

Displacement and Identity: Films on the Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka

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Bollywood or Indian commercial cinema has become a field of academic inquiry thanks to postcolonial, sociological and cultural studies approaches to film studies. Sri Lanka has a minor cinematic tradition of its own.¹ The first Sinhala film *Kadavunu Poronduwa* (The Broken Promise) came out in 1947. Sri Lankan talent was showcased as early as 1957 by Lester James Peries with a film called *Rekawa* (The Line of Destiny) which was nominated for the Palme d'or at the Cannes Festival. His *Wekanda Walawwa* (Mansion by the Lake) was nominated for Oscar in the best foreign film category in 2003. The first Sri Lankan Tamil movie *Samuthayam* (society) was released in 1962. Indeed in the 1960s and 70s it was not uncommon for Sinhalese directors to work in Tamil and vice versa. Dharmasena Pathiraja² is one such example and K. Venkat another.³ Ashoka Handagama's recently released Tamil movie *Ini Avan* has kept up the trend. This article proposes to analyze two feature and two short films in Tamil on the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka respectively by Rajesh Touchriver, Pudhiyavan and Pradeepan Raveendran and counterbalance their point of view with another and take on the issue by the Sinhalese director Vimukthi Jayasundara.

Sri Lankan Tamil cinema dates back to the 1960s. There were some seventeen films released in the 1970s, with only four seeing the light of day in the 1980s and no film made between 1983 and 1993. Three were made between 2006 and 2010. Five more are in the making.⁴ In an interview granted to Pradeepan Ravindran in the Sri Lankan Tamil journal, *Uyirnzhal*, Pudhiyavan, the Srilankan born Tamil director who lives in London, has explained the reasons for this late development of Sri Lankan Tamil cinema.⁵ There were very few cinema halls in the North of Sri Lanka when he was growing up. These showed mostly commercial Indian Tamil movies and therefore the exposure to other trends such as African or Iranian cinema which he now prefers and which could

stimulate creativity was less. During the civil war, all efforts were spent in survival. The National Film Corporation of Sri Lanka founded in 1972⁶ has a symbolic Tamil section without any power or initiative given to its head. In order to get proper technical training, Sri Lankans have had to rely on Indian institutes.

Diasporic Sri Lankan Tamil Cinema that has emerged is strongly linked to the sense of dislocation and alienation felt by Tamils who have had to leave the country and start a new life abroad. The initial tool of self-expression favoured by the exiled Tamil community was small journals. However, the task of maintaining a periodicity and reader interest proved to be difficult given the fact that the struggle for a decent living was time consuming. Making movies seemed to be a flexible alternative. These immigrant Sri Lankan movie makers from England, France, Germany, Denmark and Canada have had to take into consideration the weight of South Indian cinema, especially Tamil cinema while scripting, shooting, editing and marketing their films. If they wanted to break even, they had to accommodate the grammar of songs, dance and fighting sequences in order for the average Tamil speaking spectator not to feel disoriented. Otherwise, the choice was to aim at international film festivals which sometimes shut out the people about and for whom these artistic creations are made.

The Tamil director Mani Ratnam started the trend of portraying terrorist violence as a new theme in Indian Cinema. His assistant Santosh Sivan's *The Terrorist* (1998) depicted Rajiv Gandhi's assassination by a Tamil woman terrorist in a fictional form. Mani Ratnam himself dealt with the Sri Lankan issue in *Kannathil Mutthamittal* (2002) through the eyes of a Sri Lankan Tamil girl adopted by Indian Tamil parents. Was Mani Ratnam romanticising violence or simply being realistic is an issue that has been debated. Dealing with the burning issues of the day is

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according to him a way to vent anger and find intercommunal peace. In India, cinema has always had a therapeutic value for social and political ills. His film has the merit of staging the complex relations between Indian and Sri Lankan Tamils related by blood but divided by history through the metaphor of adoption. The documentary film in English on the Tamil Human rights activist murdered by the LLTE, Dr Rajini Thiranagama, entitled *No More Tears Sister* (2005) directed by Helene Klodawsky brought the ethnic conflict and terrorism in Sri Lanka to the forefront of the international scene using dramatic recreations.⁷ South Indian Tamil Director John Mahendran's *Anivaer* (2007) depicts military brutality in Jaffna through the eyes of a South Indian News Reporter.

Rajesh Touchriver whose surname is a literal translation of his hometown Thodupuzha in Kerala got trained in Kathakali and Kalaripayitru and took his Masters Degree in Visual Language/Scenography and Direction from the Wimbledon College of Art, London. His docufictional movie *In the Name of Buddha* (2002) indirectly draws a parallel between Tamils in Sri Lanka today and the Jewish victims of the Second World War. In this Tamil language film with English subtitles, dislocation from the home country and relocation in England re-enact the cycle of death and rebirth. Siva, the Tamil refugee and a medical student, is first taken into custody and then welcomed by an English immigration officer at Heathrow airport who has herself experienced Nazi atrocities. The flashback recounts the story of the ordeals undergone by his family caught in the crossfire between the Liberation Tigers, the Sri Lankan Army and the Indian Peace Keeping Force. The betrayal of Siva by his friend is what triggers his outward journey. The shock and confusion felt by Siva are paradoxically resolved in that transit zone which offers an alternative for the war zone and the promise of a safe haven. Shot in Kerala and London with a relatively unknown cast and funded by Da'sai films, *In the Name of Buddha* has been called an exercise in celluloid pamphleteering, lacking the lyricism or subtlety of Santosh Sivan's "The Terrorist". Its 146 minutes long graphic portrayal of ethnic violence and human rights violations in Sri Lanka such as arson, kidnapping, rape and murder perpetrated in the name of religion is visually quite brutal and brings to mind the partition violence resurging in Vidhu Vinod Chopra's *Mission Kashmir* (2000). The faith of the asylum seeker in the fairness of the English system personified as a generous white woman appears rather naive and clichéd. It might have been a ploy to enroll British sympathy for the Tamil cause.

Touchriver had denied that he was being one-sided

and asserted that his purpose was to show the absurdity of violence to prove the value of non-violence. In fact, the film's pro-Tamil stand left people wondering whether its two British Asian producers K Shanmughathas and Sai George had LTTE connections.⁸ The film does portray the LTTE leader Vallupillai Prabhakaran in a negative light. But it lacks the sophistication of Gillo Pontocorvo's 1966 commentary on guerilla warfare *The Battle of Algiers* which tries to present an objective reality to offset official propaganda.

Director Pudhiyavan Rasaiah was born in Vavuniya and lives in London. He is a Senior Lecturer in Accounting at Kingston College. He had earlier shot two avant-garde films "Matru" (2001) and "Kanavugal Nijamanal" (2003) without proper technical know-how. He took up a training offered by Channel 4 and read books about guerilla film making before shooting Mann (2006)⁹ in the Sri Lankan village of Puttalam in the space of 33 days. The crew were not told where they were and what they would be shooting so that information did not leak out. The official authorization was for a love story. As soon the scenes were shot, the unprocessed films were sent to India. Some six scenes were shot in India. The mainstory of this pastoral tragedy resembles that of Marcel's Pagnol's *La fille du puisatier* (*The Well Digger's Daughter*, 1940). Tamil teenager Lakshmi who comes with her family to Kanakaranyankulam after her brother dies in civil unrest is protected by her maternal uncle and a well-wishing teacher from her community. But she falls in love with the upper caste classmate Ponrasa who seduces her and leaves the country upon the family's pressure. The frame story is about an exiled TV reporter who returns to Sri Lanka after an interval of eighteen years to assess the horrors of the civil war and notices that the green village paradise has turned into yellow scorched earth. When Ponrasa is trapped and killed during a secret meeting, the main story and frame story interconnect as the murderer is none other than his own son who avenges his dishonoured mother thus. At times banal and trashy, the movie has two interesting song sequences which have been dismissed by Tamil critics as worthless that I want to highlight precisely because they are excellent commentaries on displaced identities. The first (59m) how the poor migrant Tamil laborers from India, exploited in the hilly regions of the country by rich upper caste Tamils whose plantations were laid out to suit colonial needs, come together. The song starts at the moment the night sets in and conveys a sense of loneliness and melancholy. Soon a crowd gathers and collectively they find the strength to reclaim justice, equality and development. The sequence ends on a bright and cheerful note as the oppressed people dream of better times. This Marxist

reading of Tamil society which exposes its own weakness rather than harp on ethnic rivalry is unusual. Also unusual is the point of view of those who have not left Sri Lanka during the civil war in search of safety, peace and prosperity to European cities like London, Paris, Amsterdam or Rotterdam who joyfully sing their acceptance of the small town they belong to.

We have not fled, we have not sought asylum, we have not given up, we will not cry, there is life and joy for us here, our dreams will come true.

With a sense of humour in that there is an intertextual allusion to Nithi Kangarathnam's Tamil *baila*¹⁰ song sung by T.E. Manohar (*chinna mamiye* - 1965) in the rhythm, their dance shows how the local is transformed by the global, while also deconstructing the cliché that happiness could be found only in dislocation to metropolitan centres. The psychological twist at the end when the abandoned son blames the father has undoubtedly an oedipal undertone. However, it could also be interpreted as an indictment of the exiled by the rooted who felt betrayed by the departure. Indeed the title "Mann" harks back to an ethnolinguistic conception of the nation. In the song quoted, the abstract idea of the soil is translated into the anthropological places like house, school, temple, street and paddy field. The film's protagonist resembles the director who is challenged by his return to the land of origin.

Indeed the concept of soil provides the connecting link between Pudhiyavan and Pradeepan Raveendran. Pradeepa Ravindran was born in 1981 in Jaffna. When he was fifteen, he was schooled in Negombo in the West Coast of Sri Lanka where he was able to have friends from the Singalese community. The ambivalence in the nature of this relationship (cordial and at the same time not-committed) seems to have marked his memory. When ethnic trouble started he moved to Malaysia and then landed in France in 2004 working for long hours as a handler, dishwasher and window cleaner to make a living and devoting the little time he had to read books and watch movies to sharpen his knowledge. He got his refugee card in 2007. The National Centre for Cinematography is currently sponsoring the full length feature film that this self-taught director is writing. He tried his hands at photography first before turning to cinematography. Among the many directors who have shaped his visual culture, he singles out Steven Spielberg, François Truffaut, Ken Loach and Ritwik Ghatak as major influences.

Pradeepan Raveendran's short film *A Mango Tree in My Front Yard* (2008), which won a Golden Bear in Berlin, lasts about ten minutes. Sex and violence are intricately

connected in this film that represents Sri Lanka but shot in India. Two Tamil girls, walking in the company of a younger boy carrying saplings in a plastic bag for a school competition, talk about the absence of a friend whose father had been abducted and killed. On their way back from school, their paths bifurcate. One of the girls gets raped, murdered and buried by Sinhala soldiers. The horror is not shown but suggested through the act of casual burial in the night. Another girl is pressured into joining the terrorists. The terrorist is hiding in a trench, only his voice is heard as if it is a ghost's. A shot of densely packed green leaves suggests the tropical jungle. The title comes from the picture on sand that this heavily armed but dreaming girl draws with a branch while guarding a post. The girl who wants to live and grow up like any child dies in combat, but we do not see her dead body which renders her disappearance all the more poignant. Several successive shots show the traces of this drawing gradually erased and the fallen leaves of the sapling fading, drying up and blackening. The displaced and broken chunk of soil that was keeping the mango sapling alive connects the real and the imagined trees. The slow but irreversible metamorphosis of a pristine paradise into hell is symbolized through a subtle interplay of sound and silence, of stillness and movement, of what is visible and what is lurking, of blue tinged dawn light and the darkness of the night betrayed by artificial headlamps. We are left to guess the choice made by the young boy and the future that awaits him. Pradeepan Ravindran's minimalist style is very effective in conveying the sense of irreparable loss.

In his conversation with me, Pradeepan Ravindran told me how as young boy, he was used to seeing weapons, touching them and feeling thrilled. Indeed collecting images of firearms was a pastime for him. As a grown up, he has decided to wield the camera rather than the gun. The traces shown at the end of the film through intervals of time can be interpreted as childhood trauma remembered and deconstructed through art. As in *Mann*, the narrator is inscribed as a character in the movie. Exile is a different kind of coming of age experience which makes the adult relive the loss of childhood.

Raveendran's *Shadows of Silence* (2010), selected by Cannes Festival for the Director's Fortnight, was shot in the suburban space of Noisy le Sec. It explores the sense of alienation and exile felt by Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in France. It focuses on a migrant worker who seems to feel no connection either with his being or with his surroundings. Dressed jarringly in a brightly coloured tea shirt and lungi, remnants of his past life in a tropical country and village setting, he stands smoking in the balcony of a high rise surrounded by snow and cold, a

phenomenological shock to him. We see a birthday party going on and the photographer fixing this rite of passage where the father is physically present but mentally absent and the mother looking troubled. We then see the father's dead body mourned by his older parents and his bereaved wife and children. In a series of flashbacks, we watch his fancied and real attempts at suicide - by jumping from the balcony, by cutting the nerves of his wrist and by jumping in front of a running train. The second time, the voice of his daughter brings the father back to the life he wants to shed. The face he sees in the mirror while shaving reflects his uncanniness. He fantasizes that he is being suffocated by a constrictor. The limitations imposed by exile are stifling but at the same time the experience mobilizes the migrant's bodily energy by challenging his self and stimulating unknown desire. The movie successfully stages the death of one's self as one knows it which migration implies according to Lucretius. "Whatever by its changing goes out of its frontiers that thing by doing so brings immediate death to its old self", to quote Rushdie's translation in *The Satanic Verses*.¹¹ The final scene is like an abstract painting where colour speaks more than the shape. A black body stretched on white snow in a pool of red blood. The spectator surmises that the father has jumped, severed ties and crossed to the other side to find ultimate peace. The ringing cell phone ironically shows the world tempting the protagonist with its connections a bit too late. There is an oedipal and autobiographical element in this story too, with the son manipulating the father as the object of his gaze by making him play the role of exile.

In all the four films analysed, a strong documentary impulse underlies the diasporic fiction with the view to decentering and countering official national history with true cross border stories. The tension between ancestral memory and challenges of modernity structures these cinematographic narratives which not only translate the migrants' attempt to write themselves into the mainstream visual culture but also their desire to form part of the global artistic elite. In her recent book "Leur regard perce nos ombres", Julia Kriteva mentions the "corpse still warm" of the mother tongue while likening the experience of exile to death.¹² Choosing Tamil as the language of the films is not only a collective political statement but also a means to connect what Aristotle calls one's *zoe* or vital process to one's biography. By twisting Joyce's definition of the nation as father's time and mother's species, we could say mourning the father's body in the mother's tongue seems to be the ritual of initiation into exilic Sri Lankan Tamil identity.

Any study on the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka cannot be complete without incorporating the Sinhalese point

of view. Vimukhti Jayasundara's *Sulanga Enu Pinisa* (The Forsaken Land) which won the Camera d'or at the Cannes festival in 2005 is a film about the impact of this war on the people who have stayed on. It flows logically from his two previous short films - *Land of Silence* (2002) and *Empty for Love* (2003) which are both about the sequels of war and prepares the ground for his second feature film with the highly evocative title *Between Two Worlds* (2009). The war is not shown on screen but evoked as in Bergman's *Silence* (1963) and *Shame* (1968) or in Tarkovsky's *Childhood* (1962) and *Stalker* (1979) through "bullet casings shifting in the sand and a military tank creaking through the small grass".¹³ The film avoids the spectacular mode that we come across in some recent films on Kashmir. Jayasundara has acknowledged the influence of Ingmar Bergman, Andrei Tarkovsky, Satyajit Ray, Akira Kurosawa, Michaelangelo Antonioni, Paolo Pasolini, Abbas Kiarostami and Ritwik Ghatak on his work.¹⁴ He is also marked by the absurdist philosophy of writers like Dostoevsky, Kafka and Beckett. He has also been compared to the Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul, though Jayasundara attributes this resemblance to a general Asian style of film making.

Vimukhti Jayasundara shot his film in a place called Kalpitiya in an unmapped territory of North Western Sri Lanka during January 2004 over a period of just 25 days. At that time, there was a ceasefire between the Sri Lankan National Army and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Even if the landscape and characters are Sri Lankan, there is no particular historical reference in the film to identify the situation as contemporary and Sri Lankan. The sparse dialogue, the indefiniteness of the place and the abstract nature of cinematic narration give it the allusiveness of primitive myth. It could be anybody's war in any part of the world. Jayasundara is more interested in exploring the impact of war on humanity than in highlighting the ethnic undercurrent that gave rise to it.

In spite of this precaution, Vimukhti Jayasundara's *Sulanga Enu Pinisa* became a controversial work of art like Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* or Taslima Nasreen's *Shame*. Its antiwar stand came under attack from the military. Rear admiral Weerasekera published a comment in the *Sunday Times* on September 4, 2005 saying that "If there is a film on war even indirectly contributing towards fulfilling terrorists' objectives willfully, then it amounts to treason and should be dealt with severely."¹⁵ As a result, Jayasundara who was awarded the national honour of Kalakeerthi by President Chandrika Kumaratunga had to withdraw his movie after a mere two weeks run in Sri Lanka because the distributors were making their own cuts. Besides, there

were threats directed at him as well as the producer, the actors and distributors.

In 2000, the government had banned Prasanna Vithanage's *Pura Handa Kaluwaru* (Death on a Full Moon Day) under emergency laws because it dealt with the issue of lying by the Sri Lankan army about the death of its soldiers. In 2006 Handagama's movie *Aksharaya* (Letter of Fire) was banned though it had nothing to do with war but with morality and sexuality. Handagama's petition before the Sri Lankan Supreme Court against this ban was turned down. Any work of art or literature that is critical of the government's authority or challenges the Buddhist cultural establishment is censored. The media is under government pressure to practice "self-censorship" when publishing "war-related" matters. Though Sri Lanka is a democracy, official public opinion is controlled. Michal Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* dealt with the curtailing of freedom of expression in Sri Lanka with gossip taking the place of reliable information.¹⁶ Amnesty international regularly publishes reports on this aspect of Sri Lanka even after the end of the guerrilla war and the physical liquidation of the LTTE supremo Vallupillai Prabhakaran.¹⁷ However, Jayasundara prefers to see in the violent reaction to his film an unconscious affirmation of the life drive of Sri Lankans. "Saying "we don't want to see that film" amounts to saying we want to see something else. The ultimate message, therefore, is we want to live".¹⁸

The plot is quite thin. Anura, a loyal home guard feels an existential ennui having been assigned to the task of keeping watch over a non-man's land. His only friend is the drunken soldier Piyasiri. The infrequently passing soldiers play a prank on Anura by stripping him of his clothes and dumping him in a river. Piyasiri will later bring his clothes and help him get back to his house. This is about the only comic relief that Anura gets. The suspended conflict outside is mirrored at his home where his disinterested wife Lata does not get along with his spinster sister Soma. Soma, for her part, is very protective of a young girl, Batti who seems to be dodging an old soldier. Lata has an adulterous love affair with Piyasiri. Anura also transgresses marital fidelity. The soldiers ask Anura to kill Piyasiri who had deserted his post. He kills him mechanically without knowing who he is killing. Witnessing all this, Soma commits suicide. The old soldier tells Batti the Legend of the Little bird in which a girl is looking for a man to get married and have children. After many a voyage, she does find a hunchback of a husband who kills her in a fit of anger, becomes mad and jumps into a fire that he has lit.

Indeed Vimukthi Jayasundara had confessed in an interview that his original idea was to make a film about

this little bird legend that he had heard from his grandmother and again from his mother. He was thinking along the lines of a fairy tale, told in an abstract manner resembling Kurosawa's *Dreams*. He realized that he would not be able to do that, but chose to connect that old story with characters living in the present.¹⁹ Jayasundara takes care not to rewrite the story. He is content with simply transmitting a timeless story on physical and psychological violence. In the oral culture of Sri Lanka, as Jayasundara remarks "as soon as you start writing down a story, you imprison it, you weaken it. But if you film it, then you're freeing it, because you are combining different elements."²⁰ By incorporating the story telling tradition without altering it in his film and by making the old man nickname Batti the Little Bird, the director performs a *mise en abyme* of his film's story. At one point in the film, Batti is so disheartened by the suspension of time that she wonders whether she will ever grow up. While Anura projects himself into future as an old man, he sees his bemoaned childhood as Batti's. Batti is dressed up as a tomboy. So it is initially difficult for the spectator to determine her gender. The tragic end of the tale translates the relational dynamics at work between genders in a given society. It could be also seen as the impossible reconciliation between two ethnic groups in the space of the nation which thus gets self-destructive.

Though his narrative revolves around Anura who morphs into the old man, it is the landscape that binds the characters together. It is the landscape that conveys the strangeness intended by the director. The succession of landscapes gives pace to the film. Jayasundara believes that "we feel our humanity more intensely in a bare and minimalist landscape."²¹ Concaneting landscapes is his method of synchronizing his own rhythm with that of the film. Vimukthi Jayasundara has clearly situated his style as something poetic and not realistic. According to him, images should evoke a certain mood and the mood should bring feelings. His mentor at Le Fresnoy School, Tsai Ming-Liang encouraged him to make films with the forms and formality of cinema. The *Forsaken Land* explores emotional isolation in the space between impending war and uneasy truce. It is not a film of action but contemplation. Its grammar is attached to lyrical symbolism. "A sensation corresponds to an image, a shot to an idea".²² Images take the place of words as when the camera pans arid terrain, sand and mud to signify emptiness, solitude and strangeness. The director becomes a builder of images, leaving the spectator to construct the meaning or hoping that the spectator will at least identify with the director as spectator of his own work and decipher his cryptic syntax. It is as if a "visual

text, in the literal sense of the term, unfolds".²³

The choice of light and colour helps translate the mood. The sound of the radio or the movement in bus from village to town brings the outside world in and connects isolated solitudes. The blowing wind evokes the absent presence of the sea in the film. Almost every scene in *The Forsaken Land* comprises just one shot. Each one plays like a mini feature in itself. The sometimes repeated shots and sequences create a sense of cyclic time that refers back to pure time. No wonder the director chose "a place where we could construct everything from the very beginning".²⁴

Because there is no war and no peace, "time has become war" to quote Vimukthi Jayasundara.²⁵ Lata does not want to wait for years for something to happen. Letting the light and air in by opening the doors, windows and curtains, her body speaks the alphabet of desire. It is her way of defying the time that passes. Unlike Lata, Soma does not open herself to another. The scenes that show her washing her body through everyday gestures underscore her retreat unto herself. Accepting her reality as it is, passively, she refuses to assume her desire. By doing so, she separates herself from nature. It is as if she is a walking dead. The director prefers to take her to suicide to underscore the absurdity of her existence. She is the reverse side of her more visible twin, the suicide bomber.

Nature is mainly represented in the film through the jungle. The jungle appears as a real geographical space. However the profusion of different colours in the jungle - black, white, green and maroon - gives one the impression that one finds oneself in a painting. The jungle becomes a metaphor for human life on earth. There is a scene in which two soldiers lie in a trench on the banks of the river with a weapon in hand. They are like wounded animals. "Civilization is nothing but the invention of weapons", according to the director.²⁶ This particular frame deftly balances the power of nature and the power of culture with the power of images. But nature, though pristine, is not entirely good and can get malevolent. Danger is lurking everywhere. Thus the call for help from the drowning man's raised hand becomes the signature image of this movie. In this sense, *The Forsaken Land* is a departure from Western films like *The Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith, 1915) or *Barry Lyndon* (Stanley Kubrick, 1975) where senseless war is contrasted with natural beauty.

The film's climax is a primal scene that makes the spectator feel guilty even if he or she is only a helpless witness. Anura's murder of an unidentified victim harks back to Raskolnikov's murder of an innocent money-lender in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. The

unbearable isolation, the harsh surroundings, the despair that comes of a monotonous and uneventful existence have benumbed the body and mind of Anura. The scene takes place in the night. The body is undistinguishable. The silence that can be heard in this scene shifts narrative time to an unfathomable past. It is the murder of Cain by Abel or Karna by Arjun. The spectator is transported to the time of Greek tragedies and the formation of human subjectivity. Does Anura, by killing the other survive or indirectly kill himself? It is up to the spectator to look for answers. Anura himself, when he hears on the radio the next day that thousands are missing, is tormented as if he had killed not one man but thousands. In modern wars, the enemy is a faceless, distant target, a sort of abstract notion, often reduced to countable figures. By literally depicting a crime, Jayasundara sends a paradoxically strong message of non-violence.

The ultimate and rather Beckettian message that Vimukthi Jayasundara wants to get across is that we are all waiting, killing time, being manipulated by warring parties. The forsaken in the title denotes the abandonment of Man by God and connotes the absence of spirituality in our world. The film warrants a comparison with Danis Tavanovic's multiple award winning *No Man's Land* (2001). In *The Forsaken Land*, a soldier likens flying a helicopter or smoking a joint to being sodomized by God. The scene itself which blurs the border between homosociability and homosexuality, the soldiers' flippancy of attitude and vulgarity of language were found to be shocking. Jayasundara has explained this particular scene as an allusion to Pasolini's *Teorema* (1968).²⁷ In Pasolini's film, a mysterious figure, who appears in the lives of a typical bourgeois Italian family, engages in sexual affairs with all the members of the household. Like God, the stranger gives unstintingly of himself, asking nothing in return. Then one day he disappears, as suddenly and mysteriously as he appeared. The subsequent void created forces each family member to confront what was previously concealed by the trappings of bourgeois life. Jayasundara's idea, therefore, is to make the soldier express his need to be close to God in a very provocative way.

While the reception of this film was quite positive in France.²⁸ The *New York Times* and *Chicago Tribune* also carried laudatory reviews.²⁹ However, *The Hollywood Reporter* identifies the setting as an African nation in the throes of an unending revolution thus ironically confirming the transnational dimension of Jayasundara, regrets the scarcity of narrative, the monotony of the general theme of emotional, physical and spiritual void and the lethargy of pace. The only saving grace *The Hollywood Reporter's* reviewer finds is the film's portrayal

of the atmosphere, the change in colour of tenebrous skies into a blistering pink. He mistakes Batti to be Anura and Lata's son and concludes that cinematically the spectator is "stranded in a Third World 'Zabriskie Point'."³⁰

Instead of the hauntingly lyrical beauty of Jayasundara's visual art, the film has been remarked for its bared bodies and explicitly sexual scenes that circulate via the internet. Jayasundara has stated firmly that sexuality is not the subject of the movie. Eros and Thanatos do wrestle in the story line. The possibility of pleasure redeems this melancholic story with a glimmer of hope that lingers in spite of its grim denouement. Through the depiction of uncanny landscape and disconnected experiences, Jayasundara wants to create a sentiment of uncertainty, waiting, "emotions being born in the very distance between things and beings and makes us aware of the threat from within: humanity can be destroyed by the feeling of void and distress that inhabit each human soul."³¹ The Korean director Kim ki Duk's influence is quite naturally discernible here.

While Jayasundara turned to Ray and Calcutta with *Chatrak* (2011), another young Sri Lankan director, Sanjeewa Pushpakumar, followed in the footsteps of Jayasundara and made *Flying Fish* (2011) confirming the birth of a new aesthetics in Sri Lankan cinema. As for the established director Handagama's *Ini Avan* (2012) which was shown in Cannes and other major film festivals, it focuses on society's reaction to an ex-LTTE soldier who returns to his home town and faces the silent disapproval of those who had lost their near and dear. The film does not depict the Sri Lankan army literally, but its presence is felt. The film's casting includes Tamil and Sinhalese actors and actresses and tries to make the point that in spite of the fatal turn that events have taken and the scars of war, life needs to continue. The title *Ini Avan* is about both post (*ini+avan* – he hereafter) war destiny and the hope for reconciliation (*Iniyavan* – pleasant man). Handagama's commitment to reconciliation is not as much at stake in the film as the denunciation of the ills of liberal capitalism. "My main focus was not on what happened during the war but what will happen if certain conditions are not corrected!" remarks Handagama.³² Such a preoccupation with inclusive development is common to India as well. The Tamil movie *Angadi Theru* directed by Vasanthabalan (2010) castigates the exploitation and abuse of sales men and women by greedy merchants in glittering megastores catering to global consumers. The NGO FLCIT – Facilitating initiatives for social cohesion and Transformation - has demonstrated its faith in the power of the cinema to make people think differently by publishing a list of movies that deal with War and Peace.³³

NOTES

1. Sri Lankan cinema has been documented in Tamil by Thambyah Thevathas. <http://www.iafstamil.com/articles/articles-thevathas.html>. See also Wimal Dissanayake and Ashley Ratnavibhushana, *Profiling Sri Lankan cinema*, Boralesgamuwa, Sri Lanka: Asian Film Centre, 2000 and http://nethelper.com/article/Sri_Lankan_Tamil_Cinema, accessed on June 24, 2013.
2. Nalaka Gunawardene and Vindana Ariyawansa, "A glimpse of Dharmasena Pathiraja's films", in *Daily Times*, May 22, 2012. <http://www.dailynews.lk/2012/05/22/fea28.asp>, accessed on June 24, 2013.
3. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sri_Lankan_Tamils_in_Sinhala_Cinema, accessed on June 24, 2013.
4. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Sri_Lankan_Tamil_films#Films_yet_to_be_released, accessed on June 24, 2013.
5. Pudhiyavan interviewed by Uyirizhal, Vol VII, Nã4, Issue 27, pp. 55-73.
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THE PERIPHERY STRIKES BACK: CHALLENGES TO THE NATION-STATE IN ASSAM AND NAGALAND

by UDAYON MISRA

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It is in the country's northeastern region, with its complex mosaic of ethnic nationalities at different stages of socio-economic and political growth, that the Indian nation-state is today facing some of its gravest challenges. Time and again, the Indian State has had to work out new strategies and adjustments to deal with the issues thrown up by the different autonomy and secessionist movements of the region. The process of nation-building received its first major jolt when the Nagas, a people virtually untouched by the freedom struggle, expressed their reservations about becoming a part of the newly independent republic and launched an armed struggle for an independent Naga homeland. But, it is the secessionist movement in Assam which seems to pose a much more serious challenge to the nation-state especially in view of the fact that the Assamese has had centuries of socio-cultural interaction with the rest of the subcontinent and had played a major role in the national struggle. Today, with its really complex ethnic situation, the insurmountable problem of influx and demographic change and the backward “colonial” state of the economy, Assam has emerged as the problem state of the Indian Union. This is a study which analyses in detail the socio-historical and political factors which have led to secessionist insurgency in states as different as Nagaland and Assam and shows how the future of the nation-state in India depends a lot on the ability to resolve the questions that are being thrown up by the struggles for a Swadin Asom and an independent Naga Lim.

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