

Films on Lankan war in stormy seas

March
14

2017 10:33 PM



A still from Sengadal.



By **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

The civil war in Sri Lanka was a bitterly fought one between the minority Tamils and the majority Sinhala. The Tamil-speaking population – which has its sympathisers in the people of Tamil Nadu, bound as the two are by a common language – was demanding a separate homeland in the northern parts of Sri Lanka. For 30 years, the two communities battled, ruining the economy and causing unimaginable suffering among the common people. In the end, the Tamils lost, and their leader, Vellupillai Prabhakaran, who headed a militant organisation called Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), was brutally shot dead by the Sri Lankan army. The strife in terms of human displacement with one million Tamils now living outside their homeland, is only comparable to World War II.

But while so many films have been made about the Holocaust and the Nazi atrocities on Jews – with six million of them being killed in gas chambers – not many movies have been made on the Sri Lankan conflict. The most important reason is the intense hostility towards any such film – both from the Tamils in India and the Indian authorities. While the Tamils imagine every movie on the subject to be pro-Sinhala, the Central Board of Film Certification in India feels that any work even remotely talking about the Sri Lankan issue has the potential to create communal disturbance. Outside officialdom, Indian extremist groups are always targeting such cinema.

The famous Lankan auteur, Prassana Vithanage's *With You Without You* – a really touching drama about a Sinhala soldier-turned-pawn-broker who marries a Tamil girl – was stopped from being screened in Chennai at the eleventh hour by Tamil chauvinists, who felt that the movie was pro-Sinhala. It was not. By no stretch of imagination, I would say.

Another film fighting it out is Sherine Xavier's *Muttruppulliyaa* (*Is It A Full Stop?*). This is a 105-minute documentary that narrates the true story of a Tamil Tiger rebel who has a hard time raising her three children after the war ends in 2009. Her husband had been captured by the Lankan army.

The protagonist's agony has been detailed in all its stark brutality in a movie which also explores the horrid plight of hundreds of women desperately searching for their missing husbands. There is a lot of real footage with recreated sequences.

The documentary was ready in 2015, but it took years for Xavier to get an Indian censor certificate. Exhibition in Sri Lanka is out of the question. Now armed with Indian rights, Xavier's search for a distributor has begun. There is none to be seen even on the horizon, for theatres know that they will receive threats from fringe groups once a release date is announced. No cinema is willing to see vandalism on its premises.

Another fiery filmmaking activist is Leena Manimekalai. In 2003, she began making documentaries, and it was one such project which took her to Dhanushkodi – on the island of Rameshwaram – that was wiped out during a severe cyclone in the early 1960s.

"I thought I would do a documentary on Rosemary, a character who appears in my fiction feature, *Sengadal* (2011)", Manimekalai told me in the course of a chat in Chennai. "I began my project in 2009 – the year the 30-year ethnic war in Sri Lanka ended. I had been a part of the Tamil resistance movement in Chennai. I will call myself pro-Tamil, but not pro-LTTE. So you find yourself in a no-man's land, and you are at once seen as an enemy."

This is one reason why *Sengadal* or *Dead Sea* attracted problems. "But I was fascinated by the stories of Sri Lankan Tamils who had suffered at the hands of both the country's predominantly Sinhala military and the dictatorial attitude of the LTTE. One of them, Rosemary, was the widow of a Tamil fisherman who was killed by the Sri Lankan Navy. She then landed in the refugee camp at Dhanushkodi. There are 300 families there even today. And Rosemary helped me discover the distraught families. When I found that each one of them had a story to say, I decided that I must cross over to the realm of fiction to narrate something powerful. *Sengadal* happened," Manimekalai said. She had a massive issue with the Censor Board before *Sengadal* got a screening certificate. But, of course. She wondered why when there are so many movies on the Nazis and Jews, we should be so touchy about the Sri Lankan Tamils. A million of them were displaced during the war, and there are so many stories to be told about them.

Sengadal, Prassanna Vithanage's *With You Without You* and Jaques Audiard's *Dheepan* – which won the Palm d'Or last year at Cannes – are

perhaps three of the very few films on this subject.

Manimekalai is planning two movies – one on the controversial Kerala poet, Kamala Das (whose conversion to Islam caused a lot of ill-feeling towards her), and the other titled Sunshine – a story about the tragedy of the cargo ship, Sun Sea, which sailed with 492 Sri Lankan Tamils from Thailand to Canada, but was not allowed to dock. A lot of people died. The year was 2010, and there was a lot of worldwide suspicion about Sri Lankans. It was assumed that most of them were LTTE rebels.

Be that as it may, Manimekalai seems all set to sail on one perilous journey after another, passionate as she is with opening the Pandora's Box of heart-wrenching tales of simple suffering folks from an island nation.

* Gautaman Bhaskaran has been writing on Indian and world cinema for close to four decades, and may be e-mailed at gautamanb@hotmail.com