



Public Enterprise in Film Development: Success and Failure in Sri Lanka

Dingu B. Nihalsingha

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In no country in the world has film development through State enterprise been an enormous success as in Sri Lanka. That experience provides a unique lesson to the whole world. In a short span of seven years, annual film attendance doubled to 74.4 million and the screen time for national cinema trebled to 58%. In this distinctive experience, Sri Lanka achieved what national cinemas the world over dream about and yearn for.

That achievement could not be sustained, however. It was eventually squandered, with attendance falling to a mere annual 12 million as the State enterprise which achieved what was a profitable success, spent its way to virtual bankruptcy.

The Sri Lankan experience is at once an object lesson in how film development and State enterprise can succeed, massively so. It is also story of how and why such an accomplishment could not be preserved and improved upon and why it eventually failed so wretchedly.

That story, hitherto untold, is of relevance to film buffs and Governments struggling to develop their film industries. The experience is also of direct relevance to State enterprise and Public Organization students the world over.

The tale is one of clash of private and public enterprise, the dominance of mainstream and the formula film; the tension between film art and business, the national cinema against the foreign, the producers verses the exhibitors. Nihalsingha takes the reader beyond the glamour of production into the hitherto untouched backrooms of the behind-the-scenes work that makes film possible as an art and as an industry: film distribution, exhibition and imports in an Asian country. This focus is all the more important when these facets remain submerged as discourse on film-as-art dominates the terrain.

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