



M.T. M. Mahees

Environmental Movements in Sri Lanka

A case study of grassroots action against a coal
power plant

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ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS
IN
SRI LANKA

(A Sociological Analysis)

**A Case Study on Nurochchola Mass Movement Against the
Proposed Coal Power Plant, Sri Lanka**

M.T.M. Mahees

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Department of Sociology

University of Colombo

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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 the increasing environmental crises. There have been many mass movements on the basis of environmental crisis against some development activities. They are the Eppawala mass movement against privatization of phosphate mine, the protest against the construction of Kandalama Hotel, the collective actions against the building Upper Kothmale Hydro Electricity Power Station and Nurochcholaï mass activism. The main aim of this study is to conduct an empirical sociological study on the environmental movements in Sri Lanka in order to understand the underlying social factors of these movements. Here, I have selected Nurochcholaï mass movement against the proposed coal power plant as a case for my study.

The factors such as livelihood vulnerability, religious leadership and the cultural identity have been the major forces functioned behind the Nurochcholaï movement. The peasants at the grass roots level are very much concerned about their life supporting ecological system than that of ecological factors. The livelihood vulnerability laid the positive foundation for these external forces to mobilize people to act on crowd sentiments against the proposed coal power plant. Since the grassroots environmental actions in Nurochcholaï almost entirely are based on livelihood vulnerability and not on any romantic or ideological views, it seems that Nurochcholaï movement needs to be understood within a new perspective of environmentalism that could be named "livelihood Environmentalism".

In Nurochcholaï movement, the Church and the Mosque jointly played a vital a role in educating, coordinating and organizing the perceived victims against the plant. It is the 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 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 and the ecological significance of religious rituals that was utilized by the religiously based leadership of the mass movement to mobilize the people against the proposed plant. These religiously motivated leaders always attempted to protect the ethnic integration and to give priority to all religious leadership in order to gain support of all three communities for the purpose of establishing a strong mass activism against the government's attempt to construct the plant. However, the religious leadership has remained the most powerful force beyond all the other factors in determining the total functioning of the movement. Moreover, Livelihood factor was heavily manipulated in the Nurochchulai mass movement by the religious leadership in order to mobilize people against the proposed plant.

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This book is about the Third World Environmental Movements based on Sri Lankan experiences. This sociological study attempts to explore the underlying social-economic and religious factors of mass activism against the coal power plant at Nurochcholai in Western coast of Sri Lanka. The factors such as livelihood vulnerability, religious leadership and the cultural identity have been the major forces functioned behind this grassroots movement. The peasants at the grass roots level are very much concerned about their life supporting ecological system than that of ecological factors. The livelihood vulnerability laid the positive foundation for these external forces to mobilize people to act on crowd sentiments against the coal power plant. This book also explains how the Church and the Mosque jointly played a vital a role in educating, coordinating and organizing the perceived victims against the plant. It is the Church that absorbed almost all the important resources and personnel into one common goal to defeat the government attempt of constructing the plant.



M.T. M. Mahees

M.T.M. Mahees is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology, University of Colombo. He received his B.A.(Hons) degree in Sociology from University of Peradeniya, Kandy in 1999 and M.A. in Environmental Sociology from University of Colombo in 2007. He is currently working on his PhD thesis in Integrated Water Resource Management.



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