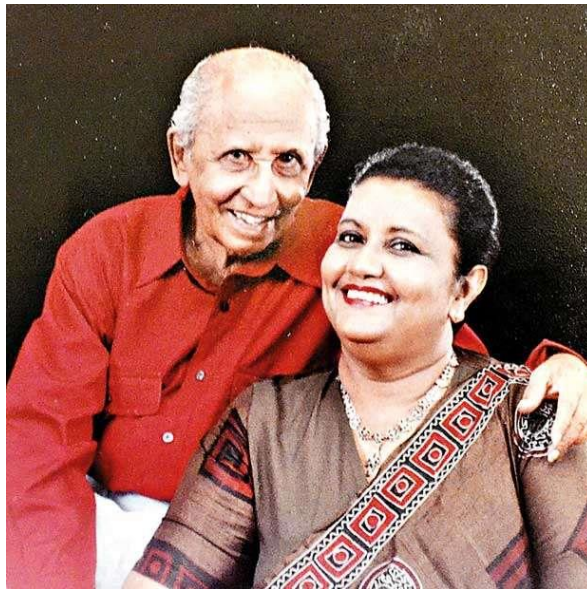


Article**Ankuran Dutta****The Peries Couple's Contribution to Sri Lankan Cinema**

The Peries couple- Lester James Peries and Sumitra Peries, has made an indelible mark on Sri Lankan cinema, elevating it to international acclaim through their innovative storytelling and cinematic techniques. Together, the Peries couple has created timeless classics and nurtured and inspired future generations of filmmakers. Their collaborative efforts, such as working together on the production and editing of each other's films, have resulted in a body of work that is both artistically rich and socially relevant. The legacy of Lester James Peries and Sumitra Peries is one of innovation, dedication, and profound impact on the cultural fabric of Sri Lanka. Their contributions have shaped the course of Sri Lankan cinema and ensured its place on the global stage.



Sumitra Peries earned the title of the 'Poetess of Sinhala Cinema' for her multifaceted contributions to Sri Lankan cinema. Renowned as a filmmaker, director, producer, editor, and screenwriter, she left an indelible mark on the country's cinematic landscape. Her journey began with the acclaimed '*Gehenu Lamai*,' a debut directorial effort that garnered widespread acclaim, clinching the 'Outstanding Film of the Year' accolade at the 1978 London Film Festival and numerous other national and international awards.

Subsequently, Peries solidified her stature in Sri Lankan cinema, directing a total of 10 films, many of which received acclaim on the global stage.

Notably, '*Ahasin Polawata*' (1979) and '*Ganga Addara*' (1981) earned her the prestigious Presidential Award for Best Editor, while '*Ganga Addara*,' '*Yahalu Yeheli*' (1983), '*Loku Duwa*' (1997), and '*Duwata Mawaka Misa*' (1998) secured her recognition as Best Director. Peries' cinematic oeuvre was celebrated for its authentic portrayal of Sri Lankan life and customs, delving deeply into themes of familial dynamics, societal conventions, and the human experience within the unique context of Sri Lanka.

Sumitra Gunawardena was born into a family entrenched in politics on March 24, 1935. She embarked on a journey at age 20 to Europe by ship to reunite with her elder brother, Gamini Gunawardena.

Though unaware at the time, she was poised to forge her own path. Enrolling in filmmaking courses from 1957 to 1959 at the London School of Film Technique, she distinguished herself as the sole female student in her field, earning a Diploma in Film Direction and Production. Upon completing her studies, she briefly joined Mai Harris, a subtitling firm, before returning home to Sri Lanka. During her departure, she fortuitously encountered the eminent Sri Lankan film director, Dr. Lester James Peries, in Paris at the residence of Sri Lankan diplomat Vernon Mendis.

After returning to Sri Lanka, her brother Gamini Gunawardena initiated contact with Dr. Peries, exploring the possibility of Sumitra

collaborating with him on a film project. Dr. Peries enlisted Sumitra as an assistant director for his second film, *'Sandesaya'*. In 1963, Sumitra, Anton Wickramasinghe, and Lester co-founded 'Cinelanka', a filmmaking company for which she held a significant stake. In 1964, Sumitra and Lester tied the knot, commencing a partnership that would endure for 54 years, both in life and on the silver screen, solidifying their status as one of the industry's most successful couples.

Dr Lester James Peries became a revered figure as a life partner, synonymous with serious cinema in independent Sri Lanka. Lester's journey began when he travelled to London in 1947 to join his brother, Ivan, a renowned painter. The brothers shared accommodations for a time, leading what seemed like a Bohemian lifestyle. During this period, Lester contributed a column to the 'Times of Ceylon' in Colombo, then under the editorship of Frank Moraes, titled 'Letters on the Arts from England'. Concurrently, he ventured into the realm of short films and documentaries, with his work 'Soliloquy,' crafted in 1949, earning recognition for its artistic and technical prowess from the Institute of Amateur and Research Filmmakers of Great Britain in 1951. Another notable production was 'Farewell to Childhood,' adapted from a short story Lester had penned while in Sri Lanka but transposed to an English setting for the screen.

The eminent filmmaker Ralph Keene played a pivotal role in persuading Lester to return to his homeland. Keene's urging, "You should make films in your own country, about your own people," resonated deeply with Lester. Thus, in 1954, he returned to the then Ceylon and joined the Government Film Unit (GFU), where he embarked on creating documentaries covering a diverse range of subjects, from malaria to vehicular traffic. Through this work, Lester underwent a profound transformation, gaining new insights into life and reconnecting with his cultural heritage. His experiences led him to develop a newfound appreciation for the island's rich cultural tapestry, a perspective that had been somewhat obscured during his upbringing in an upper-middle-class Anglicized

milieu.



In an article dated April 8, 2017, D. B. S.Jeyaraj notes the frequent comparisons between South Asian contemporaries Satyajit Ray and Lester James Peries. Satyajit Ray had already made a global impact with his films *"PatherPanchali"* in 1955 and *"Aparajito"* in 1956, preceding Lester James Peries' release of *"Rekava"* in December 1956. Despite the chronological proximity, many reviewers mistakenly assumed Peries had drawn inspiration from Ray. However, Satyajit Ray himself viewed Lester as a kindred spirit, referring to him as his "closest relative East of the Suez." Despite this creative affinity, Peries did not draw direct influence from Ray in his initial filmmaking endeavours, as noted by the esteemed writer and scholar Regi Siriwardena, highlighting the parallel yet independent trajectories of these two great Asian directors. It is noteworthy to mention here that the first film of Mrinal Sen *'Raas Bhore'* was also released in 1955, and the making of *'Nagarik'* by Ritwik Ghatak is considered the first art film of Bengal. However Peries might have watched these films, but it was during his first filmmaking, which is not sure of having any influence on New India Wave Cinema.

Over a filmmaking career spanning more than five decades, Lester James Peries directed 20 feature films, including *"Pinhamy"* in 1980 and crafted eleven short films, primarily in the documentary genre. His groundbreaking debut feature, *"Rekava,"* in 1956, marked a significant contribution to Ceylonese (Sri Lankan) cinema. It was the first movie shot outdoors and earned a nomination for the Palme

d'Or at the 1957 Cannes Film Festival. This film revolutionised Sri Lankan cinema, imprinting it with a distinct identity rooted in village life.

Dr. Peries' influence on the cinematic landscape extends beyond Sri Lanka, resonating within the broader global film community. His works, including collaborations with his wife Sumitra Peries on acclaimed films like "*Gehenu Lamai*" (Girls) and "*Ganga Addara*" (River's Edge), serve as compelling examples of cinema's capacity to probe complex social and cultural themes.



Like her spouse, Sumitra Peries delved into various societal issues within her films. Her cinematic endeavours tackled themes ranging from

women's societal roles to the clash of traditional values with modernity and the struggles individuals and families encounter amidst societal transformations. Sumitra Peries made notable contributions to Sri Lankan cinema through her independent works and her collaborations with Lester James Peries. Her influence was pivotal in advancing the nation's film industry, elevating Sri Lankan narratives onto the global stage. As highlighted by Wimal Dissanayake and Ashley Ratnavibhushana in their book 'Profiling Sri Lankan Cinema', Sumitra Peries, as the sole female filmmaker for many years, demonstrated consistent professionalism and a clear empathy towards the plight of female characters. Her focus primarily centred on portraying women as victims, with her works resonating with the reverberations of societal victimisation. She cultivated a distinct style characterised by elegance and visual allure, albeit occasionally revealing a disconnection between style and substance. Her films endure in memory for their profound emotional resonance, cultural depth, and ability to connect with local and international audiences. Together, Dr. Lester James Peries and Sumitra Peries dedicated over five decades of their lives, forsaking personal aspirations, to elevate Sri Lankan cinema to new heights.

### Filmography of Sumitra Peries

Gehenu Lamai / Girls	1978
Gangara Addara / River's Edge	1980
Yahalu Yeheli / Girl Friends	1982
Maya / Shadow	1984
Sagara Jalaya / The Letter Written on the Sand	1988
Loku Duwa / Eldest Daughter	1996
Duwata Mawaka Misa / Mother Alone	1997
Sakman Maluwa / The Garden	2003
Yahaluwo / Friends	2007

**Prof. Ankuran Dutta is the Director (First Secretary), Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre, High Commission of India, Colombo.**