

CHALLENGES OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF PALMYRAH INDUSTRY IN NORTHERN PROVINCE, SRI LANKA: SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH TOWARDS TRANSITION FROM TRADITIONAL TO MODERN SECTOR

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Abstract

Palmyrah based industry is a traditional, family based business utilises the indigenous resources of North and Eastern provinces. This industry shows a peculiar state of growth, which is affected by sociological aspects of the environment significantly. The producers involve in the production and marketing of palmyrah based products face challenges at each phase of processes. The research problems are studied and presented on the basis of qualitative method in this research paper. Informal interviews and observations are employed in the study to identify the sociological problems of the producers. Few recommendations are suggested on the basis of the findings, to rectify the sociological challenges.

Keywords: Social stratification, occupational social group, social psychology, transition.

Background of the study

Economic and social development of a region depends largely on the growth and modernisation of the indigenous sectors. Palmyrah industry contributes to a particular community's livelihood by creating employment and income in the Northern province of Sri Lanka. The process of production and marketing in the palmyrah industry have been traditionally introduced and developed with under-performance in its nature. Its under-developed pattern not only affected the community's income and standard of living but also curtail the opportunities to modernize the industry equal to other agro-based industries in other parts of Sri Lanka.

It is generally agreed that modernization of technology adopted in the process of production and marketing of any sector will promote the efficiency and effectiveness of any industry. Thus, the employment pattern, income, consumption, standard of living and social status will change and develop the attitude and work ethics of the community depend on the sector. This is mostly applicable to the Palmyrah Industry in the Northern region.

But until Palmyrah Development Board (PDB) established in 1978, no attention was paid to this industry and the community in this regard. State support and involvement were not provided in view of economic and social development and modernisation of both the Palmyrah industry and the people of the community solely depend on this production sector.

Though PDB interested in making the industry to move in a new way to change its type and pattern of production and marketing to ensure not only to increase its profitability and sustainability but also to modernize its technology.

Due to the ethnic disturbances prevailed in the region for more than three decades have blocked its progress and the efforts of PDB related to palmyrah sector. After

2009 onwards, re-construction and re-development of the economic infra-structure of this industry is being introduced stage by stage.

In this process many hidden and visible disturbances and problems are emerging. The studies conducted so far in this area have been mainly quantitative. This makes it difficult to get a clear picture of the problems and challenges since they focus on general issues related the palmyrah tree crop rather than more specific interpretable variable that could provide better information and guidance related the production and marketing style of the traditional house holders who involved in this industry.

Usually, quantitatively oriented researches rely on pre supported conditions that they think are important in influencing the style and the method of production and marketing rather than giving priority to the real opinion, attitude and practices followed by the traditional producers and marketers.

Thus in order to get a clear picture of the situation from the community and industry perspective, study on problems and challenges are of paramount importance. Hence attempts were made to identify the conditions and factors presumed to be responsible for backwardness and the slow development of this sector in relation to production and marketing.

Research problem

Research problems of this study are;

- (a) status of the palmyrah industry and the livelihood of the community in the sector are socially and economically inseparable in nature and it causes the under development of the industry.
- (b) constraints of the human resources traditionally engaged in the industry pertain to the shift to modern technology.
- (c) inability of house holders and the societies, in relation to shifting to modern approaches and techniques in production and marketing of palmyrah industry.

Objectives and research questions

As repeatedly voiced by different government officials, researchers, educators and social leaders, ignoring indigenous resources impedes regional as well as national economic development. This implies that palmyrah industry's unutilized potentials should be tapped in such a way that they can make a significant contribution to employment, income and community development of the social group depend on this agro-based industry.

This research explores the sociological challenges and problem of production and marketing of palmyrah industry in the Northern part of Sri Lanka.

This study was guided by the following research objectives;

- To describe the socio-economic conditions prevailed in the community based on Palmyrah Industry.
- To find out how the interaction prevailed between house holders and the pattern of production and marketing.

- to explore the limitation of the technology that influenced and dominated in production and marketing of palmyrah industry
- To investigate the social approach and attitude that adversely affect the open development and recognition of palmyrah industry in North.

The proposed study will provide the answers to the following questions

1. What are the problems inherited in the traditional Palmyrah Industry and the communities based on the industry?
2. What type of constraints in the industry pertaining to promoting the industry in a scientific manner?
3. How far the traditional approaches and methodology adopted in the industry affect the transition to sophisticated methodologies in production and marketing?
4. How to promote efficiency, effectiveness and quality of the human resource employed in the industry in the long run?

Study population

The focus of the study was based on the house holders traditionally depend on the palmyrah industry of the Northern region and organised outlets for collection, production and marketing of palmyrah based products.

Limitations of the study

The intention of the study is to understand and analyse the sociological problems of the community involved in production and marketing.

This study did not pay its attention to the technology involved in the activities of the production and marketing chain.

Significance of the study

The findings of the study will be used by different category of authorities in different needs.

- (1) Palmyrah Development Board and other relevant formal organisations could use the findings to formulate appropriate strategies.
- (2) Social and community development oriented organisations and programmes could prepare community based development projects to support the community traditionally depend on the palmyrah industry.
- (3) Marketing organisations that are interested in the Palmyrah based products could use the findings to change their future policies and practices pertaining to marketing the product.
- (4) The future researchers could continue their research in relation to Palmyrah based production and marketing on the basis of the findings.

Methodology

This study adopts qualitative research method and descriptive research pattern. Since it is a qualitative study, statistical techniques were not used to analyze the data.

Qualitative research method has been adopted, because the study mainly focuses on social behaviour of the people who are traditionally involve in production and marketing, in an informal manner for a longer period. Perceptions, opinions and emotions of personnel are the major indicators to judge their knowledge and experience in this small

scale industry. Observation method helped to collect information that is otherwise either inaccessible or very difficult to obtain, to fulfill the objectives of the study.

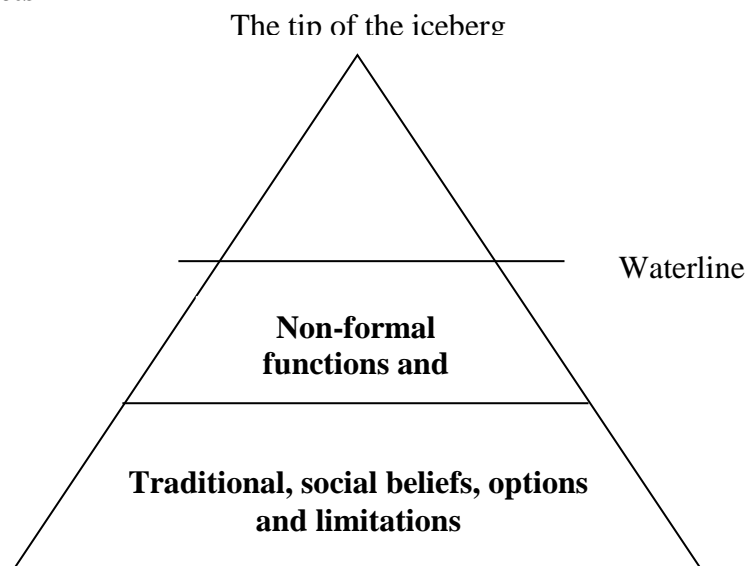
The researcher is familiar with the field, where the traditional families involved in production and marketing. In addition to this, information about palmyrah dependent workers is only available through the observation and inter-personal discussion. This is being an obstacle in acquiring the exact quantifiable data throughout the study. It also hinders the access to data by any other personnel, not sharing the physical niche with the traditional workers. Hence observation method helped to obtain adequate information on socio-economic conditions of the community based on palmyrah industry and controls the limitations to a lesser extent.

In practice, researcher has more opportunities to move and discuss the needs, problems and limitations of the marketing practices with the consumers as well as the stakeholders of the industry. The researcher herself acquired reasonable knowledge through the observation and communication with the personnel employed in the sector. Formal and informal interviews were made by the researcher with the people employed in the sector. (Thiviyaraja, 1989).

On the basis of the discussion done by the researcher with selected number of employee in production, sales and marketing, many problems were identified. Stratified purposeful sampling was used to select the individuals for the study.

Figure 1: Preliminary model for observation method

Current production and marketing behaviour of palmyrah based products



The researcher identified the preliminary model (Figure 1) to explain the structure and composition of the inter-related factors of palmyrah production and marketing. Undeveloped and non-scientific traditional behaviour pertaining to family based production and marketing functions lead to unorganised practices of the industry. Primary

data was collected by observation method using specific checklist for the producers to obtain the maximum appropriate information.

Secondary data used to explain the nature and the development of the production of the industry in the region. Relevant data were obtained from General Managers of Palm Development Co-operative Societies (PDCS) functioning in Jaffna district.

The Annual reports and documents published by the Palmyrah Development Board were also used to obtain relevant supportive information.

Literature review

Small scale industry / cottage industry by hand is labour-intensive, It requires low levels of technology and relatively small capital investments. A number of operations in the production process can be easily undertaken at home. These factors clearly demonstrate the significant socio-economic value of small-scale production. Its vast resources are either unutilized or underutilized. The small scale industries have a talent of 'dispersal'. Because most of these industries still exist in the traditional form.

Social division of labour is found in all societies. According to the occupational theory, the origin of caste system can be found in the nature and a quality of social work performed by the various groups of people. Those professions which were regarded as better and respectable made the persons who performed them superior to those who were engaged in less privileged professions.

As Sorokin stated' Social stratification's basis and very essence consists in an unequal distribution of rights and privileges, duties and responsibilities, social values and privations, social power and influences among the member of a society. Economic development/ capitalism have brought the lessening of racial differences. Inter-mixing of castes is the off-shoot of capitalism.

The social disorganisation is caused by the change in role and status of the individuals in the society. In an organised society, the roles and statuses of people are defined and fixed. A primitive society suffers less from disorganisation because it is stable. But in course of time our norms change, people begin to choose from amongst the different roles which cause disequilibrium.

War is another factor causes social disorganisation; war disturbs the economy of a country and introduces confusion and disorder in the society. War leads to scarcity, affects male-female ratio, and also weakens the sociological ties. Some sociologists referred social disorganisation as a natural process than as a malady. It may thus prove beneficial to erase the old edifice and construct a new one. Hence, to quote Sumner and Keller, the study of society must be "purely scientific" (Vidya Bhushan and Sachdeva 2005).

Findings and Interpretation

Although the problem of under-performance is common among the traditional rural, family based industries, the problems of palmyrah sector were unique in certain aspects. On the basis of the analysis of data collected, the results were derived.

- Producing main and byproducts in palmyrah industry, it is not organized like a corporate sector. The production is done by household members according to their

traditional knowledge and practices learned from their parents or relations. Therefore systematic organizational structure and functions were not followed in production process.

The quantity and quality of the products are not carefully estimated and production does not match with the changing trend of the markets. Supply and demand are not systematically and scientifically estimated in the industry. Therefore excess demand or excess supply is common problems in production. Thus, adverse experiences are found in pricing, storage and fixing the profit ratio.

Since the production based on family labour, rules, conditions, work time and work ethics were not followed in a systematic manner. It leads to compel the industry to grow as an unorganized production sector.

- Women labour force is engaged in various stages of production other than collecting toddy. Naturally they are not concentrating in production due to family-work stress. Their priorities are not clearly designed. This nature affects the scientific approach in production.

Since most of the handicraft based products are produced by the women, limitations and weaknesses affect the production processes severely.

Due to their low level of education women labour do not carefully record the details of production regularly and carefully. It affects the planning and directing the production in a scientific manner.

Women engaged in most of the production stages are at the age of 35 - 45 years old. Therefore, when the parents encourage them to leave this sector and shift their employment to other prestige production and service sector, the skilled labour requirement in this sector will decline sharply. These changes create uncertainty in the survival of the industry in the long run.

Due to the ethnic disturbances and frequent internal migration of families caused more women- headed families rely on this sector for their survival. Though women became the bread winner of the family, employment in this sector becomes a must for their livelihood. When the market demand failed to maintain stability, the income of the women employed in the sector are severely affected and leads to poverty.

This negative effect of vicious circle brings inferior quality in production and marketing process. This will deteriorate the opportunities for future growth and development.

- The labour employed in this sector does not aware about the new technologies and there are no chances to access to advanced technology. Continuously they are in the sector with the technology with limitation and disadvantages. There is a big gap between the need for advanced technology and the knowledge and the capacity of the labour to gain adequate education and training in this regard.

There are no organized efforts and programmes to promote the technical skills and potential to increase the quality of their work and the product for a long a period.

This disadvantaged status of the work force is responsible for the market shrinkage and non profitability.

- Social psychology of the community engaged in this sector did not force them to get out of the under developed nature of this industry and create eagerness to search for modern technology that could change the industry rapidly and effectively. Techno culture is not closer to their living style and the social culture. In other words, they are satisfied with the underperformance nature of the industry. This may be due to their habitats isolated from the well developed geographical region or towns.
- The old generation is able to understand the power of quality and affluent education by observing the changes of economic and cultural lifestyle of those who have migrated to developed cities and countries. Because of this they want the younger generation to get out of this industry and traditional villages in order to acquire quality education and white collar jobs. This social awareness causes the scarcity of labour in the future to meet the future demands of this sector.
- The prevailed social illusion in relation to the educational level of requirement affects the industry adversely. There is a social believe that those who have educational qualifications below grade 11 are employed in this sector. Because more education is not necessary to work in this sector. Even accidentally when more qualified people join this sector, they are discouraged to retain in the industry. It is a unique social attitude, believe and opinion pertaining to this industry.
- Social image of the industry is always inferior and scheduled on the basis of the social strata of the northern region. So therefore more qualified and people with high skills are reluctant to join this sector for their employment. This nature of social fabric blocks the qualified people from the other communities to enter this industry in order to enhance the quality and productivity.

Marketing

Until the PDB intervening in the production and marketing activities of palmyrah based products in the year 1978, traditional home oriented marketing practices were followed. The traditional system of marketing, the following weaknesses was involved.

- The production is not planned on the basis of the data on the market demand. The marketing was done seasonally when they were able to produce the products. But actually it should be vice-versa.
- The seasonal fluctuation in the production was not considered seriously and no alternative arrangements were made such as storage of raw material, work in progress and finished goods. Therefore, there was no steady regular supply of goods to market. It failed to keep regular customers for the product even it was liked most. This problem was not considered collectively or by the community organizations established by the community depend on this industry for their livelihood and development.
- There were no records for the cost estimation since it was socially neglected sector compared to agriculture or fisheries of the region. Socially this product and the producers were not respected as equal to the agricultural and marine sector.

Women who play a key role in the manufacturing process of the important palmyrah products such as *Odiyal* and products based on palmyrah leaves (*handicrafts*) were not organized, educated and provided an appropriate training in this regard. Women empowerment programmes were not considered important even by the social leaders and the community welfare and development societies of the community.

Discussion and recommendations

In Sri Lanka, recently several traditional, rural, family based industries were given priority in the national development programs and projects. Cashew and Kithul industry were paid attention in the national economic development programmes on the basis of '*Mahinda chintana*'. Special focus was also made on cashew and palmyrah industries (Gunasena and Warnasuriya, 2008). But most of the documents available pertaining to palmyrah industry focuses on the economic and technical aspects of palmyrah industry. But there societal oriented nature approaches and practices that affect the production and marketing processes of palmyrah industry were not considered for a long period. That was not seriously considered in view of the development plan of the palmyrah industry.

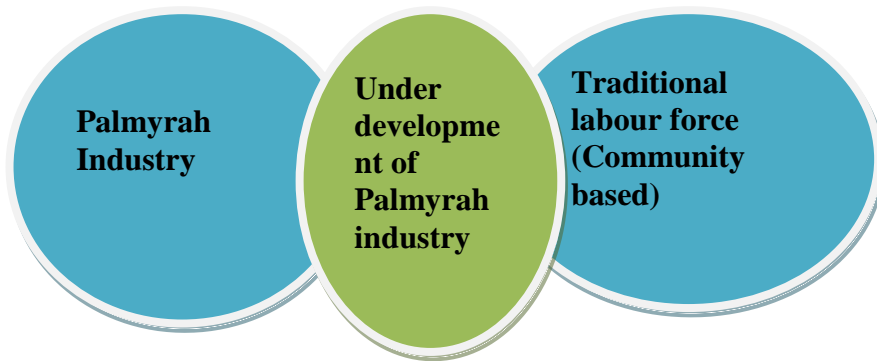
This study pays its attention to the sociological weaknesses, limitations and issues of the members of the family who are engaged in the production and marketing activities of the industry. The individuals and the families traditionally involved in palmyrah sector are ranked in a less enduring hierarchy of status of the society. Raymond .W Murrey stated that there are social "higher" and "lower" social units. Accordingly the social group engaged in the industry is comparatively in the lower status. This lower social layer negatively directed the community in the process of economic and social development (Vidya Bhushan and Sachdeva, 2005). The social system recognized the occupants in the palmyrah industry as inferior, relative to other social groups in agriculture and business sector.

The nature and the quality of social work performed by the group of people engaged in the sector were not encouraging the community to get recognition for individuals and the production sector. Therefore, the palmyrah industry has been severely affected adversely by the social stratification of that the social group are involved in the industry. It is reflected in the nature and operational standards of palmyrah industry. The production and marketing segments have been managed in a status of underutilized and underperformed.

Recommendations

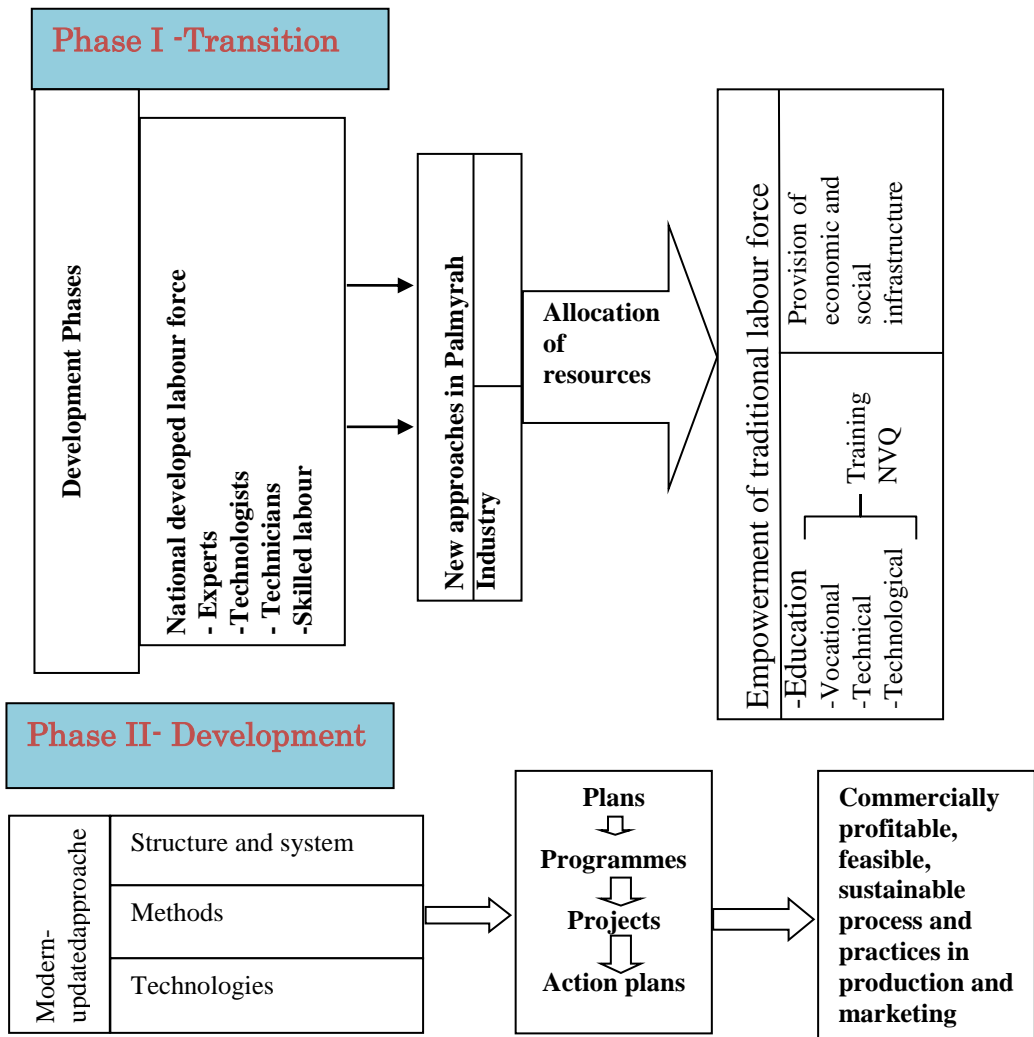
This study focused on the problems and the issues of production and marketing in the view of this social stratification prevailed in the northern region. On the analysis of the qualitative information and data, the following recommendations are proposed to transform the industry from the traditional, social based palmyrah industry to modern, formal, corporate based industry to match with other developed agro-based industries of Sri Lanka. The current status of the palmyrah industry and the community relationships are explained in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Current status of palmyrah industry



This study recommend for a transition in the following manner in two phases explained as in the Figure 3.

Figure 3: Forecasted development phases in the palmyrah industry



The proposed transition is not an easy task in the perspectives of the social system of the northern region. But at the same time, it is not impossible to go for a transition in view of the rapid changes occurring in Sri Lanka after the year 2006. The development in economic and social infrastructure of the northern region on the proposal of 'Mahinda chintana', the northern region is strongly connected with the southern parts of Sri Lanka, which are privileged in the national economic development of Sri Lanka.

Since the development of palmyrah industry is strongly connected with the regional development of Northern provinces under the vision of '*Vadakkini Vasantham*', the priorities are given to the economic developmental aspects of palmyrah industry. The social aspects related to the industry, specifically in the process of production and marketing are not given due importance.

This study recommends the following suggestions to make the transition possible socially.

1. The social leaders of the community should demand for a certain percentage of funds from the profit for the education of the community engaged in this sector.
2. The women empowerment programmes and projects should be formulated and implemented with the support and participation of the community organization that are interested in the development of the community.
3. Female students should be encouraged to continue their education in the tertiary level not only in academic courses but also in technical and technological courses of study.
4. The environment of the home where the production carried out are to be improved in order to promote the standard and the quality of process of the production. Japanese model could be used in this regard.
5. The guidance and counseling programmes should be introduced to the elders who are engaged in the industry to take them out from their psychological inferiority complex which make them to alienate from the main stream in certain occasions.
6. With the consultation of the social leaders and the executives of the community organizations, allocation of quota for their employment at various levels in the palmyrah industry in the future.

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