

Sri Lankan artists discuss COVID-19 and its impact on their creative work, living conditions

Wasantha Rupasinghe
20 November 2020

COVID-19 infections are spiralling out of control across Sri Lanka with more than 19,000 infections and 73 deaths, most of them since early October. Like its international counterparts, the Sri Lankan government has not taken any serious measure to contain the virus and is blaming the population for the spread of COVID-19.

The refusal of President Gotabhaya Rajapakse's government to overhaul and boost the health service is creating a disaster with hundreds of thousands workers, including those in the so-called "unorganised" sector, deprived of their jobs and not provided adequate social relief.

One of the sectors criminally abandoned by the Colombo government is art and culture. Musical performances, theatre, film and teledrama production, book exhibitions and similar activities have almost entirely come to a halt. Thousands of artists and creative workers employed in these activities are without income and many have become destitute.

Notoriously, even in "normal periods," capitalist governments have little regard for serious art and cultural works. They are hostile toward artists brave enough to question or challenge the official lies and false narratives. The callous attitude of the Sri Lankan ruling elite is reflected in part by the fact there are no proper statistics on how many people even work in the country's artistic and creative sectors.

Although there are various guilds, these organisations only have several hundred members each and limited financial resources.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with creative workers from the music, theatre and teledrama sector who explained that the government had failed to

provide adequate financial support and in some cases just given meagre famine rations.

Kapila Kumara Kalinga is a well-known veteran author, theatre director, lyricist and teledrama scriptwriter. His works, including his latest play *Banku Weeraya* (*Bank Hero*), have received awards at literature and drama festivals such as the State Drama Festival.

Kalinga endorsed the WSWs's characterisation of the pandemic as a "trigger event" that had escalated the social, economic and political crises of the capitalist system.

"The issues that have emerged in the field of art and culture were there even before the pandemic hit. The coronavirus has aggravated them," he said.

"The creation of artistic work in Sri Lanka has been forced to stop because of the pandemic. Tens of thousands of workers, including actors, makeup artists, as well as 'tea boys'—involved in setting up film and television sets—and drivers, have lost their livelihoods.

"Most of those involved in creative art work do not have adequate bank savings. I was forced to end the staging of my most recent drama *Banku Weeraya* due to the current disastrous conditions.

"Normally, a drama actor receives a pittance of about 5,000 to 10,000 rupees [\$US27 to \$US54] for each show. Accordingly, they get about 20,000 to 40,000 rupees if there are four shows a month. Most actors are totally dependent on this, so when a drama is not produced they don't receive any money.

"These artists are attempting to maintain themselves through the government's 5,000-rupee [\$27] subsidy," Kalinga said, a reference to the miserly financial compensation provided to families living below the

poverty line. “And because many artists do not have other jobs, they have become destitute. Consider a makeup artist for example. They can’t do anything else and there are no other jobs?”

“Several months ago, the government boasted that artists and actors would be given a 500,000-rupee [\$2,702] loan, but this was just so the government could pretend it was concerned about artists. All of the banks, with the exception of one state bank, refused to provide the loans.

“Many veteran artists are over 60 years old. When they apply for a loan, three people, including one from the applicant’s home has to sign as guarantors. Even in ordinary periods, most people are reluctant to be loan guarantors. Moreover, many people don’t even apply for loans because of the difficulties providing the documents asked by the bank.

“The prevailing uncertain situation has had a huge mental impact on artists and actors,” Kalinga said.

“I’ve been forced to be very cautious about spending my savings during the past period. The pandemic have also forced people to cut their expenses and so I’m not receiving income from sales of my books [novels, short stories and other written works]. The tragic situation now facing artists and actors is not separate in any way from that of working people and I realise that this situation is not limited to this island,” he said.

Malaka Devapriya is an award-winning filmmaker, stage director and radio playwright. His most recent movie, *Bahuchithawadiya (The Undecided)*, has been screened at several international film festivals and won Special Jury award for Best Direction at the 8th South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation Film Festival in 2018.

Devapriya said the state should be responsible not just for defending and protecting artists from the COVID-19 tragedy, but the entire mass of people. If it is unable to do so, he added, then why it is ruling?

“From the distant past, long before the coronavirus pandemic hit, there has been a deep crisis in the field of art in Sri Lanka. It has only been intensified by the pandemic. Artists have been facing major difficulties for years, particularly in areas such as securing the financial facilities for new creations and in screening their already-produced works.

“Those engaged in stage, radio plays, teledramas and film sectors can be termed workers and the only

livelihood of most of them is in the fields they’re engaged in. They don’t have any bank savings.

“The stoppage of artistic productions means that most of my friends have become ‘helpless’ and are fighting to make the daily ends meet. Some ask me for loans, but I also don’t have an income to help them. Many have pawned their jewellery.

“The financial difficulties have become so unbearable that one of my friends in this field even had to sell his library to try and survive. The only wealth of some of my friends is in the art works that they have created. A drama, however, is not like another commodity and so during this period you can’t earn any money by selling a film or teledrama script.

“The government is concealing the real disastrous nature of the pandemic from the people,” Devapriya continued.

“On the one hand, it is promoting black magic and other superstitious things, like spraying *pirith pan* [holy water prepared by chanting Buddhist recitals], in the name of fighting the COVID-19. On the other hand, the government is attempting to silence the artists and intellectuals who clarify the world against such myths through threats.”

Devapriya voiced his agreement with the *World Socialist Web Site*’s analysis of the pandemic, which was confronting workers in every country and that historic issues in the field of art and culture could only be solved through the building up of an independent political movement of the working class.



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