

# A look at rural life in British Ceylon

## Sudu Sevaneli, directed by Sunil Ariyaratne

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*Sudu Sevaneli* (White Shadows), a historical drama directed by Sunil Ariyaratne and based on Piyadasa Welikannage's award winning novel of the same name, was recently screened at the Fukuoka International Film Festival in Japan.

Ariyaratne's film is set in mid-19th century British Ceylon against the backdrop of the Matale Karalle peasant-based rebellion and its aftermath. The revolt, which was directed against British land-grabbing policies and repressive taxes, erupted in Sri Lanka's central province in July 1848. The short-lived rebellion, which called for an end to colonial rule and a return of the local feudal monarchy, was brutally crushed by British forces. Up to 200 peasants were killed and many more arrested and imprisoned.

Sudubanda (Roshan Pilapitiya), the film's chief protagonist, is a Buddhist priest who joins the uprising. Following its defeat he flees to Colombo and becomes an apprentice carpenter. After nine years he decides to return home and establish a workshop. On arrival, he discovers his family in disarray. His mother is not well and appears to have become insane. Her house is disintegrating and Sudubanda's brother Heenbanda (Linton Semage) has been jailed for murdering the Korale (local administrators appointed by the British). Heenbanda's wife, Podi Menike (Wasanthi Chaturani), and her son and daughter are living a hand-to-mouth existence in their village.

Sudubanda, who is an efficient and skilled tradesman, repairs his mother's house and with hard work provides for the whole family. One day he and Menike visit Heenbanda in prison. During the visit, Heenbanda gives permission for his beautiful wife to live with Sudubanda. Until recently, two brothers living together with a single wife was an accepted marriage custom in Sri Lanka's central hill area. The practice, known as *eka gei kema*, was not uncommon among the landed gentry and used to ensure property remained within the family.

On the way back home, Menike and Sudubanda reveal their affection for each other and begin living together. Construction of a Christian church and school in the area provides work for Sudubanda. He establishes friendly relations with the local priest and gives permission for Menike's son to attend the church school.

Several years later, on the 30th anniversary of Queen Victoria's rule, Heenbanda is given a state pardon and released

from jail. Although his return home should be an occasion for celebration, he feels like an outsider. His wife is pregnant to Sudubanda, Heenbanda feels alienated from his children and Christian missionaries are educating his only son. He is angry, confused and disappointed.

Sudubanda is also thrown off balance. He becomes dissatisfied with the new arrangements in the family home and visits a former fiancé, hoping to renew their old relationship, only to learn that she is already married.

Meanwhile, Menike gives birth, but the child is stillborn. In fact, the baby died because of Heenbanda's drunken sexual abuse of his wife in the last weeks of her pregnancy. This tragic loss is another blow to Sudubanda, who has neglected his carpentry business and is losing customers. *Sudu Sevaneli* concludes with the infant's funeral.

*Sudu Sevaneli* is a serious work and the first film in 12 years by director Ariyaratne, a University of Sri Jayawardanepura senior lecturer, well-known lyricist, and literature and music researcher. It is important, however, to examine whether he has done justice to the film's central historical themes—the rebellion and the complex social changes that followed in its wake.

Britain took control of Ceylon in 1815 and used the existing feudal relations to profit from the country's cheap labour and raw materials. In the 1840s, however, the colonial administration began introducing new methods of exploitation.

Legal ownership of land (rather than verbal transfer agreements), the sale of "wasteland" and other measures were introduced to allow acquisition of land for the developing coffee, tea and rubber plantation industry. This further weakened the feudal landlords and impacted heavily on the Buddhist hierarchy, which had large tracts of land, and the peasantry. In 1848, following a collapse of international coffee and cinnamon prices, the colonial government imposed direct taxes on a range of items, including roads, shops, guns, carts and livestock.

The social deprivations created by these measures gave rise to the Matale Karalle rebellion, which erupted in the central districts of Kandy, Matale and Kurunegala.

Although the rebellion leaders—Puran Appu and Gongale Godabanda—were not members of the feudal elite in Kandy,

capital of Sri Lanka's last kingdom, they reflected its political aspirations. The Buddhist clergy gave them monarchical status and local monks joined the movement. The rebels attacked government buildings, destroying tax records, and in late July 1848 prepared to recapture Kandy from the British.

Viscount Torrington, the British governor of Ceylon, declared marshal law and the revolt was suppressed by British forces within a few weeks, opening the way for an even broader expansion of large-scale plantations and a transformation in social relations throughout the entire country. While the peasantry and elements of the embryonic working class supported the revolt, the anti-colonial movement could not be advanced through a program that called for a return to feudal social relations.

*Sudu Sevaneli* effectively portrays the limited methods and perspective of the rebels and the changes in social life after the revolt. In fact, the character of Sudubanda vividly encapsulates this change. From Buddhist monk to carpenter and then workshop owner, he symbolises a new generation: independent from inherited property and the old feudal relations and unwilling to submit to the local Korale.

When reminded that his carpentry shop is on the Korale's land, Sudubanda declares that he will establish his own place. Nor does he want to live with his brother's wife unless it is a genuinely loving and free relationship. When Heenbanda is released from prison, Sudubanda attempts to establish a new married life of his own.

Sudubanda, however, is a contradictory character, sandwiched between the values of the old feudal system and the new economic relations. The new social order has provided him with a liberal outlook but his previous training as a Buddhist monk and the consequent renunciation of earthly pleasures, tends to constrain him emotionally.

Ariyaratne attempts to demonstrate that the missionary education alienated children from their parents and other family members. But this approach is one-sided. It also leaves the door open for an accommodation to backward looking nationalist elements that hanker for a return to the old lifestyle and the so-called superior, moralistic Sinhala-Buddhist culture.

British rule was brutal, but the plantation economy was accompanied by limited infrastructure development, including the construction of roads, which began to breakdown Ceylon's regional isolation. Although these changes were arbitrarily and ruthlessly imposed on the poverty-stricken masses, they set in motion a transformation that undermined the backward feudal family relations and created the conditions for a relatively enlightened lifestyle among sections of the local population. The missionary education, which was introduced a few decades before the revolt, also contributed to this transformation.

In the novel, Heenbanda and Menike have two sons studying at the mission school. One becomes a civil servant and the other a Christian priest. While Heenbanda is happy to see his children learning English and enjoying English culture, he feels

separated from them. Ariyaratne, unfortunately, only shows Heenbanda's suffering. This does not ring true and is further compounded by the director's decision to omit the civil servant son from the movie.

In the original story, this boy helps to expose the essential role of the colonial education system, which was to produce an educated English-speaking layer to run the British-controlled administration. Children unable to go on to higher education were absorbed into the government sectors as postmasters, stationmasters, clerks and other white-collar jobs.

*Sudu Sevaneli*, however, only shows children learning the bible. But missionary schools taught a range of subjects—English, Mathematics, Latin, Literature, History, Geography and Music—exposing sections of the population to a wider world outside the old and narrow Buddhist-based education.

According to Ariyaratne, the local population was hoodwinked into attending missionary schools. In fact, the newly emerging native bourgeoisie took advantage of this new education system and voluntarily enrolled their children in the mission schools.

Visually *Sudu Sevaneli* is limited. Filmed in cinemascope, the full potential of the medium is not realised and the sets and costumes fail to accurately represent the period.

Despite these weaknesses, Ariyaratne's film has many compelling moments with strong performances from the leading actors. The relationship between the grandmother and the little boy, Heenbanda's remorse over the death of the child and the meeting between Sudubanda and his former fiancé are beautifully portrayed.

Sudubanda and Menike's complex relationship is also effective and convincing, as is the dramatisation of Heenbanda's difficulties and frustrations. One scene after Heenbanda's return home and his rough sexual treatment of Menike is particularly poignant. Sudubanda comforts Menike by applying ointment to her scratched shoulder. While there is little dialogue, this is an extraordinarily sensitive and emotional moment.

Compared to most local films, which rarely deal with historical themes and then only skim the surface, *Sudu Sevaneli* is a serious and occasionally perceptive exploration of 19th century rural life. It signifies a small but healthy improvement in the general standard of Sri Lankan filmmaking.



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