

The Uniqueness of Sri Lanka Cinema

By Yasmin Ahmedi and Sophia Purekal

The earliest Sri Lankan movies, including the country's first recognized film, *Kadawunu Poronduwa* (Broken Promise/1947), were made by Indian producers and technicians. With independence came the need to create a pure Sri Lankan cinema. Films such as Sirisena Wimalaweera's *Podi Putha* (Younger Son/1955) and Lester James Peries's *Rekawa* (Line of Destiny /1956) created an indigenous cinema that portrayed to Sri Lankans their own culture in its natural setting. *Rekawa* screened at the Cannes Film Festival. Peries's second film, *Gamperaliya* (The Changing Village/1963), also won international acclaim. Sri Lankan film has thus been recognized on the international circuit for decades now, and was celebrated this year at the Cannes Film Festival with Sri Lanka Day.

Screened as part of Cannes Sri Lanka Day was *Ira Madiyama* (August Sun/2005), the most recent film by Sri Lanka's most illustrious contemporary filmmaker, Prasanna Vithanage. Prior to *Ira Madiyama*, Vithanage made *Purahanda Kaluwara* (Death on A Full Moon Day/1997), a story about an old man who is in denial about his son's death in the civil war. *Purahanda Kaluwara* was initially banned in Sri Lanka, but has set the record as the country's highest grossing film since its release.

Before 1983, Sri Lankan Tamils participated in all behind-the-scenes aspects of Sri Lankan Sinhala film. This practice stopped when the violence started. Sri Lankan Tamils do have a film tradition of their own, though one strained to find adequate resources, and that has had to struggle against the competition of Sri Lankan Sinhalese and Indian Tamil films. Moreover, the violence that has going on for more than 20 years now has uprooted much of Sri Lankan Tamil society and has placed a moratorium on most cultural activity.

Like Vithanage, several other Sri Lankan filmmakers have made films that address the war. Some such films have been inflammatory, but it is possible that the right kinds of films could help mend Sri Lankan society.