**Introduction:**

*“One reason for our inability to understand, or understand fully, the ‘*[*ethnic conflict*](https://www.colombotelegraph.com/?s=ethnic+conflict&x=5&y=6)*’ in Sri Lanka may be our emotional involvement with the conflict one way or the other. This does not mean that the emotional dis-involvement could necessarily bring a proper understanding of the conflict. The reason is that apart from the emotional dis-involvement, it might require a certain amount of knowledge to understand the intricacies of the ethnic conflict. Ethnic conflicts undoubtedly are one of the most intricate problems in human society.” (*Dr. Laksiri Fernando, Columbo Telegraph, June 8, 2014)[[1]](#footnote-1)

Sri Lankan Sinhalese Cinema: a Search for Identity?

A film is the result of a particular assemblage of material and cultural circumstances. The content, style and shape of any given movie are defined or delineated by for whom the movie is aimed, that is to say it depends on the audience (Gunawardana, 103). In Sri Lanka, based on language, there is two nations: the majority Sinhala-speaking and the minorities Tamil-speaking, thus, this language criteria shaped and influenced the film production, distribution and exhibition in Sri Lanka. Cinema in Sri Lanka tended to be associated with the majority and so, “when one speaks of Sri Lankan cinema, one is really referring to Sinhala-language film. The few Tamil-language films made in Sri Lanka, […] hardly constitue a significant element in the total frame” (Gunawardana, 103).

According to Jayadeva Uyango, in *Cinema in Cultural and Political Debates in Sri Lanka*, “Cinema, as far as its relationship with Sinhalese society is concerned, has long suffered a sort of identity crisis as a cultural form” (Uyangoda, 37). Indeed, a tension can be noticed between the social ideology of culture and the medium of cinema. This tension can actually be explained because cinema supposedly is a way of representing an “authentic” form of indigenous culture, yet even after more than seventy years of existence it is still questioned if cinema really infiltrated the indigenous culture of Sinhalese society. It seems to be extremely important for the Sinhalese “to promote an authentically indigenous Sinhala cinema” (Uyangoda, 37).

Sri Lankan Cinema industry began with the production of *Kadawunu Poranduwa* (The Broken Promise) by B.A.W Jayamanne in 1947 in Sinhalese language, the language of the majority Sinahala people. Sri Lankan Cinema has today reached around 1,300 movies[[2]](#footnote-2). However, from the beginning, Sinhala cinema was labelled as a kind of entertainment finding its roots “among the urban folk of unacceptable moral values” (Uyangoda, 37). Indeed, during the first years, the majority of movies were made in studios in South India and thus, Sri Lankan movies fell into line with Indian movies, that is to say a kind of deprived of authenticity which is actually the anti-ideology of the Sinhala culture. Many directors were themselves from South India or Sri Lankan Tamils and even Sinhalese directors were strongly influenced by Indian cinema, therefore Sri Lankan movies were just South Indian movies in Sinhalese language. It awakened in Sinhalese people’s mind a strong desire to “free” the Sinhala cinema from South Indian influence. The aim was to restrain the Indian expansionism.

This is why I choose to discuss in this paper, is the Sri Lankan Sinhala Cinema, a way for the Sinhalese to assert themselves, and a way to reinforce they identity?

First, I will deal with the Sinhalese/ Tamils conflict and how it has shaped the Sri Lankan society, but how it has also shaped the Sri Lankan Cinema Industry.

Then, I will focus on this desire to make an authentic Sinhalese cinema which was originally a nationalist idea and then became a more widely spread idea among the Sinhalese literati.

1. **Sinhalese Versus Tamils**

Sri Lanka has been embedded in a civil war for two decades. Just like ethnic conflicts in many other post-colonial countries, the different groups of Sri Lanka give mainly allegiance to the group, rather than to the entire country. The Sinhalese majority has slowly won the majority of seats in the government and has been quite aggressive toward the Tamil minority that they perceived as a threat to national stability, rather than a possible partner in power sharing.

1. **The ethnic conflict**

The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka has many roots causes. Sri Lanka got independence from the United Kingdom in 1948. About 74% of Sri Lanka’s population is Sinhalese who are mainly Buddhist. Tamils represent 18% of Sri Lanka’s population and are mainly Hindus[[3]](#footnote-3). After achieving the independence, Sri Lanka had dealt with the ravaging inter-ethnic conflict between majority Sinhalese and minority Tamils (Zwier, 13). Indeed, Sinhalese largely alienated Sri Lankan Tamils from society. The policies of the Sinhalese government were thus, in favor of Sinhalese and not Tamils, it then led to the rise of the extremist Tamil group called LTTE (Liberation of Tamil Tigers Eelam) in 1972.

The majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils are not only ethnically different but also linguistically and religiously distinct. Indeed, most of Sinhalese are Buddhists and some are Christians and they speak Sinhala. The Sinhalese considers Sri Lanka as the cradle of their religion and to them it is normal to urge the Sri Lankan government about the protection and promotion of Buddhism. On the other side, Tamils speak Tamil and are mainly Hindus. Both Hinduism and Buddhism came originally from India, yet after the independence, the struggle for power began and the religious and ethnic components “came into play and resulted in bloody ethnic conflict” (Zwier, 14).

The political and economic discriminations based on identity resulted in Tamils creating an extreme group and taking rough measures against government and Sinhala majority by using terrorism. Even though, the civil war is over since 2009, a peaceful Sri Lanka is still undetermined and a potential unification between the Sinhalese and Tamils is still uncertain. A year after the end of the war, this division between Sinhalese and Tamils was still not seeing as a priority for the government. Indeed, after being asked about Sri Lanka’s division, President Rajapakse answered: “Sri Lankan are not worried about these things, they are only for outsiders and NGOs with nothing better to think about. Sri Lankans want economic development […] but a political solution is coming” (The Economist, 2010)[[4]](#footnote-4). According to many experts if government keeps failing to provide solutions to Tamils in term of Tamil rights and decentralization of power, the Tamil militancy will continue.

1. **The Sri Lankan Cinema Industry**

First, there was no other purpose except entertainment in making movies and importing movies from the West in Sri Lanka. Indeed, the audience did not really struggle with language barrier either even with the foreign movies because “for instance, Tamil and Hindi films had a rich repertoire of visuals, action and sound; spectacular adventures, battles and fights, scenery, laughter and tears, heroes and heroines of epic qualities and, of course, melodious music” (Uyangoda, 39). Those kinds of movies were as popular among the two communities Sinhalese and Tamils, thus the medium of cinema penetrates both of the communities, there was no ethnic obstacles. However, a strong radical nationalism against Indian and especially Tamil cinema appears in Sinhalese society at the end of the 60s. Indeed, Sinhalese feared Indian expansionism because of the expansion of Indian culture through the medium of cinema. This idea was in line with “nationalist passions and the cultural anxieties of the rural Sinhalese youth” (Uyangoda, 38). Since then appeared a kind of boycott of Tamil movies but not only by the audience but also by the cinema industry. Indeed, even “local Tamil film critics have not been critical enough mainly because they have wanted to encourage local production and allow indigenous talent to develop” (Sivakumaran, 44). This reasoning has later put the Sri Lankan Tamil Cinema industry at a disadvantage.

For the Sinhala people, making movies in their own language took a cultural and linguistic dimension, thus, talking about Sri Lankan cinema became basically the same thing than talking about Sinhala cinema (Sivakumaran, 45). The aim of the Sinhalese was to create what they called a “truly indigenous Sinhalese cinema” (Uyangoda, 40). Film critics were very rough toward filmmakers who attempted to follow the Tamil and Hindi cinema of India, they were in favor of a realistic and authentic cinema, that is to say a Sinhalese cultural identity in cinema. Making an indigenous cinema that reflected the authentically Sinhalese culture (Uyangoda, 40). The idea of the need for an indigenous Sinhalese cinema spread even wider during the seventies. For the improvement of Sinhala cinema, it became essential to get rid of the Indian influence. On one side there was the popular genre seeking for melodrama and sensationalism, a genre based most of the time on the same pattern with a hero, a villain, a woman in love, an impossible love because of social classes and a happy ending. However, on the other side there was what Sinhalese people called “yatharthavadi” (realism), that is to say an authentic cinema (Uyangoda, 41).

1. **A Sri Lankan Sinhalese Cinema**

As said previously, Sri Lankan cinema and Sinhalese cinema became synonymous. Moreover, the few Tamil-language films made in Sri Lanka “hardly constitute a significant element in the total frame” (Gunawardana, 103).

1. **A Realistic Sinhalese cinema?**

Tamil speakers had just to import movies from South India if they wanted to hear their language, whereas Sinhalese speakers had to make their own movies if they wanted to hear their language. Thus, making Sinhalese movies almost became a cultural concern.

On opposition to “yatharthavadi” (realism), the Sinhalese critical discourse choose the words “Bolanda” (silly, unrealistic) and Vanija (money-making) to characterize Tamil cinema (Uyangoda, 41). However, what does “realism” in Sri Lankan cinema really mean remains pretty “unrefined” (Uyangoda, 41). Some argue that realism involves reflecting the conditions of life as they are, yet, in traditional art and literature, the epic and the unreal usually prevail.

The Sinhalese desire for an indigenous cinema was in some extend a way to legitimize the Sinhalese culture. However, this wish for an indigenous cinema was mostly shared among the literati: “They were university academics, writers, journalists, professionals and bureaucrats, and their cultural sensitivity and aesthetic consciousness stood clearly separated from the mass of the people.” (Uyangoda, 42). Indeed, most of the filmmakers who want to have a chance to make a difference at the box-office do not take risks and agree with the popular genre, that is to say they make movies similar to the Indian cinema of Bombay and Madras (Gunawardana, 108). Filmmakers who tried new things “thematically or stylistically” speaking except in rare occasions do not succeed to make Sinhalese movies both “works of substance and good box-office at the same time.” (Gunawardana, 108).

1. **Ways used to favorize Sinhalese cinema**

As said previously, the ethnic conflict between Sinhalese and Tamils kind of transposed itself into the medium of cinema. Indeed, Sinhalese nationalists were aware that the laws of the state were more in favor of Sinhalese and tended to neglect Tamils, thus it was helping them to reinforce Sinhalese culture as the culture of the masses. They wanted to do the same thing on the field of cinema. Indeed, they demanded the government to intervene in “regulating the importation, production and distribution of films” (Uyangoda, 42). From the beginning of the seventies, the state agreed to interfere in order to “safeguard the indigenous Sinhala cinema” (Uyangoda, 42). From that moment, the importation of Indian films was harshly limited, and the State Film Corporation made the decisions about films distributions. Moreover, the corporation had the authority to approve or not film scripts that would not be in line with the “artistic standards of the Sinhala cinema” (Uyangoda, 42).

Nevertheless, those state interventions are regarded as insufficient for the Sinhalese nationalists, thus the way of protesting took another form. In the eighties, theatres where Tamil films were attacked and destroyed by Sinhalese nationalists (Uyangoda, 43). In 1989, the nationalism action reached another level. Indeed, Sinhalese nationalists, without any government support, took the decision to forbid any “importation, distribution, screening and viewing of any Indian film or video” (Uyangoda, 42). The hunt and the capture of the “traitors” were the fruit of clandestine patriotic groups and led to summary trials where capital punishment were administered. This prohibition on Indian cinema was “astoundingly effective”. (Uyangoda, 43).

**Conclusion:**

Cinema today is caught up in the trap of antagonistic ethnic relations in Sri Lankan society, between Sinhalese and Tamils. Indeed, Sinhalese speak Sinhala and are for the majority Buddhists and Tamils speak Tamil and are for most of them are Hindus, thus it is difficult to find similar shared features between them. However, cinema could help to bring together the two identities and make one common Sri Lankan identity. It could be very worthwhile to use the spectrum of cinema to have characters from the various communities and to make them interact in significant manners and challenging the real issues that divide them from one another.

By reinforcing a real Sri Lankan identity, it will allow the different cultures to co-exist together and to see in a wider way: we are human beings before anything else regardless race, religion, cultural difference….

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1. https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/the-major-picture-in-understanding-our-ethnic-conflict/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.ipsnews.net/1999/12/arts-entertainment-cinema-sri-lanka-sinhala-cinema-hurt-by-exclusivism/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Based on 1981 statistics, the population is as follows: Sinhalese: 74.0%; Sri Lankan Tamils: 12.7%; Indian Tamils: 5.5% [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.economist.com/briefing/2010/01/28/victory-for-the-tiger-slayer [↑](#footnote-ref-4)