

Destruction of Cultural Heritage in the Name of Development

Eppawala - Destruction of Cultural Heritage in the Name of Development by D.L.O. Mendis, published by Sri Lanka Pugwash Group, and printed by Sarvodaya Vishwa Lekha Printers, Sri Lanka 1999. ISBN 955-647-001-8. Pages 328, Price SLRs 600, US\$20.

It is accepted as truism in development planning that natural resources, such as forests should be harvested and not mined. But it has not been always so. Forests of Nepal were nationalised in the mid-1950s and rapidly mined with the idea that the revenue so generated could be invested in other needful development projects. Many Third World countries have indulged in this hubris and today, while they certainly have mined their natural wealth bare, they have little development to show for it. The case of Eppawala in Sri Lanka seems to be another repetition of this sad history, as the author of this book argues.

The Eppawala phosphate rock (apatite) deposit had been discovered by the state Geological Survey and Mines Bureau in 1971, about the time of the first island-wide Sinhala youth insurrection. The rock had been quarried under a Divisional Development Councils project in the Ministry of Planning and Economic Affairs where the author of the book under review was an engineer at the time. The gradual extraction of the insoluble apatite was planned to meet some of the needs of local plantation agriculture, with provision for conversion to a soluble fertiliser for use in other fields of agriculture, in the future. Some experimentation had been done in the University of Peradeniya towards this end.

The deposit will last for over a thousand years if only local requirements of phosphate fertiliser are met in this manner. Sri Lanka's agriculture lands are phosphate poor and such a sequestering is not strategically irrational. The project was taken over by the Ministry of Industries, and even after the change of government in 1977, local ownership of the project had continued. There had been some negotiations with a foreign company but agreement was not reached for foreign participation in the ongoing project. This changed in the mid-1990s.

A joint venture export arrangement is proposed with American (65% equity) and Japanese (with 25%) firms for rapid exploitation of the Eppawala phosphate deposits with a proven reserve of 25 million metric ton and an inferred reserve of possibly another 35 million. Government-owned Lanka Phosphate Ltd. currently quarries about 40 thousand tons per year of rock which have high iron and aluminum oxides as well as chlorides that make it difficult to make soluble fertiliser with conventional technology. Hence the argument for foreign collaboration. The joint venture, however, proposes to mine 26 million tons of rock phosphate in 30 years under conditions wherein \$ 1125 million worth of rock will be handed over for foreign exploitation netting Sri Lanka direct returns during the 30-year period of only \$ 107 million. The Lankan government's equity share is only 10% whereas in Jordan, in a project of similar magnitude but using inferior deposit, a 40% equity share has been negotiated. Also, the export of 3 million tons of unprocessed rock is allowed in the first twelve years, prompting speculation that these deposits contain rare earths in extractable quantities or that the American firm needs to blend this with its other deposits too high in fluorides to be permissible in the US. Besides the contention of poor economic returns for Sri Lanka, the major argument put forward by the author

against the Eppawala mining is that the strip mining is going to destroy the ancient irrigation system of Kalawewa Jayaganga. This water management system in the dry Rajarata Kingdom zone generated the agriculture surplus to support the Anuradhapura Buddhist culture from 3rd Century BC till 11th Century AD, and continues to function till today. UNESCO through its International Committee for Monuments and Sites, ICOMOS, at a meeting in Ottawa in 1994 had recommended that the Kalawewa Jayaganga in Sri Lanka, and the Grand Canal in China, should be recognized as cultural heritage sites and monuments under their program.

Unfortunately this recommendation had not been followed to a conclusion by the Sri Lanka government in respect of the Kalawewa Jayaganga. If that had been done, the Kalawewa Jayaganga would have been a protected cultural landscape, and such a proposal as the mining to destruction of the Eppawala phosphate rock deposit could not have been considered. The author explains that the Kalawewa Jayaganga is an unique system of water and soil conservation. It is essentially a contour channel built in the 5th century to intercept rainfall from its eastern side, during the northeast monsoon season, and issue irrigation water to chains of small village tanks on its western side. It has functioned in this manner for the past fifteen centuries.

The Eppawala phosphate rock deposit lies in the local catchment area of the Jayaganga in the Kala oya basin. Any activity in the Eppawala area will have an impact on the channel, which is described as the heart of the ancient water and soil conservation ecosystems of the Rajarata. The crux of the argument to abandon the Eppawala proposal is based on the author's fears that this incomparable cultural heritage landscape will be adversely impacted if not actually destroyed. The consequences will have local and global repercussions as the author sets out to explain in detail.

There are several outside contributions in this book from distinguished scholars that merit mention. A comprehensive extract from a recent Separate Opinion in a judgement at the International Court of Justice in The Hague, the Gabčikovo Nagymaros case (known as the Danube dam case), by the Sri Lankan Vice President Christopher Weeramantry, describes the ancient irrigation systems of Sri Lanka.

The Nauru island phosphate case is described by Professor Antony Anghie who had appeared as a junior to Professor Weeramantry in that celebrated case before the World Court many years ago. An authoritative Preface by Professor Jonathan Walters who has spent 15 years studying comparative religion in Sri Lanka and knows the Eppawala area intimately, appeals for public support for the local people who are protesting against the proposal. All these are significant indications of the concern of distinguished persons outside the country about the impending disaster at Eppawala. Most importantly, it challenges the application of economic discounting which, while reasonable a financial procedure for man-made objects such as a car, is misplaced when applied to natural wealth that increases its value with age.

It also argues that entrusting natural wealth to private ownership is no guarantee of its protection for the future. This book must be read by anyone who wishes to understand voluntarism in South Asian cultural and environmental movements. Reviewed by Dipak Gyawali (The book is to be made available in Jagadamba Patan Dhoka, Kathmandu, bookstore in November)

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