

Letters protesting government ban on Sri Lankan film

17 October 2000

We reprint below a selection of letters sent to the Sri Lankan government protesting its decision last July to ban *Pura Handa Kaluwara* (*Death on a Full Moon Day*), the internationally acclaimed film written and directed by Prasanna Vithanage. It is the first Sri Lankan film to be banned under the government's emergency laws, which were promulgated in May following its military debacle on the Jaffna peninsula.

Pura Handa Kaluwara, which won the Best Asian Actor award at last year's Singapore International Film Festival, is a powerful drama about the impact of the 17-year war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) on a blind poverty-stricken Sinhala villager. The film has already been shown in Bangladesh, India, Canada, France, Norway, Switzerland, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Britain, Australia and the US.

The Peoples Alliance government, which approved release of Vithanage's film last March, reversed this decision under its emergency laws, declaring that the film could not be shown because of the "war situation". The military and right-wing Sinhala extremist groups say that the film will hamper the recruitment of rural youth into the army.

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on all filmmakers, artists, students and workers, nationally and internationally, to oppose the ban. Letters of protest should mailed or faxed to:

Sarath Amunugama, Minister of Rehabilitation, Reconstruction and Development of North No. 14, Fourth Floor BOI Building Sir Baron Jayathilake Mawatha Colombo 01 Sri Lanka Fax: 94-1-424109

Thissa Abeysekara National Film Corporation of Sri Lanka 224 Bauddhaloka Mawatha Colombo 07 Sri Lanka Fax: 94-1-585526

Please send copies of all statements and letters of protest to the WSWS at editor@wsws.org

Dear Thissa Abeysekara,

I am writing to add my voice to the multitude of people from around the world who are protesting the censorship of Prasanna Vithanage's brilliant *Pura Handa Kaluwara* in Sri Lanka's commercial theatres.

As an American film programmer, I have scheduled this outstanding film in the Asian Pacific Film Festival in Los Angeles; Hawaii International Film Festival; the Palm Springs International Film Festival and taken it on tour throughout the United States, particularly on college campuses. The thousands of Americans who saw *Death on a Full Moon Day* recognised the genius of a young Sri Lankan filmmaker, as well as a beautiful story with characters who remain with intensity inside our collective memory. Everywhere the film was screened in America, it has been received positively.

It is common sense that Sri Lankans can appreciate even more than the rest of the world the amazing talents of Prasanna Vithanage as a storyteller through cinema.

Why should Sri Lanka people be robbed of seeing their Native Son's work?

Why are Sri Lankans losing the opportunity to see an exquisite film that the rest of the world is heralding?

Why should Sri Lankans be treated as less equal than the rest of us in the world by the censorship actions of their government?

I urge you, in the name of the arts, humanities and justice, to reconsider your decision and allow this masterpiece to be screened in Sri Lanka.

Sincerely,

Jeannette Paulson Hereniko

Director

Asia Pacific Media Center

University of Southern California, Los Angeles

Founding Director, Hawaii International Film Festival

Thissa Abeysekara National Film Corporation of Sri

Lanka,

I am writing this to support unequivocally the worldwide campaign launched by the *World Socialist Web Site* against the banning of *Pura Handa Kaluwara*, the anti-war film directed by Sri Lankan film artist, Prasanna Vithanage. This ban comes after the Hindu extremist attacks on Indian filmmaker, Deepa Mehta.

The alarming increase in attacks by the so-called democratic states, as well as by extremist political groups, on art and artists are the clear signs of a fascistic threat that could engulf the entire world. That is the reason why these state-sponsored attacks on individual artists, and the threats to art in general, should be condemned and defeated.

In the case of Prasanna Vithanage's internationally acclaimed film, the State Film Corporation has not only deprived the individual artist but also destroyed the right of art to be free from all restrictions. It should be stated in no uncertain terms that the states and their representatives have no right to determine "what is art" and "what artists should create".

The banning of *Pura Handa Kaluwara* is not only a threat to the freedom of art but also a gross violation of the basic right of the public in Sri Lanka to enjoy works of art.

I condemn in strongest possible words this fascistic act by the Sri Lanka government and urge all those concerned with the freedom of art to support the campaign launched by the *World Socialist Web Site*.

Professor M.G.A. Cooray

Department of History and Political Science
University of Colombo
Sri Lanka

For many of us who have seen Prasanna Vithanage's *Death on A Full Moon Day*, it's clear that the director's world view is a humanist as opposed to a political one. As in our experience of life, what is normally forgotten is the human tragedy, which only gets mentioned as a statistic. Vithanage's film brings home that statistic as a human feeling.

Philip Cheah
Festival Director
Singapore International Film Festival

Sarath Amunugama Ministry of Rehabilitation,
Reconstruction and Development in the Northern
Province

Sir,

I vehemently oppose the banning of *Therafilm Handa Kaluwara* as a violation of the fundamental human rights of director Prasanna Vithanage. I also perceive it as a threat against genuine artists, to discourage them from using matters of state, including the racist war, as themes in their work.

Everybody knows how the BJP, the ruling party of neighbouring India, sabotaged the production of the film *Water* by Deepa Mehta. Now we experience the same with your Peoples Alliance government. There is no doubt that this could be the first of a series of attacks by the PA against genuine artists. As a person deeply involved in the field of art, I reiterate my opposition your decision to ban the film *Pura Handa Kaluwara*.

On the other hand, Prasanna Vithanage's creation is not for you but for all those who appreciate works of art. I insist that you release the film immediately, for their sake.

Darshana Medis Poet/Critic



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact