

Alcoholism and Social Evils in 19th century Sri Lanka: Some Insights from Contemporary Sinhala Poetry

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Abstract

A campaign to outspread the use of alcohol was considered by colonial rulers as a way of enrichment, and they strove to popularise it in every possible manner. This approach resulted in an increased demand for alcohol from workers, while the profit from these ventures enriched a sector of the indigenous population.

‘Fleecing the last penny’ seemed to be the foundation, on which the colonials based their economic policy. As was traditional amongst the colonial elite, alcohol and beer were served at celebratory functions. Some groups in the society and social workers opposed to the increased use of alcohol amongst the population and objected via public protests, but the government considered this as a source of increased revenue.

Popularising alcohol would steadily lead to disastrous social consequences. Aim of the present study is to find whether a direct link prevailed between heavy drinking and violence. To realize this objective, this research study utilised primary and secondary sources from original booklets written on the subject obtained from Sri Lankan Museum Library, National Archives in Sri Lanka, and London British library. Data analysis and other collected information revealed a direct link between the increased use of alcohol and violence, which led to a radical change in the society.

Key words: *Alcohol, Violence, Printing, Poet*

1.1 Consumption of Liquor and Crime Offences

Is there a link between liquor and crime? Only a limited research was performed during the period of colonialism to find the causes of criminal offences. John Rogers (1987), in *Crime, Justice and Society in Colonial Sri Lanka*, examined some causes of crime. In his research study, Rogers claims that cattle stealing was a grave crime prevalent in colonial Sri Lanka. It is described as 'the national crime', and the 'great curse of the country' (Rogers 1987:83).

Although cattle stealing was identified as the major crime, the 19th century literature bears contradictory evidence. In his book, Rogers points out that the effect of modernisation alone was not a major factor prompting crime increase. He claims that urbanisation and industrialisation (Rogers 1987:4) during the pre-colonial British rule in Sri Lanka was a contributory factor for increasing crime. Changes in the economy and the growing population were the reasons for increased number of homicides, riots, and civil disturbances (Rogers 1987:122,157). In this context, it appears that alcoholism introduced into the society had been a major reason for crime. Rogers has not mentioned about alcoholism in his research, but poets (Appuhāmi 1896: vv.25,26,33) claim that stealing chicken was highlighted as a crime in this work. There is evidence to prove that robbing and alcoholism were closely related. Skinner (1966) mentions that alcoholism is a major national calamity, and every step should be taken to suppress it. He further claims that it was an evil, which removes the sense of decency among respectable people.

The British rulers attempted every possible means to gain control of the world economy (de Silva 1981: 259). Colebrook explains how the British started many construction works to promote economic crops in Sri Lanka with the aim of earning a fortune, and with the same purpose, made effort to open up taverns in plantation areas (Leg 1907:253). Leitch (1890:101) mentions, British promoted the cultivation of tea and in plantation areas, and followed it up with the opening of liquor shops in towns and villages. Earlier, the Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims, refrained from consuming liquor; however, during the British rule, this situation changed and people became addicted to alcohol.

Use of alcohol was closely associated with the working class. Kumari Jayawardena (2002:63) mentions the increase in labour force had a close link with the rise of liquor consumption. The other sectors of the labour force, namely the construction workers in mining,

towards use of alcohol. Drunkenness tended to increase further drunkenness and construction workers sent from one place to another made the alcohol market gain heavy profits. This gave rise to opening up of small sale points for dispensing liquor, which resulted in gaining enormous profits from alcohol Jayawardena (2002:65) at the expense of the poorer classes of the society.

The colonial economy rested on many workplaces and service providers. This included printing, tramcar service, hotels, bakeries, furniture shops, retail shops, tailoring shops, laundries, aerated water manufacturers etc. In all these places, workers received payments on daily basis. Further, there were small-scale traders, vendors catering to tourists, carters, and handicraft workers, engaged in self-employment ventures.

Below this stratum were the unskilled and unemployed labourers. Those who depended on the generosity of the affluent remained at the bottom level, and they subsisted with whatever they received; if they failed, they searched for other providers of supplication. They were actually vagabonds and their rank included petty robbers, beggars, prostitutes, and orphaned children. All these classes of people, found during the colonial era, belonged to the (illegal) underworld in urban areas. This poverty-stricken class, exposed to exploitation and misery, were prone towards consumption of alcohol (Jayawardena 2002:66).

In addition, construction and maintenance of roads needed a regular workforce in many districts. The nature of their work contributed to flourish the business in taverns. The workers, who did strenuous manual labour, and the soldiers, were often indulged in consuming liquor whenever they had leisure, helped to flourish the liquor business. This fact was accepted officially as true by the relevant authorities.

The other class of people addicted to liquor consumption were the carters, whose numbers increased with the development of roads (Jayawardena (2002: 68). Hence, it is obvious that drunkenness spread into the lower strata of the society through urbanisation. Evidences confirm the presence of many illicit liquor joints in Colombo city. The author of *Sūdu Haṭana* (Perera 1893) remarks that the police inspector John Kotalavala was rendering a great service to Colombo by eradicating endless crimes and bringing solace to the common man. Here the poet identifying Kotalavala with the *govi kula* caste

signifies that a higher position in the society is given to this caste. *Govikula* means *Govigama* (cultivator of soil) or farmer.

horā surā pān vikunuva koṭahēne
purā dasa satara avruddak keruṇē
darā balaya gos kotalāvala tumanē
tārāsayen un allā gena gosinē

Sir John Kotelavala was able to apprehend an illicit liquor joint in Koṭahēna area, which was in operation for nearly ten years.

melaka tuḷa koḷomhi duppatungen horā gat
neka neka tāna unnā u horun bo vānāssū
govi kula mahatāṇan takkaḍiyangen vijē lat
dinapati rāka detvā mē mātindāva dikkal

(Perera 1893: vv. 5,11,15,45)

(May this gentleman of the *govikula* caste, who redeemed the poverty stricken people from these robbers, live long)

In the first half of the 19th century David de Saram of Mātara, an eminent devotee, organised a great religious ceremony, called as *Gaṅgārohana pinkama* in Mātara Nilvala river. Based on this grand event, a poem, ‘*Gaṅgārōhaṇa Varṇanāva*,’ was composed. As per the lines in the stanzas, the poem was named as the *gaṅgaru vaṇana*, but it became famous as the *Gaṅgārōhaṇa Varṇanāva*.

As stated at the end of the poem, the poet identifies himself as *Govi kulē* Samarasekera Dissanayaka. The poet presents two reasons for composing the poem: With the use of meters, he hopes to generate aesthetic delight and appreciation in common man while cultivating Buddhist virtues in them. The other reason, according to the poet, was to glorify and appreciate Saram Mudali and his noble deeds.

In the first decade of the 19th century, there were prolonged discussions on the usage of orthography and alliteration, when composing verses. The debates that arose concerning one stanza of the *Gaṅgārōhaṇa Varṇanāva* dragged on throughout the century that kindled a vibrant literary awakening. When Mihiripānnē Dhammaratana there pointed out some faults in the arrangement of syllables in the first stanza of the *Gaṅgārōhaṇa Varṇanāva*, it ultimately led to a serious controversy on poetics. Many learned scholars of the 19th century were involved in this controversy, known as the *Sav Sat Dam Vādaya*. Because the debaters used many words unfamiliar to the Sinhala language, some learned scholars strongly criticised them.

There were many gambling dens, illicit liquor booths, and houses of ill fame in Colombo (*Satyālaṅkāraya* (1874 February 18)1.2 :86). In many places in the city, there arose *rice riots* (*Satyālaṅkāraya* 1873 December 10)1.6: 48) in which, many shops were looted and rice stocks were plundered. To protect from the gangs, service of the British soldiers was sought, but was not provided. A band of robbers from the cinnamon garden area reported to be the culprits.

This indicates that a vicious circle sprang up because of commercialisation. In addition to those planned robberies (*Satyālaṅkāraya* (1875 July 28), 3.51:397), there was a gang of pickpockets operating in Colombo area. Thus, anti-social activities tended to spread out into the outskirts of Colombo. The extent to which the robberies spread was evident when even the goods produced in the court premises were stolen (*Satyālaṅkāraya* (1876 June 14), 4.97:124). Robberies of planned nature became noticeable, including vehicle thefts.

Kotalāvala mātiṅdunge daskaminā
ahalā oṭṭu Mātara puravarayaṭa pämiṅā
dākalā bakki riya gat soru siya netinā
damalā e hānd-kap dātata vigaṣinā
(Perera 1893: v. 13)

(Oh! The efficiency of Hon. Kotelavala helped apprehend the buggy cart robbers in Matara and brought them handcuffed)

Drunkenness spread even among the upcountry farmers (Jayawardena 2002:73). They had easy access to liquor as they were employed in coffee plantations and road construction work, which were remunerative vocations (Jayawardena 2002:62). When work became tedious, they sought the extra energy required to engage in their work through consumption of liquor. Workers in the harbour, railways, and workshops, whose work was tedious, also sought relief by consuming liquor. Most undernourished workers sought revitalisation through consuming liquor, especially, arrack and toddy (Jayawardena 2002:66). However, the physical stimulus the worker gained through alcoholic beverages produced adverse effects, which ultimately led to various social problems.

1.2 Consumption of Alcohol, Stealing Poultry, and Other Related Crimes

In the colonial Sri Lanka, John Rogers identified cattle stealing, murder, and riots, as major social problems. Nevertheless,

a closer connection between liquor and crimes was highlighted in the poetic literature during that period. The creativity of those poets have repeatedly mentioned the spread of alcoholism and its pernicious effects.

The ill effects of alcohol usage had been a real threat. Labourers brought from South India were addicted to alcohol, which affected adversely on the sober milieu of the Sinhala society. The British rulers did not pay any heed to control these activities, and the Buddhist clergy had no voice as they lacked state support (Skinner 1891). The spread of alcoholism contributed to increase the crime rate and court cases became a national calamity. It promoted evil feelings and thoughts in the minds of people and the malicious effect of the alcohol consumption led to many corrupt practices and lawsuits among the community. Skinner states that drunkenness was a swiftly spreading national catastrophe (1891:219). Drunk people misbehaved in the city, especially in crowded places.

ara gana gosin bīlā veri velā *d a n a*
tāna tāna vāṭī budyati keḷa perā *gana*
yana ena danan dākalā ēvā *āsina*
apamaṇa miga kiyati ē kāraṇē *g ā n a*
(Silva 1891: v.56)

(Many drunkards were seen fallen on the wayside and the passers-by blamed them for their misconduct)

avalan andamaṭa jāta kara vadāpu kollan
tābārumvala nitara siṭṭi mayi gaha gana *lollen*
vaṇḍuran lesa uḍa pāna pāna kolla kaṇḍa *viparan*
takudin taka dodakin toge nāhe kaṇḍa vara *dān*
(Appuhamy 1893:v.22)

(Many young men with no reputable family backgrounds were seen loitering and drinking in the taverns)

This exposes the fact that such loiterers, doing nothing but drinking, created problems. They come from undisciplined family backgrounds in low social strata. Drunkenness was quite rampant among all communities, including Sinhalese peasants, Tamil plantation workers, and those living in the coastal areas.

bī amā yayi sitā matpān tānin *t ā n a*
bēbadukam kiyā demalen doḍā *p ā n a*
e velaṇḍam karana samahara abisarina
Mīgamuve di duṭimi pera mīvaden *vana²⁶*
(Fernando n.d.:v.36)

According to Capper (1877:13), the worst was the installation of taverns at village centres. The serene and tranquil environment of the village was transformed quickly into an atmosphere full of conflicts and disputes, as crimes increased. Legal issues cropped up and people who lived as good neighbours for many generations became archrivals. Countless conflicts sprang up in the society just one year after opening the taverns. Rogers claims that urbanisation of the village resulted a change in the rural scenario. Individuals were at liberty to pursue any vocation they wanted and to earn, as they wished. Circulation of money in the hands of villagers was a reason for them to be tempted towards liquor consumption (Jayawardena 2002: 80). Skinner mentions that there were taverns both in small and large villages. Drunkenness was so rampant that some villagers disposed their harvested paddy to the tavern owner, at the threshing field itself (Skinner 1891: 219-20).

Having realised the capability of earning high incomes from liquor trade, the colonialist grasped the opportunity to expand the liquor trade. This increased liquor consumption rate of the working class. Profits gained through this trade, eventually produced a class of locally rich business magnates (Jayawardena 2002: 82).

However, this elitist group consumed liquor in a different manner; they usually consumed liquor at dinner parties. Although most people who attended these parties consumed liquor (Skinner 1891:31), no records are available of the ill effects of their liquor usage. The varying effects of liquor consumption depended on the class to which the consumer belonged.

doḍam tämbili palavāla gena kannō ya
vāyin viski jin brāṇḍit bonnō ya
saban nūl iṇḍikaṭu vikunannō ya
raten avut bāsa balamin innō ya
(de Silva 1890: v.35)

Regular addiction to alcohol gave rise to stealing and robbery).

rā vena koṭa mulu muluvala kukuḷo soyā ā v i d i n
(Appuhamy 1893: vv.25-26)

rā vena koṭa giya giya tāna kupāḍi rās v i m ē
eḷi vena koṭa sūdu horun kuḷan velaṇḍāmē
ē madivaṭa kāḍa horun dādu damana mahimē
vagē da mun hari piyakuṭa jātaka nāti karumē
(Appuhamy 1893: v.34)

However, this comment does not present a true picture of the Sri Lankan society of that time. He seems to have made these comments after observing different anti-social activities during that time.

*samaharu ehi badu gānumata lamain saha pāmina
piyakaru badu balamin neka milayata illamini
sitayuru badu aragena yati tawekek suru karamini
badu sorakam karanatavut guṭi läbagati nomini*
(Silva 1899: v.138)

(Some came to buy things along with their children. Then some began stealing some of the goods because those were very attractive. This ended in some sort of quarrel or fight)

Cattle stealing is not mentioned in poems, but newspapers have reported that it was on the decline since 1875 and the people were happy about it. The village headmen was to be complemented for controlling such cattle thefts (*Satyālaṅkāraya* 1875, August 25, 3.55:418).

1.3.1 Homicides and Social Unrest

John Roger attributes homicide in 19th century, mainly to the following causes:

“A little more than one-half of violent deaths resulted either directly or indirectly from disputes over land, money, or other property, or from a desire for economic gain. Material conflict played no direct part in the remainder of incidents, many of which arose from sudden quarrels or disputes over women. Nearly one out of ten homicides were perpetrated as part of robberies”(Roger 1987:134).

Homicides were largely due to irrational actions, a product of insecurity over personal status. The economic and social changes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had minor impact on the way people judged each other (Roger 1987:153). ‘In 1834, three murder cases, five rape cases, and 48 assault cases had been recorded (Stark 1845: 6). Crime investigations revealed that the culprits involved were Buddhists, Muslims, and Christians, most of whom belonged to lower castes (Stark 1845: 78).

Poets had commented on the relationships between drunkenness and murder. A murder happened in the courts at Hultsdorph (*Alutkaḍē*) became the theme of a poem title, *Duliyānu* or *Avavāda Maldama*

(Prera 1895). The youth involved in this murder was under the influence of liquor.

*bomin surā bōtalyak manā mila dilā mama atinē
aran pihiyakut kaḍē gosillā duliyata äнна menē
laṅgin siṭan mama bīpu matin duliyanāṭa äнна tänē
ema sänen piyun varu vaṭalā ävidin rekulāsiya lesinē*

(Prera 1895:v.20)

(The youth who stabbed Duliyanā had earlier consumed a bottle of arrack)

On 13th September 1879, at 7.00 a.m., four convicts were sent to the gallows. One expressed his feelings prior to hanging as:

“I had been driven into this fierce moment due to drunkenness. The murders committed by me were not intentional but rather due to my miserable drunkenness. Therefore, I appeal to all those present here take this confession of mine as a valid proof of the disastrous consequences of drunkenness.”(C. R. T.S. 1891:29).

This confession is a clear proof of the connection between murder and drunkenness.

Addiction to liquor and its adverse effects were highlighted in the newspaper *Satyālamkāraya*. ‘A father stabbing his son’ was a report appeared in *Satyālamkāra*, (1876 September 27;4.112:202) which described that a father, aged over 70 years, stabbed his son after both got drunk. The father, Petiyāgoḍa Loku Appu, was sentenced to jail for 12 months under hard labour. Poets at that time very well described the people thus sentenced to jail.

*hiren vāṭilā āva aya men koṇḍā samaharu kapā damamin
milat vaṭinā saḷupīli neka lesina ända pälānda ganimin
isen toppit damālā vit alut iṅgrisi [bāse] doḍamin
tavaṭ siṭi taruṇō peḷak ehi vitara näti bas tepalamin*

(Diyawadana 1894: v.31)

(Some who had come out of jail had cut their hair, wear valuable clothes, and spoke a novel form of nonsensical English, moving themselves among other youth)

Satyālamkāra reported many murders committed during that time under headings, ‘Two fierce murders,’ (1876 May...; 4.93:105) and ‘A murder’(1875 June ...; 4.45:358). However, these crimes were not connected to alcoholism. Licensed liquor outlets were identified as a source of crimes and anti-social activities. Some

misbehaved, like dogs (1876 November ...; 4.117:230). During certain special cultural festivals and functions, the liquor dealers enjoyed a flourishing business. It indicates that all such events of that time had some connection with liquor (1875 August...;4.55:418). A woman in Galle complained to the Justice of Peace that she had to face a lot of inconvenience due to a tavern opened near her house (1875 September; 3.58:436).

Certain incidents happened at the tavern at Ilukmōdara September (1874 March..; 4.13:103) demonstrate how some people had become insane due to alcohol and how they were involved in various disputes and quarrels. Illicit liquor was declared unlawful and ten people were fined Rs. 200/- each at Avissawella courts for selling illicit liquor (1875 July...; 4.51:397). Along with these social deviations, a change in behavioural patterns of people too became noticeable.

taruṇa pahē kolu gāṭayō mähāliyo geni yannā
lapaṭi pahē ḷamissiyō nāki samaga yannā
taruṇa pahē kasāda laṇḍa dukinma pasu vennā
lamayā āhe dākālā hinahāve paṇa yannā

(Appuhami 1893:v.43)

(Young men took old women; old men took young women)

Government officials, i.e. village headmen, *disāvē*, *mudliyar*, *muhandiram*, *āracci*, and *kōrālē* performed official functions while *vidānēs* executed police duties. Magistrates during that era were British. According to Binings, the police performed their duties properly (Binning 1857). However, on certain occasions, they were accused of accepting bribes.

kostāpol dutvama mun mudal ṭikak dilā
kastigal kiyati polis surukāṃḍu kiyalā
iṣṭāyil lesaṭa mevun karatta piṭa nāgilā
dos vācal kiyati munva taruniyo āsa dākālā

(Appuhami 1893:...)

(When a constable was sighted, money was palmed of to him)

When drunkenness was condemned as an evil, many poets made efforts to depict the evils of drunkenness in their poetry. The booklet titled, ‘Drunkard and the Sinful Companion’ (*bēbaddā saha pāpa mitrayā*) highlights the adverse effects of such anti - social activities.

*inē redda hättte äñda nodaniti
anē sidda una karumeka rudu gati
guṇē äti e bārīta me duksalati
anē sidda unē mā pinisāniyani*

*piṅgan valan puṭu mēsa da banku sāma
saṭan paṭan gā dasataṭa visirāma
bān bolan kiyami mālañta pema
adan tettam keru wemi nopamana ma*

(Appuhami 1888: vv.68,88)

(They did not know the women were clad in cloth and jacket. They ill-treated the good learned wife. They dashed the pots and pans on the ground)

Poets have done a great service to educate people about the evils of liquor consumption. Though these poems did not displayed creative talents, they educated the masses as a means of communication. The poem *bebadu vipata* highlights the ill effects of drunkenness.

*bīmatkama nimala siya paṇaṭa satureka
pohosatkama pähāra gannaṭa rudu soñdureka
lō sathāṭa yadina yadi danage mitureka
yāpat āmbu darun näti karana kurireka*

(Appuhami 1888:70)

(Drunkenness is a curse on the life of innocents. It destroys wealth. It turns one to be a beggar. It disrupts the family and deprives a person of his wife and children)

*me lesā mini marā rudu pavu kara peminā
nolasā deviñdu udahasa mehi da daraminā
alasā nova māruṇa kaḷa nirayä vāṭeminā
kelesā ahō viñdineda ehi duka nominā⁶²*

(Thus, they commit murder and receive God's curse. After death, they undergo suffering in hell)

The poets of this period have emphasised the evil effects of drunkenness; it harms not only his worldly life but also the life after death. Thus, it is clear that there was a movement to wipe out alcoholism. Sinhalese capitalists, the majority of whom were Christians of the *karāva* caste, controlled manufacturing and distribution of arrack and toddy. There were also Buddhists of the same caste and other castes who made substantial investments in the liquor industry (de Silva 1981: 259).

Some of the middle class people were also engaged in the alcohol industry, which drew a certain amount of contempt from the contemporary society (T.R.2 1891: 15). A book titled *amadyapa wākya sangrahayawa* was published to deter people in remote regions from this menace of alcoholism (T.R. 2 1891). Certain other Englishmen opposed the liquor industry thus introduced by the Englishmen, and they too were determined to wipe out this menace. The Wesleyan church in Kollupitiya started a movement to dissuade people from alcoholism (*Satyālaṅkāraya* 1873 October ; 1.3:21). However, those movements for teetotalism gradually lost vigour and finally became defunct (*Satyālaṅkāraya*, 1876 August 9; 1.105:164).

An article titled ‘About Ceylon’ appearing in *Satyālaṅkāraya* , (*Satyālaṅkāraya* , 1874 April 29; 1.16:151) very powerfully describes the progress made in respect of roadways and railways by the Englishmen. That same book mentions the social evils caused due to spread of alcoholism.

Buddhist and Christian organisations jointly worked towards preventing and deterring people from the perils of alcoholism. People who realised the importance of the temperance movements took great interest to assert their authority in the society. “The temperance movement became at once an integral part of the Buddhist revival, to political activity” (de Silva 1981: 259). By the second half of the 19th century, Buddhists were striving to achieve some authority through this temperance movement (Malalgoda 1976: 191-261).

Conclusion

Establishment of the British colonial rule in Sri Lanka had its repercussions felt directly on the changes that had been taking place in traditional society. Implementation of the Colebrook reforms can be identified as the main factor responsible for such changes. Abolition of the rajakāriya system, introduction of plantation economy, giving pride of place to English language and expansion of the printing industry were among the other main contributory factors. With the implementation of these reforms a neo-liberal society came into being in Sri Lankan society, which granted the basic freedom for any individual to engage in any form of livelihood that he preferred. Also, the neglect of traditional agriculture and expansion of the plantation industry led to the emergence of a capitalist class. Certain categories of people who were engaged in the arrack rental business and other trading enterprises like cinnamon, though conversed in English and held Western culture in high esteem, paid respect to their indigenous

culture as well. However, there was another category of people in society who possessed wealth, but displayed a high regard for their mother tongue and Buddhist faith. Thus, in this social fabric one could distinctly find people showing a penchant for various cultural traits.

With the changes that took place as a result of the new economic reforms of the British rulers, there was a great change in the traditional life of the Sri Lankan people. According to the history of the country, there have been crimes in Sri Lankan society; but the use of alcohol which was popularised during the colonial rule among different strata of the society had a great influence on the people belonging to the lowest strata. What was clear from this study also is that the influence of alcohol of one of the reasons for committing different types of crimes. The intelligent and learned people, and social workers in the society, strove hard to organise protests against alcohol addiction. However, the government considered this problem in a negative manner, since they knew it would deprive them of the main source of income.

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