

"I appeal to all thinking people to stand up for Pura Handa Kaluwara"

A dialogue with Sri Lankan film director Prasanna Vithanage

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The screening of Pura Handa Kaluwara (Death on a Full Moon Day) by internationally acclaimed Sri Lankan film director, Prasanna Vithanage, was suspended indefinitely by Sri Lanka's Peoples Alliance (PA) government on July 21. Produced in 1997, the first public screenings of the film in Sri Lanka were scheduled for July 28 this year. The suspension was imposed through a directive issued to Thisa Abesekera, chairman of the National Film Corporation (NFC), by Sarath Amunugama, the cabinet minister who holds the NFC portfolio.

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 Trampets.

Pura Handa Kaluwara is a powerful artistic representation of the impact on Sinhalese villagers of the country's 17-year civil war. From the outset the film production faced obstructions from the government, the military and Sinhala chauvinists who claimed it would hamper the recruitment of rural youth into the army and focus public attention on some of the social and political problems in Sri Lanka.

Following considerable acclaim for the film at international film festivals, where it received a number of prestigious awards, the government was forced to recommend its local screening. But after a series of military defeats, the government imposed far-reaching emergency regulations and the screening was suspended. The World Socialist Web Site, which opposed this attack on democratic rights, recently spoke with Vithanage.

Waruna Alahakoon: The PA government has deferred the release of your film. What caused this?

Prasanna Vithanage: The censor board for drama and films approved *Pura Handa Kaluwara* last March but it had to be presented to the Competent Authority [CA] for media censorship on May 22, under the emergency regulations enacted from May 3. On the same day, the censor denied the approval, declaring that some scenes could not be allowed.

But on June 30, the Supreme Court decided that the powers vested with the Competent Authority were bad in law and so the censorship imposed on *Pura Handa Kaluwara* was revoked.

Everything was planned and prepared for a screening of the film on July 28 but on Friday July 21, I was informed that it had to be suspended due to the war situation. And I was also told that when the normalcy returned to the country, I would be informed about the possibility of showing the film. Since then the screening of *Pura Handa Kaluwara* has been suspended indefinitely.

I have lived amidst this war for 17 years—under UNP [United National

Party] and PA governments. At times these governments have declared that the security situation is good, and on other occasions they declare otherwise. *Pura Handa Kaluwara* is now being banned because the security situation is bad, but the media claim it is good. Different people interpret the situation according to their whims and fancies.

WA: We heard that, even before the ban, the government had raised objections against the film.

PV: Today what you see is only a portion of *Pura Handa Kaluwara's* original script. The full script could not be produced without using army equipment and that needed Defense Ministry consent. But when the screenplay was submitted to the Defense Ministry they refused to cooperate. When I presented a revised screenplay, they again refused to assist, giving four reasons. The main reason was that the film would create recruitment problems because it shows that those who join the army do it as a job, not as a sacrifice for the country. It also shows the difficulties getting compensation after their death, etc.

WA: The CA letter decreed that you should self-censor the film. How do you assess that directive?

PV: The authorities enticed me into self-censorship by trying to implant a certain fear. They tried to convince me that there was a danger of attacks from the extreme right and that I would have to bear all responsibility for whatever reactions were produced by the film screening. When I disagreed and said that I wanted the film screened the Minister imposed the ban.

WA: Does that mean there was not any rightwing threat?

PV: I can only say that there wasn't any openly expressed opposition in the weeks before the banning. Professor Nalin de Silva, who represents extreme Sinhalese chauvinism, tried to stir up some reaction against me by highlighting some of the things I said in an interview with the *World Socialist Web Site*. But this attempt failed.

WA: Doesn't that reflect the reaction of a certain section of society against the film?

PV: Of course. The political aims of racial chauvinists are exposed through this. Extreme chauvinist elements are raising their heads at present in Sri Lanka, and throughout the Indian subcontinent. But the ideas of the extreme Hinduthva of the RSS and Shiva Sena in India aren't the ideas of the majority. They do a lot to divide people on religious and ethnic lines and the state utilises these elements to suppress the people. Indian filmmaker Deepa Mehta faces this suppression today. The ruling class wants to repress artistic freedom of self-expression, as a part of the broader attack on the democratic rights of the people. These are the conditions that we live under.

WA: How did you select the film's theme?

PV: I felt a certain responsibility towards the community that this film is based upon, especially the people who live in border villages of the war zone. You may be aware that considerable numbers are recruited to the security forces from the North Central Province. I saw their devastated living conditions they confront when I went looking for locations for the film. This also forced me to rework my original script and to produce a script based on their lives. Their voices are not heard in Colombo—this is a voice that the rulers do not want to hear—so I felt a responsibility to let them be heard.

WA: What has been the response by expatriate Sri Lankans who saw the film?

PV: Sri Lankans living in countries such as Australia, England and India watched the film and everywhere they embraced it. When the film was screened in Switzerland a young Tamil girl approached me and said: “I am Sri Lankan but my parents fled for their lives to Switzerland when I was an infant. For the first time in my life today I saw Sri Lanka. Now I can explain to my friends about Sri Lanka.”

This was the general reaction of both communities of Sinhalese and Tamil everywhere it was screened. The reality of Sri Lanka depicted was a shock to Sinhalese living away from the country but they never became hostile towards the film. They became more concerned and thoughtful about this disastrous war.

WA: The war has dragged on for nearly two decades but it has rarely, apart from your film, been genuinely reflected in an artistic way. How do you understand this?

PV: Most artists don't see this war as something bound up with their own lives. One can argue that we all are forced to pay a defense levy on all the goods we purchase and therefore are connected to the war. Some may grumble about the other economic burdens brought on by the war but they don't see beyond that. Most artists lack social consciousness, not only about the war, but also about the rightwing terror of 1988-89, and so nothing much with artistic humanism is presented to the people. There isn't any other country in the region that underwent so many social upheavals. There has been so much raw material available for creative thought during the past 20 years, but these experiences have not been explained in art. This is a challenge that all artists must recognise.

When I made *Pura Handa Kaluwara* I thought seriously about what was the best film I could make, a subject that other Sri Lankan artists had not approached? So when my film is banned, even after receiving international acclaim, it is easy to imagine why other artists are hesitant, or avoid touching such a subject.

WA: Do you think the negative response of a section of Sri Lankan artists on the banning of your film reflects their indifference to the war and the government attacks on the democratic rights of the masses?

PV: Definitely. In this or that form they are tied to the state for their day-to-day existence. They could be thinking that if they protest against the banning it will disrupt their comfortable lives and so they refrain from doing anything. This same approach is seen in the creative works they produce. Basing themselves on these same personal interests, many artists purposely refrain from dealing with certain important and central social themes, or maintain a self-imposed censorship.

Artists must be prepared to oppose this type of state interference, in the field of arts and other cultural activities. This is a challenge that must be faced.

WA: Isn't this response a result of not seeing any possibility of solving the social problems?

PV: Of course. I think you've turned me into a very contented man returning home after a hard day's work by asking this question. Every good artistic creation reflects an optimism in social progress and the artist's optimism comes out through his creations. If it isn't represented in their inner selves how can they stand for the defence of *Pura Handa Kaluwara*?

WA: The superiority of many great artistic creations is inspired by a broad progressive social movement of the era. What do you think?

PV: There we move into another field. In Sri Lanka we have an intense social, political and economic crisis. In such a situation, as artists, we should be more impelled to see the future, to understand the changing world. This crisis penetrates the lives of artists forcing us to open our minds. On all previous occasions artistic development was bound to social movements with a progressive perspective. The October revolution in 1917 and the French revolution in 1789 were the result of enlightened thought on a broad social scale. It inspired the artists to break new ground, in themes and in forms. The issue you have mentioned is sharply confronted by artists today.

WA: Finally would you like to make an international appeal against the banning of *Pura Handa Kaluwara*?

PV: I don't think the problem I face is an accident. This is happening all over the region, and the world. Here I think a kind of comradeship must be developed amongst artists who have been victimised and artists who have decided to protest against these attacks. Therefore I fraternally appeal that your readers to not regard this as something just facing a Sri Lankan artist but a common problem involving the democratic rights of all. I appeal to the progressive thoughtful masses to stand up for *Pura Handa Kaluwara*. Life cannot be appreciated without man's conflict against external forces that appear to be stronger. Though it may be difficult, this task must be faced up to.

Letters of protest should be mailed or faxed to:

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