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Some Missing Pages from History: D. J. Wimalasurendra and Developmental Nationalism of Ceylon

Nehruvian developmental nationalism, a campaign that existed and was relatively widespread in the island during the early part of the twentieth century, has escaped the gaze of scholars of Sri Lankan history for some reason. This gap in history writing is highlighted in Spencer (2008) when he says that "Sri Lanka never developed a mass anti-colonial nationalist movement out of which Nehruvian developmental nationalism emerged".

The Aberdeen-Laxapana Hydro Electric Scheme, the first ever hydroelectric project designed and commissioned during the first half of the twentieth century, with predictions producing excess energy than the demand in the island at that time provided the ground on which the discourse on developmental nationalism emerged and spread. The life story of engineer D. J. Wimalasurendra from the time he worked as an engineer at the Public Works Department to the time he served as a legislator at the State Council provides details of how he designed the Scheme, how the implementation was delayed by around thirty years amidst powerplay among actors representing diverse colonial and local interests and how this delay helped the emergence and the spread of a Ceylonese discourse on developmental nationalism as an alternative to the one on achieving agricultural prosperity as imagined in ancient Sinhalese kingdoms.

Sources required to construct this story can be found spread across the first half of the twentieth century and can be positioned in different spheres such as technical debate among engineers, colonial administrative literature such as yearly Administration Reports and Sessional Papers published by the Colonial Government (not as main texts, but as annexures), public speeches given by prominent leaders of colonial Ceylon, newspaper reports and articles, biographies of D. J. Wimalasurendra and undocumented narratives of the Scheme related by local people involved in it and passed down orally from generation to generation. The first major intervention towards this was the paper presented by Wimalasurendra at the Engineering Association of Ceylon in 1918. By formulating a comprehensive argument, the paper titled "Economics of Power Utilization in Ceylon", makes three proposals to improve the economics of power use: centralised power generation in bulk as against decentralised power generation by a number of small units (favouring the introduction of hydro power to the system); exploitation and development of extensive sources of available water-power; and operating some sections of the Ceylonese railway system electrically using power generated by hydro, especially in the hill sector.

The early part of the twentieth century was marked by rifts among different groups and communities for social, political, and economic power. Social organisation governed by divisions based on class, castes, ethnicities, religions and regions was a characteristic common to the entire South Asian region. It was a time of uncertainty as well as a time of opportunity. The power play among these groups decided the nature of the Ceylonese state to be formed after independence and the features of Ceylonese nationalism that were to emerge. Wimalasurendra's link to the Navandanna caste, arguably the caste that practised the pre-colonial version of modern engineering and technology, brings an

additional dimension to discuss the already complicated socio-political context of the early twentieth century Ceylon on which the Hydro Electric Scheme can be positioned.

This chapter reveals that the thoughts we so far understood as dispersed thoughts on industrialisation expressed by Ceylonese leaders such Marcus Fernando, Anagarika Dharmapala and Munidasa Cumaranatunga in fact were coordinated more or less by the solid foundation offered by the Aberdeen-Laxapana Scheme. The comprehensive industrial development plan proposed by Wimalasurendra at various stages during the first half of the twentieth century at forums attended by engineers, at the State Council and at public meetings attracted the attention of the political elite at national and regional levels, print media and the general public. Even by 1930, the year in which Wimalasurendra retired after a long period at the Public Works Department, his involvement with the Hydro Electric Scheme and his vision for an industrially developed nation was known and widely appreciated. Records of a public meeting held in the town of Galle in 1930 provides evidence for this. Proposing a vote of thanks at the end of the public talk given by Wimalasurendra convened by the Galle Maha Jana Sabha in 1930, C. W. W. Kannangara, the prominent national leader who represented the Legislative Council and the State Council, said that "it was a great pleasure and a pride to see that the eminent engineer who hailed from Galle was trying to interest the people of his native town in an industrial renaissance". Some of the Sinhala and English newspapers played prominent roles in carrying his message of hydroelectricity driven industrialisation to people.

Wimalasurendra used every opportunity he received to express his opinion to campaign for his mission. In his speeches he elaborated in detail the types of heavy industries Ceylon could develop, the need for an industrial development policy that could facilitate such a process, features of mechanisms that could be introduced to coordinate the implementation of the proposed industrial policy and the ways in which the technical labour force required for industrial development could be nurtured through technology training and education. As part of the campaign he moved private motions at the State Council demanding a national policy for industrial development.

Therefore this chapter rephrases the statement made by Spencer (2008) and tries to address the question of why this wide-spread imagination in an industrially advanced Ceylon that was confidently backed by the Aberdeen-Laxapana Hydro Electric Scheme failed to evolve into to a mass movement of developmental nationalism leading to the Sri Lankan developmental state, a status that was achieved in India under somewhat parallel conditions. It is argued in the chapter that the Aberdeen-Laxapana Hydro Electric Scheme perhaps provided a rare 'moment' or opportunity in history to rally all ethnicities in the island around the Scheme to build the post-independent Sri Lankan nation, a status that has not been achieved even by now. It is speculated that the personal conflicts among officials of the Public Works Department, caste rifts among Ceylonese political elites and the nature of their class interests that was attached to the colonial economy caused this failure.