

# Sri Lanka's state-owned television censors drama series

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Censorship of filmmakers, artists and writers is escalating in Sri Lanka in line with the Rajapakse government's intensification of its war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

In a recent case, the Sri Lanka Ruphavanini Corporation (SLRC), the island's state-funded television channel, cut dialogue from the weekly teledrama *Sudu Kapuru Pethi* (*White Camphor*) early last month and a few days later axed the series entirely, claiming it "disgraced" the military.

The then SLRC chairman Newton Gunaratne told the media the television show had insulted the security forces. "Some parts of this teledrama bring disgrace to these soldiers and their self-respect," he claimed. Gunaratne, however, made no attempt to substantiate his claims.

In fact, the multi-episode drama directed by Athula Pieris and funded by the broadcaster is a love story involving a Sinhalese girl from Sri Lanka's south and a Tamil boy from the north. Based on Thushari Abesekera's award-winning novel of the same name, the teledrama is set during the island's protracted civil war prior to the 2002 ceasefire. The drama was initiated following the 2004 Boxing Bay tsunami and promoted by the SLRC as part of the network's attempts to present "a new vision of peace".

While *Sudu Kapuru Pethi* is not an explicit antiwar drama, it is a humane work. Its central love story between Tamil and Sinhalese youth is anathema to the Sinhala communalists, who dominate the Sri Lankan state, including the army. Its censorship follows a pattern of increasingly serious attacks on artists, filmmakers and journalists who reject Sinhala racism or dare to raise questions about the government's war drive.

Last year Rear Admiral Sarath Weerasekera

published a comment in the *Sunday Times* denouncing local filmmakers—Asoka Handagama, Vimukthi Jayasundera, Prasanna Vithanage and Sudath Mahadiwulvewa—for making antiwar movies. He claimed these films aided "terrorism" and were tantamount to treason.

A few days later Weerasekera, accompanied by Brigadier Daya Ratanayke, met with several filmmakers, including Handagama and Mahadiwulvewa, and said those who failed to produce pro-military movies when war resumed against the LTTE would "face the consequences". The "consequences" were soon made clear.

In March, Culture Minister Mahinda Yapa Abeywardana suddenly banned Asoka Handagama's *Aksharaya* even though the film was not about the civil war. It had been already approved by Sri Lanka's censorship body, the Public Performance Board (PPB) and cleared for local release.

Handagama's movie was denounced as a "foreign-inspired" attack on Sri Lankan moral values. State authorities threatened criminal charges against the director, claiming he had violated the country's child protection laws.

Last month's axing of *Sudu Kapuru Pethi* was equally arrogant and provocative. SLRC management did not even bother to tell director Athula Pieris that dialogue had been cut from his show. He only learnt about it during the broadcast of its tenth episode on September 3.

When Pieris protested this violation, management "suggested" he re-edit the entire program. He refused and the show, which had another 13 episodes to run, was summarily cancelled.

Pieris is a well-known local television director whose *Sindu kiyana Una Pandura* (*Singing Bamboo Bush*)

won Sri Lanka's best single episode teledrama prize in 2005. He told the *World Socialist Web Site* the SLRC invested some 4.7 million rupees in the production, which had been initiated under the previous Kumaratunga government. The Rajapakse government approved its script in late 2005.

"After broadcasting 10 weekly episodes the SLRC stopped my teledrama without providing any acceptable reason. Without my knowledge they censored the dialogue—'Jaffna tears are as cold as tears in Hambantota [Rajapakse's electorate]'—in the tenth episode and then telecast it," he said.

Pieris's ability to legally challenge the axing of his production is limited because he is an SLRC employee and does not own the rights to the teledrama. But he is determined to fight this attack on artistic freedom.

"I condemn any sort of censorship, let alone state-sponsored censorship, which effects the creator's and the viewer's freedom," he continued. "This is what happened with the recent banning of the local film *Aksharaya* (*A Letter of Fire*).

"The government and their supporters want to encourage a war mentality in this country. My drama attempts to discuss the real situation here and that's why they censored some scenes."

The cancellation of *Sudu Kapuru Pethi* foreshadows further assaults on democratic rights. As it widens its deeply unpopular war, the Rajapakse government is determined to silence any opposition. In this case, the suggestion that ordinary Tamils and Sinhalese share common problems and concerns was enough to provoke the ire of those who are deliberately stoking communal hatreds.



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