

Sri Lankan government bans local film *Aksharaya* (Letter of Fire)

Wije Dias
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In a serious attack on freedom of speech, Sri Lanka's United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government has banned screenings of *Aksharaya* (*Letter of Fire*) and threatened legal action against the film's producers.

Written and directed by Asoka Handagama, the movie depicts a series of psychosexual traumas within an upper middle class Sri Lankan family—a female magistrate (Piyumi Samaraweera), her elderly husband, who is a former High Court judge (Ravindra Randeniya), and their 12-year-old son (Isham Samzudeen). It explores the questions of incest, rape, murder and other dark secrets within the family and their impact on the young boy.

Without revealing the film's complex plot, it includes a scene where the magistrate mother bathes naked with her son. When the boy later accidentally murders a prostitute, his mother attempts to cover-up the crime with tragic consequences. During the film the mother also learns that her elderly husband is in fact her own father.

Aksharaya, which was partially funded by Fonds Sud Cinema of France and shown at festivals in Spain and Japan last year, was initially given an “adults only” rating by Sri Lanka's censorship body, the Public Performance Board (PPB), and cleared for local screenings in early April. Soon after, however, the minister for culture Mahinda Yapa Abeywardana suddenly claimed the film production involved child abuse and ordered the PPB to reverse its approval.

Abeywardana's intervention contravenes existing Sri Lankan law on two counts. Firstly, he directed the PPB to give him a video copy of the film, without Handagama's approval, and thus violating the director's intellectual property rights. Secondly, Abeywardana's ban challenges the independence of the PPB, the sole arbiter of public performances of film and other artistic work in Sri Lanka.

When asked by the newspaper *Rawaya* about his legal power, Abeywardana simply declared: “I am not concerned about those laws. As the minister, my

responsibility is to see whether the film is defending the culture of this country and to see how far it is important to the moral values of this country.... If it is wrong, ask them to go to courts. Anyhow, we will not allow this film to be screened here.”

Abeywardana claimed that the movie's bath scene constituted child abuse. At the same time police launched an investigation into whether the filmmakers had violated Sri Lanka's Child Protection laws. But, as *Aksharaya*'s producers have made clear, the actors involved in the bathroom scene were filmed separately and the footage edited together. Despite this, police have interrogated the 14-year-old actor who plays the part of the boy, his real mother and the movie's cinematographer.

The minister's actions, however, have nothing to do with protecting children from abuse, but are designed to polarise public debate along communal lines.

Another reason for the government sensitivity to *Aksharaya* is that it delves into the moral degeneration and corruption of sections of the Sri Lankan ruling elite, in this case the judiciary. According to Handagama, if the minister's allegations of child abuse cannot be sustained, the government plans to initiate contempt of court action against the director for bringing the judiciary into disrepute.

Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinists have denounced the movie as a “foreign-inspired” attack on Sri Lankan moral values and demanded that the government pull the PPB into line for initially approving it.

Writing in *Sunday Lankima* on May 14, Champika Ranawaka, national organiser for Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) claimed that Handagama and other local filmmakers had launched “an attack on Sinhala and Buddhist culture” and were functioning as “proxies” for the French embassy.

Ramani D. Wickramaratne, another right-wing critic of the movie, echoed this on *Lankaweb*: “Why did he

[Handagama] choose to insult motherhood, the judiciary and the children of this country? Why do all his productions show a morbid picture of Sri Lanka? Is this not sadism towards one's Motherland? ... [A] commercial minded minority must not be permitted to insult our country in this manner. Our national identity and cultural heritage must be upheld at all times, against 'cheap commercialism' in the name of 'globalisation'."

Aksharaya is Handagama's fourth feature—previous works include *Chanda Kinnari* [1998], *Me Mage Sandai* (*This is my Moon*) [2000] and *Thani Thatuwen Piyambanna* (*Flying with one wing*) [2002]. They all attempt to explore social and sexual issues that previous Sri Lankan filmmakers have been reluctant to deal with. This has made him a favourite target of the Sinhala-Buddhist supremacists.

His first television serial, *Dunhinda Addara* (*At the Dunhinda Falls*), for example, came under attack from those who claimed that the director had distorted "village culture" because he dared to portray a rural woman involved in extra-marital affairs.

Handagama's second movie, *Me Mage Sandai*, is about a young Sri Lankan soldier who becomes sexually involved with a Tamil girl, deserts his post and returns to his village. It was attacked by right-wing elements because it revealed the impact of the war on the poverty-stricken Sinhala village and portrayed the local Buddhist priest as a drunk and a lecher.

While Handagama's last two movies do not contain any direct antiwar messages, the banning of *Aksharaya* is intimately connected with government moves towards a resumption of a deeply unpopular civil war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

Mindful of its isolation, the UPFA government is attempting to present itself as the champion of Sinhala-Buddhist moral values, as part of its campaign to heighten communal tensions in line with the drive to war. At the same time, a precedent is being set for even more heavy-handed censorship measures against filmmakers, artists and writers which will be imposed not by the current statutory body but directly dictated by government ministers.

The military fired the first shots in this campaign last September when Rear Admiral Sarath Weerasekera published a lengthy comment in the *Sunday Times* naming Handagama and other local directors—Vimukthi Jayasundera, Prasanna Vithanage and Sudath Mahadiwulvewa—and denouncing them for their antiwar movies. Weerasekera claimed that their films aided

terrorism and were tantamount to treason, and declared that the directors should be making patriotic movies.

Weerasekera, accompanied by the armed forces official spokesman Brigadier Daya Ratanayke and a senior air force officer, then met with the head of the National Film Corporation and suggested that the international acclaim and funding of these films meant that the directors were in the pay of foreign masters. According to one news report, Ratanayke told the meeting that the antiwar movies were a "new form of terrorism" and the filmmakers "vehicles of terrorist propaganda".

The military chiefs then met with Handagama and Mahadiwulvewa and bluntly told them that they should be making "pro-army films" and warned that they would "have to face the consequences if the war breaks out again".

Prominent local filmmakers, cinematographers, artists and intellectuals have denounced the film ban and the government's blatant violation of freedom of artistic expression.

Lester James Peiris, veteran filmmaker and pioneer of Sri Lankan realist cinema, commenting in the *Island* newspaper said: "Handagama's film is a serious work, powerful, disturbing (to the faint hearted), a searing attack on all our 'Sacred Cows'. Critics might find it difficult to read all the sub-texts, which are sardonic assaults on marital, sociological, cultural institutions in the narrative....

"One may like or dislike the film—that is another matter. But, surely hasn't every adult the right to see the film once passed by the PPB? If you don't like it you have the luxury of walking out of the cinema."

The banning of *Aksharaya* constitutes a clear assault on freedom of expression and is aimed at disciplining or silencing all thoughtful and socially-critical artist and filmmakers. The UPFA, the military and other sections of Sri Lanka's ruling elite cannot tolerate any artistic work that provokes audiences to ask questions about existing social relations, whether it deals with the moral decay of the powers-that-be or a racially-based war.



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