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<td>Author(s)</td>
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The Status Of The Sri Lankan Film

By

Irvin Weerackody
&
Edwin Ariyadasa
SEMINAR ON ASIAN FILMS - SURVIVAL OR REVIVAL

SINGAPORE

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PAPER ON

THE STATUS OF THE SRI LANKAN FILM

JOINTLY PREPARED BY

IRVIN WEERACKODY

AND

EDWIN ARiyADAsA
A. BRIEF HISTORICAL NOTE

When Sinhala Cinema had its birth exactly forty-one years ago, the world was still in the throes of a global war. In Sri Lanka of that day, near-universal employment and war-time inflation ensured a steady flow of cash, bringing in its wake a euphoric sense of sudden affluence. The ever-present threat of death and destruction, though muted to an undertone, unleashed a frenzied indulgence in sensual pleasures. The most wide-spread form of entertainment available to the masses at that time was the legitimate theatre. In the new centres of human settlement, that had been called into existence through the needs of the war-effort, the travelling theatrical companies received an adoration that verged on the religious. The Sinhala actors and actresses, who became mass-idols of the day, could not cope adequately with the ever-burgeoning demand for their plays. In the nature of things, the live presence of a given actor or actress could happen only at one place at one time. If the theatre companies were keen to rake in the available shekels in larger quantities they had to devise a method of multiplying the appearance of these actors and actresses so that they could perform simultaneously at several centres.
The crucial question was, how could this 'miracle' be achieved?

Cinema, of course, held the key to the solution of this problem.

Convert the stage-play into its photographed version, and you get a simultaneous, island-wide audience for your play.

At the height of this preoccupation with the cinematographed play, that is approximately during the latter half of 1946, Sri Lanka did not have studio or other facilities for the production of films locally.

An artistic and economic pilgrimage had to be made to South India, as that was the film-making location closest to us.

On the 21st of January 1947, "Broken Promise" was released in Sri Lanka, as the first-ever Sinhala film. While making history, this pioneering film became the first of a series of Sinhala films to be made in South India. The impact of the South Indian influence on Sinhala cinema has been aptly summed up by film critic Jayavilal Wilegoda in the following words "On January 21, 1947, when the first Sinhala film - Broken Promise - was shown, the Indian cinema then speaking in about 12 different languages, found another tongue". The historical necessity that compelled the pioneering Sinhala film-makers to seek South Indian technical facilities and directorial talent, gave a marked theatrical bias to the Sinhala films of the initial phase.
It is to the credit of the Sinhala film-goer, that he grew tired of this kind of film-fare within the first decade itself. Unlike in South India where mass taste tends to remain static for ages, in the compact society in Sri Lanka the mature attitudes adopted towards other art-forms inevitably seep into cinema as well. In consequence, the masses discovered before long that what was offered to them as Sinhala cinema was neither Sinhala nor Cinema in the real sense. In an objective assessment of the evolution of the Sri Lankan film tradition, Lester James Peries has to be rated the first Film Director to pioneer a truly Sinhala Cinema. His *Rekhawa (The Line of Destiny) of 1956 was shot almost entirely on location in Sri Lanka, when outdoor film-making was a rare phenomenon both in South India and in Sri Lanka. The film was a considerable critical success though a box-office flop at the time of its initial release.

Lester James Peries, is without any doubt the most dominant presence in the landscape of Sri Lanka film-making, spanning a period of forty-one years. His achievement in the field of film-taste is equally important. He was not daunted by the box-office failure of his first film.
Unfazed, Lester James Peries persisted; and eventually the film-goer escaped the hypnotic grasp of the formula-film and began to acquire a slowly maturing taste for films made in a truly cinematic idiom.

Lester James Peries, is the most notable Sinhala-film pioneer, to have evolved entirely within the cinema tradition.

In historical hindsight, the Nineteen Sixties stand out as the decade that assembled the most spectacular array of cinematic talent in the whole history of Sri Lankan cinema. Director Lester James Peries' 'Gamperaliya' (The Changing Village), released in the mid-sixties, was the climactic meeting – so far in the history of Sri Lanka cinema – between an exclusively Sinhala theme and an essentially cinematic interpretation. "Gamperaliya", assumes a special importance in the history of Sinhala Cinema, for several other reasons as well. In 1965, "Gamperaliya" won the "Golden Pea-cock", awarded for the Best Film in the third International Film Festival organized by the Government of India. The Award was an impressive feather in the cap of Sinhala Cinema.
From then on the Sri Lankan film began to acquire a prestige it did not enjoy earlier – people no longer felt that they needed to be apologetic about the Sinhala Film, like an urban sophisticate about the coarse ways of his country cousin.

In the fifties and the sixties, a host of talented film-makers who are essentially men and women of cinema, followed Lester James Peries into the world of Sri Lankan Film. From the sixties, our cinema began achieving freshness through the contribution of a new wave of film directors.

This bred in the mind of the film-makers a desire to yearn towards the larger and more satisfying world of International Cinema that tended to offer tantalizing rewards of fame, prestige and even affluence. Momentarily, at the beginning of the Nineteen Seventies there was a perceptible preoccupation with quality consciousness. Directors of significance made a determined effort to venture out of the relative safety of the beaten-track of the formula and to utilize material which was unquestionably indigenous.

An inevitable result of this trend was the search for social issues that agitated the mind of men and women of Sri Lanka.
Knitting up all these tendencies into a practical resume, one could unhesitatingly state that the seventies opened with Sinhala Films moving towards the process of evolving into a National Cinema.

But, as the seventies progressed, Sri Lankan cinema began to fall victim to unabashed commercialism.

In 1972, the State Film Corporation (Now the National Film Corporation) was established in a state-sponsored effort to counter the ills that plagued Sri Lankan Cinema. In consequence, a good part of the cinema landscape of the subsequent years is dominated by the National Film Corporation and its giant presence.

In the late Seventies, the character and the quality of discussion of Sri Lankan cinema underwent a sudden change and, a tone of unprecedented urgency entered into film-parleys.

The reason for this development was the formal debut of Television in Sri Lanka in 1982. In the affairs of Sinhala Cinema in the late Seventies something like an atmosphere of life and death was in the air. For the first time since it began, Sinhala cinema was deeply disturbed, driving those connected with it, to an agonized soul-searching.
The Eighties, have so far been crisis years for Sri Lankan cinema. An in-depth scrutiny of this crisis is essential for a study of the current status of the Sri Lankan Film.

B. PROFILE OF THE STATUS TODAY

The predominant fact about the status of Sri Lankan cinema today, is the rapid dwindling of cinema attendance. The inescapable implication of this situation is that for the Sri Lankan, the Film is no longer the primary entertainment option. The factors that brought about this change of attitude will be looked at in detail in subsequent sections.

Despite the fact that cinema-attendance declined significantly during the period focussed upon, Sri Lankan cinema has achieved several memorable triumphs during this time.

In January 1987, while Sri Lankan cinema was completing its 40th year, Sri Lankan film actress Anoja Weerasinghe won the best-actress Award at the 13th International Indian Film Festival in New Delhi. The film "Koti Waligaya" (Tiger's Tail) set up the highest box-office record in Forty Years of Sri Lanka cinema, in 1986. The film, directed by the popular Film and Stage Actor Gamini Fonseka, has the contemporary social disturbances, as its theme.
During the past five years, Television in Sri Lanka made rapid headway. In 1979, the year in which Television was introduced to Sri Lanka, the number of TV sets in use was only 2,810. Today (1988) the number has escalated to about 520,000, (including around 90,000 clandestine TV sets utilized without a licence in the Northern and Eastern Provinces of the Island).

The concern for the future of Sri Lankan cinema has reached an extremely high level.

C. PRODUCTIONS

A special characteristic of the Sri Lankan cinema of the last five years is the progressive decline of the number of films produced each year. Several factors determined this outcome:

1. The cost of film production escalated by leaps and bounds.

2. The number of exhibition points began to dwindle.

3. Cinema attendance dropped making film-production a questionable investment.

4. The temptation of some would-be film-producer to turn to television for quicker and bigger profits.
The extent to which the cost of Film productions have soared could be seen through some comparisons. In 1975 the cost of Picture Negative (1000 ft) was Rs.602.00. In 1982 the price escalated to Rs.3,250.00. The escalation has gone on unabated from 1982 to 1988. The cost of services associated with film-making has also risen sharply. The average cost of transport for the production of a film in 1975 was in the range of Rs.50,000.00. In 1982, the relevant figure was Rs.150,000.00. Service-costs kept on ascending from 1982 to 1988. The costs have a way of soaring in tandem. The high transport costs will affect all the other services, sending up the total cost of production.

D. AUDIENCE TRENDS

In the early years of the National Film Corporation, the limits imposed on the import and public exhibition of films, would have brought in more viewers to cinema when locally made films were exhibited. The audiences at that time did not have an alternative to watching theatrically released films. But from 1979 the audience trends underwent a change. If the film-goer was disinclined to watch a film at a regular cinema he had an exhibition-point at home - the domestic TV set.
To him watching Television is psychologically more satisfying. He has greater control over what he views. He can adjust colour and sound to suit his personal taste. TV offered a wide variety of programmes. He could relax in his favourite seat, have whatever company he wished. Dressing up, and travelling were eliminated. When a TV set in a shop-window showed a film, people gathered in the streets to view what was going on, braving the weather if it came to that. These new audience trends contributed towards the decline in cinema attendance.

E. NUMBER OF CINEMAS

An event that deepened the crisis in Sri Lankan cinemas, was the destruction of cinema-halls in the course of terrorist violence that flared up in 1983.

Prior to these acts of destruction, there were 357 cinemas in Sri Lanka. But in July 1983, 12 of these were destroyed. The serious depletion of cinema attendance that came in the wake of this destruction can be gauged from the following table.
## CINEMAS DESTROYED IN JULY 1983 AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO THE CINEMA INDUSTRY

*(As at Year 1981)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME OF CINEMA</th>
<th>LOCATION</th>
<th>SEATING CAPACITY</th>
<th>SINHALA FILMS</th>
<th>TAMIL FILMS</th>
<th>ENGLISH FILMS</th>
<th>HINDI FILMS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sapphire</td>
<td>Colombo</td>
<td>591</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>317,197</td>
<td>7,695</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rio</td>
<td>Colombo</td>
<td>748</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>122,938</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalpana</td>
<td>Colombo</td>
<td>720</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>237,958</td>
<td>--</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trio</td>
<td>Dehiwela</td>
<td>564</td>
<td>103,412</td>
<td>1,798</td>
<td>23,450</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gamini</td>
<td>Colombo</td>
<td>601</td>
<td>329,208</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raj</td>
<td>Negombo</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>189,413</td>
<td>12,292</td>
<td>32,261</td>
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<td>Kasino</td>
<td>Matale</td>
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<td>93,564</td>
<td>99,616</td>
<td>47,156</td>
<td>-2,325</td>
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<td>Kandapola</td>
<td>372</td>
<td>10,671</td>
<td>76,153</td>
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<td>Trinco</td>
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<td>15,204</td>
<td>114,185</td>
<td>7,661</td>
<td>--</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liberty</td>
<td>Badulla</td>
<td>763</td>
<td>130,004</td>
<td>306,166</td>
<td>25,065</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modern</td>
<td>Badulla</td>
<td>830</td>
<td>160,686</td>
<td>69,201</td>
<td>17,490</td>
<td>1,432</td>
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<tr>
<td>Modern</td>
<td>Bandarawela</td>
<td>860</td>
<td>57,607</td>
<td>39,998</td>
<td>21,850</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>7,757</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,089,769</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,274,564</strong></td>
<td><strong>321,164</strong></td>
<td><strong>8,099</strong></td>
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*Note - Total cinema attendance for the Year 1981 = 58,000,000*
In the past five years, the cinemas in the Northern and the Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka did not function with any regularity due to the serious disruption of life in these areas as an outcome of terrorist violence. Exhibition of films in other areas was also interrupted from time to time, since the curfew that had to be imposed due to acts of violence made cinema attendance impossible.

Some of the cinemas in these affected areas were among the highest grossers in the whole Island. The non-exhibition of films in these, has brought on a serious depletion of the income of the National Film Corporation.

F. **THE IMPACT OF TELEVISION ON SRI LANKA CINEMA**

The adverse impact of Television on Cinema is a classical situation in international media. TV, at least in the initial years of introduction has always dealt a blow to the Film Industry. Even such a mighty giant as the Hollywood Film Industry reeled when TV impacted upon it. It has not recovered fully still.

In Sri Lanka, there is something of a simplistic explanation of the manner TV has affected the Film. According to this interpretation, cinema-going has dwindled because Sinhala films were shown on Television.
Although this could be one reason for falling cinema-attendance, the real cause is much more subtle.

A TV watcher views on his domestic set a slick, technically advanced and very well acted TV programme of foreign origin. A locally produced programme follows immediately on the screen. The TV watcher sees that the local-programme looks clumsy in contrast to what he has just seen. He experiences a sense of dissatisfaction with the local product. But he cannot articulate why he finds the local product wanting. He extends the sense of dissatisfaction beyond the TV screen to the locally produced film. Invariably he finds that he is disenchanted with the locally made film as well. In other words, he does not find in the locally produced film the slickness and the accelerated pace he experiences in the foreign TV programmes and in the imported film.

This is the more subtle reason why film-goers have shunned cinema in droves.

There is yet another formidable threat to the film. It is the Video Cassette.
G. THE VIDEO

Those who possess the necessary hardware, insert a cassette in their VHS set and create their own programming, independent of the programming telecast by the formal stations. The tendency to use the VHS hardware operates more acutely when the regular stations transmit weak programmes - weak from the point of view of their regular TV watchers. Video shops that hire out cassettes to members have begun to spring up in most parts of the Island. The Video Cassette promises 'thrills' and 'experiences' that the regular cinema cannot afford to give.

In an effort to survive, even regular cinemas have shown a partiality to exhibit films that teeter on the verge of 'blue' films.

Outstanding film personalities - both artists and technicians - have deserted the film for Television and Video work. The Report of the Presidential Committee in Sri Lankan cinema states, that a well-known Film Director has advertised that his services are available for the production of Video records of Weddings and other social functions.

The Film Industry has been caught up in a vicious circle as a result of the falling off of cinema-attendance. Since incomes are reduced to a trickle, owners find it difficult to maintain their theatres in proper trim.
Sound-system is faulty. Seats are dilapidated. Appearance is not quite attractive. All these again repel the would-be film-goer.

The element of 'addiction' to films was made up of favourite 'stars' and singers. But the compulsion to stay with film stars and film songs is vastly weakened.

The Teledrama - on the other hand - is quite addictive. When a story is serialized, the TV watchers get addicted to their favourite TV stars. They await their return impatiently, until the next episode.

The threat to the Film Industry from the Video Cassette is also very real. Video parlours have arisen in the cities and suburbs. Each has its regular coterie of clients.

H. DEVELOPMENT OF TALENT AND TECHNIQUES

There is a wide-spread recognition of the need to develop talent and technique in the field of film-making. But only a peripheral effort has been made to fill this lacuna.

In 1969, the state set up a series of higher educational Institutions entitled "Junior Universities". In one of these the first-ever course in Mass Communication, at higher educational level, was launched.
One of the areas of study at the Junior University Mass Communications Course, was Cinema.

In 1972, a Department of Mass Communication was set up at University level at the present University of Kelaniya. Here, the course of studies includes cinema.

Over and above these, private individuals and groups organise Cinema Courses from time to time.

Although a somewhat strong film-society movement thrived in Sri Lanka about a decade ago, it is now safe to assume that the Film Society Movement has now passed into History.

In around 1979, The National Film Corporation made an attempt to organise a Federation of Film Societies. No tangible result issued out of this effort.

Local Film Festivals, held both at State and Private levels, take on the shape mainly of Show Business occasions and cannot strictly be regarded as initiatives towards the development of talent and technique.
The Film Festivals and Film Shows organised by Foreign Embassies and Local Branches of Foreign Institutes, tend at times to be moves towards the development of talent and technique.

The German Cultural Institute, hold seminars from time to time to enable film-enthusiasts to study in depth the works of individual film-makers and works in the category of Experimental Films. Quite often authoritative critics from abroad are present at these occasions, providing opportunities for the development of film-sense.

The American Embassy exhibited a series of films on the art and technique of film-making.

But the best opportunities for the development of talent and technique are offered by the Film Industry itself. Apprenticeship in the Industry is, without any question, the best mode of talent and technique development.

**IMPORT AND EXPORT OF FILMS**

From the time the exhibition of films started in Sri Lanka, there has been a film import-business of a considerable size. For quite a long while, the main-fare of film-exhibition was made up of imported films, which spoke English, Hindi and Tamil.
In the area of exchange and export, there has been no activity to speak of. On a very rare occasion, a stray local film would be exported commercially, or would be exchanged.

As regards the exchange of films, an interesting instance is provided by Sri Lanka – Pakistan co-productions. These productions have proved commercially successful in both these countries. In fact a Sri Lankan film-star is one of the most adored actresses in Pakistan. This proves the point that for successful exchange of film, the exchange of stars is a very vital factor.

This is an area that should receive close scrutiny when we consider export and exchange of films.

Even the well-known Yugoslav film SUTJESKA (1972) in which Richard Burton portrayed Marshal Tito, achieved international fame because of the exchange of stars. This way the exchange of stars seems to hold the key to successful exchange and export of films.