Before the Rains: Hazarding the deeper waters of colonialism

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Directed by Santosh Sivan, screenplay by Cathy Rabin, based on the film *Red Roofs* by Dan Verete

Before the Rains, directed by Indian filmmaker Santosh Sivan, follows the doomed path of an English spice baron in the latter days of British rule in India. Sivan (*The Terrorist*, 1999), a well-known cinematographer who has worked on the films of famed Indian director Mani Rathnam and others, locates his new movie in 1937 in tropical Kerala on the Malabar Coast of southwestern India.

Against a backdrop of growing political turmoil, Henry Moores (Linus Roache) plans to strike it rich by establishing a spice plantation. Failure, for a host of pressing personal reasons, is not an option for him. The endeavor depends on the construction of a new road through lush, hilly terrain before the onset of the monsoon season. He secures financing from British bankers based on the assumption that this can be accomplished.

For manpower, the sahib relies on his trusted foreman, T.K. (Rahul Bose), to corral and control the local villagers. T.K. is a young Indian who believes that collaborating with the British is the way forward for himself and his country, despite the opposition of his parents and the anti-British sentiment increasingly gripping his peers.

Henry is also conducting a dangerous love affair with his housemaid, the fiery and beautiful Sajani (Nandita Das), a married woman with a brutish husband. She is risking life and honor for Henry, who in turn promises they will be together. For his part, he is transgressing against class and community. With much at stake, their trysts take place in a forbidden territory. Nonetheless, on one occasion, they are detected by two boys from the village.

When Henry's wife Laura (Jennifer Ehle) returns with their son from a sojourn in England, the unhappy Sajani is reassured by Henry that he loves her. So when her husband beats her to learn the identity of her lover, Sajani escapes and runs to Henry. Tragically, she gets a fatal lesson in the nature of his commitment, for beneath his pleasant and fair-minded surface lies something else: selfish class and personal interest. T.K. too learns the hard way about the ambition of his patron. But time, place—and weather—are turning against the colonialist.

Filmed on location, *Before the Rains* is beautiful to watch and skillfully employs the talents of its cast. It is a humane piece. One of the production companies associated with Sivan's film, Merchant Ivory Productions, founded by director James Ivory and the late producer Ismail Merchant, is renowned for its intelligent, literate English-language films often set in India.

Sivan intends the relationships between the characters to be a metaphor "for the promise—and tragic flaw—of British Colonialism." He says that although his protagonists "fight to straddle the great cultural divide, they ultimately suffer for their attempts."

The characters' illusions about a British-Indian "partnership" dominate their interactions and result in their destruction. This is a legitimate theme and well worth exploring. The world has hardly seen the last of imperialism and colonialism in a variety of forms, as well as the illusions and opportunism within colonialized populations. Whether or not the filmmaker had Iraq and Afghanistan in mind, for example, they will inevitably occur to the spectator.

Unfortunately, the treatment here is rather formulaic and predictable. From the moment that Henry makes T.K. the gift of a pistol, it is clear that the weapon will play a part in the tragedy to come. When the spectator sees Henry take Sajani in his arms, disaster is in the air. At the moment the two village boys discover the lovers, the film's denouement is telegraphed. This does not, however, fully explain why the movie operates on a single plane, hovering just above the melodramatic—or why its

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internal combustion engine is weak.

The director states that the work encompasses "hope for T.K.'s independence and the independence of his people." But much water has flown under the bridge since 1937 and the project of Indian independence from British rule has not resolved any of the fundamental social problems. Present-day bourgeois India is a nightmare for the vast majority of its population. It's very difficult to sidestep this issue. Or if it is avoided at the level of the artist's *conscious* functioning, it comes in the back door in the shape of a formally and dramatically coherent work that lacks enormous purpose or commitment.

Sivan may think—or hope—that because the film's timeframe is solidly in the past, present-day reality won't make its presence felt. It will and does.

Social and artistic impulse is critical. Under what social impetus is a particular work being carried out? *Before the Rains* is burdened by the director's ambivalent or limited attitude toward the current political and social circumstances in India. One can't speak deeply or richly about past events in a work of art, *especially in a case like this*, without working through one's view of the consequences in the present of those events.

The failure to do that diminishes what Sivan is trying to accomplish in the psychological and emotional sphere. It deadens the atmosphere. For all its beauty, the film is marred by an inherent lack of dynamism. Even as the action heats up, it generates inadequate energy to propel itself forward.

The past also has its say, but not to the movie's advantage. Sivan says: "When our producer Doug Mankoff showed me the Israeli short film *Red Roofs* [the inspiration for *Before the Rains*], I was struck by how timeless and universal the story was. My fascination with the story was that it could happen to anyone, anywhere at any time. I like the collision of cultures and the shifting points of view in the film, along with the fact that the characters were so complex, since I'm always interested in exploring grey shades of people, not just black and white."

But a "timeless" story is not one that can precisely enough bring out the complexities and subtleties of human behavior. Human beings don't operate outside time; even the most enduring elements in human life (birth, love, sex, death) take place under specific social and historical conditions, and the forms in which they occur are qualitatively influenced by those.

It is only in the context of those concrete conditions that the intricacies of thoughts and feelings, their specificity, break through the limits of a universal "black and white" consciousness and reveal the "greys." While Sivan does present scenes that depict a Gandhi-like figure and non-violent protests against the British, these are slight and a mere background for his exploration of the colonial mindset. This approach further erodes the film's tension. A false urgency tends to fill gaps in the drama.

The choice of the year 1937 is also curious. To be sure, it was a pivotal year in the struggle for Indian independence and the twilight of empire and the Raj. But in fact, by that time, the Indian National Congress's campaign of mass civil disobedience was collapsing under the weight of British repression and Congress's internecine disagreements. Huge struggles of workers and peasants and the beginnings of movements for political and social change were emerging in princely states such as modern-day Kerala.

The Stalinist Communist Party, which would assume enormous importance in Kerala, was officially founded in the region in 1937. The political insurgency in the late 1930s continued through the world war into independence and the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947.

To end a film in 2008 with imagery that expresses an unqualified endorsement of independence is at best misleading. The 1947 partition of the Indian subcontinent was one of the great tragedies of the twentieth century—a tragedy that resulted in the deaths of 2 million people, rendered 14 million homeless and has led to a decades-long rivalry that has already produced three wars and continuously threatens new ones.

Without question, British imperialism, with its strategy of divide and rule, was responsible for inciting communal animosity in South Asia. But the partition was proposed and implemented by the Indian National Congress and Muslim League leaders—the political representatives of the South Asian bourgeoisie—who combined to abort the anti-imperialist struggle.

Simply ignoring this reality, which has so much to do with the present dilemma of the Indian masses *and* the crisis of Indian cultural life, has artistic consequences and weakens a generally admirable and worthy investigation.

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