

Film director Prasanna Vithanage discusses *Paradise with the WSWS*

Richard Phillips
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Sri Lankan film director Prasanna Vithanage spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about his film *Paradise* during a recent visit to Australia. The WSWS review of the film is available [here](#).

A veteran independent filmmaker, Vithanage made his first feature, *Ice on Fire*, in 1992, directing another 10 features and a documentary since then. These include *The Walls Within*, *Death on the Full Moon Day*, *August Sun*, *With You Without You* and *Gaadi*. The following is an edited version of the discussion with Vithanage.

Richard Phillips: Thanks for your time and congratulations on *Paradise*. It's a compelling work and one that reveals much about Sri Lanka, set as it is during the protests that brought down the Rajapakse government. Could you explain why you made it?

Prasanna Vithanage: Yes. The mass actions to oust Gotabaya Rajapakse first began in 2022 because farmers were not getting fertilizers for their crops. The government then declared bankruptcy, revealing that the Central Bank had dangerously low levels of foreign currency.

The people came into streets without any real leadership and that's why the movement failed. They surrounded the president's house on March 31 that year demanding their basic needs—food, gas, fuel and an end to the electricity cuts—just before the declaration of bankruptcy.

Very few predicted that these mass protests would happen. The Sri Lankan middle classes believed that class struggle action was over. It was something from a bygone era and wouldn't happen again because everyone was upwardly mobile, benefitting from the consumer society and the so-called open economy. This was the assumption.

In 2019, President Gotabaya Rajapakse came to power promising national security and claiming that he had won his majority from Sinhalese Buddhist voters and was going to serve these people. The empty ideas of nationalism and national security and various false promises were in the forefront, so when the supermarkets suddenly had no goods, and the stalls had nothing everybody started coming into the streets.

Ordinary people were undergoing tremendous hardships and so various groups started gathering at Galle Face Green in Colombo and through that the "Gota go home" movement was created.

There were many elements involved but most of its organisers didn't want to have any sort of revolutionary leadership. They didn't want to associate with Marxists or any kind of party politics, or even a clear alternative political program. They simply argued that if they could oust the president then everything would be solved. I soon realised that although it was a genuine struggle for genuine concerns it was a disorganised mass struggle and would collapse.

Finally, the ruling classes got Ranil Wickremesinghe appointed, first as prime minister and then president, after Rajapakse was forced out, and then reestablished their control of the situation. It was a great political lesson for us in 2022—something that people are still thinking about—but let me come to your original question.

I personally attended these agitations and went marching with other

artists demanding the ousting of Gotabaya Rajapakse and kept wondering what I could say about this experience.

As an artist I wanted and needed to say something about what was going underneath the surface of this incredible situation, to intersect with it and open it up. So, I created this story about two people who come to Sri Lanka but have nothing to do with the country and are indifferent to what's happening.

I wanted to reveal something about their middle-class psyches, but as David Walsh often explains you cannot really bring out the inner life of people without genuinely trying to understand the social fabric, the social situation. My job was to draw out how the situation in Sri Lanka impacts on them and show how the personal interacts with the political.

I also needed to say something about the political situation. This is important because some members of the ruling elite are attempting to say that the whole movement was a coup and aided by the US embassy.

RP: Rajapakse has written a book—*The conspiracy to oust me from the presidency*—claiming it was a coup.

PV: Yes, that's right. These people want to demean the mass movement, deny that the people were against them and that the people themselves took a stand. It is therefore important to reject this and show that mass anti-government agitation was the result of real class differences in our society—divisions between the haves and the have nots—which had increased with the pandemic.

This is especially for the working-class people shown in the film, the estate workers, who are the most deprived sections of the working class. They are cynically used in presidential or general elections to get votes for Tamil leaders and politicians to win seats and get government portfolios.

These are some of the things underpinning the film and which gave me the opportunity to show these things and, I hope, the resilience of the people.

RP: Has anybody else tried to respond to these events artistically?

PV: Maybe there'll be literature written and probably some documentaries made and hopefully my film will not be the only dramatic feature.

RP: Can you say something more about the characters for those that won't have seen the film. Kesav and Amritha, the Indian couple are following a particular religious tourist route. Why did you decide on that?

PV: I've closely studied both Indian and Sri Lankan politics and recently spent more time in India. The Indian middle class think their country is booming and believe that in a few years it will be the third biggest economy in the world. These layers are preoccupied with being upwardly mobile and climbing up the social ladder.

Kesav, who from is Kerala, is this sort of character. He's been struggling to get ahead in Mumbai, the financial capital of India, and soon after arriving in Sri Lanka learns that he has won a contract to produce an Indian version of *Squid Games*, which is about the class divisions.

Kesav and his wife decided to go to Sri Lanka for their fifth wedding anniversary with the Rama tour as a sort of pretence. His mind and heart

are not on the Rama tour or the wedding anniversary. Amritha, his wife, maybe had some hopes in her youth of writing a novel but has become a blogger. She's under the shade of her husband and depends on him. Everything seems fine on the surface but there are divisions between them which widen during the film.

The other character, Mr Andrew, is a tour guide. He speaks like someone who knows all about the Rama legend but is not an expert and keeps forgetting the things he has read in the books about the Rama story. He tries to be apolitical, someone who doesn't have any point of view, and doesn't really want to be there because the tourists are generally uninterested in the Rama legend. Kesav is looking at his phone every five minutes, an indication of how contemporary capitalist society constantly distracts people with hopes and illusions of receiving some sort of message validating their lives or benefitting their careers.

The story occurs just after India agreed to provide about \$US200 million in loans to Sri Lanka and so Kesav has a somewhat superior attitude. This is shown in how he treats Sergeant Bandara and the pressure he puts on him to immediately recover the couple's stolen iPad and mobiles.

RP: Bandara is under pressure but knows how to proceed.

PV: Yes. The sergeant knows exactly what to do. When I shot the film in the Upcountry most of the Tamil people in the film, who were not actors but from the estates, told me this sort of thing happens all the time. The easiest targets for the police are the estate youth who get the blame for everything.

This part of the story was not a plot device or introduced for effect but is the reality of what happens in these regions.

About two months ago the *Daily Mirror*, Sri Lanka's English-language paper reported 25 cases of suspects dying during police custody over a short period. I have studied so many cases of suspects being tortured to death. It's simply a fact.

This sort of incident could be sensationalised in the film, but I don't believe artists should exaggerate this sort of thing. It will boomerang if you overdo something like this and prevents you from revealing the truth. People will say this filmmaker is guided by political ideology.

RP: It's also a question of respecting the intelligence of your audience.

PV: Exactly. I don't believe in spoon feeding. It is better to be subtle and you rouse your audience's imaginations to challenge them to think things through. That way they'll be more alert and connected to the story.

RP: There's an interesting exchange in the film when Amritha asks the sergeant, what's the price of a life?

PV: She feels guilty about what's happened but, in fact, her question was being asked by many, many Sri Lankans during the protests. What is the value of our lives?

Young people from the south were trying to emigrate to Italy or any other country for work. There were long queues in passport office to get away from Sri Lanka. And why? Because people felt they had to leave not just escape the economic situation but because their lives were not appreciated. They were being treated like human dust.

Why did Sri Lankans on Galle Face Green start chanting "We don't need the 225"—that's the number of Sri Lankan parliamentarians? It was an emotional response which denounced all these politicians for looting the country, that these are people who don't have any concerns for human life.

Sergeant Bandara's response to Amritha—that the value of an estate worker's life is just one vote and only during presidential or the parliamentary elections—is a statement of fact.

Estate workers were previously aligned with the left-wing Lanka Sama Samaja Party, but because of its betrayals in the 1950s and 60s, that support was taken over by the bourgeois Tamil elites who now use it in their parliamentary bargaining deals.

I'd also like to make another point about the class divisions in the film. I've always been inspired by Robert Altman's *Gosford Park*, which

carefully explores the divisions between the British ruling elites and their servants. I wanted to show how this upstairs and the downstairs of social life is expressed in the attitudes of the Indian middle-class couple towards the tour guide and in turn the servants.

RP: Can you speak more about how you developed the script?

PV: One of my filmmaking mottos is from Trotsky who said that for a creative work to serve the revolution it must be a true work of art. This means that my scripts must be cinematic.

There's your own anger about the power outages, gas and fuel shortages and the political events—and I was passionate about all these as I was writing—but you must have certain key images already in your mind. Of course, you must develop your characters, try to be truthful to all of them and not be afraid bringing in different points of view, but always remember that you're speaking to your audience with images.

When filming you're attempting to bring out the truth of each character and establish an objective truth from their subjective viewpoints. This is very challenging. *Paradise* is only 90 minutes long and so it is very concentrated and minimalist, and therefore, I hope, more powerful.

RP: Did you make many script changes during the shoot?

PV: Not really, but I worked closely with my cinematographer Rajeev Ravi, who is a very socially conscious person. He was very helpful and able to get all the visual beats—the looks, the moments and nuances—of each character and the interchanges between them. I wanted the viewer to be inside the story and not miss out on any of those beats because the story occurs in the space of three or four days.

RP: How long was the shoot?

PV: It was 25 days, starting in January 2023. The inflation rate was 64 percent in Sri Lanka and so we had to shoot the film in a well-planned way and very quickly.

RP: Although the dialogue is sparse there are many interesting and revealing interchanges. The discussions in the police station between the Indian couple, Sergeant Bandara and Mr Andrew, and then later involving the two members of staff at the homestay are very interesting. Could you speak about that?

PV: Yes, the dialogue is spare, but this is not my personal style. The point is to bring out the emotional experiences of the characters and in this film to explore the politics of language used by these characters.

The Indian couple speak to each other in English and Malayalam but when they want to hide certain things from the servants they speak in Malayalam.

When Kesav speaks to Sergeant Bandara he uses English. Bandara knows a little English and he knows he is being threatened and feels inferior. The way language is used by the characters is another way of showing the power structure and relationships.

RP: You're a regular reader of the WSWS. Could you speak about that, and whether its art and cultural analysis guides your artistic approach?

PV: That's a good question. I've been a WSWS reader since 1999 but let me speak first about the film articles, and then I'll talk about the politics.

The WSWS reviews make you realise that you're not alone, that there's still a voice out there fighting to make people understand cinema better and more deeply, and of its history.

I won't just say that WSWS provides a Marxist analysis, which of course it does, but its articles on the history of cinema, reviews, and the direction it gives to artists are unique. No one else publishes this sort of material. Whenever I have time, I go back and reread pages from Comrade Walsh's *The Sky Between the Leaves*, which has many precious insights and is a book that I regard as one of my most priceless gifts.

Some say that we live in a time of despair, or at least that's how some artists respond to Gaza and the war in Ukraine. They become cynical and say that there's no future, which ultimately leads them into accepting the

current situation.

Having served as a jury member at film festivals I watch a lot of very personal films that fail unfortunately to reveal any objective truths.

In fact, some artistic circles don't believe that there's such a thing as objective truth. Their work is often self-indulgent and like a harangue. Maybe they're trying to understand the psyche of a particular person or character, and I'm not saying they shouldn't, but you can only understand a person by understanding the world and the social relations in which they live.

RP: How did you become a film director and what's the situation facing Sri Lankan filmmakers today?

PV: Sri Lankan filmmakers confront a very difficult situation today and the collapse of the economy has made it even worse.

I've often been asked at the end of a film screening how I've survived. I never went to film school, because there was no such thing in Sri Lanka and still isn't, but I was a movie buff and studied the masters. I watched the films of Jean Renoir, Fritz Lang, Marcel Carné and his *The Children of the Paradise*, Eisenstein's Soviet films, John Ford's movies and many others, including the great films from 1974 that the WSWs recently reviewed.

I also think about filmmakers like Abraham Polonsky who during the McCarthyite era in the US stood firm for their principles and their art.

Filmmakers need to take forward the baton that he and other great directors carried, that's why filmmakers and other artists need the WSWs and its political analysis and reviews.

Paradise has been screened in India, Europe, the Middle East, Australia, and in some American cities, as well as numerous international film festivals. It has also been watched in Sri Lankan cinemas by over 25,000 people, following its release in July, with more screenings planned for university students and in the island's tea estate regions. The film is currently available on Amazon Prime Video in India and Simply South. It will be on Channel 4's streaming platform in the UK and Ireland at the end of the month.



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