

# The impact of war on daily life in Sri Lanka

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*Ira Mediyama*, written and directed by Prasanna Vithanage

*Ira Mediyama* (August Sun), the fourth and latest feature by Sri Lankan filmmaker Prasanna Vithanage was recently screened in local cinemas. Set in August 1996, against the backdrop of the 20-year civil war between the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan military, the movie has been well received in Sri Lanka and won several international awards.

The name *Ira Mediyama* refers to the hottest time of the year, the season when the sun is at its zenith. Vithanage is clearly using this as a metaphor—that ordinary Sri Lankans, having suffered an estimated 60,000 casualties and over one million people displaced or made homeless, have reached a high point of suffering from the war carried out against the Tamil minority. While the bloody conflict has been in a temporary freeze over the past three years, the current cease-fire agreement has become highly unstable. Increasing political tensions and constant agitation by Sinhala chauvinists threaten the eruption of full-scale war once again.

The film consists of three separate but simultaneously interweaving stories. Although the characters in each separate story “cross paths” as the film progresses there is no direct communication between them. Everything in their lives, however, is determined by the war.

The first story is about a soldier on leave, Dumidu (Namal Jayasingha), who comes to Anuradhapura with two of his friends. A holy city with many ancient Buddhist shrines, Anuradhapura is situated between the northern war zone and the southern part of Sri Lanka, from where the majority of the combatants are recruited to the Sri Lankan army. For soldiers on leave, the holy city has become a place to relieve their harrowing frustrations and the three soldiers maintain this norm by visiting a brothel.

To his amazement Dumidu discovers that his sister Kamani (Nadee Kammallaweera) is a prostitute in the brothel. Enraged, he attacks the young girl who leaves and returns home. Later, having calmed down, he visits her

and gives her a pair of ear-studs. The family home is only half built and Dumidu’s mother depends on her son’s income to complete the house and provide money for his sister’s dowry. The mother, is unaware of the difficulties facing Kamani, who became a prostitute after she lost her factory job.

The second story deals with Chamari (Nimmi Harasgama), the partner of a government air force pilot who was shot down somewhere in the northern battle zone. Chamari believes that he is being held by the LTTE and is desperate to locate him. She approaches a television broadcaster, Saman (Peter de Almeida), who is supposed to have connections with the LTTE and insists that he accompany her on a trip to the north. Chamari’s search, however, is fruitless.

The last story explores the situation facing Islamic communities in the north where the LTTE often evicts Muslim families accused of providing information to the Sri Lankan military. Those accused are given an ultimatum of only 12 hours to leave. This story focuses on a Muslim cloth vendor, Hassan (A. A. Mansoor) and his family, who have been ordered to leave the area. Arafath (Mohamed Rahfulah), Hassan’s small son, is forced to part with his pet, a stray dog.

The villagers are only allowed to take 3,000 rupees (\$US30) in cash but the cloth vendor’s wife (Rajeena Begum) sews a secret pocket to her underskirt to carry the family savings. While she is lucky enough to get through the checkpoint undetected, others are not so fortunate. A woman who hid some money in a transistor radio unwittingly drops it and is pounced upon by the LTTE cadres.

Recent Sri Lankan cinema suffers from a dearth of good scripts dealing with social issues. *Ira Mediyama* is an important exception and thoughtfully highlights the devastation of human relations caused by the war.

As in earlier works, Vithanage focuses on the plight of ordinary people and their struggle to find some joy in their lives. The Muslim mother, for example, who kept a vegetable patch at her previous dwelling, attempts to grow

a plant in a mud pot after she and her family are forced out of their home.

Perhaps one of *Ira Mediyama*'s most moving portraits is of the Muslim boy and his pet. When the family leaves home in a three-wheeler taxi, the dog faithfully follows the vehicle. It is finally left behind when the family takes a motorboat across a vast lagoon. When the little boy begins crying over the loss of the dog, his father scolds him and explains that Muslims do not keep dogs as pets. The young boy, however, is quick to respond to a new friendly dog.

While there are many similarities to *Pura Handa Kaluwara* (Death on a Full Moon Day), Vithanage's previous film, *Ira Mediyama* is a more technically accomplished work. It too evokes strong antiwar feelings. Contrary to government propaganda, which claims that civilians are not targeted, the movie shows that villagers in the war zone are often forced to seek refuge in bomb shelters.

Vithanage is clearly influenced by contemporary Iranian cinema and this is reflected in many different ways, including his expert handling of non-professional actors. The mass exodus of the Muslims is particularly effective. The director also elicits strong performances from the few professional actors in the film. Peter de Almeida and Nimmi Harasgama are excellent. Likewise, editor A. Shreekar Prasad has skillfully interwoven the three plot lines and the film unwinds with great lucidity and no jarring notes. In fact, *Ira Mediyama* has the same classical simplicity apparent in the director's earlier work.

Like *Pura Handa Kaluwara*, Vithanage's latest movie also shows the obvious contradiction between the social reality facing ordinary people and what the religious institutions have to offer—for example, the *seth-pirith* or the religious chanting dished out by the Buddhist institutions for the “welfare of the people”. Shots of dilapidated *chethiyas* (ancient structures where Buddha's relics are enshrined) powerfully symbolise the ideological decay of society. In fact, the illuminated *chethiya* shown in *Ira Mediyama* looks more like a crude commercial spectacle than a religious monument.

Vithanage explores how his protagonists use religion to numb themselves to the tremendous difficulties they face. Chamari, the air force pilot's partner, splits a coconut and prays to a horse statue in the hope that it will bring luck to the search for her beloved. Similarly, when she and Saman visit a church to meet the priest she prays there too.

*Ira Mediyama* also reveals the plight of an old Muslim

woman ordered from her home by the LTTE. When the engine fails in the motorboat on which she is travelling, she immediately prays to Allah. After it restarts she looks to the sky, thankful for “divine intervention,” and a slight smile appears on her upturned face.

Like the central character in *Pura Handa Kaluwara*, who won't accept state compensation for the death of his soldier son because he refuses to believe that he is dead, Chamari refuses to believe her partner is dead. She too, does not believe the authorities and is engaged in a desperate but fruitless search.

Another noticeable similarity with *Pura Handa Kaluwara* is the relaxation of tension mainly toward the end of the movie. Chamari, after reading a newspaper report that may assist her search, decides to embark on another journey to the north to find her partner. The soldier, after visiting his family, is on his way back to the war front; and the Muslim cloth vendor resumes his business in the new location, this time using his bicycle to hawk his wares, while his son has found another pet.

*Ira Mediyama*'s characters, irrespective of the grave challenges they face, are determined to reestablish some peace and stability in their lives. While this central theme—the elemental striving of the masses against all forms of deprivation—is obviously important, Vithanage is unable to go beyond this general truth or provide any deeper insights into the origins of the civil war or why its resumption remains a constant threat to ordinary Sri Lankans. Despite these weaknesses, *Ira Mediyama* is an intelligent and humane film. Its power lies in its sensitive and insightful portraits. It provides yet another indication of the deep-seated popular opposition that exists within Sri Lanka to racialism, militarism and war.



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