

1. Food

2. Utility (gas, electricity, fire wood, water, etc.)

3. Children's education

4. Drinks

5. House items (TV, plates, furniture, etc.)

6. Phone bill/ internet bill

7. Other

2.4. People who are in touch with - off and on estate

2.5. Leisure time

2.6. Frequency of going out of estate and places of visit

ただ変化が無いのか、悪化なのか？

—スリランカ高原地域の紅茶プランテーション農園に居住する
エステート・タミル人の生計—

栗原 俊輔

要約

本論文は、スリランカ高原地帯に広がる、紅茶プランテーション農園に居住する、エステート・タミル人の生計について、スリランカ市民権を得た1988年を基準に、その後の生計の改善はあるのかを検証した。そのため生計調査をスリランカのヌワラエリヤ県の紅茶プランテーション農園に住む100名を対象に実施した。

プランテーションはスリランカの中では常に再貧困地域のひとつとして位置づけられていたが、現在は賃金も上がり、以前ほど貧困とは捉えられないが、物価の上昇にともない、支出においては都市部、農村部と比較すると最も支出率が高い地域であり、生活は一向に改善されていないことが分かった。農園に居住するエステート・タミル人の生活改善のためには農園労働も今後検証する必要がある。

(2017年6月1日受理)