

An interview with Prasanna Vithanage, Sri Lankan filmmaker

“The struggle of the common man for self-dignity is very profound”

Richard Phillips
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Sri Lankan filmmaker Prasanna Vithanage recently visited Sydney, Australia for a special showing of his latest film, Pura Handa Kaluwara (Death on a Full Moon Day). The film, which was reviewed on the World Socialist Web Site on February 29, explores one man's attempt to deal with the impact on his family of the Sri Lankan government's 16-year war against the Tamils in the north.

While Death on a Full Moon Day has not been released in Sri Lanka, it has been shown at several film festivals over the last year and had limited screenings in some cities in North America, Europe and Asia. It is due for commercial release in France and has been submitted for this year's Sydney Film Festival. Vithanage's film was nominated for Best Asian Screenplay at last year's Singapore International Film Festival and Joe Abeywickrama, who starred in the film, won a Silver Screen Award for Best Asian Actor at that festival.

Vithanage, who has directed three other films—Ice on Fire (1992), Dark Night of the Soul (1996) and Walls Within (1997)—was born in 1962 and came to filmmaking through theatre. In 1986 he translated and directed performances of George Bernard Shaw's Arms and the Man and in 1991 Dario Fo's Strawberries and Trumpets.

Richard Phillips: Although Death on a Full Moon Day is a relatively simple story, the film's measured pace and depth of characterisation is striking. Could you explain how you developed the script?

Prasanna Vithanage: The original script is quite different from the film you saw yesterday and centred not on the old man but the soldier. However, when I went to the location I realised that my script was false compared to what was actually happening in the village. It was incredible because, on the surface, life in the village seemed to be simple, but underneath the issues were very profound. So I decided to go with what I saw in this village and changed the whole script.

I was influenced to a great degree by the film traditions of the Fifth Generation of Chinese filmmakers. The Fifth Generation filmmakers were born out of Mao's Cultural Revolution. Because they were forced to live in far away villages they saw that life in these areas was completely different from the official government line. So they began making films, such as Yellow Earth by Chen Kaige, that tried to be true to reality, not what Mao said or the Communist Party of China said.

Fortunately I had money from outside Sri Lanka—the Japanese Broadcasting Corporation funded the film—and although they didn't like me changing the script I thought this was a chance to make a film and truthfully investigate what is happening in my country. I knew that even if the censor board in Sri Lanka did not allow the film to be screened it didn't matter because I had the opportunity to produce an honest film. So all the things you saw in the film are based on real life incidents.

Let me give you a picture of the region where the film was made. The village is in the north central province, near the ancient capital of Sri

Lanka, and an area still famous for its irrigational skills and man-made dams. The city is Anuradhapura, which is considered a sacred city, and is the ultimate metaphor for Buddhist-Sinhalese chauvinism. But there is a great contradiction between these chauvinistic ideas and what is happening in the village.

When I arrived, there had no been rain for three years and no paddy cultivation during this time. The only option for youth was to join the army or go into town in search of a job. The parents knew, and the youth knew, that by joining the army they would probably be killed. But the parents couldn't stop the young people because they thought that even if they were killed the compensation money would provide for their kith and kin. In other words, they were prepared to sacrifice themselves so that their families could live.

The bodies of those killed in the war would be brought to the villages in sealed coffins and after all the crying and the rituals, people were given this compensation. I realised that this was a tragic and vicious circle, so I created a character that would expose this.

RP: What is the significance of the film's title?

PV: I decided on the title Death on a Full Moon Day because the full moon for Sri Lankan Buddhists is not only a night but it is also a day. It's a day for religious observance and a national holiday. The film tries to explore the connection between religion and society.

In Sri Lanka religion is not only a way of life; it is life itself. You will notice that I started the film with the Buddhist chanting. Chanting takes place every morning in the sacred city of Anuradhapura, but there is a contradiction between this chanting and the delivery of coffins of dead soldiers.

You may also know that Buddhism is institutionalised and the Buddhist monks are in the foreground of the chauvinistic Sinhalese movement. The constitution gives preference to Buddhism and Dr Colvin De Silva, who was once a Trotskyist but betrayed socialism, put this clause in the 1972 constitution. The chauvinists demand that it should be kept that way. So Buddhism is an institution that manipulates and can be very oppressive.

In the film the Buddhist monk tells the old man that his son is a war hero and that they will build a bus stop in his honour. In fact, there are so many bus stands built in memory of fallen soldiers in these areas. For the Buddhist this is a sacrifice for the country. The father, who is very subtle, says that building bus shelters and other things should be done anyway. So I use the Buddhist rituals in the film, not as some kind of tourist attraction, but to debunk the rituals.

RP: The father refuses to accept compensation and eventually digs up the coffin. Is this common?

PV: No it is not common, that is why I decided that the father should do it. If someone opens a coffin they lose the compensation money. These are the rules. The coffin is sealed and two soldiers stay with it until it is

buried. In my film the old man has the coffin broken up so that no one will get any compensation.

After the film was screened yesterday, one young man came up to me and said it would be better if the coffin contained an army uniform otherwise youth would be discouraged from joining the army. I explained that the film had to show what was really happening—that the army and government don't even bother to keep the soldier's uniform—they just put tree trunks and stones to give some weight to the coffin. This is the harsh reality of the situation.

RP: When did you begin opposing the war against the Tamils?

PV: From the beginning, even from childhood. My parents, especially my father, were inspired by the early Sama Samaja movement—when it was a Trotskyist party. This had an influence on me.

I went to school with Tamils, Sinhalese and members of the Burgher community. Of course there were also many chauvinists at the school but from childhood I was politically aware and felt that Tamil culture had been suppressed. I also read the *Saturday Review* from Jaffna. This newspaper exposed what was happening under the J.R. Jayewardene regime. I also saw the 1978 riots and the 1983 riots. The Tamils are oppressed culturally and economically and so my feelings go with them.

RP: Why did you shoot the film sequentially?

PV: When I told my Japanese producer that I was shooting the film in chronological order he was a bit nervous. He told me this was a luxury, that no one could shoot films this way. But I explained that I had clear structure and was not shooting blindly. I wanted to see how the main character bloomed so I was always discussing with the actor. By shooting sequentially I had a chance to think and react to the development of this character. I am not from this area so it also gave me time to explore the village.

I always try to shoot the film not according to logical sequence—from medium close-up to master shot and so on. My aim was to try and convey how the power structure of the household changes when the father's daughter arrives. So the camera changes its approach and becomes more observant. Rather than cutting from shot to shot, the camera work becomes very meditative. The audience may not completely notice this, but it was important to try and make them go more inwards. So we planned the film and all the camera movements very carefully.

Let me also explain our work with the actors. Many Sri Lankan films fail when they attempt to portray villagers. When professional or more popular actors are in the same frame it's easy to pick who is from the city and who is from the village. If you come from this area, the colour of your skin is different because the sun is so harsh. I wanted to change that.

Two actresses who appeared in the film had acted in one or two television films but they had never faced a film camera, and they looked like they were from this area and the person who plays the priest is the village priest. The exorcist, who comes to the father, is the village exorcist. So there were a lot of contributions from the local people, which enriched the film and provided it with authenticity.

RP: There are accusations by one of the film's characters that the father's daughter is becoming involved in prostitution. Could you explain?

PV: The youngest daughter has a job in a garment factory. In every village from 1982 to 1994 President Premadasa organised garment factories. His idea was to take the city to the village, so a working class, a proletariat, began to be born in the villages. In the film the boyfriend felt that she was not telling the truth. He went to the factory and saw soldiers looking for girls. The boyfriend feels helpless and angry about this and says to the father, 'you are thinking about your son and your daughter is going into prostitution.' She explains that she is working in a proper job.

When I made the film in July 1997, prostitution was just beginning in Anuradhapura. Now, after Colombo, the highest prostitution rate in Sri Lanka is in Anuradhapura, the sacred city. Soldiers who come from the

north spend two days in this city and a whole prostitution industry has developed. The wages in the garment factories are very low and so some of the girls go to massage clinics and from there they are pushed into prostitution. I heard of one incident involving a young soldier who went to a brothel and was shown all the girls available. He saw his sister amongst these girls and became so angry that he attempted to kill the brothel-keeper and his sister. The brothel-keeper took him to another room, calmed him down and got him another girl. You see how the war has eroded basic human values and the conception of Sri Lanka as some great Buddhist civilisation.

RP: The father's opposition to the war is naïve and passive. Is this typical of are villagers and small farmers beginning to consciously oppose the war?

PV: I wanted the film to express my opposition to the war, but I have to be truthful when I create such a character. The father doesn't know what he has exposed. The reality of the war in some ways is beyond him. This is what the film shows. Opposition to the war, however, is now starting to build up throughout the country. People are getting tired of the argument that the war can be solved militarily by massacring Tamils, especially when their sons and next of kin come back home in sealed coffins. I hope my film will assist in this process.

RP: As I watched the film I was constantly reminded of Ignazio Silone's *Fontamara*, the story of peasant life in fascist Italy in the 1930s.

PV: You mention *Fontamara* but I must admit I was not consciously thinking about it when I made the film. I remember though how much I enjoyed and was inspired by the novel. As you know most of the characters in *Fontamara* are politically ignorant. They do not understand what has happened. It is ironic, and this is similar to my film, that although these people do not know exactly what is going on, they are constantly resisting the new situation they confront.

Let me explain the Vahimminy character. He predicts that there will be rain. He doesn't have the meteorological department service, but is able to predict from the wind and the clouds. He is also a courageous and determined man but is unable to grasp or accept that his son could be brought back to him in a sealed coffin. This issue is beyond his comprehension and so he becomes paralysed. People are trying to persuade him to sign the papers for compensation and the pressure is very great. Eventually he decides to take control of things himself and dig up the coffin. The way in which he tries to deal with this basic issue, has a kind of epic quality, and this quality is present in *Fontamara*.

For me the struggle of the common man who faces all the burdens and is fighting for self-dignity is very profound. And the purest moment is when someone fights the system. In my own culture or society, I've felt like an outsider so I always empathise with other outsiders who are fighting the system.

RP: Could you provide some background on your lead actor?

PV: Joe Abeywickrama is one of the most respected actors in Sri Lanka. He joined the Sri Lankan film industry in 1957 as a comedian and was the most popular comedy actor until 1970. After that he acted, as they say in Sri Lanka, in serious roles. Actually he is half-blind and he has many similar characteristics to the person he plays. He enjoys going to the jungle and can also predict rain. So I wrote my first script with him in mind. When I changed the script most of the film fell on his shoulders and if he had not been successful in the role the film would have been very different.

Before we started shooting I didn't have a completed script so he was asking me, 'what are we going to do without a script?' So I told him to just be there. This was a little bit of an insult to him because I am a lot younger than he is.

The brilliant thing about him is that he makes you feel what is going on inside his mind through his facial expressions. So I am very thankful to him for his great contribution and I am happy for him that he received the

best actor award at the Singapore International Film Festival last year. This is the first international award won by a male actor from Sri Lanka. All the male actors, and it comes with male chauvinism, are rather worried about their physical appearance. He is not a racist, he can speak Tamil, and he knows the village scene and its characters well, and was not afraid to show his emotions. He is the only character that could provide the qualities needed for this film.

RP: What has been the government response to the film? And why did you decide to screen the film outside Sri Lanka first?

PV: When I submitted the script to the Defence Ministry of Sri Lanka they objected. Although it's not necessary to give the script to the military, if you are going to use firearms or military uniforms you have to get their permission. They objected on four grounds. The most important reason for them was that the film, they said, would discourage soldiers and officers joining the army and that family members were shown to be neglected.

But I went ahead and shot the film 180 miles from Colombo. Somehow, using guerilla filmmaking techniques, we were able to get the shots we needed. So I made the film against their directives and didn't submit the completed film to the government. My aim was to get recognition, or rather attention from the international film festivals. If a film is submitted to the government in Sri Lanka and they say no, then you cannot export any prints.

The film will be presented to the Sri Lankan censor in the first week of March. I have told the newspapers that if the government insists on cuts, especially the controversial final scene, I will not agree. The money for the film came from NHK [Japan Broadcasting Corporation], so I am not after money. I have done my job and if it is approved I will go to the villages and show the film.

RP: You are aware of the campaign by the Hindu fundamentalists against Deepa Mehta. Could you comment on this and describe similar problems facing artists in Sri Lanka?

PV: What is happening in India will also happen in a big way in Sri Lanka. Like the RSS, Shiv Sena and similar fascist organisations, when the economy declines and turns to recession or depression, every government or the state has to try and create scapegoats. In India, it is the Christians and the Muslims.

In Sri Lanka there are similar organisations. There are Sinhalese extremist groups—Vira Vidahana and the NMAT, the National Movement Against Terrorism. There have been incidents where they have threatened Muslims and driven them out of business in certain areas. If the Muslims don't leave, then the business is bombed. The weapons used belong to the army. Nothing is done about this. Incidents like this could only happen with the knowledge of the government.

In Sri Lanka if a film, drama or novel is against the wishes of these organisations, they are attacked. This is why artists have to get together to safeguard their right to air their views.

Deepa Mehta is facing all these issues now. She faced it with her film *Fire*. And when Dilip Kumar, the movie idol, opposed Shiv Sena's ideas and supported *Fire* members of the Shiv Sena group demonstrated outside his home and removed their clothes in protest. If you support *Fire*, they said, here are nude scenes from us. This is what it was like a few years ago, now it has turned into physical violence and even before the film is made.

I would like to declare my solidarity with Deepa Mehta, and her right to air her views and make her film. The same elements exist in Sri Lanka, so artists must make people aware of what is happening, before it is too late.

RP: What will your next film be about?

PV: As Bertrand Tavernier explains in his interview, it's very difficult to find money for good films. But I now have a Sri Lankan producer and for my next film I would like to explore the connection between money and the war, and its impact on social and ethical values. There are so

many deep emotional questions that must be investigated. The war has created a class, which has gained great wealth and power from the war.

RP: Do you think that your film will encourage other filmmakers in Sri Lanka?

PV: I hope so. In Sri Lanka as in other countries, there is censorship and self-censorship. You hear people in Sri Lanka say, if we make a film about this subject it will be banned and how will we cover our money for this or future films? I think my film is important because it is saying, don't be afraid.

As a reader of the *World Socialist Web Site* I know there is a difference between globalisation and global capitalism. Because of the changes in production—the development of information technology and communication—frontiers are becoming fluid. It's necessary to understand that by developing a global audience you can overcome many problems. This is why the favourable international response to my film has been important. In fact, the awards and international recognition provide filmmakers with ammunition to fight the mediocrity and government controls in their own countries.

Ten years ago the sort of discussion we are having would have been very difficult. Now we can discuss this film, and the film itself is communicating visually. So I hope that my film will encourage other young filmmakers to explore some of these questions.



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