

## Film Review

# Saroja: a distortion of the racist war in Sri Lanka

Darshana Medis  
13 October 2000

*Saroja*, written and directed by Somaratne Dissanayake and now screening in cinemas across Sri Lanka, has been widely applauded by critics and the local mass media. One reason for the praise is that the film has won several international awards: the NETPAC (Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema) award at this year's Dhaka International Film Festival in Bangladesh and a bronze award in the first feature section of Houston's Worldfest Festival. It was also screened this year at the Singapore International Film Festival.

Prior to *Saroja*, Dissanayake produced several interesting stage plays, among them the 1988 political satire, *Mee Pura Wesio* (Rat Citizens), and a television drama, *Iti Pahan* (Candle Lamps), in the mid 1990s. While these works revealed that the young director had some talent, *Saroja*, Dissanayake's first film, is seriously flawed.

The film is set in a village somewhere in Sri Lanka's North and East provinces amidst fierce fighting between the Sri Lankan armed forces and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Sundaram (Mervin Maheshan), a Tamil villager, is ordered by the LTTE to join its army and begin guerilla training. Having already lost his 14-year-old son, who was forcibly conscripted into the Tamil Tigers and then killed in fighting, Sundaram disobeys the LTTE's orders. As punishment, the LTTE murders his wife and torches their house.

Although Sundaram and his seven-year-old daughter Sarojini (Nithyavani Kandaswami) escape, he is badly wounded and the two are trapped in the jungle, between the LTTE and government forces. Anxious to save Sarojini, Sundaram persuades her to leave him and head towards a nearby Sinhala village. Before she reaches the village, however, Sarojini meets Varuni (Pramudi Karunaratne), a Sinhala girl of the same age and the

daughter of Punchibanda (Janaka Kumbukage), a local schoolteacher. Although unable to speak each other's language, a strong bond of friendship develops between the two girls and after a day or two Varuni persuades her father to allow Sarojini and the wounded Sundaram to stay at their home.

Sundaram's wounds, however, deteriorate and he is taken to hospital where his true identity is eventually discovered. He is taken into custody and put on trial for being a member of the LTTE. Although Sundaram is acquitted, some local villagers distrust Punchibanda for sheltering a Tamil and demand that he be transferred to a remote village. During a farewell gathering for the teacher at the school, Sundaram is shot by an unidentified gunman on a motorbike. The film concludes with Punchibanda and his wife adopting Sarojini.

According to most reviews *Saroja* is a symbolic call for ethnic harmony. Sunil Ariyaratna, a well-known Sri Lankan film director and critic, declared: "Although there are several artistic creations about the ethnic crisis most of them are false, fashionable creations. The distinguishing feature of *Saroja* is the sincerity and humanity of the creator."

Although the film shows some concern about the impact of the conflict on ordinary people and a genuine sincerity for the Tamil community, it uncritically embraces and bolsters most of the official justifications for the Sri Lankan government's 17-year racist war against the Tamils.

Much of *Saroja* is simply unbelievable and gives the impression that it was constructed to fit a pre-determined framework that matches up with Dissanayake's confused partialities and political bias. For example: A sympathetic Sri Lankan soldier in the midst of fierce fighting allows Sundaram (who is dressed in military uniform and armed)

and his daughter to escape from the battlefield. Sundaram tells his daughter to approach the Sinhala village because “a little kid won't be mistreated”. All the Sri Lankan army officers are exceedingly polite and display no animosity toward the Tamils. The judiciary miraculously acquits Sundaram and only lightly fines the schoolteacher for harbouring a former LTTE member. The local police maintain a very friendly attitude towards the acquitted Sundaram.

What is the reality? Hundreds of schools and houses in the North and East have been shelled or bombed by the Sri Lankan armed forces, resulting in the deaths of thousands of Tamil men, women and children. Sri Lankan soldiers have raped Tamil girls and hundreds of Tamils languish for years in southern remand prison hellholes, demanding, “Put us on trial if there are any charges, or else release us!”

Dissanayake portrays the majority of Sinhala villagers as stupid and possessed by communalism, and therefore co-respondents in the ethnic discord. This is symbolised by the behavior of Sirisena, a local villager, and his followers, who publicly threaten Tamils in the village.

While middle class, lumpen and fascistic elements in urban and rural areas in the South express these attitudes, the reality in border villages is not so clear-cut. Anti-war sentiment is common among those sandwiched between the ruthless attacks of the LTTE and the repressive measures of the Sri Lankan forces. Many caught in the crossfire yearn for a revival of the bygone cordiality with neighboring Tamil communities.

It may appear that *Saroja's* main protagonists are Sarojini and Varuni. After all, the film centres on a warm and unaffected friendship between two Tamil and Sinhalese girls, well portrayed by Nithyavani Kandaswami and Pramudi Karunaratne. This is certainly what the producers and promoters hoped to convey, advertising the film as a “warm-hearted story about children in war-torn Sri Lanka”. But the dominant character, or at least the central ideological and political figure in the film, is Punchibanda, the schoolteacher, who believes that the Tamil Tigers are entirely responsible for disrupting Sinhala-Tamil harmony and the terrible situation confronting the villagers.

The schoolmaster is not an extreme racist and is bold enough to bring Sarojini and Sundaram home. He opposes those villagers who call for the elimination of the Tamil minority. In one scene he refers to King Dutugemunu [1] and tells the children in his class that anyone who calls for the elimination of Tamils is a fascist.

But this humane outlook, and the genuine and unaffected friendship of the two girls is used to provide sugar-coating to the film's underlying message—that Sinhala-Tamil disharmony has been created by the brutal activities of the LTTE and that the Sri Lankan army is fighting a just war against terrorism, which somehow will create the conditions for Tamil and Sinhalese unity.

Sri Lanka's Minister of Education has praised *Saroja* and declared that it should be viewed by all school children. This government patronage has ensured that the film is still screening in Sri Lankan cinemas, six months after its release.

By contrast, Prasanna Vithanage's *Pura Handa Kaluwara* (Death on a Full Moon Day), a moving and artistically convincing portrait of the impact of the war on a Sinhalese villager, is banned because the government believes it is detrimental to army recruitment.

The ruling elite has no such concern about Dissanayake's film.

Note:

[1] According to *Mahawamsa*, an ancient history of Sri Lanka, King Dutugemunu, a Sinhala monarch who ruled from 101-77 BC, saved the Sinhalese and Buddhism from the Tamils by killing Elara, a Tamil king, and slaughtering thousands of Tamils in battle. Although the conflict was dynastic and not racial in character, the story is part of Sri Lanka's official school curriculum.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**