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The Eppawala trilogy and the privatisation of water

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"Think globally and act locally" seems to be the buzz phrase used in driving everyone towards the dream of a Global Village or more correctly, the Global Marketplace. The three books by Eng. D.L.O. Mendis give a beautiful twist to this thinking by describing some local developments in the backdrop of global manipulations.

E 1) Eppawala - Destruction of Cultural Heritage in the name of Development.

E 2) WTO, Globalisation and Eppawala after Seattle.

E 3) Pugwash, Globalisation and Eppawala - Pugwash Betrayed? Or, Eppawala Betrayed?

This trilogy of books by D.L.O. Mendis discusses

not only the Eppawala phosphate rock deposit but the proposed privatisation of water as well. The connection, as the author explains, is that Eppawala is situated at the heart of the Kalaweva-Jayaganga ecosystem.

The first volume in this trilogy, E1, was launched in June 1999 by the then Minister of Science and Technology, Batty Weerakoon, who alone in the Cabinet had proposed the proposal to sell out the deposit to a multinational corporation. Eppawala was that much in the news, with demonstrations against the proposal at Eppawala itself and in Colombo. E 1 consists of a number of articles on Eppawala set in the context of the Jayaganga, the 54

and a half mile long transbasin diversion channel built by King Dhatusena in the 5th century that carries water from Kalaweva to the Anuradhapura city tanks. The ancient irrigation systems which the author describes as water and soil conservation ecosystems, are also dealt with in some detail.

An extract from Dr. C. G. Weeramantry's Separate Opinion in the Danube dam case describes the ancient irrigation systems in Sri Lanka as an example of sustainable development. A paper first published in 1974 describes the planning of the Eppawala project as a DDC project using labour intensive technology immediately after

the youth insurrection in 1971. Another article focuses on the need for self-reliant development, the prevailing political philosophy at the time of the project was launched. Other papers deal with the Naru phosphate case and the extraction of natural gas in the Netherlands on a World Bank project which will exhaust a precious non-renewable resource in about 30 years which is considered the best time span for such a project according to economical accounting procedures.

The second book in the trilogy, E 2, had actually been launched on World Water Day, March 22, 2000. It is a collection of illustrated articles compiled by Mendis including

a number of first hand impressions of the street demonstrations at Seattle which successfully aborted the WTO ministerial meeting in the city in November - December 1999. The World Trade Organisation is described in detail with actual examples of how it has functioned since it was set up as the successor of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). The role that can and has been played by the WTO in the privatisation of water all over the world is described. In particular, the privatisation of water in Canada after the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into existence, is described. The extraordinary powers of the WTO which allow it

to over-rule the laws of a sovereign state, are also documented with examples. Protestations against the possibility of similar interventions on behalf of multinational corporations in the Narmada valley in India are also discussed.

The last volume in the trilogy, E3, carries the judgement in the Eppawala Fundamental Rights case, delivered on June 2, 2000. It also has a chapter on the Privatisation of Water in Sri Lanka which anticipates many of the issues now under discussion.

All three volumes provide a comprehensive coverage of the ancient irrigation systems of Sri Lanka which Mendis, who started life as an irrigation engineer, argues, is a tremendous

asset if correctly understood as "water and soil conservation ecosystems". This is of special significance in the present context of impending privatisation of water since these systems represent the most comprehensive utilisation of the water resources of the island that are essentially dependent on seasonal monsoon rainfall.

If one were to see the Eppawala case as a temporary respite against attempts to exhaust a non renewable natural resource in a very short time, then privatising of water could be seen as a looming threat to the life blood of the peasantry of the country that has to be faced. The idea of attaching price tags to goods for the convenience of shoppers seems

to have reached its limits by price-tagging natural resources. Where these strange ideas germinated and how they are planted in our soil are brilliantly exposed in the trilogy.

After reading Mendis' description of the role played by water in Sri Lanka's "water and soil conservation ecosystems" the idea of pricing water seems to be an idea conceived in ignorance. One could not help pondering over the wisdom of defining a fool as "one who knows the price of everything but the value of none."

All in all, this trilogy should be mandatory reading for policy makers and all others interested in the efficient and sustainable utilisation of water in Sri Lanka.