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Sri Lanka: 'The Frozen Fire' - the JVP as Art And Political Reality

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There are diverse views about the politics of the JVP and the inherent limitations contained in their political discourse. In particular, many of the views that exist regarding the politics of comrade Rohana Wijeweera and his assassination have contrasting narratives. In such an environment, even coming forward to produce a cinema work like 'The Frozen Fire' is a matter that needs commendation and appreciation.

The film 'The Frozen Fire' had also been nominated as 'the best movie' at 2018 Oscar Academy Awards. This film will be screened in Australia sometime in the future. Hence, this article is based on the information found in the sources I have so far been able to read about the film. The film has been introduced as "the story of the iron men tempered in the time of fire". According to the information presented by comrade Ariyawansa Dhammage, who had composed the concept paper for the film and comrade Anuruddha Jayasinghe who has directed the film, the creation of this film is the result of the experiences of a few years and a study conducted about that turbulent period.

Most of the creative artists who appear for radical projects are not those engaged in revolutionary politics. Similarly, most of those engaged in alternative politics have a little understanding about radical art creations. Attempts at artistic creation based on research studies cannot be expected from most of those involved in politics.

The statement of the director who had been associated with the student movement of the JVP, that he had "an intention to present this creation very well" shows that he deviates from the tradition. The producers of the film claim that they met and discussed with the people and political colleagues comrade Rohana had been closely associated with during the period he spent underground, received their assistance, acted as per their guidance and "showed the instances that needed to be corrected".

The decision whether an artistic creation demonstrates the reality or not depends on whether the producers have designated the imagery and frames aesthetically, accurately, clearly and realistically. On the other hand, it is not always possible to decide whether an artistic creation is acceptable or not merely based on political theories. The artistic nature of a creative work can be assessed on the basis of theories and laws that correspond to art itself. The aim of this article is not to review the artistic nature of this creative work.

The political correctness of a creation is determined by a scientific and logical analysis. In what form the creation becomes visible at a certain point in time and for what reasons can be clarified only politically. A creation cannot separate itself from the prevailing socioeconomic and political circumstances. A creation that is detached cannot survive and protect itself. The active nature of artistic works of our time is determined only to the extent that such creations are involved in the endeavours of transforming society.

It is important to emphasize here that the facts mentioned below are not presented to aim at the current JVP or its leadership.

The immediate context for this article was a review comrade Thimbiriyagama Bandara has published as “‘The Frozen Fire’ called politics and life’. The review mentions as follows:

1. “The right-wing government using as a pretext the racist clashes of 83 proscribes the JVP. When attempts were made to arrest its leaders, they were forced to pursue an underground political existence for their safety.”
2. Referring to various sources for studying Wijeweera’s character and even mentioning that in the bibliography is a positive characteristic of Anuruddha. Some of our filmmakers bear no such qualities. A human can lie in life. In Art it is not possible to lie.”

I need to make a certain clarification here.

The Black July Pogrom of 1983 was launched on July 24. 37 Tamil detainees held in Welikada Prison were massacred on July 25. On July 26, an island-wide curfew was imposed. On July 28, for the second time, 15 more prisoners were killed in Welikada Prison. The President addressed the people on July 28. On July 31 the Communist Party of Sri Lanka, the Nava Sama Samaja Party and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna were proscribed by an extra-ordinary gazette notification, based on the allegation of conspiring to capture state power by force through racial riots.

During this time, I was at the Party Head Office in Armour Street, Colombo and at home in Mawaramandiya, Kadawatha where we lived. As I stayed back in the Party Head Office, I could gather information from our members about the groups that led the Black July pogrom. The Criminal Investigation Department detained us only about two days later. While being held in detention, it was possible for me to challenge the baseless allegations the state had raised against the JVP utilising the information I had collected and a few months later, to get all those held in detention released without any charges as a result of comrade Chitra filing a habeas corpus application.

Prior to the proscription of the JVP on July 31, the final full plenary session of the Central Committee was held for three days from July 21 to 23 to discuss the party policy on the national question. This session was held at the party school at comrade Vijitha Ranaweera’s residence in Vitharandeniya, Tangalle. I did not agree with the stand taken at this session to change the party policy on the national question that existed until then. I came out of that session with the decision to resign from the party due to the stand taken and also due to additional differences of opinion I had at that time with the party leadership.

What I wish to point out here is the fact that comrade Rohana went to comrade Vijitha Ranaweera’s house to go underground, not after the proscription of the party, but on the day the Black July pogrom started, the July 25th itself. The vehicle in which he left was driven by comrade Sepala Liyanage, who is still with the JVP. Comrade Rohana went underground without consulting or discussing the matter with the members of the Politburo.

Comrade Somawansa Amarasinghe met me at the Armour Street office and took part in a discussion I had with other parties about the party proscription, especially with the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, on a day after the 31st of July. The view of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party was also that we should go underground, but I did not agree with it. Likewise, I did not agree at all with the decision to go underground that comrade Rohana had taken all by himself at that point in time.

The opinion I held in the past and hold currently is that because we of the JVP, including the

leadership had nothing at all to do with any of the incidents in connection with July 1983 riots, let alone a conspiracy to topple the state, we should have responded to the political and criminal charges of the bourgeois regime levelled against us and defeated such allegations amongst the people while remaining in the open. When leaders like comrades Rohana and Gamanayake went into hiding, the politically erroneous view that the JVP would have in fact been involved with the July 1983 pogrom and a conspiracy to topple the state would have been consolidated in society. However, at that time the JVP repeatedly appealed on the national and international level to demand the state of Sri Lanka to lift the proscription of the party.

While I was held in detention at the fourth floor of the CID as well as after I was released in December 1983, all the efforts to bring comrade Rohana to the open failed. I still believe that is why the state was able to make its ideology prevail for some time. When I met President J R Jayewardene regarding the lifting of the party proscription, what he said was that 'Rohan' needs to come and make a statement. Every time when I proposed the JVP and comrade Rohana to come to the open, the only answer I received was that he would be killed if he did so. However, there were no such killings in the south by 1983-84.

According to the information I have, I was not alone in the attempts to bring the JVP and comrade Rohana to open politics. Comrade Prins Gunasekara, who passed away recently and the then Minister of Finance Ronnie de Mel with whom comrade Rohana had maintained contacts later on through comrade Ananda Wijeweera (comrade Rohana's brother) and Mr Ariyadasa Sellaheewa of Devinuwara (a close associate and a relative of theirs), had made the same request at a later stage. Even when comrade Prins as comrade Rohana's attorney and Mr Ronnie de Mel as their security wished to come forward to protect comrade Rohana, the reason for the JVP and comrade Rohana to reject this proposition is beyond explanation.

On the other hand, one could raise a fair political question; that is, whether the JVP leaders would have decided not to come to the open because they were indirectly engaged in an exercise of gaining political advantage to win over the Sinhala majority in the south by making use of the state's allegations levelled against the JVP regarding the July 1983 pogrom. It is impossible to forget that the then leadership of the JVP acted later on with dedication to build a strong platform for and work closely with Sinhala nationalists and racists in the south carrying Sinhala nationalism on its back against the then Tamil nationalist struggle in the north.

First the leaders of the Communist Party surrendered to the police. After an inquiry, all of them were released and the proscription of the party lifted. The Nava Sama Samaja Party leaders, who were initially in hiding, came to open politics later with the intervention of comrade Vijaya Kumaratunga, and eventually their party proscription was also lifted. At that time, only a group including comrade Uduvarage Henry Perera, who had been working with a Tamil militant group in the North, was charged with plotting to overthrow the government. He had been in custody in connection with the April 1971 Uprising and after his release had been engaged in politics for some time with the Revolutionary Marxist party led by comrade Bala Tampoe. There was not a single charge filed against the Communist Party of Sri Lanka, the Nava Sama Samaja Party or the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna.

Sadly, comrade Rohana and almost all the leaders of the JVP who had engaged in underground politics and armed activities were assassinated by November 1989. It was highly unlikely that the JVP leadership's self-inflicted political suicide would have occurred, if they contested the party proscription and proved their innocence to the people instead of continuously remaining underground. The destruction of about 60,000 lives could have been avoided.

The intention of the producers to designate the imagery and frames accurately, clearly and

realistically was evident due to their initial efforts to establish contacts with me to get an idea about the characters of the film 'The Frozen Fire'. However, those efforts were thwarted in no time. The questions that obviously arise are: by whom, for whose need and to protect whose interests.

From a political point of view, if this artistic creation 'The Frozen Fire' displayed to the people what the reality was about the differences that existed between the vision and the program of the JVP from about 1972 until July 1983 and the vision and the program of the JVP since the party was proscribed in July 1983, especially from 1986 to around 1990 during the time the armed struggle was launched, it could have brought an important experience and made a significant contribution towards social development in Sri Lanka.

The task of socialising the experiences of the restructuring of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna prior to the armed struggle in 1989 and the analysis of the social and political basis of the party's oscillation from the extreme right to the extreme left still remains.

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