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# ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS IN SRI LANKA

*(A Sociological Analysis)*

A Case Study on Nurochcholai Mass Movement Against the  
Proposed Coal Power Plant



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## ABSTRACT

Sri Lanka as a third world country carries out a number of development projects catering to the livelihood of people. Those development projects face a variety of ecological limitations due to their continuous counteraction to the increasing development crises. There have been many mass movements that emerged against the environmental crisis questioning the sustainability of certain development activities. Eppawala mass movement against privatization of phosphate mine, protest against the construction of Kandalama Hotel, the collective actions against Upper Kothmale Hydro Electricity Power Station and Nurochchulai mass activism against the planned coal power plant are some of the environmental movements that had a powerful impact on those development projects. The main aim of this study is to conduct an empirical sociological study on the Nurochchulai mass activism in order to understand the underlying social factors and forces in relation to environmental movements in Sri Lanka.

The factors such as livelihood vulnerability, religious leadership and cultural identity were identified as the driving forces behind the Nurochchulai movement. The peasants at the grass roots level could be highly concerned about the life supporting nature of the ecological system than on purely ecological factors. The anticipated livelihood vulnerability due to the proposed coal power plant was the major factor that was instrumental for the forces to mobilize people to act on crowd sentiments against the coal power plant. Since the grass roots environmental actions in Nurochchulai almost entirely are based on livelihood vulnerability and not on romantic or ideological views of the environment, this study attempts to understand Nurochchulai within a new perspective of environmentalism that could be named "livelihood Environmentalism".

However, in Nurochcholai movement, the Catholic Church and the Mosque could be seen as jointly playing a vital a role in educating, coordinating and organizing the perceived victims against the plant. It is the Catholic Church that absorbed almost all the important resources and personnel into one common goal to defeat the government attempt of constructing the plant. Although the Mosque also played an indirect role, the Church was the backbone of the mass movement. The role of the priests and religiously motivated NGOs played a key role in this regard. The livelihood vulnerability based on life supporting ecological system laid the positive foundation for these external forces to mobilize people to act on crowd sentiments against the proposed coal power plant.

It was the cultural identity of people based on religious and ethnicity and the ecological significance of religious rituals that were utilized by the religious leadership of the mass movement to mobilize people against the proposed plant. Throughout the movement leaders took an effort to maintain the ethnic integration that lasted in the society include religious leaders in the movement belonging to all the religions in order to gain support of all three communities in the area for the purpose of establishing a strong mass activism against the government's attempt to construct the plant. The religious leadership remained the most powerful force beyond all the other factors in determining the total functioning of the movement until the end. Livelihood factor that was for community support for the movement was heavily manipulated in the Nurochcholai mass movement by the religious leadership in order to mobilize people against the proposed plant.