

Prasanna Vithanage's *Paradise*: Police brutality and a marriage implosion amidst Sri Lanka's economic collapse

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5 September 2024

Paradise, written and directed by veteran independent filmmaker Prasanna Vithanage, is a compelling drama about the widening cracks in the marriage of a young Indian film producer and his wife whilst holidaying in Sri Lanka. While early European traders reportedly called the island paradise, a word constantly repeated by the tourist industry today, the film's title is obviously ironic.

The 93-minute multilingual film is set in June 2022, a few months after Sri Lanka's president Gotabhaya Rajapakse declared the country bankrupt and unable to repay most of its foreign loans. The government responded with immediate rationing of diesel, gas, food and other essentials, sparking mass protests in Colombo and across the country.

Kesav (Roshan Matthew) and his wife Amritha (Darshana Rajendran) have decided to take advantage of the parlous state of the island's economy and celebrate their fifth wedding anniversary at a tea plantation bungalow in Sri Lanka's Central Hills. Their idyllic and well-appointed accommodation is nowhere near the huge demonstrations in the major cities, but close to the old and overcrowded homes of poverty-stricken Tamil plantation workers.

The trip includes visits conducted by Mr Andrew (Shyam Fernando), a former bank worker but now a local guide and driver, to several historic sites referenced in *Ramayana*, the ancient Sanskrit epic about Lord Rama the incarnation of Vishnu, one of Hinduism's principal gods.

According to the legend, Rama's wife Sita was kidnapped and taken to Sri Lanka by Ravana the island's king. A war ensues and she is eventually rescued by Rama.

The couple are sceptical and generally uninterested in the religious mythology. Towards the end of the film Amithra points out to Mr Andrew that there are 300 different versions of the ancient story. He embarrassingly admits that he has his own tourist interpretation.

Amritha, however, is attracted and emotionally moved by the island's striking natural beauty and especially a wild deer that appears occasionally near their bungalow accommodation. She is unsettled, however, by some local anti-government demonstrations that they briefly encounter and wants to know

more about them.

Preoccupied with his career, Kesav is untouched by the protests and unlike Amithra, his only interest in the deer is whether it can be shot by bungalow manager Shree (Sumith Ilango) and eaten for dinner.

Soon after the couple arrives in Sri Lanka, Kesav learns his company has been chosen to produce nine Netflix episodes of a Hindi version of *Squid Game*, the popular Korean survival drama series.

While millions around the world have watched *Squid Game*, attracted by its anti-capitalist critique, Kesav is excited, not by the artistic challenge of further exposing the brutality of the existing social order but purely by the personal economic benefits it will bring. "We'll be filthy rich," he says on receiving the news, later telling Amritha, "The struggle phase is over, now we can enjoy life."

But that night, the couple are awoken by thieves who have broken into their bedroom, stealing their mobile phones and Kesav's iPad. The theft is a disaster because the iPad contains all the preparatory work for the *Squid Game* episodes.

The following day, Kesav orders a local police officer, Sergeant Bandara (Mahendra Perera), to quickly find the culprits. He threatens to contact the Indian High Commissioner if the sergeant does not immediately recover the iPad and phones.

Kesav's demands set into motion a series of events which lay bare social relations in their holiday "paradise" and inexorably push the middle-class couple apart.

Bandara rounds up three young Tamil men from the nearby plantation workers accommodation and asks the Indian couple to "identify" them at the local police station. After some initial hesitation, Kesav insists that one of the men had robbed the couple. Amithra is not so sure and is concerned about her husband's forthright response.

The accused young man protests his innocence but Bandara, a 40-year veteran of the Sri Lankan police, knows how to extract admissions of guilt. In fact, this procedure is so commonplace that Bandara does not think twice about allowing the Indian couple to remain near the cell and hear him bash the accused to

within an inch of his life.

The beating is so brutal that the police later attempt to transport the seriously injured young man to the nearest hospital but with scant supplies of diesel, their vehicle runs out of fuel.

Kesav, Amritha and Mr Andrew, who happen to pass by the stranded police car, are enlisted to get the injured man to hospital. He dies in hospital and cannot be revived because the facility has been hit by power cuts and has no diesel for its generators.

Tamil estate workers and their families angrily demonstrate outside the police station over the murder of the young suspect, attacking the building and forcing Bandara and other police officers to evacuate.

Kesav, Amritha and Mr Andrew later return to their bungalow with Bandara, who has been officially assigned to protect the Indian couple. After a couple of drinks, Bandara decides to resume his investigation into the bungalow robbery crime.

Within minutes he insults Iqbal (Azher Samsodeen), the bungalow's Muslim cook, and accuses Shree, the Tamil manager, of being involved in the original crime. This results in an angry altercation with Shree threatening to kill Bandara. "You took three innocent boys and blamed them. And one is dead now. Now you are going to do the same thing to me," he says.

The potentially fatal exchange is interrupted by protesting Tamil estate workers who have converged on the bungalow and began attacking it. The violent confrontation ends tragically.

Some days later Bandara, Iqbal, Shree, Amritha and Mr Andrew separately explain to an unseen police officer their versions of the disastrous event. The next day Amritha asks Mr Andrew whether he believed what he said to the police. He doesn't answer, his silence implying that nothing will change. The film concludes with a final lingering image of one of the Ramayana tourist trail sites.

Paradise is a multilayered and compelling work with excellent performances from the entire cast. Skillful interplays of Malayalam, English, Sinhala and Tamil, especially between the Indian couple and their guide and Sergeant Bandara, are strong and further illustrate the class differentiations and tensions.

Director Vithanage also punctures the commercialism of the Ramayana tourist industry and by implication suggests cinema audiences think about how this mythology is reinterpreted and used by Indian and Sri Lankan religious chauvinists alike to bolster their respective nationalist ideologies.

Paradise contains no footage of the months-long demonstrations in Colombo occurring at the time, nor is it necessary. The plight of the masses and Tamil plantation workers in particular—the result of past and present government attacks—and the embedded state-sanctioned prejudices are manifest throughout.

The brief scene of the grieving Tamil mother wailing in the village street with the body of her murdered son, or another scene at the local hospital where a young mother screams about the death of her child, are deeply affecting. Their cries echo thousands of others whose children have been killed by police repression and government cuts to public health, or direct military assaults during the 1983–2009 civil war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

As the film makes clear, police frameup and beatings are not an aberration but the norm. In 2023 alone, Sri Lanka's Human Rights Commission received over 200 complaints of police torture.

Life is cheap for Bandara, whose only concern is obtaining a signed confession. If a suspect dies during an "investigation," he will simply round up others.

In one chilling exchange Amithra asks him whether they are responsible for the boy's death. "No madam," Bandara replies. "He is responsible for your troubles and all my troubles."

"But isn't this a human life. Doesn't it have any value?" she asks.

"Yes. During the elections it has the value of one vote," Bandara answers, and repeats this in Sinhala to another policeman who laughs in agreement.

Bandara, of course, is just a small cog in the state apparatus. Last December the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka found Deshabandu Tennakoon, who had just been appointed Acting Inspector General of Police, and two other police officers guilty of torturing a man accused of theft in 2010. Tennakoon, who authorised police assaults on protesters in 2022, is notorious for his violations of human rights.

Paradise is a poignant and commendable work and fully deserves the numerous awards and critical praise it has won following its premiere late last year at the Busan International Film Festival in South Korea. The film is currently screening in Sri Lanka, where thousands have watched it since its release in July, and is now available on Amazon Prime in India. It will be screened on the BBC's South Asian Film Season on Channel 4 and available for streaming in the United Kingdom and Ireland later this month.

While Vithanage has made the first and only film set during the economic crisis and mass protests that brought down the Rajapakse regime, the class oppression and injustices dramatised in *Paradise* are not Sri Lankan questions but another component of the social reality confronting millions of workers and youth around the world.



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