

Gaadi: Caste oppression in pre-colonial Sri Lanka

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Gaadi, Sri Lankan filmmaker Prasanna Vithanage's ninth feature, was finally released in Colombo early this year and then screened in cinemas across the country. The film had been shown two and three years earlier at various international film festivals, winning awards in Dhaka, Chennai and at Brisbane's Asia-Pacific Screen Festival, but its Sri Lankan release was delayed by COVID-19.

Written and directed by Vithanage, *Gaadi* is set during the last year of the feudal Kandy kingdom in the early nineteenth century as British colonialism made its final effort to take control of the entire island.

The 103-minute movie explores the brutality of caste oppression, centring on a complex relationship between Vijayaa (Sajitha Anthony), a member of the Gaadi caste, and Tikiri (Dinara Punchihewa), a young woman from the ruling Kandy aristocracy. Although Tikiri has very little dialogue Punchihewa's depiction is convincing and portrayed through subtle facial expressions and body language.

The Gaadi were the lowest caste in Kandyan society, the feudal kingdom that emerged in the early 15th century and which came to dominate the central and eastern interior of the island.

Gaadi, which means "Children of the Sun," held a similar social position to the Dalits or the "untouchables" in Hindu India. According to ethnographic records, the Gaadi worshiped the goddess "Ratnawalli" and Vithanage's use of their dialect, music and dancing provides the film with important allure and authenticity.

The Kandy aristocracy and other upper castes referred to the Gaadi as Rodiya (Refused) and subjected them to harsh discrimination. Gaadi caste members, who were banned from growing crops or drawing water from public wells, survived by hunting, forest foraging and begging. Strict caste laws demanded, among other things, that the Gaadi, men and women alike, should not wear any clothing above their waists.

The movie begins with Sinhalese noblemen Ehelepola Adigara (Ravindra Randeniya) and Bulathgama Dissave (Shyam Fernando) conspiring with British emissary John D'Oyly (Mohamed Adamaly) to depose Sri Wikrama Rajasingha, the then Kandy king who was of south Indian origin. D'Oyly claims that he is only interested in expanding trade and pledges to support Ehelepola as the new king.

The plot fails, however, and the scheming noblemen go into hiding. The king orders severe punishment of the wives of the plotting noblemen. This includes Tikiri, Bulathgama Dissave's teenage wife. Under feudal law, these women can only "preserve their honour" by publicly committing suicide. If they fail to do so they must become wives of Gaadi men.

In one of *Gaadi*'s most emotionally powerful scenes, the victimised high-caste women, each wearing red-flower garlands and a huge stone tied around their necks, are lined up on a pier jutting out into a river. One by one and beginning with the oldest, they drop into the deep water and disappear, their red garlands slowly bubbling to the surface.

Tikiri, the last in line, walks to the edge but then turns back, refusing to jump. This is a signal to a group of young Gaadi men who have been forewarned by feudal authorities to assemble on the other side of the river. Knowing that the first Gaadi man to get to the teenage girl can marry her, they furiously swim across. Vijayaa is the first to reach the other side and claims her.

Vithanage's film then focuses its attention on the social complexities confronting the two protagonists as they attempt to deal with their own pre-conceptions of each other and the harsh realities of life for the Gaadi and other lower castes.

Tikiri's refusal to commit suicide is a courageous act, challenging this brutal convention and by implication other feudal codes, including the treatment of women like

chattel slaves. The young woman cannot, however, shake off her own aristocratic upbringing and its ingrained caste prejudices. She repulses all Vijayaa's overtures, resisting any suggestion that she is now his wife, and rejecting other Gaadi social codes.

Tikiri's resistance creates tensions within the clan, which now faces more repression from other sections of the nobility. Vijayaa is transfixed with the beautiful young woman but decides that they must leave, assuring the clan leader that he will rejoin only after he has convinced her to accept Gaadi traditions.

What follows is a series of interweaving episodes as the penniless Vijayaa and Tikiri, at odds with the customs of their respective castes, attempt to survive in the wilds and find somewhere safe.

Notwithstanding his physical strength and energy, Vijayaa is a gentle young man with a poetic sensibility. He protects her from the natural hazards of the jungle while providing food, clothing and shelter. In a fireside night scene, he dances and sings a Ratnawalliye poem as she lies listening inside a temporary hut that he constructed for her. The song refers to Tikiri as a goddess and calls on her to "descend from the tree" of caste prejudices.

The couple initially interact with a poor and badly injured farmer who agrees to pay Vijayaa to catch wild buffalo but this hopeful prospect fails after they are later attacked and tortured by three other suspicious farmers.

Vijayaa and Tikiri briefly assist a fleeing nobleman and his entourage. They are captured by British troops and their local hirelings who have been terrorising and destroying local villages opposing the invasion. Vijayaa and Tikiri, who get away as the British are preparing to shoot the nobleman, eventually reunite with Vijayaa's clan.

Gaadi does not indicate how the British and their local allies overturn the king. Its aftermath is portrayed though in a victory ceremony organised by colonial emissary D'Oyly. The event is attended by two British military officers, along with Ehelepola Adigara and other high-caste collaborators.

The ceremony involves a performance of traditional songs and dances by Gaadi women, with Vijayaa, Tikiri and other clan members in attendance. Tikiri recognises Dissave, her former husband, seated on the victory platform. She stands up and stares at him, perhaps hoping that she will be acknowledged and reunited with her family. He responds by ordering his thugs to remove her.

Vijayaa is viciously attacked when he tries to protect her.

D'Oyly, who is infatuated by the dancers, is puzzled by the violent fight, and asks Adigara what has caused it. This is what happens, Adigara contemptuously replies, when you invite outcasts to perform. "Outcasts are like dust. If you play with them, you get dirty," he says.

This chilling response foreshadows a terrible turn of events for the Gaadi clan, a tragedy that only Vijayaa and Tikiri survive. The scene is reminiscent of the violent pogroms unleashed by the country's political elites against Tamils and other oppressed layers. For this writer it recalled the brutal attacks on Tamils living in Colombo by Sinhala thugs in 1983.

The film's end titles state that Britain repudiated its previous promises to the Kandy noblemen and made Ceylon a colony on February 15, 1815. A few decades later the British abolished the duty system based on caste, the end titles say, and that the Gaadi integrated themselves with other lower strata of society. But as the film makes clear, Vijayaa and Tikiri, both exiles from their former caste positions, face an uncertain future.

Towards the end of the film, Vijayaa, with Tikiri a few yards further back, stands on the edge of large rock that overlooks a huge valley. It metaphorically suggests that even though they have risen above their caste divisions, the world beneath, where they must make a life together, remains torn by harsh and unforgiving social divisions.

Importantly, *Gaadi* punctures the mythology of contemporary Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinists who claim that a "supreme culture" prevailed in Sri Lanka until the British took control. Contrary to these claims, the film reveals the harsh reality of life for the lower castes who were treated as sub-humans and frequently subjected to violent persecution and even murder.

Vithanage is well known for his sensitive explorations of class relations and communalist divisions in contemporary Sri Lanka (see: *The Walls Within*, *Death on the Full-Moon Day*, *August Sun* and *With You Without You*). His examination of the country's feudal period and how caste and other artificial identities poison human relations—his first dramatic history film—maintains this intelligent and vital approach.



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