

Editorial:

Environment and Society in Sri Lanka

We are late. This issue of *Polity* is over-due by at least two years. We were late already. This encounter is overdue by at least thirty years.

To be sure, there were the prescient among us. Already in the 1980s Professor Nadarajah Shanmugaratnam, one of the founders of the Social Scientists' Association, extended his research from agrarian relations in Sri Lanka and Japan, to sustainable development on a world scale.

In an early intervention first published in 1989, he insisted on differentiating the planetary environmental crisis as not one but two. "The environmental crisis in the North is the result of more than 200 years of development through industrial transformation, the crisis in the South is the product of more than 200 years of underdevelopment ...".¹

He goes onto make what could be our point of departure: the environmental crisis in the South is "a crisis of survival for the majority of the people who [depend] on the environment for their livelihood".² The source of this condition, he observes, is that relations of exploitation in the inter-state system have been internalised in national power structures.

Shanmugaratnam poignantly adds, "In most parts of the South, environmental degradation coexists with the degradation of the social, economic and cultural conditions of life for the mass of people: two processes which appear to be mutually reinforcing".³

In relation to the social sciences in Sri Lanka, these insights remain novel rather than common-sense. Here, as elsewhere, it is apparent that environmentalism is sometimes synonymous with conservationism or the 'cult of the wilderness': as if, humans are exterior to nature and vice-versa.

The consciousness of many who speak in defence of ecology, is heightened in matters of plastic pollution, beach nourishment, and other affronts to an aesthetic; but dulled to the relentless decimation of poor people's habitats and livelihoods.

A recent inventory⁴ of environmental conflicts over the past quarter century classifies these latter injustices as follows: land-grabs (for tourism, cash crop plantations, military, etc.); deforestation (e.g. for bio-fuel production); water contamination; infrastructure projects (e.g. highways; mega-dams); mini-hydro power projects; building materials extraction (e.g. cement, sand, stone); solid waste management; agro-chemicals; genetically modified seeds; and others.

Camisani sums up as follows: "Tourism and industries as well as the construction of new infrastructures (dams, power plants, roads, ports), aiming to foster and sustain development, are causing displacement, pollution, land degradation and water shortage, particularly affecting the communities of farmers and fishermen whose livelihoods are based on such natural resources. As a result, those affected social groups mobilize against unfair impacts".⁵

The 'Peoples Land Commission', a civil society initiative, held hearings among some of those affected across 18 districts of social, economic, ethnic and religious diversity in the course of 2019. Environmental degradation featured as one of the core themes in its recent report.

The Commission identified four major types of land-use that cause environmental harm to poor people's livelihoods: large-scale development projects; tourism projects; large-scale commercial agriculture; and militarisation.

"Most of the participants consulted were aware

of how their livelihoods were intertwined with the environment and how they interact with and impact on one another. This was particularly highlighted when topics pertaining to the human-wildlife conflict and changes in weather patterns were discussed.”⁶

What follows is only a start of an investigation into relations between the environment and society in Sri Lanka. The disclaimer is that where – and how – our inquiries begin, has not been so much as out of choice, but rather by way of inheritance.

In assembling this issue our perspective may be expressed in this way “... nature has to be understood as a product of the interaction between material structures (including the natural environment) and human activity. Furthermore, the environment is more than nature, it is the physical but also the social, economic and political world in which people live. These different worlds shape each other”.⁷

The papers that constitute the core of this volume speak to this insight. The first two papers by Harini Amarasuriya and Buddhima Padmasiri explore the challenges and tensions of mobilising communities on issues relating to the environment. In different ways, their papers point to the intimacies and conundrums (economic, social, political, affective) that shape action and engagement with the less visible aspects of environmental activism. Mark Schubert and Rebecca Surenthiraraj’s paper on the Broadlands Hydropower Project in Kitulgala and Gayathri Lokuge’s paper on disco net fishing in Trincomalee explore dynamics that appear to be antithetical to environmental movements. The central tension of both papers is arguably between that of the environment and the economy, and their

papers highlight the many ways in which these tensions are negotiated within local communities of practice. The final two papers in this section by Iromi Perera on the impact of the push for urban beautification on working class families in Colombo and by Vagisha Gunasekara & Taniya Silvapulle on the 2018 budget may appear to be vastly divergent in scope and focus. Yet, both papers provide valuable insights that broaden our understanding of how the idea of the ‘environment’ is deployed as a mechanism of neo-liberal governance.

In addition, we open this issue with three early reflections on the impacts of COVID-19 both globally and in Sri Lanka. The papers by Sivamohan Sumathy, Ramya Kumar and Quincy Saul are different in their register. Yet, each is an acute response to the shock of a global pandemic. All three papers look to different futures, some more optimistically than others perhaps. But all three document some of the early apprehensions and possibilities that are still unfolding as the long-term effects of the crisis become apparent.

Our thanks to all the contributors for making submissions which help us along that way, for their engagement in the editorial process, and multiple revisions to drafts. As usual, signed articles do not necessarily represent the view of the Social Scientists’ Association. We also want to thank Thilini Prasadika for her editorial assistance and Hanim Abdul Cader for supporting us with the laying out of this issue.

There is much more to say. But for now we pause here and cede the floor to our contributors.

Notes

- 1 Shanmugaratnam, Nadarajah (2012). ‘Development and environment: a view from the South’ in Kjosavik, Darley Jose and Vedeld, Paul (eds.), *The Political Economy of Environment and Development in a Globalised World: Exploring the Frontiers – Essays in honour of Nadarajah Shanmugaratnam*, Social Scientists’ Association: Colombo, p. 177.
- 2 Ibid., p. 179.
- 3 Ibid. p. 180.
- 4 Camisani, Paola Bianca (2018). “Sri Lanka: a political ecology of socio-environmental conflicts and development projects”, *Sustainability Science*, Vol. 13, Issue 3 (May 2018), pp. 693-707 at p. 697.

- 5 Ibid., p. 704.
- 6 People’s Land Commission (2020). “*Our Land, Our Life*”: *People’s Land Commission Report 2019-2020*, People’s Alliance for Right to Land: Colombo, p. 84.
- 7 Berg, Sebastian (2020). ‘Political Ecology and British Marxism’, in Prendiville, Brendan and David Haigron (eds.), *Political Ecology and Environmentalism in Britain*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing: Newcastle-upon-Tyne, p. 114.