

EPPAWALA - The impending destruction of an ancient heritage of the Raia Rata civilisation and its irrigation ecosystem

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On Wednesday 22 March 2000 at 5.30 p.m. a meeting was held at the Galle Face Hotel to discuss EPPAWALA and its impending destruction. The following spoke from the rostrum:

Mr. A. T. Ariyaratne, Chairman and Founder of the Sarvodaya Movement, spoke on the social implications of the sell-out to foreign multinationals who he said are the real governors of the world. He vehemently opposed any form of massive mining of this resource and said he would personally mobilise a million people to oppose this project going ahead.

Ven. Piyarathana Thero of Eppawala made an impassioned plea to safeguard the ancient site and its villagers who have lived there for centuries, from eviction.

An emotional but balanced talk was also given by **Father Mervyn Fernando, Director of the Subodhi Institute,** who stressed the need to support and be identified with this national cause.

Ms. Nimalka Fernando of the Centre Against All Forms of Discrimination gave a detailed account of the tremendous upheaval and the harm that would result to women and children due to the eviction of 5000 families from this area.

Dr. Jayantha Jayewardene, former Director of the Mahaweli Project in charge of the Eppawala area in the 1970s and 1980s gave a scientific and well researched account of what would happen to the water systems of the Anuradhapura district, if the Jayaganga is interfered with. **Dr. Christopher Panabokke, Research Scientist** who had conducted research in the area summed up all the views expressed and emphasised the absolute necessity not to proceed with any form of accelerated mining of this whole complex which has been finely balanced for the past 2000 years.

Dr. Brendon Gooneratne, chaired this meeting and gave the introductory talk printed on this page, prior to the discussion.

by Dr. Brendon Gooneratne

Before we get on to the main meeting I would like to express gratitude and thanks on behalf of all of us, concerned Sri Lankans, to Mr. Nihal Fernando, Mr. D. L. O. Mendis, Mr. Denis Fernando, Mr. D. G. de Silva, Dr. Christopher Panabokke, Ms. Premila Canagaratna, Ven. Piyarathana Thero and many others involved in the issue of Eppawala. Their contribution and the contribution of many organisations like the Environment Foundation and many overseas advocates of the cause, like Dr. Jonathan Walters and

Prof. Phillip Smith have made it possible for us to continue this protest against the proposed massive commercial exploitation of this non-renewable phosphate resource which would cause immense destruction, if carried out as planned.

AT THE OUTSET I WOULD LIKE TO EMPHASISE THAT THIS IS NOT AN ANTI-GOVERNMENT OR PRO-GOVERNMENT MEETING. IT IS ABOVE PARTY POLITICS AS IT SHOULD BE. IT IS A PRO-EPPAWALA MEETING TO SUPPORT THE PEOPLE OF EPPAWALA AND ALL CONCERNED PEOPLE OF SRI LANKA, TO PREVENT THE DESTRUCTION OF AN ANCIENT AND PRICELESS AREA. IF THE PROJECT PROPOSAL AS ENVISAGED IN THE DRAFT AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE SRI LANKAN GOVERNMENT AND FREEPORT MCMORAN, IMC-AGRICOLA & THE TOMEN CORPORATION OF JAPAN, THE JOINT PARTNERS SELECTED TO CONDUCT THIS MASSIVE MINING DEVELOPMENT, GOES AHEAD, SRI LANKA AND ITS PEOPLE WILL FACE:

Firstly: A widespread dislocation and interference with possible destruction of our ancient Irrigation Systems, the Cascade Water Systems and the irrigation ecosystem of the Raja Rata which has served Sri Lanka well for 2000 years, and for which Sri Lanka and its ancient engineers have been justly renowned. After mining this phosphate, in order to make it commercially viable, the phosphate has to be converted into di-ammonium and tri-ammonium phosphate which by itself is a very destructive process which would clog the water systems of the ancient irrigation canals besides requiring large quantities of water from the Yoda Ela (Jayaganga) with a diversion of this water from the canal which is the important feeder canal to Anuradhapura situated only 16 miles away. Whatever assurances given by whomsoever, this is inevitable with the present technology available. The processing plant is to be situated in Trincomalee where the Government of Sri Lanka cannot even today guarantee the safety of a telephone booth from LTTE destruction. How can they safeguard this massive structure? Secondly: This area of Eppawala is only 16 miles/23 kms. from the city of Anuradhapura itself and is therefore in the centre of our ancient Raja Rata civilisation which still has large areas to be excavated, and houses many treasures in the form of archaeological sites

and other art treasures. These too would be damaged, stolen and lost.

Thirdly: An equally important aspect of this horrendous plan will be to evict 12,000 people from their homes, against their will.

Planned project

Some salient comments at this juncture are of relevance:

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Traditional pottery sold by travelling cart. (Picture by Nihal Fernando - Studio Times)

Eppawala is being currently mined by the Government through its instrumentality, Lanka Phosphate Ltd., where 40,000 metric tonnes are produced. However, the planned project wants to telescope this into a 25-year program even though Sri Lanka could continue to mine this profitably for hundreds of years. Let me quote from a pertinent comment made by Prof. Philip Smith of the Centre for Energy and Environmental Studies in the Netherlands: "Mining the Eppawala deposits of igneous phosphate rock to exhaustion in only a few decades would have disastrous effects on the region. As far as I am concerned, the most important question is not why this mining must take place at all, but why it must be done with such 'indecent haste'?"

After all, the rock is already being quarried at a rate and using technology which leaves natural systems intact, and is bringing profit to the region. Not only that, but these profits could continue to flow in for a thousand years. That is certainly long enough to permit the adoption of use and and reinvestment

policies which satisfy the criterion prescribed by Daly and Cobb ("For the Common Good"), London: The Merlin Press, 1989), if the political will to do so were to be present. But if the present proposal to exhaust the entire Eppawala deposit in such a short time is followed there will be no future income, as far as sustainability is concerned. Why then would anyone want to do this, especially the government of the country itself?"

particularly in relation to their exploitation of the gold reserves in Irian Jaya and their explorations in Florida where they have dumped thousands of tonnes of poisonous waste into the river systems there. Coincidentally, they are being tried in Britain for alleged misdeeds in their mining operations.

It has been said that Freeport McMoran has the technology to conduct this mining operation but they must certainly change their dubious methodology if the people of Sri Lanka are to deal with them at all.

Having said all this, we have to be conscious of the fact that Sri Lanka needs foreign exchange and it also needs to utilise its natural resources for the good of its people. Sri Lanka has capable and excellent scientists who are in addition patriotic, and has the country's good at heart. It is they who should be in the forefront of this development. All the scientific evidence points very clearly towards a small time operation of this phosphate resource

Dangerous proposal

The Chairman of the Board of Investment Mr. Thilan Wijesinghe has been a fervent advocate of this flawed and dangerous proposal, while the Minister of Industries Mr. C. V. Gooneratne is also said to be involved in pushing this project through.

But the vast majority of concerned Sri Lankans are all determined to stop this destruction, and are optimistic that this project will fall down. Once this happens, everyone and this includes the people of Eppawala, Government officials, scientists, environmentalists and others should get together, and with more detailed and honest discussion, work out a consensus on how best to utilise this massive phosphate deposit with the least possible damage to the people of Eppawala and to Eppawala itself, which includes the ancient Raja Rata civilisation and its ancient irrigation system and that magnificent canal of antiquity - the Yoda Ela, also called the Jayaganga.

Eppawala has the potential to divide this country, especially since the international community has already been made aware of this. Heaven knows immense problems as it is. Why add to them? So, all of us have a responsibility to handle this issue with care and with proper regard for the country and in particular for the people of Eppawala, and to ensure a smooth and consensual development of this valuable resource.

UNDER THE ANTIQUITIES ORDINANCE AMENDMENT ACT OF 1998, BROUGHT IN BY THE PRESENT GOVERNMENT THEMSELVES, THE YODA ELA (JAYAGANGA) IS TOTALLY PROTECTED FROM DIVERSION, INTERFERENCE OR DAMMING. ALSO ANY OTHER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES AND MONUMENTS THAT ARE THERE AT PRESENT OR WOULD EMERGE FROM THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT TO BE DONE, WOULD ALSO BE TOTALLY PROTECTED. THIS WOULD THEREFORE PRECLUDE ANYONE FROM CONDUCTING SUCH A MASSIVE PROJECT TO THE DEIRIMENT OF THE COUNTRY AND ITS PEOPLE.

There is now a very concerned section of Sri Lankans both here and elsewhere and also foreigners who love this country who are determined not to permit the looting and vandalism of this magnificent and ancient land.