



Documentary: **'Democracy in Debt: Sri Lanka Beyond the Headlines'**

Produced by Beena Sarwar | [Southasia Peace Action Network](#) | [Sapan News](#)
Co-written and co-directed by Beena Sarwar and SinhaRaja Tammita-Delgoda
Supported by the [Pulitzer Center](#)
Institutional facilitation in Sri Lanka by the think tank [Factum.lk](#)

Trailer here - <https://youtu.be/ax1OvuWWqVE>

To watch the film:

Fill in the Global Community Screening form at: <https://tinyurl.com/SLdocu-Scr2>.



- ❖ *Awarded 'Best Social Film: Outstanding Achievement', and 'Best Screenplay' awards at the 2nd Jalgaon International Film Festival 2026, India*
- ❖ *Official selection at multiple film festivals in 2025.*

About the film

A conversation starter on democracy, people's aspirations, and debt

'Democracy in Debt: Sri Lanka Beyond the Headlines' is a 25-minute-long documentary film produced by Beena Sarwar for [Sapan News](#) and the [Southasia Peace Action Network](#), supported by [The Pulitzer Center](#), USA.

Filmed at a remote village in Sri Lanka as well as Colombo city, the documentary was screened at about a dozen venues in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and the USA between June and August 2024, ahead of the Sri Lankan presidential elections – the outcome of which it predicted. Through a series of Global Community Screenings, the film has been screened at more than **80 venues in 20+ countries** across five continents.

Synopsis

The film provides a multilayered narrative about the universal challenges of governance, accountability, and the enduring spirit of democratic aspirations. This makes it relevant beyond Sri Lanka to India, Bangladesh, the USA, and wherever people are struggling to uphold democracy and accountability.

Following up on Sri Lanka's emergence from a political and economic crisis two years later, the documentary offers a unique perspective that transcends national boundaries. It delves into Sri Lanka's socio-political landscape, exploring the impact of the 2022 economic crisis through the voices of villagers, policymakers, academics, and political representatives.

It juxtaposes the thoughts and feelings of residents from the ancient village of Dutuwewa with the opinions of urban policymakers, exploring how the country has coped and what lessons can be learned globally.

The film was made with a local crew and sources, including **Dr. SinhaRaja Tammita-Delgoda**, an authority on the art, history and culture of Sri Lanka. The project was supported by the reputed foreign policy think tank [Factum](#), the institutional partner in Colombo, with researcher **Uditha Devapriya**, Factum's Chief Analyst for International Relations, as the reporting partner.

The film has been shown at packed halls to diverse and engaged audiences at several venues in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and the USA, including panel discussions with prominent personalities, with audience sizes ranging from a dozen at a small public library in California to more than a hundred people at a leading cinema in Colombo, besides at venues in Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad.

The audiences at these in-person events have included students, journalists, filmmakers, artists, academics, activists, policy makers, politicians, educators, theatre artists, IT persons, bureaucrats, and retired military personnel.

Producer, director, writer: Beena Sarwar

Beena Sarwar is a multimedia journalist, editor, and documentary filmmaker from Pakistan focusing on human rights, gender, media, and peace. Currently based in Boston, she has held senior editorial positions in Pakistani print and television news media and been on the founding teams of several media ventures, including Himal Southasian magazine and Panos South Asia. She has contributed to various international media outlets, including InterPress Service, BBC, Washington Post, and Al Jazeera. She is Editor of Aman Ki Asha (hope for peace), a unique platform launched jointly in 2010 by the Jang Group of Pakistan and the Times of India, the two largest media groups in either country. She teaches journalism at Emerson College, Boston, and has taught journalism earlier at Princeton University, Brown University, and Harvard Summer School. Her academic background includes an MA in Television Documentary from Goldsmiths College, University of London (2001), and international fellowships, including at the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University and the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School.

Special consultant, co-director, co-writer: SinhaRaja Tammita-Delgoda

Dr SinhaRaja Tammita-Delgoda is an author, lecturer, academic, and filmmaker, with his most recent documentary 'In Search of the Malwatu Oya' garnering multiple awards. He is an authority on the art and culture of Sri Lanka and has headed major research and publication projects for commercial and government sponsors. He possesses a wealth of experience in different aspects of Southasian and Sri Lankan society, environment and culture and is an occasional lecturer for visiting groups. Dr Tammita-Delgoda has expert multi-disciplinary exposure to the diverse fields of history, art, culture, international relations, strategic and security studies, particularly in relation to the Indian Ocean. He has taught and lectured in the USA, UK, across Southasia and at sea.

Southasia Peace Action Network

The [Southasia Peace Action Network](#) or Sapan, launched in March 2021 after an online meeting of over 80 activists, academics, journalists, students and professionals feeling the urgency of building peace in the region and beyond. Its [Founding Charter](#) has been endorsed by over 90 organisations and hundreds of individuals so far, including many prominent public figures.

Sapan News

[Sapan News](#) is a nonprofit media outlet that covers and connects Southasia, the Indian Ocean and diaspora, bridging academia, activism and journalism. Founded in August 2021, Sapan News produces syndicated features that are published in dozens of reputed media organisations in Southasia and elsewhere, including parts of the USA and Australia.

Southasia Peace Action Network and Sapan News operate through the Sapan Foundation, registered in the U.S. in December 2023, as a nonprofit organisation with 501c3 status. This allows tax-free donations to the organisation.

Beena Sarwar's stories from Sri Lanka were published by Sapan News, as well as the Pulitzer site and various media outlets, including: [From rural Sri Lanka, solidarity for Gaza and American students protesting for Palestine](#), and [Hope, wisdom and cynicism: Voices from rural Sri Lanka](#).

Testimonials

“...a wonderful film that draws us in at so many levels. First, it is exquisitely beautiful. The cinematography makes the country of Sri Lanka become a part of us – with its stunning look at the land, and the compassionate portraits of the people.” - Hayat Imam, feminist activist, in [Sapan News](#), Boston

“The film was fabulous and it inspired us to learn more about Sri Lanka. We loved how you wove the history into the current issues they’re facing. Hope to hear more!” - Michael Fitzgerald, investment banker, and Phoebe Hastings, artist, New York.

*‘I thoroughly enjoyed your documentary. I initially expected it to be filled with economic jargon, but I was pleasantly surprised by how you humanized the grassroots of Sri Lanka and highlighted the hardships faced by ordinary people.’
— Daniyal Mohmand, public school English teacher, Islamabad*

*“A well made documentary, so relevant to us here in Pakistan. It not only gave a deeper understanding of the turbulent events in Sri Lanka but also was a warning for Pakistani policymakers to avoid taking the road to Colombo” -
Shahid Nadeem, Ajoka Theatre, Lahore*

“...jewel-like documentary Democracy in Debt: Sri Lanka Beyond the Headlines examines the economic collapse of 2022 in Sri Lanka. ... presents a range of voices that reflect the cultural and philosophical attitudes weaving through the analysis of political catastrophe.

“Her journalistic methodology is quintessentially an anthropological one, and specifically one that anthropologists would identify as an “emic” approach. Emic methods (as distinguished from “etic” methods) give preference to the point of view of the interlocutor. This approach becomes a major strength of the film as it engages the stakeholder as well as the viewer in a non-judgmental partnership towards comprehending key problems besetting Sri Lankan society. – **Nusrat Khwaja**, in [Dawn](#), Karachi

“A good documentary film is one which helps educate you on a subject you didn’t know about or didn’t know very much about. An exceptionally good documentary film is one that educates you on something you actually knew quite a lot about. Sanja and I saw just such a documentary, which premiered at the Colombo City Center a few days back. Titled ‘Democracy in Debt: Sri Lanka Beyond the Headlines’...

Every Presidential candidate and political party leader must watch Beena Sarwar’s memorable mini-movie.” - **Dr. Dayan Jayatileka**, in [Daily Financial Times](#), Colombo

MEDIA COVERAGE

- *Gulf Times*, Qatar: [Documentary on Lanka to take 2 awards at Indian film festival](#), 26 Feb 2026

Documentary on Lanka to take 2 awards at Indian film festival

A documentary on Sri Lanka is adding two Indian film festival awards to its growing global résumé. *Democracy in Debt: Sri Lanka Beyond the Headlines*, backed by the Pulitzer Center, will take home both Best Social Film and Best Screenplay honours at India’s Second Jalgaon International Film Festival, says a press note.

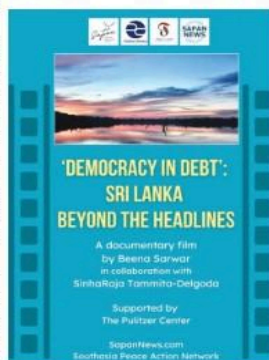
Shot on location in Sri Lanka in 2024, the film weaves together the raw, unfiltered accounts of farmers and teachers scraping by in a remote North Central province village against the polished policy-speak of economists, government officials, and the then-prime minister in Colombo. It’s a portrait of a nation caught between grassroots suffering and top-down decision-making – and audiences worldwide have clearly taken notice.

The project is the brainchild of Pakistani journalist-filmmaker Beena Sarwar, who co-produced it alongside Sri Lankan historian and filmmaker Dr SinhaRaja Tammita Delgoda – who also co-wrote and co-directed – and researcher Uditha Devapriya. It marks the first production under Sarwar’s Southasia Peace Action Network and its syndicated journalism arm, Sapan News, both dedicated to easing regional tensions through storytelling.

The film got its first public airing at the Barbaryn Ayurveda resort in Weligama before officially premiering at a Colombo cinema in July 2024 – a star-studded affair drawing ambassadors, politicians, journalists, academics, and retired military brass. Since then, it has clocked more than 80 screenings across roughly 25 countries,

landing at prestigious US institutions including Cornell University, Emerson College in Boston, Cambridge Public Library, and SUNY Buffalo, as well as major South Asian cities from Karachi and Lahore to Dhaka and Kathmandu.

The Jalgaon festival is no small pond – this year it drew over 2,500 submissions from 75 countries, with just 250 films earning jury recognition from panelists spanning India, Iran, Egypt, Portugal, and The Netherlands. Winners will be feted on March 1 at an awards ceremony at the Abdul Kalam Azad Research Centre in Aurangabad, Maharashtra – a historically rich gateway city to the Unesco World Heritage sites of Ajanta and Ellora. Each honouree takes home a trophy, a certificate, and a traditional Maharashtra pagri turban. Local activist Mirza Da-wood Azad will accept on the film team’s behalf.



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- United News of India, [Pakistan-Sri Lanka documentary wins big at 'Jalgaon International Film Festival'](#), 27 Feb 2026
- Press Trust of India report in *NewsDrum*: [Pakistani-Sri Lankan documentary to receive two awards at Jalgaon film festival](#), 26 Feb. 2026
- *Devidiscourse*, [A documentary triumph: Democracy in debt shines at Jalgaon film festival](#), 28 Feb. 2026
- *Daily Star*, Dhaka: [Pulitzer-backed documentary 'Democracy in Debt' wins two awards at Jalgaon International Film Festival](#), 28 February 2026
- *Prothom Alo*, Bangladesh: [Pulitzer Center-supported Pakistani-Sri Lankan documentary being awarded in India](#), 23 Feb. 2026
- Southasia Peace: [Pulitzer Center-supported Pakistani-Sri Lankan documentary being awarded in India](#), 23 Feb 2026

- Sapan News: [Documentary film on Sri Lanka sheds light on universal struggles with debt, inequality, and corruption](#), Hayat Imam, 10 Jan. 2025
- Dawn, Pakistan: [DOCUMENTARY: AFTER THE APOCALYPSE](#), by [Nusrat Khawaja](#), October 13, 2024
- Emerson Today, Boston: [Short Film Screening: “Democracy in Debt: Sri Lanka Beyond the Headlines”](#), 16 Sept. 2024
- Sapan News: [Ahead of Sri Lanka presidential elections, ‘Democracy in Debt: Sri Lanka Beyond the Headlines’ documentary goes global](#), 14 Sept. 2024
- *The News on Sunday*, Pakistan: [Seeking connectivity and a collective response](#), 25 Aug 2024 (plus several reports in Urdu papers in Lahore, based on Alhamra Arts Council press release)
- *Dawn*, Pakistan: [Film on Sri Lanka’s crisis prompts comparison with Pakistan](#), 12 Aug 2024
- The Morning, Sri Lanka: [The geopolitics of democracy](#) - analysis by Uditha Devapriya, 04 Aug 2024.
- The Desi Buzz, USA: [Documentary on Sri Lanka by Pakistani Journalist Supported by the Pulitzer Center Screened](#), 04 Aug 2024.
- *The Daily Morning*, Sri Lanka: [‘Proper journalism is also activism’](#), by Shailendree Wickrama Adittiya, full page interview, 02 Aug. 2024.
- *Daily Financial Times*, Sri Lanka: [‘Democracy in Debt: Every candidate should watch this!’ - Lanka Guardian](#) column by former ambassador, **Dr. Dayan Jayatilleka**, one of Sri Lanka's foremost political commentators, 01 Aug. 2024.

Screenings:

Through the Global Community Screenings series, this film has been viewed around the world, often followed by engaged discussions, at over 90 venues in nearly 30 countries across five continents. Some are listed below:

March 2026: Kandy, Sri Lanka

Oct. 2025: [Buffalo, New York](#)

- Wed., Oct. 15: **Squeaky Wheel** Film and Media Art Center,
- Thurs., Oct. 16: **University at Buffalo**, Center for the Arts, Screening Room

Sept. 2025: **Cornell University**, Ithaca, NY, screened Friday, 12 September 2025 as part of a two-day conference *Cultivating a Southasian Public*, followed by a discussion with Beena Sarwar and Ronojoy Sen, moderated by Hadia Khan (Jamhoor).

August 2025: Tuesday, 19 August 2025 | Thilak Wijesekera Library Building, Katapothuvila Viharaya, Pahala Athuraliya, Matara district

Screening of the Sinhala version followed by a discussion with Priyantha Pradeep Ranasinghe (translator and producer) and filmmaker Beena Sarwar. Organized by Prathiba Media Network and Athuraliya Media Literacy Society.

July 2025: Urdu and Sinhala versions of '*Democracy in Debt: Sri Lanka Beyond the Headlines*' screened in Karachi, Colombo, and other venues in Sri Lanka.

This was a groundbreaking project, perhaps the first time that an English-language documentary was translated into the language of its country of origin, localized for its intended audience. While subtitling is common for international distribution, translating into the language of origin ensures the documentary's message is received authentically and effectively within its original cultural context.

Media reports:

- [Democracy, documentaries, and discourse](#), by Shailendree Wickrama Adittiya, about the screening and discussion at the Sri Lanka Press Institute in Colombo, 30 July 2025
- [Sinhala version of documentary 'Democracy in Debt' screened for Media Minister](#), Sunday Times Online, Sri Lanka, 6 Aug 2025
- Live on ITN Colombo with senior journalist Priyantha Pradeep Ranasinghe, producer of the Sinhala version, 4 Aug 2025. Direct YouTube link <https://tinyurl.com/ITV-Cmb-4Aug25>.
- The Urdu version of the film, produced by senior journalist and documentary filmmaker Nusrat Amin, head of the Geomentary section of Geo TV, premiered at the Pakistan Arts Council in Karachi, 24 July 2025, hosted by senior journalist Munazza Siddiqui, with opening remarks by the honorary Consul General of Sri Lanka in Sindh, Mehmood Mandviwalla. The screening was followed by an engaged discussion with panelists including economist Dr. Kaiser Bengali. Here's the Geo TV report about the event <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2fUrhEu-6FE>

June 2025: 'Democracy in Debt' screened at the Bloomsbury Institute, London, at a special half-day event in collaboration with SOAS. [Details here.](#)

A list of 2024 screenings [is at this link](#). Details below.

Film festivals (official selection):

- 2nd Jalgaon International Film Festival 2026 (**Awards: Best Social Film - Outstanding Achievement; Best Screenplay**)
- 5th Himachal Short Film Festival (India) 2025
- 4th West Bengal Short Film Festival 2025
- 12th Goa Short Film Festival 2025
- 6th Alibag Short Film Festival 2025
- 15th Pune Short Film Festival 2025
- 5th Kerala Short Film Fest 2025
- Asian Talent International Film Festival 2025

SCREENINGS, 2024 / Global Community Screenings-1

The first phase of the film's [Global Community Screenings](#) took place at some 40 venues in 14 countries across 5 continents in the run-up to the Sri Lankan presidential elections in Sept. 2024.

- Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, Coventry University, UK, Thurs. 05 Sept
- First Unitarian, Chicago, Sun. 08 Sept.
- Emerson College, Boston, Wed. 18 Sept.

The documentary has been screened to packed halls and engaged audiences at various venues. Details below.

UK

Sept. 5: The reputed [Centre for Peace and Security, Coventry](#), whose Executive Director is Sir Ciaran Devane, also former chief executive of the British Council, hosted a screening of the documentary at its Monthly Governance, Leadership and Trust theme meeting, led by theory expert Dr. Duru Imrie-Kuzu and peace mediator Dr. Jan Pospisil. The event, facilitated also by human geographer Dr. Serena Hussain and doctoral researcher Vishal Sharma of Sapan, emphasised the film's relevance beyond Sri Lanka and the importance of showcasing it to policymakers. Beena Sarwar joined the meeting online, attended by several staff members and doctoral researchers, hailing from countries around the world, including Turkey, Colombia, Palestine, England, Scotland, Ireland, India, and South Africa, working globally on themes related to democracy. They emphasised the film's relevance beyond Sri Lanka and the importance of showcasing it to policymakers.

PAKISTAN

Islamabad premiere, 09 August, The Black Hole, a project of Mashal Books, Islamabad.
[Livestream at this link.](#)

Followed by a discussion on '**Parallels with Pakistan's Debt Trap: How can Pakistan get out of it?**' moderated by physicist Dr. A. H. Nayyar, in conversation with the filmmaker and former senator Farhatullah Babar, Dr. Noor Fatima, International Islamic University Islamabad and Dr Ali Salman of the Policy Research Institute of Market Economy. The 75-seater hall was packed full. Guests included iconic feminist poet Kishwar Naheed, former Director of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Dr Safraz Sipra; physicist Dr Pervez Hoodbhoy; senior journalists including Adnan Rehmat, Nadeem Iqbal, Khalid Hussain; director Omar Asghar Khan Foundation Rashida Dohad; activist Arif Azad; educationist Dr Naazir Mahmood; theatre activists M. Nafees and Sanober Naazir; besides students and civil servants, some of whom had traveled from Mardan and Peshawar for the event.

Karachi premiere, 10 Aug., The Second Floor (T2F)

Video: [▶ 'Democracy in Debt: Sri Lanka Beyond the Headlines' @ T2F, Karachi with ...](#)

The screening was followed by a discussion with the prominent economist Dr Kaiser Bengali and filmmaker Aisha Gazdar. The 80-90 person audience included publisher Ameena Saiyid, journalists Ghazi Salahuddin, Shahzeb Jillani, and Kamal Siddiqui, social worker and educator Sadiqa Salahuddin, CEO Bank of Punjab Zafar Masud, activists Nuzhat and Zaheer Kidvai, Prof. Zakia Sarwar, artist K.B. Abro and poet Attiya Daud, and writer-educator Sehba Sarwar visiting from Los Angeles.

Canvas Gallery, Karachi, 13 Aug

Organised at short notice by curator Sameera Raja, the gathering of some 50 persons was attended by Pakistanis and Sri Lankans. They included artists like Rehana Saigol and Rumana Hussain, classical dancer and feminist Sheema Kermani, poet Bari Mian, journalist Dr Ayoub Sheikh, Supreme Court advocate Zahid Ebrahim, environmentalists Tariq Qaiser and Ahmed Shabbar, Salim Vahidy, former police officer and member of the UN special peacekeeping force, as well as Sri Lankans living in Pakistan like Sabera Tapal.

Lahore premiere, 15 Aug., Alhamra Arts Council

Introduced by prominent human rights activist and art educator Prof. Salima Hashmi, the Lahore screening featured a panel discussion moderated by Jahanzeb Aslam, editor of the Pakistan Standard, in conversation with the filmmaker, former chair of the Pakistan National Commission on the Status of Women Khawar Mumtaz, and CEO Bank of Punjab Zafar Masud. Prominent guests included actor Samiya Mumtaz, filmmaker Farjad Nabi, educationists Tausif Hyat, Nasrene Shah and Ahmed Bilal, photographer Aysha Bilal, among others.

SRI LANKA

Colombo premiere

The project's Sri Lankan partner Factum hosted the premier screening at a Scope Cinemas Multiplex - Colombo City Centre, one of the leading cinemas in Sri Lanka, on Colombo, 25 July, reportedly the first time a film made by a 'foreigner' about Sri Lanka was premiered in the country. [Press release here](#) and [Google Drive with photos here](#), by Yaswan Dissanayake. Factum [Facebook post with photos here](#).

Good Governance Yaya, Colombo - [video recording here](#)

The activist group **Good Governance Yaya** hosted a screening on 31 July, followed by a discussion with group members and the filmmaker. Audience members included journalist **Andrew Fidel Fernando**, activist **Pavithra Perera**, and filmmaker **Cyrus Vicaji**.

Barberyn Waves Ayurvedic Resort, Welligama

An international audience, including European guests, Sri Lankan staff, and eminent Pakistani artists and intellectuals, watched the documentary at a private showing in **Barberyn Waves Ayurvedic Resort**, Welligama (23 July). Prof. **Salima Hashmi** introduced the film, attended by producer and writer **Moneeza Hashmi**, artist **Naazish Atullah**, and architect **Fauzia Qureshi**, among others.

USA

In its last stages of completion, the film was screened at:

Dishari Public Library, Milpitas, CA

Private screening, 15 June, at **Dishari Public Library**, run by a Bengali heritage foundation in the Bay Area, founded by **Dr. Jaideep Das**. Just weeks later, events in Bangladesh underlined the relevance of the film there.

ArtSpark, Austin, TX

The film was screened at the **ArtSpark Community Center** in Austin, TX, in collaboration with Peer Bagh Films, on 18 June, organised by screenwriter **Shuja Uddin**, and hosted by **Peerbagh** founder **Upasna Kakroo**, joined by several prominent community members. Former Pakistan national cricket team pacer **Jalal Uddin**, who bowled the first ever hat-trick drove down with his family from Houston. **Shahid Iqbal**, founder of **Rung Film Festival** in Houston, was also present, besides filmmaker **Asad Kirmani**, **Devon Foster** and **Matt Rifley**, founders of **Austin Indie Fest**.

Donate to help us meet our costs

All this work has been done on an entirely **voluntary and non-commercial** basis so far, with the Pulitzer grant covering logistical expenses and local talent in Sri Lanka. If you wish to contribute, please **donate at [this link](#)**. Regular monthly donations, even small amounts, will help us continue our work at [Sapan News](#).

(ends)