

Social Exclusion and Vulnerability of People in Gypsy Community

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Abstract

Gypsy community people are marginalized, socially excluded and vulnerable even today in the society. Gypsy community people have been identified as a disadvantaged group in Sri Lanka since past. They are still confronting with number of challenges and excluded in the development process of the country. In this regard, this study was conducted to identify the key challenges that lead to social exclusion and vulnerability of Gypsy community people in Aligambe Girama Niladhari division of Alayadiwembu Divisional Secretariat division, Ampara district among 40 individuals. Primary data was collected using interviews, focused group discussions and observations while secondary data was gained through records and reports of Alayadiwembu Divisional Secretariat division, books, newspaper articles, journals and web sites. Collected data were analysed using qualitative analysis method and presented in a descriptive way. The study found that the people of Gypsy community are socially excluded from getting basic facilities and needed developments that are normally available to other community people. Lack of water, health care, proper housing condition, sanitation facility, transportation, road facility, vulnerable to diseases, challenges in education, poor economy, gaining social status among other community people and poverty were identified as the continuous challenges faced by the Gypsy community people. As a developing country, Sri Lanka needs to consider and focuses on the well-being of all its citizens without excluding anyone in the development process, especially the marginalised and disadvantaged communities. Comprehensive measures, good policies and plan interventions are essential to improve the living standard and the social status of Gypsy community people.

Keywords: Challenges, Gypsy Community, Social Exclusion, Vulnerability

1. Introduction

Social exclusion affects the life of individuals and the whole society. As members of the society, people have the rights in exercising the economic, social, cultural and political

participation. This social exclusion exists, where people have limited access to rights, lack of materials, limited social integration and participation in the societal phenomena (Walsh, Scharf, & Keating, 2016). People are systematically obstructed from the full access to their rights, opportunities and resources in the social process that is equal to social marginalization. They become vulnerable when they are excluded socially and their rights and obligations are denied. It would cause downward mobility too. Social exclusion has the connection with the person's social class, race, religion, ethnicity and the status. People are excluded socially based on their social class, for instance lower class people are excluded in some social process based on their limited access in the economy. As well as the racial and religious differences, cultural diversities cause social exclusion and make the powerless people to suffer more and evolve in vulnerability (Giddens & Suttons, 2013).

Sri Lanka is a country with different ethnic and cultural diversity. Many cultural people with different languages are living here. The colonization in the country paved the ways for the settlement of multiple and different communities in Sri Lanka. Presently, there are 20 multi-ethnic communities dwelling in the country. Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims, Tamil Community of Indian Origins, Colombo Chettis, Malayalam Community, Malays, Dutch Burghers, Portuguese Burgers, Chinese Community, Memons, Coast Veddhas (Verdas), Bharatha Community, Kafris, Dawoodi Bohras, Vedda Community, Sindhi Community, Gypsy Community and Parsis are the established groups/communities in Sri Lanka (People of Sri Lanka, 2017). Compare to the major communities such as Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims, some of the minority communities are too small and they are found to be the marginalised communities in the nation with less political engagement. They often enjoy their life with limited economic, social access and political participation here.

“Gypsies” often called as “Roma” is an ethnic community with shared characteristics. There are about 12 million Gypsies scattered in many parts in the world, especially in Europe and Indian subcontinents. Gypsy community people adjust to continue their life in different living environmental conditions with common identity. India, Persia, Africa, Romania, Spain, Sri Lanka, Hungaria and Romania are some of the famous countries where gypsies exist in the world (Subasinghe, 2009). Gypsy community is also considered as one of the ethnic minorities and a cultural group in Sri Lanka who trace their origin in South India. They are largely unknown and left unnoticed by other major communities in the nation. According to the Sri Lankan government report in 2017, there are 3,792 Gypsies settled across the nation. They

have settled in various parts in Sri Lanka such as Kudagama and Kalawewa in Anuradhapura district, Aligambe and Siriwallipuram in Ampara district, Vaviniya, Mihintale and Kurunegala district (People of Sri Lanka, 2017).

However, Gypsy community people have been a marginalised and disadvantaged group in Sri Lanka since past. They are still confronting with number of challenges and excluded in the major development process. These challenges and exclusion are severely affected the life of the people in the Gypsy community. Development of a country depends on the improvement of the living standards of all citizens. However, it has not been achieved in the case of people belongs to the Gypsy community. Numerous studies were conducted and arguments were raised about the situation of the people in the Gypsy community, however there has no proper solution found to be yet.

In this context, this study was conducted to emphasise the social exclusion and the vulnerability of the people in Gypsy community in Sri Lanka with special reference to Aligambe Gypsy community to identify the key challenges that lead to social exclusion and vulnerability of Gypsy community people.

2. Research Methodology

This study was conducted at Aligambe GN division, which is located in Aliyadivembu DS division of Ampara District in Sri Lanka. It is an isolated village situated 18 Km distance from the Akkaraipattu town area. Aligambe GN division includes two small villages and fully surrounded by paddy fields. The people reside in the Aligambe GN division is called as Gypsies. There are 309 families residing in the study area and total population is 1158 (Male- 577 and Female- 581) (Resource Profile and Statistical Report of Alayadiwembu DS Division, 2017).

Under the Non-Probability Sampling techniques, Purposive Sample method was used for this study. The sample size is 40 individuals including men and women who are dwelling for many years in this study area. Both primary and secondary data collection methods were used for this study. Interview, focus group discussion and observation methods were used to collect primary data. Records and Statistical reports of Alayadiwembu DS division, books, newspaper articles, journals and reliable web sites were the secondary data utilized for this study. Qualitative data analysis method was applied to this study and analysed data were summarized and presented in texts accordingly.

3. Results and Discussions

The study focused the key challenges faced by Gypsy community people to understand how they are deprived from social inclusion and become vulnerable in the society.

3.1 Key Challenges faced by People in Gypsy Community

3.1.1 Lack of Water

The study area is a place where water scarcity highly exists. The area is far away from the main road of Ampara and Akkaraipattu (18 Km) and the land area is covered with full of rocks and mountains. This condition has created scarcity of water in the study area. House wells are not available and seven common wells are found in the study area. However, these common wells are situated far away (300 to 400 feet) from the residences of the people and mostly go dry in the drought season. Alayadiwembu DS division is responsible in providing the necessities of the people in the Aligambe village and they send 3000 litres of water twice a week to this area; however, it is not enough for all. People often walk to the nearest canals and small pond to bath and fetch water in the study area. Women, children, elders have become more vulnerable due to scarcity of water because they are responsible for collecting water to their household. They carry pots, cans, baskets and other containers on their head at around 12 o'clock to the main road and wait for the bus service and then travel by bus to the nearest Sinhala village called "Maanthotam" to collect water and they return by 2 o'clock in the same bus every day. Apart from drinking water for survival, people use water for many other purposes including cooking, washing, bathing, keeping houses clean and keep plants alive. Water scarcity in the study area has pushed the people of Gypsy community to the lowest level in their life.

3.1.2 Lack of Health Care

The people in Aligambe village are suffering without having a proper health care system in their village. This village does not have a hospital or a medical unit to address the health related issues of people and they have to travel to Akkaraipattu town which is situated 18 Km away from their village, in case of emergencies. This situation of improper health care system made Gypsy community people to face more difficulties. This study explored that the village people often experience barriers to healthcare services, which limit their right to obtain the health care they need. There is a small maternity health care centre available in this area, but doctors or medical professionals do not visit this area. A mid-wife comes only for checking the pregnant mothers and infants. All the respondents reported that, they are highly worried about their

current situation about the Medicare. They claimed that, they are uneducated and their knowledge about the outer world is very poor, as a result most of the time they remain at home without taking hand medicine in considering the distance and practical difficulties of travelling to the nearest town for medication. Especially, pregnant mothers and those who have small infants faced practical difficulties to go for medical check-up and monthly clinical check-up. Even pregnant mothers do not visit Medical Office of Health (MOH) for monthly medical check-ups. The elders also face the same problem and do not go to get treatment for their diseases here.

3.1.3 Lack of Housing

People in the Gypsy community face difficulties without having proper shelter in the study area. 76% of the houses in the study area consist of only one room and there is no fence or walls. This condition has created an insecure situation in the study area. The houses are made up of clay and thatched roofs and it often collapses during the rainy season. 67% of the houses have only one room. They face difficulties of managing one room for all purposes here. However, these poor people are adjusting their life within that room with more difficulties. People have no trust and hope in their mind of having a good life with comfortable shelter. This area is highly vulnerable because of animal attack too. Elephants enter their residences and destroy their crops and shelter. This condition also created a threatening situation among the people especially, among the elderly people, women and children who stay at home.

3.1.4 Lack of Sanitation Facility

Majority of the people have temporary toilets in poor condition in their houses. Even, there are houses without toilets. Some people go to their relatives' and neighbours' home in order to use toilets. The study found that 30% of the houses do not have toilet facilities and 17% of the houses have temporary toilets and 15% of the families use environment to relieve them. Proper sanitation facility is very essential here. Children are grown up with such environment would definitely cause problems in their development process. Men from the Gypsy community somehow adjust to this situation; however, women are facing difficulties when using environment and relatives' house for sanitation purpose. It is felt that this issue of poor sanitation facilities creates various discomforts, unhygienic condition that affect the healthy life of people and there is a dire need to change this condition.

3.1.5 Vulnerable to Diseases

The Gypsy community people are suffering due to multiple diseases that threaten their life. The uncleanness, lack of pure water for drinking, poor sanitation facilities, unhealthy food behaviour, improper Medicare system and the village situation make them fall in communicable and non-communicable disease in the study area. The habit of eating betel and taking liquor has become serious problems among the total population in the study area. Lack of water and poor sanitation facilities create water related diseases like cholera and Diarrhoea, 88% of the respondents reported that, they mostly remain in their home without going for work due to diseases. Snakes and poisonous insects are also available in this area. Dengue virus fever also persists in the area, the medical health report of the people indicates that, 105 dengue patients have been identified in Alayadivembu area and 20 people are from this Gypsy community from 2006 to 2016.

3.1.6 Lack of Transportation and Road

As the study mentioned earlier, this is an isolated and remote village situated 18 Km away from the nearest town. People of this area visit Akkaraipattu town to fulfil their basic needs and other purposes. People of this area find difficulties to reach the town due to lack of transportation facilities. A bus service is going through this area from Akkaraipattu twice a day at 6.30 am and 12.30 pm. However, people in this area complain that, only the afternoon bus service is useful to them and the morning shift is not useful because in the morning they mostly engage in domestic work. People of the area have requested to the respected transport board to change the morning shift of the bus service to evening time to fulfil their needs. However, they have not received any response to their request yet. This condition of poor transportation facilities negatively affects the people. They face difficulties in travelling to the nearest town to buy their groceries and other essential things. Therefore, Gypsy community people often walk or hire a three-wheel or they wait for tractors going in that way. The condition of the road in this area is also not good. It is difficult to go smoothly or fast in case of any emergencies. Since the roads are potholed water remains in the damaged roads in the rainy season.

3.1.7 Educational Challenges

Aligambe village has a mixed school that has classes up to grade 10. There are 269 students (143 boys and 126 girls) currently studying here. Most of the female students drop out from the school after completing grade 10 and stay at home. Only, 50% of the male students are going to the other town area to continue their education. There are no any secondary higher education schools available in this area. If the students wish to study further, they need to travel

to other places nearly 18 Km far from their residence to pursue education. The studies are conducted in Tamil medium in the school. Tamil language is the second language for the students here; therefore, the school requires more teachers to teach the students. There are 18 teachers teaching in the particular school. Nevertheless, there is a shortage for teachers to teach important subjects like English, Mathematics and Science. Most of the students drop out due to financial difficulties, lack of schools and teachers, for engaging in domestic works and help their parents in income generation activities. The children who ought to carry the books are going for begging and other farming activities with their parents.

3.1.8 Economic Challenges

Gypsy community people in the study area engage in agricultural activities, farming, crop cultivation, animal husbandry, labour works, fishing and doing small business and even they go for fishing. Very few of them are going for snake charming, monkey performances, palm reading, begging and fortune telling. However, the incomes of the individuals are very low and most of the time they face losses and low output due to lack of water, electricity, proper machineries and infrastructure facilities. Especially the road condition of this village is in very poor condition and transport facilities are not sufficient to carry the goods to the distance market. If they hire a vehicle to carry their goods to the market, the cost of transport is between LKR 500-600. 95% of the labourers get less than LKR 1000 per day as wage. Most of the breadwinners of the family remain without any income at home in the off-season of the paddy cultivation.

3.1.9 Poverty

The people in the study area live in poverty because of their poor economic standard. The income of the working people are very low and they mostly depend on paddy cultivation and crop cultivation where they work as a poor wage labour and their income is mostly determined by the seasons in paddy cultivation, if someone from other areas need a poor wage labour, they hire the people from Gypsy community. Normally, one-day wage of a labour in the other areas is LKR 1500, yet the Gypsy community people receive only LKR 750 to LKR 1000 per day. This income of the earning people is also not static. This income is not enough to cover the daily expenses of the family members and to fulfil their basic needs in the Aligambe village. Because of poor income, some of the people are begging in some other town areas like Akkaraipattu, Palamunai, Addalaichenai and Nintavur. They beg for food, clothes and so on.

3.1.10 Challenges in Gaining Social Status

The Gypsy community is largely unknown and left unnoticed by other major communities in Sri Lanka. Even, most of the people fail to consider them as normal human beings like them. Tracing their history, these Gypsies belong to high caste and class in India, but in Sri Lanka, they have been *looked as outcastes or untouchable people. However, the people in Gypsy community have improved in education level; they are humiliated by other societies in public places. When the people belongs to Gypsy community visit houses and shops, other community people often treat them as untouchable people and keep them away from their boundaries; even they are not welcomed in the front yard of the houses. If the Gypsy community people asked for water to drink from other community people, they are given water with old glasses or in broken mugs. Others humiliate the children who are studying in outer districts too. If they visit to public service sectors like hospitals and banks, other people ignore them. The people are still struggling to gain the social status among other communities. It could not be achieved it because of the attitudes of other community people towards the Gypsy community people.*

4. Conclusion

The Gypsy community people are marginalized, socially excluded and vulnerable even today in many aspects in the society. They are socially excluded from getting basic facilities that are normally available to other community members. This situation has pushed the people of the Gypsy community to suffer in numerous ways. The life of them has become vulnerable without accessing to the basic facilities and they fear about the voidable future life of their offspring. As a human being, each and everyone have their own dignity, reputation and self-identity in the society. They have the rights to live a healthy life at least with minimum living standard. A developing country like Sri Lanka, which celebrates the diversity of cultures and different ethnicities, needs to consider the well-being of every community in the nation without excluding anyone in the development process, especially the marginalised and disadvantaged communities. The other community people also should change their negative attitudes towards the Gypsy community people. Efficient development projects, comprehensive measures, good policies and plan interventions are essential to overcome the challenges faced by the people in gypsy community. It will enrich the disadvantaged people's lives, living standard, social status and the whole country.

5. References

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