



A sociological study of the socio-economic background of three wheel drivers in rural Sri Lanka: Special reference to Rathnapura, Ambilipitiya and Wallavaya areas

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Abstract

Three wheelers, taxis are a key part of Sri Lanka's public transport network, especially after dark when buses stop operating due to state mandated fares which do not permit night fares. During the past decade or so Sri Lanka has seen a rapid growth in youth, early school leavers and people from lower income groups taking into the occupation of being three wheeler drivers. This research is conducted considering this growing trend and the impact it has on the country's economy and the socio-cultural impact.

The main reasons for three wheel occupation are as follows. Primary reason is the inability to fulfil the growing demand for transportation in terms of public or private transport. Secondly the lack of alternative transport forms in some rural areas. Finally the fact that three wheeler drivers providing a flexible transportation service. This service commenced in 1978 and it has become the most popular private transportation method in present day Sri Lanka as a result of many low income group people taking into this occupation and a large number of commuters patronizing the service. The objective of this research was to study the social, economic background of three wheel drivers in Sri Lanka, as they seem to possess a very strong sub-culture that protects their interests and prevents unwanted or undesirable elements penetrating their strongholds or territories.

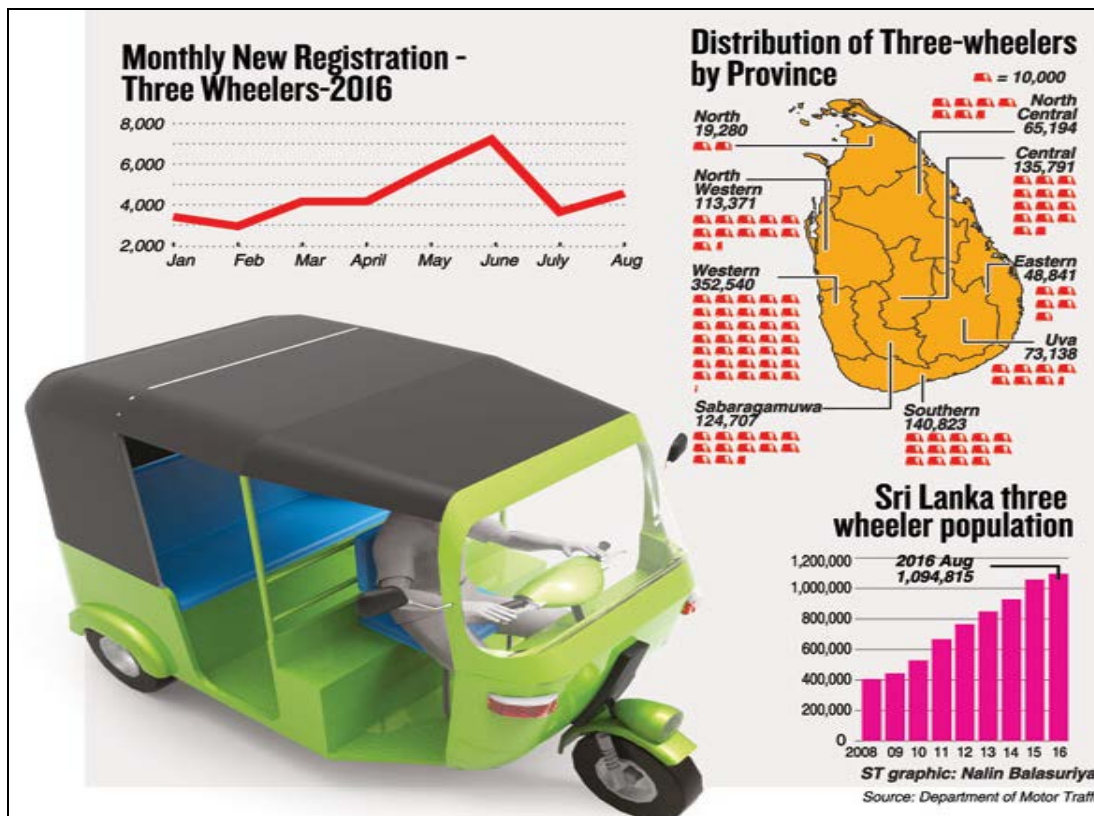
The study was carried out in Rathnapura, Ambilipitiya and Wallavaya areas. According to a random group of 674 three wheeler drivers were selected as a sample. A questionnaire based survey, interviews and observation methods were used for data collection. The research revealed that 64% three wheeler drivers' education was limited to O/L qualifications. A surprising amount of 46% claimed a daily income of only Rs. 500-1,000. Further a 33% of the three wheeler drivers, whom we contacted received a monthly income of Rs. 20,000-30,000. Another 35% of the drivers were involved in farming as a secondary income because they do not have a permanent source of income nor the earnings from the three wheeler was not enough to make the ends meet. Out of the research groups, 77% were married and another 51% of them were drug addicts. Considering the above observations, the overall objective of this research is to prove that the socio-economic conditions of three wheel drivers are in still in a very backward and deprived condition.

Keywords: occupation, society, three wheel service, education, transport service

Introduction

In today's world one of the most challenging problems we face is, providing optimal, efficient, cost effective and also environmentally friendly transport services. Informal Public Transport (IPT) modes are widespread social phenomena in Sri Lanka and have become an integral part of the transport sector. The most common and visible IPT mode in Sri Lanka is the use of Three-Wheelers. Most people in urban areas as well as rural areas uses three-wheelers for their day to day travelling. Low cost and easy maintenance are the main reasons for this. Even though many representatives of Sri Lankan society consider it as a nuisance; congestion of traffic,

noise and air pollution, association with illegal activities, and price irregularities, from the standpoint of passengers, its ready availability, flexibility in door to door service, ease in communication and "affordability" have found the grounds for the existence of Three wheelers as an primary IPT mode. Sri Lanka had 929,495 three wheelers registered by the end of 2014, according to data from the Department of Motor Vehicles, with 79,038 vehicles being imported in that year. In Sri Lanka, after a reformed public transport arrangement in 1977, private sector has taken a key role in providing transport services.



<http://www.sundaytimes.lk/161002/news/number-of-three-wheeled-vehicles-increases-dramatically-211146.html>

Fig 1: Number of three-wheeled vehicles increases

The main reasons of starting three wheel occupations in Sri Lanka are as follows.

- Inability to fulfill the growing demand for transportation in terms of public or private transport.
- Lack of alternative transport forms in some rural areas in the country.
- Flexibility of three wheeler as a transportation service.

Since then, the private buses started their operation in a well organized manner with a scheduled time table, but transport in early morning or late night has become a problem for the public, especially commuters in rural areas or in small cities. Motorcycle and bicycle are the alternative modes to solve their problem, but the capacity of these modes will not allow carrying additional passengers. There are no other modes to support their urgent needs, especially during nighttime and emergency situations. As a result, commuters are having serious transportation problems. Therefore the three wheeler service comfortably started filling these needs. Three-wheelers perform many of the same functions the taxi and it is considered as a next step up ladder for personal mobility to buses in small cities. However its existence and operation fail to get the credits from the society. The three wheeler drivers and their valuable services are not appreciated at all only negative aspects are highlighted. Therefore reasons for these social issues faced by the drivers in society were considered in this study.

Three-wheeler growth continues because they serve a need in urban and rural areas as an Informal Public Transport service since the bus and rail systems are failing to meet riders' needs.

They are a source of employment for many, a cheap mode of transport, and at this time, impose very little burden on the government as opposed to busses and trains which require subsidies and oversight. However, they operate unsafely, swerving into and out of traffic to pick up passengers, making illegal turns, and allowing passengers to disembark from the right side. According to the Traffic Police Reports in 2004, over 50% of the accidents in the western province were related to the three-wheelers and 51% of the traffic violations were committed by the three-wheeler drivers. In Sri Lankan transport context three-wheelers are generally considered as the poor person's vehicle for his or her transport needs (Samarasinghe, Samarakkody, *et al.* 1999)^[1].

Objectives

Main Objective

To study the social, economic background of three wheel drivers in Sri Lanka

Specific Objectives

- To study cultural background of the three wheeler drivers, as they seem to possess a very strong sub-culture that protects their interests and prevents unwanted or undesirable elements penetrating their strongholds or territories.
- To identify job satisfaction of the three wheeler drivers

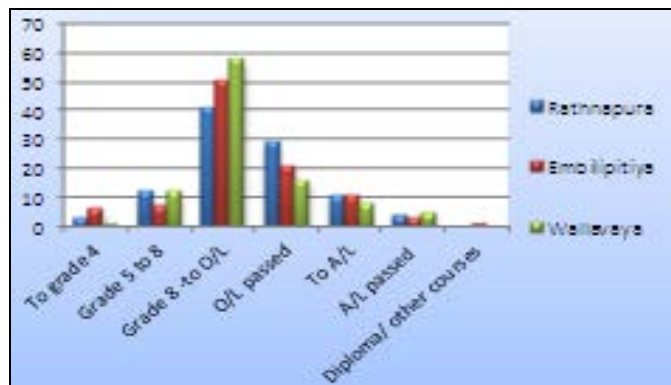
Methodology

Study was carried out in Rathnapura, Ambilipitiya and Wallavaya areas. According to a random group of 674 three

wheeler drivers were selected as a sample. These cities have identical characteristics in various issues such as population density, level of transportation facilities and availabilities, education and age structure and so on, thus these cities were selected for the study. The three-wheeler drivers have themselves formed into small groups, and each group have their regular operation starting from predetermined place such -as a street or a market place. Therefore surveyors simply visited their locations to fill the questionnaires. A questionnaire based survey, interviews and observation methods were used for data collection.

Result and Findings

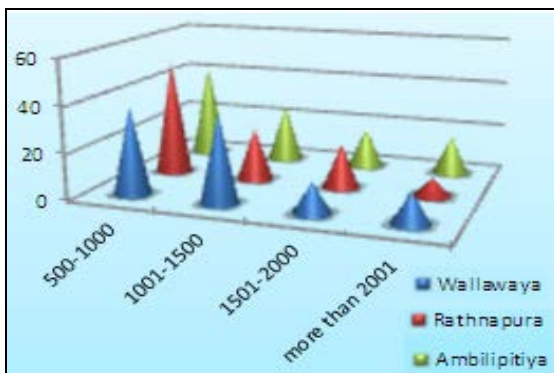
Socio-economic background of the Three Wheeler drivers are analyzed in terms of age, marital status, educational level, daily income on average, job satisfaction, employment category, and the ownership of the Three Wheel. Data analysis was done by SPSS. According to the data, the highest age group among the interviewees were 34-38. Majority Three Wheel drivers are in the active working age group.



Sources: Field Survey 2015

Fig 2: Educational Level

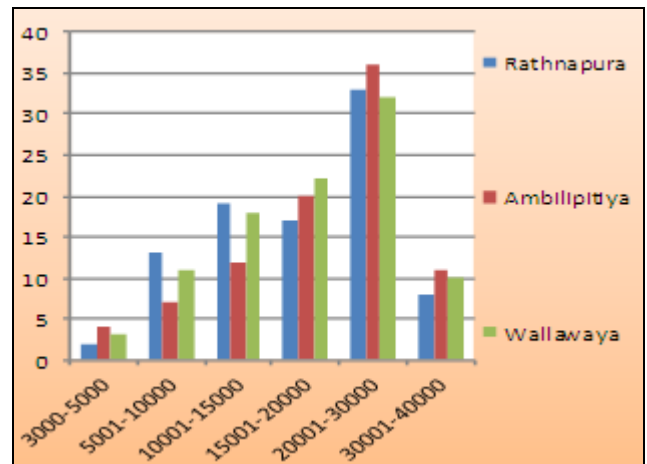
When considering Three Wheeler drivers’ education level majority of them have studied up to Grade 8 or O/L. In Sri Lanka, generally for a person to be employable, passing results in A/L and credit pass in Math and English is a requisite. As a result, this group of three wheeler drivers must have undergone a difficult time in finding a job. Without this qualification, they are unable find a government or private sector’s job. Because, they have joined with this job.



Sources: Field Survey 2015

Fig 3: Daily Income Level

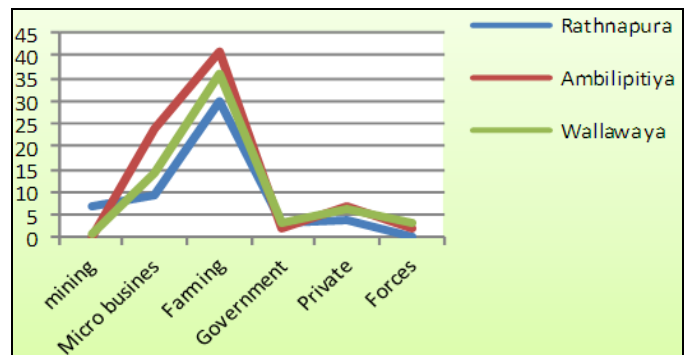
In all the three selected areas, the daily income of the Three Wheel drivers is Rs. 500-1000. Among them majority was Rathnapura area Three wheel drivers.



Sources: Field Survey 2015

Fig 4: Monthly Income Level

Based on this information the monthly income level of the three wheeler was drivers not enough to get a profit from their job. As far as total cost is concerned 52% of their income was spent on fuel, which is a major component of the operating cost of a three-wheeler. Other than fuel, service expenses, leasing payment and membership fee are the cost components of the cost structure.



Sources: Field Survey 2015

Fig 5: Secondary Income Sources

What they earn from this job is not sufficient to meet their daily requirement thus they try to pursuit other ways of income sources. But 4.4% of them were unable to receive other income generation method. That rate was 46% from Rathnapura 38% from Ambilipitiya, 46% from Wellawaya. Theirs income generation source were farming, small business, security jobs, retired forces, government jobs. However, they indicated that this less income isn’t enough and not support to struggle with the current economic condition. They express theirs view like this,

“We have to get fuel to the three-wheeler, have a family to feed, children have to be sent to school and so on and how do we manage all these with a fewer income?”.

Out of the research group, 77% were married and 51% of them spent money for alcohol from which they earn. This has had affected to their family economic as they are married. 68% of them were satisfied about the three wheeler job but 32% of them were not satisfied with the job. The reason why they liked their job was, it was their career which they earn. Drivers were in a view that during last few years, not only increased trend in vehicle robberies and thefts but also killing and assaulting to the drivers were also increased. So these problems influenced the drivers to restrict the area of working and to reduce the working hours especially during the night. Both passengers and drives feared to travel with unknown persons and it may have led to restrict the area of three-wheeler operation. Majority of three-wheeler drivers are married and their wives stay at home and some of them do not engaged any income sources. In this situation three-wheeler drivers had to work from morning to mid-night. They always in the three-wheeler park and around 79% of them have thorough understanding of the current updates in the country. They were worried on the discrimination regarding their career. But certain number of three-wheeler drivers have involved in some illegal activities. They support and provide transportation for the persons who are dealing with illegal drugs, prostitutions so then they would be able to have large amount of money.

Conclusions

Considering the above observations, the overall objective of this research is to prove that the socio-economic conditions of three wheel drivers are in still in a very backward and deprived condition. The main complaints against this system are targeting badly on drivers behaviors such as not obeying traffic rules and regulations, engaging in illegal activities, drinking and smoking habits on duty, speeding, crisis crossing, contributing traffic congestion by irregular traffic movements, significant accident involvement, unauthorized parking behaviors and used for robberies, nasty works, illegal and so on. These are the reasons in macro view multiply and pave the path for not recognizing their services in a society. The three wheeler stands or parking places are often illegal and there is no organization to look into their pathetic conditions. Three wheeler drivers have no way of proving his profession. There being no public or private organization to make sure the three-wheeler service is provided in an orderly manner or to control this service in any way is a big problem. As a result of these factors the drivers have no confidence in their job.

Suggestions

The age limit for obtaining the license is significant and this age limit should be increased. It is very important to take initiation to develop the economic and social conditions of the three-wheeler drivers. Providing a proper place for parking, issuing an index number for drivers, introducing new rules, improving good counselling services and implementation legal actions strict for those who taking alcohol while driving, are the most important in the context of suggestions. Further, the mottoes in the back side of the three-wheeler show the state of the mentality of the drivers and this will help to understand the sub-culture which they belong.

Reference

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