

# ARTISTS PROTEST

On August 15, the *Nidahas Kala Sandhanaya* asked its supporters to gather outside the premises of the State Film Corporation, in order to pressurise the Corporation authorities to take action to implement a Court Order, actually issued six weeks earlier, asking that the negative prints of the films *Bhavaduka* and *Bhavakarma* be placed in the safe custody of the Corporation until such time as a legal dispute over the film was settled. At that moment, the director of the films, Dharmasiri Bandaranayake and the person who was keeping the film negative unlawfully in his custody, Tilak Epa Arachchi, were both in the Board Room of the SFC, along with the Chairman and other members of the SFC Board. They were supposed to be discussing an issue on which really no discussion was necessary.

Although the Court Order was several weeks old, neither the officials of the State Film Corporation nor any other of the authorities concerned had taken any steps to ensure that the orders of the Court were complied with. This was all the more disturbing when one considered the fact that the Chairman and several of the Directors of the SFC were persons linked to the film industry themselves, who would have known what agonies Bandaranayake was going through because of his constant fear that the precious negatives would be harmed in some way, fears that were fuelled by some of the threats uttered by the other party to the dispute. In fact, Bandaranayake himself is/was a Director of the SFC. Adding insult to injury, when pressured by Bandaranayake to resolve the situation, the officials of the SFC decided to discuss the matter with Epa Arachchi; this gentleman is better known as the publisher of a series of scurrilous and virulently Sinhala nationalist news rags. What they thought remained to be 'discussed' is a mystery. All that was required was for the SFC to take legal steps to ensure the implementation of a Court Order.

Nevertheless, discuss they did, while over a hundred of Sri Lanka's best known stage and film artistes and media persons hung about on Bauddhaloka Mawatha, outside the gates of the SFC. The mood was so relaxed that it was only at about 1 p.m., almost two hours since they first got there, that some placards were quickly drawn up and displayed. Most of the slogans called for 'Respect for Artiste's Rights' and for implementation of the Court Order.

The mood quickly changed and became highly emotionally charged when Bandaranayake ran out of the building in tears at about 2 p.m. declaring that he was being tricked yet again and saying he would not leave the premises alive if he did not see the negatives safely inside the Corporation by nightfall. This outburst mobilised the entire group to enter the premises; first the group stood outside the building, and then entered it, making its rather unruly way to the Board Room where Epa

Arachchi and the SFC officials were gathered. By this time, the entire crowd was outraged at the manner in which the officials of the SFC seemed to be treating this matter, and for several moments there was utter bedlam inside the Board Room, voices raised, fists clenched, one person on top of the Board table, several others on chairs - and the officials unable to intervene to calm the situation.

Ultimately, the voices of Lucien Rajakarunanayake and Jackson Anthony managed to prevail over the chaos. The SFC officials outlined the stage at which the negotiations were; that Epa Arachchi would bring the cans of film in to the SFC on the following morning. The group was unanimous in rejecting this offer and kept on insisting that the cans should be brought in immediately. It took quite a lot of talking to calm the crowd down, and to get them to agree to leave the room leaving a chosen group of negotiators inside.

It was only several hours later, and after Police intervention to guarantee the return of Epa Arachchi, that a group left the SFC with Epa Arachchi. It took at least an hour more for them to return - with the negatives. In the meanwhile, a team of officials from the CID turned up at the SFC, belatedly wanting to take Epa Arachchi into custody. They waited for him, as did all of us. There was still a group of about 30 persons left when Bandaranayake emerged from the SFC at about 6.30 p.m. to assure us everything was alright.

It had been quite a show. It was heartening to see the expression of solidarity for a fellow artiste. It was thrilling to see that people still had the capacity to be enraged at injustice and take a stand against it. It was disturbing to see the inability of the officials of the SFC to assert their authority on their own premises.

But what was most frightening of all was the realization that overtook all of us as we stood around, exhausted, after we knew that our objective had been achieved - the realization that once again we had proved that in Sri Lanka today, if one wants justice, one doesn't seek it through peaceful means or through legal processes. One is pushed into using intimidation and terror.

A director of the Film Corporation asked us not to behave like terrorists. But he should realise that it was precisely their inaction that compelled our actions.

The inaction of the Film Corporation is also difficult to understand in the context or what is happening to the industry. In 1994, four new films were made; in 1995, so far, not one film has been started.

**Sunila Abeysekera**