

Moon River Movement: Reclaiming Fishing Livelihood against the Pak Moon Dam

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Dam construction has been one of the key controversies between the people and the state throughout the intensive socio-economic modernization period in the 1960s-1990s in Thailand. While water control is significant for fishing and agriculture the state exercise its power to alter the usage of this water resource for electricity generation. Most of the dams in the country are constructed for hydro-electric power although the Electricity Generation Authority of Thailand (EGAT) often claimed that the objectives of these dams are multi-purpose. Spawned amidst the 1990s, the Moon River Movement became the key driving force to protest against EGAT's Pak Moon Dam project. The Movement has set many unprecedented public communication actions to struggle for their community right. This is a brief account of how the Moon River Movement gained media attention when they confronted the authority by direct action and how they find their real strength in alternative media and communication.

Pak Moon dam project

In the early 1980s the government proposed to build the Pak Moon Dam on River Moon in the Northeastern province of Ubonrachathani. The dam would produce 136 megawatt of electricity for the lower Northeastern region. Villagers from 5 districts; Kongjiem, Pibunmangсахarn, Taansum, Warinchamrab and Muang began to form social networks against the project. Despite continuous protests during 1990-1991 the government under the National Peacekeeping Council, which staged a military coup in February 1991, started the construction by unearthing the river bed with heavy explosives near Baan Hua Haew. River Moon is known for its rich species of fresh water fish and its special environ as

the breeding ground for fish and other live forms from the Mekong River and Moon River because of its river rock. The dam in the middle of the river would bar this important annual breeding to take place. It would destroy the lives of over 3,950 families who depend entirely on fishing as their livelihood.

Protest strategies during Pak Moon dam construction

The Moon River Movement initial objective in 1990 is to stop EGAT and its Pak Moon dam project. But their petition to the local politician and the government go unheeded. Thereby, the peaceful protest at the site of the dam turned violent after their demand for three years compensation and 15 rai of land has been rejected by EGAT. In 1993, the first confrontation between villagers who were against the dam and those who supported it resulted in 31 casualties. It caught local media attention though there was little report in the national press. Subsequently, EGAT agreed to the Movement's five-point demand that; there must be clear sign post of flood water level, there must be financial compensation for the loss home and land, there must be new land allocation for villagers who lost their homes, there must be social and scientific studies on the effect of the dam on fishing, and there must be compensation if there were any public health hazard. When the dam was completed in 1994 EGAT refused to pay any compensation. However, after five months of strenuous demonstration EGAT finally paid the three-year compensation (35,000 baht/annum) to the villagers to recover the loss of their fishing livelihood.

But the protest did not end here. The Movement found that Pak Moon dam has seriously ruined the river. The abundance of Moon River is lost along with their fishing. They must rethink their strategy to regain nature and their livelihood. It is the exact political moment in 1995 when 'The Assembly of the Poor' has been organized. This is a social movement made up of 125 groups of networks concerning 205 cases on land use, agriculture,

fishing, dam (including Pak Moon dam), public health care, housing, and large state development projects. 'The Assembly of the Poor' has approximately 180,000 members participating in the networks (Pintobtang, 1998). In 1997, 'The Assembly of the Poor' organized the 99-day protest in front of the Government House to press for their demand. The Movement's presence made huge publicity on television and newspapers. As a result, they were able to have access to the mainstream media. With a great deal of public pressure the government of Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudth (New Aspiration Party) resolved that the villagers should receive 15 rai of land or 500,000 baht/family for the loss of their livelihood (Kunnawat, 2002).

Transformation of Moon River Movement: Public communication and the media

In 1998, the Democrat government cancelled the previous cabinet resolution. It is the turning point of the Moon River Movement. To demand financial compensation is seen as a thing of the past. The Movement perceive a radical change which is the rehabilitation of the river and its environ. A strategy designed with the hope of a brighter future for their fishing livelihood. Hence, villagers began to build a temporary village next to the dam and campaigned for public support. They made request to EGAT to open the floodgates for the fish to swim up-river and breed in their natural habitat. With this major shift the Movement must come up with new communication strategies in order to inform and build public support.

During their struggle both 'The Assembly of the Poor' and Moon River Movement learn that they could not rely on mainstream media to publicize their case or put forth their argument on local power and democratic participation to the public (Chalermripinyorat, 2002). They come to the conclusion that they would attempt to struggle for some public space within the mainstream media. But they must become self reliant on informing their own

networks as much as the public and their opponents. Prasitiporn Kanonsri, information and media specialist for the 'The Assembly of the Poor', stated bitterly that, "*since complaints and petitions did not bring any positive result from the authority the best solution is to communicate directly with society*". In 1999, the Moon River Movement set up 3 major media and communication strategies; cultural communication, alternative media and an information center in order to shore up the Movement's identity and to achieve the ultimate goal of reclaiming their fishing livelihood (Kunnawat, 2002).

Cultural communication

The first step is the creation of a new village called 'Mae Moon Man Yuen' (or Moon River Forever) located next to the dam. This is the base to demonstrate the right to self governance of local villagers. The organizing principles are egalitarian, participation and transparency of an ideal democratic community. This is contrary to the state and EGAT secretive operation on the Pak Moon dam project which excluded local participation and their right to make decision regarding their livelihood. In their discursive struggle against the state the Movement organized regular cultural activities to build up their confidence and to communicate with the local and general public. They campaign through 'The Nature's Stride' along Moon River to inform local communities and to rally for their support. Local histories and rituals are used as a means to confirm the cultural identity of the Northeastern ethnicity. There is Baaisri ceremony by the Movement's elders to welcome supporters such as academics, students, activists from non-governmental organizations who visited 'Mae Moon Man Yuen' village. There are prayers and rituals for the longevity of the river. On the other hand, cursing ritual such as the burning of salt and pepper is used against evil forces that destroy Moon River. Popular expressions in the forms of music and dance are used for both self reflection and entertainment. 'Mohlam', the Northeastern singing, with bamboo pipe as its key musical instrument, has been recorded in an album called 'The Cry of Mae Moon'.

The singing narrates the tale of the Movement's struggle. Some of the lyrics tell the stories of people who share similar wretched plight. The songs beg the government to sympathize with the poor and those who were affected by large developmental projects. It is sung in Northeastern language and Central Thai in order to communicate with both local listeners as well as the general public from other parts of the country.

Alternative media

Alternative media or small media are seen as an effective means of independent communication. Villagers learn to produce banner, flag, bulletin board, pamphlet, newsletter, and public statement for various forums such as seminar, conference, and public hearing. Children and villagers work side by side with students and volunteer groups to produce the message for the campaign. Some of them appeared in the video documentary, 'When the Fisherman Rebelled', and in the research report 'Mae Moon: The Return of the Fisherman'. In addition, the creation of these alternative media also merged movement campaign materials with local resources that bring interesting hybrid form of communication. Bamboo utensils such as fan, sticky rice container (called Kratib), hat, and fishing equipment such as fishing net are made for sale. The production process has brought back the lost consciousness among the young generation of the Movement and civil society workers on the close relationship of nature and people's livelihood on the river.

Information center

The third major strategy is the information center. The Movement set up its information center for public communication and to ward off any distortion by EGAT and the mainstream media. The systematic news evaluation and records of events provided the Movement with accurate and up-to-date analysis of the situation. They also work with Friends of the People (FOP) who is the secretariat and information center of 'The Assembly of the Poor'. In this way, the Movement could produce its own news agenda. The information

center and FOP use the Internet to send out statement, news up-dates with photos through their mailing list to local and international networks, and the mainstream media regularly. The non-governmental organizations' portal website, <http://www.thaingo.org> has been an important communication space for the Movement. It plays a significant role as it could bypass the limitation of the mainstream media.

Despite all the communication efforts mentioned above the Movement must work with the mainstream media. There is no escape because national newspapers, television and radio easily reach the national audience on a daily basis. Although the public communication methods of the Movement are similar to those of a public relations organization they have to work doubly hard to convince the media that their agenda are newsworthy. Since the Movement is equipped with elders and organizers, academics and civil society workers who volunteer to supervise the Movement's media campaign they become key information sources for the mainstream media. The social statuses of a large number of these sources make the interview highly credible in the eyes of the public. They also organize press conference, seminar and public discussion so their voices are heard. Combined with these kinds of public communication they are far more effective than merely giving interview.

Democratic public space: civil disobedience, public hearing and dialogue

Apart from media campaign outreach the Moon River Movement has devised many political and tactical moves in order to build public consensus around the issue. The civil disobedient actions took place during the Democrat government (1998-2001) in which their demands have been stalled or turned down. In 2000, the Movement confronted EGAT and peacefully seized the dam. The government reluctantly set up an ad hoc committee to follow up on the resolution to open all the dam floodgates for 4 months. After two months, the Movement came to protest in front of the Government House to press for their demand.

Totally neglected by the government the Movement decided to use disruptive measure. About 200 villagers broke into the compound of the Government House after the religious ceremony in the evening of Buddhist Lent. Young and old, women and children, were beaten and imprisoned. But due to intensive media and public pressure, at home and abroad, the government hastily released the protesters and agreed to look into the matter again. In any event, the Movement pressed further by staging a 3-day hunger strike. It gained public sympathy and the government complied with the Movement for an open public hearing at Thammasat University in Bangkok. The Minister for Public Energy was held accountable while villagers appealed convincingly to thousands of audience in the auditorium. The event was broadcast live on Channel 11 to the whole nation.

In 2001, the new government led by the Thai Rak Thai party agreed to open all the floodgates of Pak Moon dam for four months to rehabilitate the river. EGAT, however, refused to comply with the order. It took the Prime Minister to go down to the dam and ordered EGAT to open all of the eight gates. The habitat was restored and the river was teeming with fish after the gates were open. By the end of 2001 the government renewed the agreement with the Movement that the gates should be open for another 12 months and research should be carried out on the impact of the dam on the environment and the breeding cycle of the fishes in Moon River.

But the tide was turned in 2002. EGAT lobbied the government to go back to the initial agreement. The floodgates were to open for four months during the breeding season, and close for eight months to store water for electricity generation and agriculture. Although research by Ubonrachathani university research team showed that the opening of the floodgates would not destabilize the level of electricity generation in the Northeast the government stood by EGAT. The Movement, therefore, made a radical demand that the gates should be open for five years based on the research finding of the university. The government

reluctantly organized a meeting at Government House to negotiate with 30 representatives of the Movement. It was the first of its kind. The meeting was chaired by the Prime Minister, with villagers, academic and ministers sitting side by side. With live television broadcast on Channel 11 representatives of the Movement were given equal opportunity to state their case. No clear agreement was reached from the negotiation table. The Prime Minister went to the dam and asked the National Statistical Office to carry out a public opinion survey regarding the opening of the gates. The survey showed that most of the people wanted the gates closed for eight months. In 2003, the Cabinet resolved that each year the gates were to open for four months and close for eight months.

Although the Moon River Movement's hope to completely rehabilitate the river failed to materialize the Movement has been partially successful in their attempt to reclaim the river and their livelihood. Media and creative public communication strategies play a central role to form the much needed public consensus. They could pressure the government and EGAT, and not least, the mainstream media to focus on the problem. With broad and strong networking the villagers take political actions as citizens in order to demand for their community right. In this process they have opened up new media spaces and set unprecedented models of public communication such as open negotiation and public hearing in the highly limited and controlled public sphere within the Thai socio-cultural context.

* This article is dedicated to the courageous people of the Moon River Movement and, especially, for Wanida Tantiwitayapitak, the leader of the Moon River Movement, who died on 6th December, 2007 at the age of 52.

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13 February, 2008