

"It is in my inability to conform that I find the passion necessary to create"

Part 2 of an interview with Sri Lankan film director Prasanna Vithanage

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The following is the second part of an extensive interview with the well-known Sri Lankan filmmaker Prasanna Vithanage, whose work *Pavuru Valalu* (Walls Within) was reviewed on the World Socialist Web Site earlier this year.

Vithanage's newest film, *Pura Handa Kaluwara* (Death on a Full Moon Day), about the consequences of the civil war raging in Sri Lanka, has appeared at a number of international film festivals and won considerable acclaim.

Participating in the discussion with Vithanage from the WSWs were Piyaseeli Wijegunasingha, Varuna Alahakoon and Wije Dias.

Piyaseeli Wijegunasingha (PW): In the interview you had with *Ravaya* (Voice) (1999 March 14), after quoting the Polish film director [Krzysztof] Kieslowski, you commented that you needed to influence society through your works of art. You had also said that the ability of an artist to influence society through his work is being destroyed more and more in the world today. Please elaborate on this.

Prasanna Vithanage (PV): Kieslowski was an artist engaged in a determined struggle against the Stalinist regime. The Solidarity Movement was behind him in this struggle. When this movement came to power and established itself, Kieslowski went to Poland and made a film. Kieslowski made the statement that I quoted in my interview with *Ravaya*, and that you referred to—while he was in Poland.

What Kieslowski said was that earlier, when a strong Stalinist regime had been in power, people had been eager to know how Wajda or Kieslowski interpreted what was happening in Poland. Continuing with his statement, Kieslowski said that after Lech Walesa established himself in power and Poland turned into a multi-party system, and the authoritarian kind of rule also had changed, people had money in their pockets—and were not concerned any more about what Wajda or Kieslowski had to say. That was what Kieslowski said.

Now I would like to say something I deeply believe in. If an artist thinks that he can make the revolution through art ... it is not possible to do so. The revolution is a task to be fulfilled by a political organization. I completely agree with what you said on this matter, at the seminar on the film *Pavuru Valalu* held at the Mahaveli Center. An artist is only capable of revealing truths about society. At the same time he is capable of giving an impetus to life—even within the absolutely infertile and barren living conditions existing today. That impetus has its effect on the individual and compels him to think. This is something I completely believe in. When I am depressed, a work of art, a musical composition—one of Beethoven's symphonies succeeds in giving an impetus to life. This is what art essentially does.

One exhibits arrogance when talking about accomplishing the revolution through art.

PW: I think you are correct when you say that the revolutionary party, with the world revolutionary outlook, is necessary to accomplish the socialist revolution. Here we must also take into consideration what Trotsky says in the *Manifesto - Towards a Free Revolutionary Art*. He says that true art, art that insists on expressing the inner needs of man and mankind in its time—true art is unable **not** to be revolutionary, **not** to aspire to a complete and radical reconstruction of society.

We valued your film *Pavuru Valalu* as a work of art because it brings the spectator to the realization of the necessity of a revolutionary change of society—the need of the socialist revolution. As Trotsky says in the same *Manifesto*, when an artist accomplishes this task with his work of art—in so far as he is conscious of it, he becomes “the natural ally of revolution”.

The ruling class political establishment does not always become aware of the dangers the work of a cinema artist like yourself holds for their system. When the revolutionary implications contained in your work become clear, the possibility exists that the establishment too might become aware of dangers your work holds for them. The establishment is afraid of good artists. Have you considered the possibility of such a situation arising?

PV: What compels me to create is the conflict I have with the existing social conditions. If I went along with it, if I aligned myself with the establishment, I would not be able to create. Great artists remain great artists only through their inability to adapt to this society and because of the conflict they have with this society. It is in my inability to conform that I find the passion necessary to create. I have come this far in my creative work, always portraying the conflict between the individual and social institutions. You yourself have stated this regarding my film *Pavuru Valalu*.

When I go on portraying this conflict, the necessity of my confronting the establishment even more powerfully—would inevitably arise.

PW: Would you like to comment on the intervention by the Defence Ministry against your film *Pura Handa Kaluwara* (Death on a Full Moon Day)?

PV: Since *Pura Handa Kaluwara* is a film against the war, we needed to use war equipment in it. Therefore we asked for help from the Defence Ministry. When we handed over the script to the Defence Ministry and requested their aid, they refused our request and also stated four reasons for their refusal.

The first reason given was that the film depicted youth as joining the armed forces not because of patriotism, but to seek to make a living. They also said that the film depicted families being displaced as a result of the war. Stating these reasons, they concluded by saying that if they supported the making of this film it would create difficulties in recruiting soldiers to

the army.

As a result of their refusal to provide war equipment I had to make certain changes in the script. After finishing the film, to avoid any harmful repercussions due to the aforesaid incident, I decided to present the film at foreign film festivals prior to placing it before the Public Performance Censor Board for its approval. I did so because if I had placed *Pura Handa Kaluwara* before the Public Performance Censor Board and there it had been subjected to some kind of censorship, it could have also obstructed the chance I had of presenting it at foreign film festivals.

Now that this film has won international recognition [*Pura Handa Kaluwara* won the International Film Critics' Award at the 13th International Cinema Festival held in Fribourg - Switzerland recently, and the Award for the Best Actor at the 12th International Film Festival held in Singapore in April 1999 - PW], I heard that the Sri Lanka Film Corporation is showing a readiness to screen it in Sri Lanka; and yet, problems may still arise. If so, I hope to take it to the Sri Lankan spectators in some way that is possible.

PW: In the interview you gave *Ravaya* you stated that the Sri Lankan cinema could get over the problems it faces, including financial ones, and survive only through building up a connection with world cinema. I quote your own statement: "We can easily say that the commercial enterprises should intervene and help the commercial cinema and that the Sri Lanka Film Corporation should invest in the making of artistic films. These are high sounding words. . . . But I doubt if such a plan can succeed. Therefore we must get ready to take our films to the foreign film market, and to seek our survival through presenting our films at international film festivals. In Sri Lanka the number of spectators who frequent the cinema halls is not enough for the survival of Sri Lankan film artists. Therefore the Sri Lankan film artist has got to send his creations abroad—to a television channel or to video-companies; and for this it is a must that we make good films. If not the film artists face an uncertain future."

Can you elaborate these views?

PV: The views I expressed to *Ravaya* regarding the future of the Sinhala cinema were in a sense expressed in relation to myself. I can truthfully say that if tomorrow some Sri Lankan cinema artist succeeds in creating a film that could achieve success with local audiences, a film capable of attracting large crowds, much more than *Pavuru Valalu* did, I certainly would be extremely glad. It has to be a film which succeeds in winning the hearts of a large number of spectators while penetrating deeply into the human situation. If for such a film, the necessary number of spectators are not to be found in this country it is due to existing economic and social processes. It is my belief that a single individual is incapable of changing this situation, because the number of spectators who frequent the cinema decreases as a result of economic and social processes.

Another thing that can be seen in Sri Lanka is that Sri Lankan cinema, like Sri Lankan politics, has also become lumpenized. In Sri Lanka this lumpen class that emerged as a result of the so-called open economy, has secured more political power for themselves than they ever did before, and they exert their power over the cinema too. It is the influence of this class that we see in the large number of sex films that are being screened today. Though these films may at first glance appear to be the work of a certain section of the population that has lost its livelihood and is financially trying to make ends meet somehow or other, they are also the social expression of a certain class.

The spectators who contribute most towards the survival of these films are the members of the armed forces, today amounting up to one million. They also provide the necessary patronage for these films. The war and the immense social pressures generated by the existing economic and social conditions have created an immense resource for the survival of these films. Because it is clear that these films are created in response to a certain social demand there is a marked preference for this kind of film by cinema hall proprietors too. This has resulted in a decrease in the demand

for the films we create.

In these conditions, foreign interest in our films is significantly important not because it enables one to build up one's image in the public eye, or for the awards one carries away, but because it enables one to create a situation where one can say what one wishes to say without hindrance. In the attempt to surmount the difficulties one faces in this manner, the biggest obstacle one confronts is the economic depression that holds sway over Japan and other Asian countries.

Sri Lankan cinema artists first emerged into significance via Asian film festivals. Today the economic depression in Asian countries has had an impact on Asian film festivals too. Due to the economic depression, the ability of these film festivals to survive in the future is uncertain. In Europe too ... I became aware of this situation only recently, the value of the Euro, the currency of the European Common Market countries, has also begun to fall. The European cinema festivals are held by certain independent groups who are interested in the cinema. The future survival of the cinema festivals held by these groups too is also uncertain. The survival of these festivals also depends on world economic and social conditions.

Varuna Alahakoon (VA): Your latest film *Pura Handa Kaluwara* won the Fipresci Award at the Fribourg International Film Festival recently held in Switzerland. We have no doubts whatsoever about the artistic power of your film *Pavuru Valalu*. In recent times in Sri Lanka, and even more so in countries like Iran, Taiwan, Singapore and India we can see a flowering of good films. How do you explain this phenomena.

PV: You mentioned *Pavuru Valalu* and *Pura Handa Kaluwara*; but it is a fact that Sri Lankan cinema as a movement has not made an impact, in the way countries like Taiwan, India and Iran have done. I am not happy in saying this, but from Sri Lanka you see the influence of only one person.

If we consider the development that has taken place in the Iranian cinema, it had to find a cinematic grammar that could enable it to outdo the pressures of the fundamentalist regime and also escape the scissoring of the censors. Now I must say that I can see the birth of an extraordinary cinematic grammar in films created by Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Abbas Kiarostami. When cinema artists were put under pressure by the fundamentalist establishment, their attempts to overcome these pressures resulted in the birth of this extraordinary cinematic grammar; and simultaneously a number of cinema artists emerged in Iran.

American films and Hollywood films are not screened in Iran. All these are controlled by the state and there is less commercial pressure on cinema artists; but the religious pressures are immense. That is the difficulty faced by cinema artists there. In Iran during times of political unrest, there is a little radicalization; during other times the situation hardens again. At present as far as I know cinema artists work amidst political and social unrest. Meanwhile two or three good cinema artists are producing good films.

In China too—as I have already stated—Fifth Generation cinema artists began depicting life as it had never been depicted before on film. Due to the present policies followed by the Chinese Communist Party, this movement of the Fifth Generation film artists is showing signs of withering away.

These artists too erred in some ways. The films of these artists at the beginning were very honest. They desired to depict reality in China as no one else had done before. When their films became famous through international film festivals, various American companies began approaching them. How disastrous the result is can clearly be seen now. At the beginning, the difficulty they confronted was not having the freedom to express what they wanted. Even with this difficulty, they were expressing themselves. When American companies came and offered them large sums of money to do films, their work began to fail as works of art too. They were unevenly placed in their struggle against the big

American companies. The companies broke the backbone of these artists and trampled on their freedom of creation.

In the 1980s good films were being made in Taiwan too: especially Ang Lee's films. The life in Taiwan controlled by America was well grasped by the two films, *Wedding Banquet*, *Eat-Drink, Man and Woman*. But what happened in the end? Ang Lee himself was bought by America. At present he even lives in America.

In the '80s there were a lot of good cinema artists in these countries. Now in these countries, in Iran as well as in Taiwan, you see a few cinema artists engaged in making good films under very difficult conditions.

In India, the situation is even worse. There you see the collapse of the tradition of using the cinema as a medium for artistic self-expression by cinema artists like Adoor Gopal Krishnan—and also by cinema artists in the regional states. They have not produced any good films recently, and you do not see film artists who have newly embraced this tradition either. In the '90s, only one Indian film won an award at an international film festival. That film was Santosh Shivam's *The Terrorist*. Indian cinema has ceased to win international recognition as a powerful cinema.

VA: In countries that were under Stalinist rule, conditions necessary for the creation of artistic works were non-existent. You mentioned the struggle waged by artists to free themselves of the bureaucratic chains which bound the freedom of artistic creation; but even after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in '91, what we still see—as you yourself clarified—is that the necessary social conditions for cinema artists as well as for other artists to create, are still eroding away.

PV: In Eastern Europe, the necessary conditions for artistic creation are eroding even more.

VA: At present, while the social degeneration persists, the economic production has become globalized. You yourself described the problems that cinema artists faced in this situation. Do you see a way in which cinema artists could resolve the problems they face and continue with their work?

PV: I do not expect an economic boom to occur again in the capitalist world. On every side we see the tendency towards economic depression. The Film Corporation expects to import bad films, sex-oriented films, and somehow or other pay the wages to its employees and continue with this situation. You will definitely see in two years' time the American companies' arrival here. We are liable to think that America would see nothing they can gain by intervening into the Sri Lankan film industry; but whenever there is a video showing of *Titanic* somewhere in Sri Lanka, the American Embassy would without fail inform the Film Corporation of Sri Lanka to take immediate action. They keep on urging the Film Corporation and the state to abolish certain barriers that exist regarding the importing of films.

American companies have no intention whatsoever of aiding the cinema in this country. What we will see in the future is America's attempt to widen its market. In the conditions of an economic depression, they have no intention other than to widen their own market; and in the future the people who will have to bear the brunt of this situation are the film artists of this country.

VA: You mentioned that American companies' sole intention of intervening here will be to make Sri Lanka a market for American films. In this situation if we face the problem from the angle of the Sri Lankan film artist, will he not find it necessary to sell himself in the film market even more than he has done up to now?

PV: This is how I comprehend the situation. When I make a film, at the outset I determine it to be an expression of my inner being; but this self-expression at a certain point has to become a commodity, which has to be distributed and sold in the market. The reason? On the capacity of my film to gain some commercial success will depend my ability to continue with my artistic self-expression. This is a deadly condition produced by the capitalist property system for the artist to face. We know that from ancient

times artists have been destroyed by this deadly condition. If the artist's self-expression is unable to satisfy the demands of the market, in his attempt to satisfy those demands the artist will destroy himself and that would be the end of his artistic creation. I agree when you say that the artist's having to sell his product in the market is a deadly noose hanging over his head. It is the deadly confrontation the artist is forced to deal with in this society.

VA: Your film *Pavuru Valalu* begins with the scene of Violet's elder daughter entering Galle Fort in a car. The film ends with the scene of a car carrying Violet and Victor leaving Galle Fort. In the final scenes of the film we see, Violet in her hallucinatory mental condition, imagining herself getting married to Victor, and in that way being united with him.

It may be deemed improper to ask an artist why he decides to conclude his work of art in a particular manner; but since the manner in which you have concluded the film gives certain meanings to it, I will ask this question: Did you expect to convey anything specific to the spectator through concluding the film with the scene of Violet and Victor leaving Galle Fort?

PV: I can say that Violet is incapable of having her expectations fulfilled within the existing material conditions. Therefore, as has already been discussed, it is Violet's inability to have her deepest spiritual needs fulfilled within a society where the family institution exists, that led us to portray this social system as an obstacle to individual's happiness.

I feel what you want to know here is whether in sending Violet and Victor away in the said manner, I had intended to project the same as a solution to the social problems depicted in the film.

VA: Yes, that is what I wish to know.

PV: Two scenes occurred to me as being suitable to end the film with. My preference was to end the film with a scene showing the car approaching the spectator with Violet and Victor seated in the back seat. I wanted to use a close-up showing their faces; but when I edited this scene, I perceived a certain imperfection in it. Therefore I used the other scene contained in the film now.

After I have completed a film, it is no longer mine. Then it belongs to the spectator to see and comment on. If the couple's leaving Galle Fort in the said manner, as is portrayed in the film, gives spectators the impression that I intended it to be understood as a solution to the problems the couple faced, I can say I did not intend it to be so. But if the scenes have been arranged and brought together in a manner that generates such an impression, that too is wrong. My sole intention was to generate in the spectator the realization that within the existing social conditions Violet's dream could never be fulfilled, and in that way, impel the spectator to think about the two social institutions, family and marriage.

Wije Dias (WD): You said you intended to take *Pura Handa Kaluwaru* to international film festivals so as to utilize the awards and favorable comments you could gain there to win the opportunity of screening the film here. Do you not think that this shows the impossibility of engaging freely even in the creation of films without the help of international solidarity?

PV: Yes, I think it does.

WD: Your course of action has our sympathy and agreement. Your film *Pura Handa Kaluwaru* has fulfilled your expectations and won international acclaim. Therefore you may also achieve your aim of being able to have public performances of your film here; but the possibility still exists, that you may not be able to do so cannot be ignored entirely. You cannot stop your creative activities due to such a situation. What do you intend doing if such a situation arises?

PV: I know from experience that what you achieve through individual effort in this kind of situation never lasts long.



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