

Water Politics in Sri Lanka: A Sociological Analysis of Mass Movement against Contamination of Drinking Water

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Abstract

This study investigates the socio-political factors that drove the 2013 collective mass protest against drinking water contamination by an export-oriented latex glove manufacturer in Rathupaswala, Sri Lanka. Following violent state repression that resulted in civilian casualties and escalated to an international human rights concern in Geneva, this exploratory mixed-methods case study utilized questionnaire surveys, in-depth interviews, and newspaper content analysis to understand the community's mobilization. Results indicate that grassroots action was overwhelmingly driven by lived experiences and socially constructed realities regarding public health, which overrode the lack of definitive scientific evidence linking the factory to the pollution. The findings reveal that an overwhelming majority of villagers participated with full commitment, motivated by intrinsic environmental consciousness rather than personal grievances. Furthermore, while most respondents reported no direct religious influence in instigating the movement, local religious leaders provided crucial grassroots solidarity and physical sanctuary during military crackdowns. Ultimately, the crisis fostered strong cross-class integration, uniting ordinary citizens, the business community, and the educated middle class against a powerful state-corporate alliance. The study concludes that the Rathupaswala movement was a profound demonstration of middle-class environmentalism and ecological democracy, illustrating how vulnerable communities within a "Soft State" mobilize against unequal political ecology to demand basic human rights.

Keywords: water politics, political ecology, middle class environmentalism, collective action

Introduction

Water is perceived in fundamentally different ways depending on the context as a traded commodity, a shared common, a sacred resource, or a fundamental human right. In Sri Lanka, water is deeply intertwined with daily life and religious rituals, functioning as a symbol of life, fertility, and purification (Herath, 2009). However, dominating our understanding of water with just one of these partial perceptions can lead to misguided conclusions (Iyer, 2003).

Hydrologically, Sri Lanka is endowed with rich water resources primarily emanating from the central highlands. The mean annual rainfall is approximately 1,900 mm about two and a half times more than the global annual mean of 750 mm (FAO, 2011; International Water Management Institute, 2000). The country is broadly divided into wet and dry zones, receiving a mean annual rainfall of 2,424 mm and 1,450 mm, respectively (Central Environmental Authority, 2014). The total volume of fresh water received annually is 13,230 million cubic meters (FAO, 2011). While Sri Lanka possesses abundant water resources in aggregate terms, this overall picture is highly misleading due to severe seasonal and regional variations in availability (Anon, 1998).

When the uneven distribution of vital resources collides with industrialization and political mismanagement, severe tensions arise. Globally, water and fertile land have become prominent sources of dispute, leading to what Shiva (2000) terms "water wars" or "ecological conflicts" These range from interstate disputes over shared rivers such as the Tigris and Euphrates (Turkey, Syria, Iraq) or the Jordan River (Israel, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon) to intra-state conflicts over major rivers in India (Gleick, 2000; Shiva, 2000).

To critically understand these localized and global water conflicts, frameworks from environmental sociology and political ecology are essential. Environmental sociology examines societal-environmental interactions, focusing on the socio-cultural factors that cause

environmental problems and the societal impacts of these crises (Benton, 1989; Dunlap, 1997; Hannigan, 2006; Murphy, 1994). Political ecology goes further, examining how unequal power relations and the political economy shape environmental management. In developing nations, it highlights how conflicts over natural resources are directly linked to systems of political and economic control, which ultimately increase the marginality and vulnerability of the poor (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987; Bryant, 1992).

This vulnerability is exacerbated by what Gunnar Myrdal (1968) identified as the "Soft State." In a Soft State, laws and environmental regulations are passed but rarely enforced. This flabbiness encourages rampant corruption, which in turn weakens the state further. In Sri Lanka, democratic practices, heavily influenced by market-driven economics and party politics, have fostered new patron-client relationships. This political culture has corroded social order and made the impartial enforcement of environmental regulations in local governance a severe challenge (Brow, 1996; Mahees, 2011; Spencer, 2007).

Against this backdrop of a Soft State and highly politicized environmental management, the contamination of water due to rapid industrialization has become a critical crisis in present-day Sri Lanka (Central Environmental Authority, 2014). Historically helpless against industrial pollution, affected communities are now mobilizing, giving rise to grassroots environmental movements. Unlike aesthetic environmentalism, these Sri Lankan movements are deeply rooted in livelihood vulnerability, religious leadership, and an ecologically determined culture (Mahees, 2010).

A defining catalyst for this new wave of social movement occurred in Rathupaswala, located in Weliweriya within the Gampaha District. In this populated area, numerous factories operating under the Board of Investment provide employment and economic benefits, but at a

severe environmental cost. Villagers alleged that an export-oriented glove-manufacturing factory was heavily contaminating their groundwater with dangerous chemicals. Conflicting water quality studies deepened the divide between the "scientific reality" presented by authorities and the "social reality" experienced by the community.

Driven by the threat to their lives and livelihoods, the community demanded their basic right to clean drinking water and the closure of the factory. The protests peaked in late July 2013. On 1 August, villagers launched a massive demonstration with the support of local Buddhist monks and Christian priests. The state response was violent, the army and police opened fire to disperse the crowd. While the government officially reported four deaths, it is widely believed that six people died and 25 were injured.

This day, remembered as "Black Thursday," devastated the community but failed to extinguish the movement; villagers continue to organize. The unrest in Rathupaswala sparked a precedent. A subsequent mass protest for clean drinking water in Thunnana, Hanwella (on the Colombo-Ratnapura Road) led to further violence, resulting in the death of a police inspector and the mass arrest of villagers. This study seeks to investigate these acute conflicts, analyzing the collision between rapid industrialization, state power, and the fundamental human right to clean water through the lens of political ecology and grassroots environmentalism.

Objectives

The main objective this study is to investigate the factors contributing to collective mass action against drinking water pollution caused by an export-oriented factory at Rathupawala, Sri Lanka. The main objective can be specified as follows.

1. To examine the association between the collective mass actions against the contamination of drinking water and the environmental sensitivity of people

2. To identify the political power relationship of the local community in terms of mass movements against the drinking water issue.
3. To assess the role of religion and local culture in mobilizing people towards the social movement against the contamination of drinking water.

Methodology

This is an exploratory qualitative study based on a case study of mass movements against the contamination of drinking water in the Rathupaswala area of Gampaha District, Sri Lanka. The case study method applied to this mass movement was useful for examining the subjective and less visible contradictory aspects of the public protest. This study attempted to promote interdisciplinary approaches and data collection techniques. Although this study mainly focused on qualitative aspects of collective mass movement against water crisis, quantitative data will also be collected from the relevant respondents in order to quantify some of the findings and results. The following data collection tools were used to study mass movements based on the case study method.

Review of Secondary Information

Secondary data were collected from a range of existing sources, including academic publications, government reports, policy documents, previous research studies, and media reports related to water pollution and environmental movements in Sri Lanka. This helped to contextualize the study and support the analysis with existing knowledge.

Semi-Structured Questionnaire

A semi-structured was administered to 100 households in the affected area to gather quantitative and qualitative data on perceptions of water pollution, participation in the protest

movement, and environmental awareness. The semi-structured format allowed for both fixed responses and limited open-ended insights.

In-depth Interview

In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 key informants, including villagers, community leaders, government authorities, journalists, and politicians. These interviews provided detailed insights into personal experiences, perceptions, power dynamics, and the social processes underlying the protest movement.

News Paper Content Analysis

A content analysis of selected newspapers was carried out to examine how the water crisis and protest movement were reported in the media. Articles about the protest published in 2013 (Daily Mirror and Lankadeepa) were systematically reviewed to identify key themes, narratives, and representations of the event.

The data generated from questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively by using Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS). Quantitative data were analyzed on proportionate basis. The data collected from in-depth interviews and informal discussions were analyzed based on the theoretical concepts of environmental sociology, and political ecology.

Qualitative data were gathered through in-depth interviews and newspaper content analysis. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured guide, allowing participants to express their experiences and perceptions of the water crisis and protest movement. Key stakeholders, including villagers, community leaders, authorities, journalists, and politicians, were interviewed, and the data were recorded and transcribed.

In addition, newspaper articles published during the protest period were systematically reviewed to comprehend media representations of the crisis. The qualitative data were analyzed

by identifying recurring themes and patterns related to environmental perceptions, social mobilization, power relations, and collective action. These themes were interpreted using the theoretical perspectives of environmental sociology and political ecology.

Results and Discussion

As has been pointed out, the mass protest was carried out due to contamination of water caused by the industrial plant at the center of the dispute in that Rathupaswala area. According to the newspaper content analysis, 1 August 2013 was a significant date in the history of Sri Lanka, marked by an unforgettable incident. It was the date on which four innocent civilians were killed while demanding access to clean drinking water. This protest was initiated by the villagers in Weliweriya in Gampaha District against the water contamination. Even though the brutal clash occurred between army personnel and civilians, the roots of the issue can be traced back to the period when the company was established.

Even though the residents of Weliweriya had been complaining against the Dipped Products PLC since its establishment, a well-organized public outcry was launched in 2013. By 28 July 2013, the residents of Rathupaswala/Weliweriya and nearby villages engaged in a protest demanding an expeditious solution to the contaminated water reserves in the area. Then by 30 July 2013, residents in Weliweriya led by a chief monk in Galloluwa Sri Sambuddhathwa Jayanthi Viharaya, Venerable Theripaha Siridhamma Thero launched a fast unto death after talks with the government and the private company to resolve the groundwater contamination crisis broke down.

It is possible to examine the views of the people regarding water pollution caused by the factory based on the data collected from the questionnaire. According to Table 1, villagers strongly believed that drinking water had been polluted by effluents from the factory.

The questionnaire survey data further reveal that 96% of the villagers stated that they participated in the protest movement with full consent and commitment. As one respondent revealed in the in-depth interview,

“Although we had some differences among ourselves, we got together on behalf of villagers and formed environmental committee with three different level of leadership (1) Rich high status (2) middle class level (3) ordinary people”

According to the study, respondents expressed their views regarding water pollution. Table 2 illustrates the correlation between various causes associated with water pollution attributed to the factory. The primary factor identified by respondents (39%) was that water quality tests had revealed contamination. The second reason for participation in the protest movement was the disposal of effluents by the factory into water bodies.

According to the content analysis of newspapers, the protest against the industrial plant at the center of the dispute arose when people began to experience a number of health hazards due to chemical imbalances in the water. Newspaper reports indicate that villagers suffered from various health issues, which they attributed to water contamination (Daily Mirror, 2013). Some media sources further suggested that water quality tests indicated acidic conditions in the wells. Since the establishment of the company, there have been several instances in which people have protested against these issues.

Several villagers reported that interior of the factory emitted a strong odor. They also stated that acidic chemicals used in the production of rubber gloves were hazardous to human health. The factory had discharged their chemical wastage into a site that was not properly designed for such disposal. These chemicals were described as highly acidic. The water in the surrounding area was also reported to have a foul smell, and aquatic life had died due to the effects of those toxic

substances. A female resident of Rathupaswala further stated that a former factory employee had died as a result of chemical exposure (Lankadeepa, 2013). She also mentioned that the factory had provided compensation to the affected family for a considerable period of time.

According to the newspaper content analysis, one villager, who was also a former factory worker, stated that a scientific examination of well water revealed that approximately 15,000 liters of chemicals had been released into the environment by the factory. He further claimed that these chemicals had been discharged since the establishment of the factory. During the seven years he worked there, he observed that the machines intended to purify water were in use. Moreover, he explained that the factory avoided using those machines due to the high maintenance costs involved. Furthermore, on several occasions, villagers from Rathupaswala travelled to Kadawatha and Mahara to request that government authorities conduct water testing; however, the reports were not released at the time.

Data generated from interviews with respondents indicate a form of conflict between scientific reality and social reality with regard to water pollution caused by the factory. Although there was a lack of definitive, widely accepted scientific evidence establishing a direct chemical link between the factory and groundwater contamination, the community's lived reality shaped their convictions. As one respondent stated:

‘We are not scientists, we cannot do scientific test on water but we know that water is polluted according to our experience, science is not always correct, as farmers we have been dealing with water for a long time and we know the taste and color of water more than the test, in this country anything is possible to happen, even water testing can be bribed, so can we trust those reports’

It is crucial to understand the grievances of villagers through their lived experiences of health challenges. Such phenomenological perceptions may be contested by the scientific arguments based on empirical evidence. However, there could be many social realities that cannot be fully captured by scientific explanations. Table 3 clearly indicated that the majority of the respondents believe that people's health has been severely affected by water pollution. This is further supported by the content analysis and interview data.

One resident of Rathupaswala stated that acidic water discharged from the factory into paddy fields had also harmed several farmers. Some individuals were reported to have developed eye-related illnesses. Most water sources had become unusable. Another resident explained that when people drank from a well located very close to the factory, they experienced a burning sensation in their mouths. She believed that this was due to the water becoming acidic as a result of factory waste. She also stated that the factory waste was discharged into abandoned lands in the area.

However, the villagers strongly believe that their illnesses resulted from the activities of the fully owned manufacturing subsidiary of the corporation in question. They reported that many villagers had developed long-term health conditions. One male resident of Weliweriya stated that when he sought treatment for a throat infection, the doctor initially diagnosed it as a thyroid-related condition, which was later identified as cancer. Another male respondent diagnosed with a thyroid-related illness further noted that several others had been diagnosed with similar conditions. He also stated that at least three individuals had been prescribed thyroid hormone treatment. Overall, these accounts suggest that a number of patients in the Weliweriya, Kudumiriswatta area were diagnosed with similar thyroid-related illnesses.

Moreover, it was reported that some villagers were suffering from skin diseases. However, these cases were observed in remote areas located more than 10 km from the glove factory. Similar cases were observed in Panwila and Galoluwa in Rathupaswala as well. Even though the factory authorities were aware of the issues reported by villagers, they consistently denied the allegations. They maintained that such health problems were not associated with the factory's activities.

In relation to public participation against water contamination, people organized themselves into a mass movement. Villagers mobilized on a voluntary basis without political or religious support. According to the questionnaire survey, 97% of respondents stated that they were not influenced by any political forces in participating in the movement. At the same time, 82% of respondents reported that there was no religious influence, while 18% acknowledged that religion did have some influence on the movement. According to one respondent,

“This is Buddhist majority area and there were considerable Christians in this area, but the Church did not directly support the movement, the Church wanted to be with people, one Buddhist monk of the area who had close relationship with the government worked against mass protest. However, all religious leaders supported the 1 August protest.”

It is evident that religion or religious based organizations of the area did not directly influence the people to join the mass protest. Villagers willingly participated in the protest movement without significant religious. However, on the main protest day, 1 August 2013, the protest march was led by Buddhist monks and Catholic priests. According to newspaper content analysis, at around 6.30 p.m. on 1 August, protesters were assaulted with poles and shots were fired into the air. Tear gas were also used to disperse the agitated crowd. Many sought refuge in the church grounds and immediately the church bell was rung. A resident of Weliweriya, who witnessed the incident, reported that he escaped and took shelter inside the Weliwariya *pola* (Daily

Mirror, 2013). He said that it was pitch dark when he heard continuous gun shots and people screaming. He further said that he heard gun shots near the church and people crying for help from the church grounds. He also reported seeing a pool of blood on the church corridor, which was reportedly washed away by army personnel the following morning. However, several blood-stained boot prints remained on the polished cement floor. Traces of dried blood were also observed in pools of water.

Figure 1 reveals that only 12 Buddhists and five Christians stated that religion motivated them to participate in the movement whereas 62 Buddhists and 17 Christians and three Hindus expressed that religion did not influence their participation. It is important to identify who encouraged villagers to join the protest movement. As shown in Table 4, the entire protest campaign was primarily organized by affected residents of the area, with strong support from local elites. These individuals formed an organization called *Siyane Environmental Protective Organization*. Even outsiders, trade unions supported this organization. This is further supported by newspaper content analysis. The secretary of Ceylon Teachers' Association, Joseph Starling stated at *Sanasa* Hall in Gampaha that more than 40 state and private sector trade unions had agreed to support Weliweriya water crisis movement. He further noted that if an immediate solution was not provided to the villagers, a one-day strike involving all government employees in the Gampaha District would be launched. Representatives of the *Siyane Environmental Protective Organization* also participated in this meeting (Lankadeepa, 2013).

Table 5 indicates that villagers engaged in the protest not due to any personal grievances with the factory. 64% of the respondents disagreed with the statement that people had personal issues with the factory while 35% of respondents strongly disagreed. In addition, 45% of respondents stated that environmental concern motivated their participation, indicating that

environmental awareness contributed to collective mass protest against the water pollution in the area.

The nature of threats and risks experienced by people is presented in Table 6. Furthermore, the clear majority of respondents stated that all those who participated in the protest faced various threats and risks during the protest campaign. This is further confirmed by the interview statement.

“We were threatened by government and some local politician not to organize or join the protest campaign. The fear aggravated further after the brutal attack by army on the August 1st and there were some conflicts among the leaders of mass movement considering the life risk. The participants had many other risk and fear regarding their day today life.”

The attack and control of collective mass protest constituted a violation of the fundamental human rights and was later raised at the Geneva Human Rights Commission. According to newspaper content analysis, Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL) invited 26 state institutions including the Ministry of Environment, the Police Department, the Ministry of Water Supply, the Central Environmental Authority, and the Board of Investment. The then Human Rights Commissioner, Prathibha Mahanamahewa, had mentioned that a delegation of five senior officials visited the Weliweriya area and collected information by visiting the police station, the hospitals where the injured were treated, the church and the homes of the victims (Daily Mirror, 2013). This incident is widely regarded as a controversial event in Sri Lankan history due to alleged human rights violations during a protest, which resulted in deaths and injuries. However, the villagers organized this collective mass protest through the mobilization of various social actors and stakeholders.

Conclusion

This study investigated the underlying factors driving the collective mass protest against drinking water contamination in Rathupaswala. Although the manufacturing facility provided local employment opportunities, the community overwhelmingly held it responsible for the severe degradation of their water supply and associated health hazards. First, regarding the community's environmental sensitivity, the findings reveal that collective action was deeply rooted in lived experiences. While definitive scientific evidence linking the factory's effluent to the groundwater was contested or delayed by authorities, the community's "socially constructed reality" shaped by visible environmental degradation and health impacts overrode official scientific narratives. The mobilization was not driven by isolated personal grievances, but by a shared environmental consciousness that recognized the existential threat to their basic human rights. Second, the crisis transformed local political power relationships by creating common ground among socially divided groups. The movement was characterized by middle-class environmentalism and ecological democracy, where the educated middle class, supported by the local business community and ordinary citizens, united to challenge a politically powerful state-corporate alliance. This highlights the unequal political ecology of the area, where vulnerable communities are forced to mobilize to protect themselves within a "Soft State" that prioritizes industrialization over environmental regulation. Finally, regarding the role of religion and local culture, the study found that while religious institutions did not directly instigate the protests, they played an indispensable role in the movement's survival. Local cultural dynamics and religious leaders, namely Buddhist monks and Catholic priests, provided vital grassroots solidarity, moral legitimacy, and physical sanctuary during the violent state crackdowns.

Ultimately, the Rathupaswala protest exemplifies how grassroots environmentalism in Sri Lanka relies on strong social integration, shared lived realities, and community resilience to demand ecological justice and defend fundamental human rights against disproportionate political and corporate power.

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Tables and Figures**Table 1***Co-relation between water pollution and Factory*

Do you agree with the idea that water was polluted due to the factory?	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	94	94.0%
Agree	6	6.0%
Disagree	0	0.0%
Strongly disagree	0	0.0%
Not relevant	0	0.0%
Total	100	100.0%

Table 2*Nature of the water pollution by the factory*

Responses	Count	Percentage
It was revealed that water was polluted in the experiments conducted	39	39.0%
The factory had disposed chemical waste into water bodies	23	23.0%
Farming was badly affected after factory's waste was disposed into the environment	12	12.0%
The factory had disposed chemical waste into the soil	7	7.0%
The fish died in the streams to which the factory had disposed chemical waste	7	7.0%
The water in the streams to which the factory had disposed chemical waste became unusable	8	8.0%
The water resources were badly affected only after the establishment of the factory	4	4.0%

Table 3*Health Concern of people due to water pollution*

Do you agree with the idea that people had health concern due to the water pollution by the factory	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	18	18%
Agree	48	48%
Disagree	22	22%
Strongly disagree	05	05%
Not relevant	0	0.0%
No response	07	07%
Total	100	100.0%

Table 4*Sources of Encouragement for Participation in the Protest*

Who encouraged people for the movement? (Multiple responses)	Frequency
Priests	7
Traders	1
Affected people	98
Elites of the village	37
Educated people of the village	7
Others	9

Table 5*Protest movement and personal problem with factory*

Do you agree with the idea that people who had personal problems with the factory joined the protest movement?	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	0	0.0%
Agree	1	1.0%
Disagree	64	64.0%
Strongly disagree	35	35.0%
Not relevant	0	0.0%
No response	0	0.0%
Total	100	100.0%

Table 6*Nature of the threat and risk*

Nature of the threat and risk (multiple responses)	Frequency
Some people lost jobs	69
People were afraid of the military involvement	9
People lost water resources	65
Some people were threatened	51
People spent weeks of sleepless nights (Unfavorable for people's health)	11
People spent their wealth over the protest movement	8
Temples were closed in the village	9
People couldn't carry out their day-to-day activities	13
Several persons were killed in the protest	15
Some people were bribed to stop the movement	10
Children couldn't go to schools during the protest period	11

Figure 1

Motivation for the Mass Protest by the Religion

