

Evaluating and Ameliorating Visual Impacts of Waterfalls Hydropower on Holy Sites

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Abstract: There is no sharp line between “natural patrimony” and “cultural heritage” and commonly, sites or objects of primarily natural provenance may come to be ascribed with religious significance. Great cataracts - and sometimes even modest-sized waterfalls - are often considered as holy places and frequently are the venues for erecting shrines and temples. According to the original concept, the Upper Kotmale Hydroelectric Project (UKHP) in the tea country near Talawakelle, Sri Lanka was designed to terminate five waterfalls. Among the five waterfalls at least two were the sites of minor shrines and the third, the setting of a highly revered - amongst the Plantation Tamil community – a miracle temple. Initially, both the Japanese funders and the national project proponents were resistant to the concept of “aesthetic releases” which should have at least partially or intermittently conserved the beauty and spiritual character of waterfalls otherwise being sacrificed to energy development, but which would have necessarily entailed significant “opportunity costs”: i.e., foregone revenues for ungenerated and unsold power. The controversy over UKHP, largely on the waterfalls issue, delayed its construction for fifteen years, but it was eventually approved and quite recently completed, and the project as - implemented included consideration of aesthetics and cultural sensitivities. We will be presenting the original image archive produced in 1991 for the required environmental documentation, but also new interactive digital media from our December, 2013 post-facto evaluation of the UKHP’s actual visual impacts.