

“We need to create some artistic space”

## Vimukthi Jayasundara, Sri Lankan filmmaker, speaks with WSWS

Richard Phillips  
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Sri Lankan director Vimukthi Jayasundara recently visited Australia for screenings of his first feature *The Forsaken Land* (*Sulanga Enu Pinisa*) at the Brisbane International Film Festival. A visually striking and poetic work, the film is set in rural Sri Lanka following the 2002 ceasefire of the 20-year ethnic war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). It won a Certain Regard prize at the 2005 Cannes International Film Festival, the first time a Sri Lankan director has ever won this award.

Jayasundara, who is just 28, studied at the Film and Television Institute in Pune, India between 1998 and 2001 before making *The Land of Silence*, a documentary about the victims of Sri Lanka's civil war. He continued his studies at the Le Fresnoy Art School in France and in 2003 was selected to participate in the Cannes Film Festival Cinefondation's residency program.

*The Forsaken Land*, which the WSWS reviewed in its coverage of 2005 Toronto Film Festival (see “The scars of war”), is one of several local antiwar movies denounced by senior Sri Lankan military officers in September last year.

Rear Admiral Weerasekera on September 4, 2005 published a comment in the *Sunday Times*, declaring that local directors should be making pro-military movies. “If there is a film on war even indirectly contributing towards fulfilling terrorists' objectives willfully, then it amounts to treason and should be dealt with severely,” he declared. A few days later Weerasekera and armed forces spokesman Brigadier Daya Ratnayake told a meeting of filmmakers that they should stop producing antiwar movies and “would have to face the consequences if the war breaks out again”.

Jayasundara spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about these threats and the current difficulties confronting Sri Lankan filmmakers.

Richard Phillips: Could you provide some background on *The Forsaken Land* and why you chose this subject?

Vimukthi Jayasundara: The film is set during the ceasefire in Sri Lanka. While there is no fighting there is an underlying sense in all the characters that they are closer to war than to peace—that fighting can erupt at any time. You feel the presence of the military in the huge flat landscape where it is set and although people attempt to get on with their daily lives their activities are limited and there is a tension and a sense that nothing can ever be right again.

RP: Where and when was it shot?

VJ: In a place called Kalpitya, in the northwest, over a period of 25 days during January 2004. Although it was relatively peaceful at that time, rather than what is happening now, there was a little hope that there would be peace.

It's difficult to explain, but the film is not supposed to be an exact portrait of reality, it's more like a psychological landscape and is slightly unreal. The war is about control of the land and although there is a ceasefire there are many mines in this area which prevent the characters from really accessing this land. This is a symbol for all the problems they face and an example of how they are restricted and cannot plan for the future.

RP: Why did you decide on this approach and what influenced you stylistically?

VJ: I'm not sure how to answer that fully but I wanted to examine how war impacts on people socially and psychologically without showing any military action. Although the characters are Sinhalese, their ethnic origin is irrelevant. In fact, my aim was to create characters that could be from any place so that the film could work on a more abstract level.

As you know, most war movies, even those that are against war, are action films with a certain fascination for the mechanics of war. I deliberately wanted to avoid this approach and create a totally different atmosphere that would force people to think more deeply. I don't know many directors in the world that make movies about war in this way but Andrei Tarkovsky was one of them. His *Ivan's Childhood* [1962] and *Stalker* [1979] were a big influence because they're very psychological films about war but there are no battles.

RP: Can you comment on the Sri Lankan military threats against filmmakers last year?

JV: Although I wasn't at the meeting that was reported in the press I heard all about it. It wasn't an official meeting but was with advertising and film industry people and it seemed to have happened without government knowledge. The funny thing is that President Kumaratunga had been trying to help the film industry and some of the filmmakers at the meeting had been given official Sri Lankan awards for their work. The whole thing was pretty strange.

RP: Rear Admiral Weerasekera's article in the *Sunday Times* was pretty clear though. It was a public threat that filmmakers

should be making pro-military movies or they would be face serious consequences. This is unprecedented.

JV: Yes and its completely wrong. Artists and filmmakers in Sri Lanka don't need any government or military supervisory body to tell them what to do. Our films are concerned about the impact of war on humanity. We don't criticise the military for its tactics or whatever, and they shouldn't come along and tell us what we can or cannot do. If the military wants propaganda war films then it should start its own production company. I'm sure there are people who would be quite willing to help them.

I've never heard of the army in any country, not even Israel, telling directors to make certain movies. Obviously there is always pressure to follow the official line but nothing like this or with a newspaper article from a military leader. Nobody in the civilised world should have to accept this.

Unfortunately there were very few voices speaking out against this and the problem is not just the army. Since then we have had the banning of Handagama's movie *Aksharaya* (*Letter of Fire*), which is not dealing with the war issue at all. (See "Sri Lankan government bans local film *Aksharaya*"). This makes clear that anything critical of the government's authority or that challenges the so-called cultural Buddhist establishment will be banned.

These sorts of problems began with the banning of Prasanna Vithanage's movie *Pura Handa Kaluwara* (Death on a Full Moon Day) and have continued since then. It now seems to have reached another climax with the banning of *Aksharaya*. Some people might have mistakenly felt that the military had some legitimate concerns about antiwar films but it's clear that this is really about freedom of expression for artists and filmmakers.

RP: This obviously makes conditions for Sri Lankan filmmakers extremely difficult.

VJ: Yes. Do you know the films of Dharmasena Pathiraja? He made some very beautiful and important films in Sri Lanka during the 1970s, including Tamil language movies. At that time it was generally accepted that there was something wrong in the North and the East and there were quite a few films made about this situation.

I don't know exactly what happened but sometime in the late 1980s this stopped and there was a big drop in the number of local movies. So my generation was deprived of films that tried to explore the social situation in Sri Lanka. In the 1990s it became possible again to start making movies about some of these issues but this has only lasted for a few years.

RP: Since the release of *The Forsaken Land* the war has resumed. What is the responsibility of filmmakers and artists in this new situation?

VJ: It's difficult and is a bit like 1989, when the government asked artists to shut their mouths. The press is also controlled by the authorities and doesn't write about the real situation in the North and the East. It didn't even properly report on what was happening to Sri Lankans trapped in Lebanon. Essentially the media is against genuine artists in Sri Lanka and so official public opinion is completely controlled.

The government publicly claims that it supports artists who want to see things differently, but this is not true. It doesn't want any criticism of important issues like the war and a range of serious

cultural issues that should be discussed.

If the court decides to ban *Aksharaya*, it will represent a real turning point. On the other hand, if Handagama can win his case and the film is released then it means we can create an artistic space for ourselves and begin fighting to change public attitudes. At the moment there is no space at all.

RP: Have you tried to screen your film in the North and East?

VJ: No, it's too difficult at this stage. I know that there are filmmakers in Sri Lanka who have gone to the North and shown their films but there are many problems. The LTTE are not very helpful or supportive and most Tamils tend to watch Bollywood movies. There is a different movie culture. This is frustrating, of course, because every filmmaker wants to reach the widest audiences.

RP: What was the response to your film in Sri Lanka?

VJ: The film screened for two weeks but we decided to withdraw it because of what had happened with the military and various threats that were made against us. The movie was released during the presidential election campaign, which I thought would be a good time, but it was a mistake.

A few weeks earlier, when we won the award at Cannes, the media and others had hailed us but this changed during the election and we were suddenly presented as the worst people in the country. Pressure was placed on cinema owners and some of them who were screening the movie began making their own cuts to the film. There were also a lot of threats—I received some and so did the producer, distributor and some of the actors. It was a bad situation and so we decided to withdraw the film in order to highlight what was going on and to provoke discussion.

RP: And your next project?

VJ: I haven't decided yet because I want to see what happens in Sri Lanka. I've only made one feature film and so I have to keep making movies. I may do something in India if the war in Sri Lanka stops me from immediately working there. Making films in Sri Lanka, as you know, is not that easy. You can't make movies like some sort of guerrilla action project. Public support is needed. I want to be able to create and extend the artistic space that we need to make serious films in Sri Lanka.



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