



MAPPING THE SOCIO-CULTURAL DISCOURSE SURROUNDING THE BACKYARD POULTRY FARMING SYSTEMS IN SRI LANKA

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INTRODUCTION

The livestock sector plays a major role in providing economic and nutritional security for people. Among the key livestock industries operating in Sri Lanka, the poultry sector consists of exotic, mixed and indigenous breeds of animals (Silva et al, 2019). While the exotic and mixed breeds can be seen in large scale commercial farms, the indigenous breeds can be mainly found in home gardens and are mainly reared by small holder farmers (Silva et al, 2019). The livestock sector contributes around 1% to the total GDP and the poultry sector is placed in a higher position due to its higher contribution to the national GDP and the generation of a higher tax revenue compared to other livestock and fisheries industries (Manjula, et al. 2018). Furthermore, poultry products are devoid of certain cultural inhibitions within the Sri Lankan context and is consumed across Sri Lanka.

The poultry sector in Sri Lanka ranges from intensive systems to backyard production. In intensive production systems, exotic birds are reared under high input management with the intensive use of capital and labour (Manjula et al., 2018; Silva et al., 2014). The intensive system operates under vertical integrators and they are highly commercialized market-oriented systems. In contrast to this, backyard poultry systems consist of indigenous stocks who are “allowed to roam freely and scavenge for their feed. It’s a low risk-low investment-low production-low return enterprise system with extensive form of management” (Korale-Gedera et al., 2018; Silva et al., 2014). Backyard poultry mostly consists of small flocks kept under low to little bio-security measures (Conan et al., 2012; Kumar et al., 2021) and mostly consists “of free indigenous unselected breeds of various ages, with various species mixed in the same flock” (Conan et al., 2012). Kumar et al. (2021) states, backyard poultry farming is also used as an effective means to improve the “socioeconomic and nutritional status among rural poor people of the society due to availability of cheap source of protein (egg and meat), for eradication of malnutrition, generation of self-employment and supplementary income” (p. 1477).

Though commercial layers and broilers production systems dominate the Sri Lankan market in terms of providing eggs and meat as organized systems, the backyard model, despite being not organized has its own means of operation. Likewise, native chickens possess a huge symbolic value within Sri Lanka. The chicken is used as an auspicious symbol on top of the oil lamp which is traditionally lit at the beginning of functions within Sri Lanka as a mark of goodwill. The village chickens are also used for various black magic, and religious activities across Sri Lanka by all ethnicities. Furthermore, village chickens are also kept as pets and recreational animals and are treated as part of the extended family as they interact quite closely with humans in the same household (Conan et al., 2012).

Therefore, the poultry distribution and network (PDN) in relation to the backyard poultry sector in Sri Lanka is not merely an economic activity but is interconnected with capitalism, the market, income, livelihood, marketing and tradition, culture, religion and beliefs which therefore turns rearing backyard chicken into a discursively complex socio-political activity. Likewise, neoliberalism has also begun to slowly intrude into the backyard poultry rearing systems attempting to transform it into a profit oriented, capital intensive and productivity-based model. The neo-liberal and the neo-colonialist desires of re-structuring the backyard poultry rearing system in Sri Lanka under the aegis of western scientific production paradigms



are currently giving rise to tension within the field. To achieve such ends, western-based “knowledge” on rearing structures under the guise of promoting the one health approach, reducing the zoonotic threats, increasing animal welfare, protecting animal health and improving feed are slowly being injected into the local rearing models and systems practiced for years through various training programmes or knowledge distribution programmes under the label of “proper management”. This creates the binary between what is proper and improper and yet again neo-liberalism has been successful in promoting a specific type of knowledge by promoting possible techno-scientifically created risks (Beck & Ritter, 1992). Though many farmers have got integrated into the model purely for profit, it is interesting to see that neo-liberalism still has been unable to promote the western secular ethic among farmers in the poultry sector in Sri Lanka to a large degree. For example, many Sinhalese-Buddhist farmers are reluctant to cull their chicken for the purpose of selling them as meat. This behavior is looked upon as exotic and is at times constructed through orientalist pedagogy as anti-scientific and sentimental, but the mindset of Sri Lankan semi-urban and rural farmers remain to be unchanged.

But despite these interlocutions, majority of the research work conducted within Sri Lanka in relation to backyard chicken are conducted in relation to genetics, breeds, improving productivity or its socio-economic aspects in removing rural poverty and providing self-employment. For example, the research work conducted by Atapattu, et al. (2016), Manjula, et al. (2018), Silva, et al. (2014), Silva, et al. (2019), Korale-Gedera, et al. (2018), all focus on the above-mentioned facts. Thus, less attention is placed on how the complex socio-political-cultural and economic variables operate within the sector in terms of discourses. These discursive practices present important socio-political-cultural and economic facts about the Sri Lankan social mosaic and hence this paper attempts to analyze these complex socio-cultural discourses operating within the backyard poultry rearing sector in Sri Lanka.

METHODOLOGY

With the intention of mapping the socio-cultural discourse surrounding backyard chicken farming in Sri Lanka and exploring the discourse, this research study was conducted following a qualitative approach. This approach was used as it would yield non-statistical data which can be analyzed through non-statistical means, because through this method, it will allow multiple stories to emerge without reducing the findings to numerical data (Dornyei, 2011). The data were collected by conducting semi-structured interviews with twenty people chosen using the convenience sampling method in selected areas in Sri Lanka. The data gathered were then tabulated, coded and themes were derived. The identified themes were analyzed using critical discourse analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the research were analyzed under three main data-driven themes; Distribution of Village Chicken and its Associated network, Feed Practices and Socio-Cultural Values which are discussed in the following section.

Distribution of Village Chicken and its Associated network

Village chicken rearing takes place in an interesting way. The production and the distribution network of village chicken is neither a structurally organized system on public/private administrative principles nor a structural state governed system. The state has also not formulated any strict regulations governing the system and therefore the operations lie outside regulatory authorities. This is indeed an interesting impasse. But this is not to state that the system is without structure as it has its own *modus operandi* developed through years of locally developed practices. Some of these practices might come across as unscientific when it is compared with the Western scientific epistemological and pedagogical practices. But without



serious techno-scientific interventions, or administrative structuralizations, the backyard poultry sector has survived for ages and has been one of the major sources of providing an income and much required protein to rural households.

Some of these farmers are registered at the regional veterinary office and duly maintain a cordial relationship with the veterinary surgeon and the livestock development officers while some have not even heard about the veterinary office or the need to register. Since the number of birds kept in a backyard are mostly less than 1000 birds, there is no necessity to get permission from the authorities. Certain farmers use the deep litter system to house the birds (where the flock is large) and others have homemade structures out of wood. The type of housing and the relationship with the veterinary office mostly depend on the farmer's economic status and knowledge about the western scientific discourse on backyard poultry management.

Many people keep chickens as a practice which has come down from one generation to another in the backyard of their homes. Others rear chicken for pure commercial purposes where the main aim is to get eggs and meat. Village chicken are generally distributed among interested parties for free through the divisional veterinary offices under various government aided projects after the veterinary offices purchase day-old chicks from the Karandagolla or Kotadeniyawa breeding farms. If not, there are private individuals who own hatcheries who then sell day old chicks to interested parties. These hatcheries operate at various levels where some use imported egg hatching machines while the others use locally sourced and locally produced hatching machines from refrigerators or rigifoam boxes. Hatchery owners at times source eggs from selected backyard farms for hatching purposes or source eggs from their own farms. As respondent A2 pointed out, "I get the eggs and sell them to a hatchery owner who comes from Marawila. The rest I sell to the shops" (Field Interviews, 2021). Likewise, there are a small number of individuals who hatch eggs using the natural methods by giving the eggs to a hen. Mostly, these eggs are sold to neighbours, and interested parties from the farm itself or are sold to nearby shows for prices ranging from Rs. 25-30.

The farmers also sell the village chickens for meat mostly to intermediaries who then slaughter them and sell them in the open market. Prices for chicken vary depending on their size and sex. A rooster is sold for approximately Rs. 1500 and a spent hen is sold for around Rs.600-800. In layman's terms, a respondent pointed out, "chickens are like ATM machines. Whenever you want cash, you can almost surely sell them without much of a problem" (Field Interviews, 2021). In addition, some farmers also rear game fowls and pointed out that:

Rearing them is not illegal, but using them for fights is. If these birds win fights, their prices go up to around Rs. 300000-Rs. 400000 which is quite something. If they don't win games, we can anyway sell them for a good price". (Field Interviews, 2021)

Thus, it is evident that, the backyard poultry network, although not organized or structured, has been in operation for years. Kumar et al. (2021) point out that "[p]roduction, reproduction and growth potential of backyard poultry is low" (p. 1477). Therefore, the farmers now point out that they "are given trainings on how to make the poultry houses, how to prepare feed, how to administer vaccines, how to adhere to bio-security measures which in the hope of improving productivity" (Field Interviews, 2021). These training programmes then attempt to restructure the backyard poultry operations on the grounds of improving productivity and reducing the threat zoonoses can pose. But again, the local practices pertaining to rearing are then labeled as non-effective and not productive within the neoliberal discourse. Hence, what can be witnessed here is how western scientific knowledge is posited as the ultimate logos i.e. the truth whilst de-centering local community-based practices. As the western knowledge is said to improve productivity which then is stated to raise the income of farmers (despite the fact that more production will lead to a possible reduction in prices), farmers too attempt to adhere to practices propagated through western knowledge though at times resistance can be seen. Hence, what becomes evident here is how corporatist practices are slowly being instilled and injected into small scale community rearing practices in the hope of commercialization and entering the free



market. This itself shows how powerful, invasive, manipulative and hegemonic the current neoliberal discourse is. It slowly succeeds in hailing human beings to come under its domain through the power of rhetoric. But, there is no ideological or pragmatic resistance from the side of the farmers due to their marginalized position within the socio-economic map of Sri Lanka and their resistance is founded mostly on religious ideologies and lack of capital. For example, the respondent F5 pointed out that “though they say give this vaccine and that vaccine, there is no necessity to do so. Village chickens are not like broilers, they are strong and won’t get sick” (Field Interviews, 2021). Furthermore, the respondent D8 pointed out that “We need additional money to do all that. What we have been doing has not gone wrong yet” (Field Interviews, 2021).

Feed Practices

Most respondents pointed out that, despite the growing emphasis on complementary inputs of especially compounded commercial concentrate feed for the sustenance of village chicken and for the achievement of greater production potential, country chickens are able to sustain mostly by scavenging and utilizing locally available feed resources. The respondent G2 even pointed out that she feeds her flock of chicken nothing, but locally available fruits and indigenous medicinal plants and these chickens provide her with the desired number of eggs (Field Interviews, 2021).

Socio-Cultural Values

Country chickens are also inextricably linked with the socio-cultural lives of the farmers. Besides providing meat and eggs, indigenous village chickens are used for ritual practices and religious and cultural festivals. For example, in some exorcist ceremonies (*yak tovil*) in Sri Lanka, a chicken sacrifice (*kukul billa*) is offered to the demons to dispel the evil spirits (Obeysekere, 1984). Farmers, mostly women and children who spend most of their time with the chickens consider them as companion animals and especially as part of the family (Alders et al, 2010). In many households, poultry houses are built in the backyards and located close to the main house. This close interaction between the chickens and their owners results in building an emotional attachment towards the chickens which even makes these owners reluctant to cull the spent hens or sell them for meat. Many participants mentioned that, because they consider chickens as family members, the loss of a chicken resembles the death of a family member.

This attachment when coupled with the pervasive religious ideologies deeply rooted in the Sri Lankan society exerts a tremendous influence on the socio-economic behaviour of the backyard poultry farmers. In a very superficial sense, religion and economy seem antithetical. Religion mostly deals with the life beyond while economy concerns itself with the world of pragmatism, production and consumption. Yet, in the Weberian and Althusserian sense, these two diverse systems are related. Religious doctrines, ideas, beliefs and value systems in human societies guide and influence the way their members act, even in the economic sphere. Religions dictate certain preferred guidelines of behaviour according to which its followers orient their activities.

In the ideologically laden context of Sri Lanka, Buddhism as a religious doctrine plays a key role in shaping the socio-economic behaviour of Sri Lankans. This notable presence of Buddhism in the socio-cultural fabric of the Sri Lankan society is one major factor which influences the economic decision making of farmers engaged in backyard poultry. The farmers even go to the extent of retaining their spent broods of chicken at the expense of the profit they can gain by selling these chickens for meat.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The multipurpose backyard poultry sector supports the livelihood of farmers living in semi-urban and rural areas in Sri Lanka providing them with economic and nutritional security.



Nevertheless, it has become a contested discursive space where complex socio-political-economic and cultural variables interplay. Caught in neo-liberal economics and neo-colonial pedagogical practices, the backyard poultry sector in Sri Lanka, as discussed before, is undergoing a crisis. But, it is evident that it is a lucrative enterprise which can, in reality, solve the rural unemployment problem if handled carefully and can provide the much-required nutrition for communities at a fairly affordable price. Therefore, a sustainable model of governance should be introduced after looking at the local practices without solely relying on practices imported from the West. This hopefully will ensure the sustainability of this vibrant sector with its political disjunctures and discursivities.

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