

# Film questions Sri Lankan society's 'silence' on past brutalities

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**Sinhala film Paangshu zooms into the trauma of enforced disappearances by foregrounding the struggle of a missing person's family.**

Like many Sri Lankans, academic and filmmaker Visakesa Chandrasekaram has been struggling to come to terms with the civil war's gory end in 2009. The graphic visuals of the bloodshed, which some "shared like trophies", made him question what he'd thought were basic human norms.

When he decided to give it creative expression, he chose to tell the story of a mother's quest for justice, after her son was forcibly disappeared by soldiers. Except, the story is not from the war zone where armed forces fought the LTTE for three decades. It is from an earlier chapter of brutal violence and state repression in Sri Lankan history.

Mr. Chandrasekaram's recently released Sinhala film *Paangshu*, or *Earth*, zooms into the agony of dealing with an enforced disappearance of a loved one. It follows an aged mother from the marginal dhobi caste group in the island's Sinhala-majority south, looking for her son, who, like scores of rural Sinhala youth, is drawn to the leftist-nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-led armed insurrection in the late 1980s.

The period connotes the second JVP uprising — the first was in 1971 — against the widening inequality in the decade after economic liberalisation in Sri Lanka, mass youth unemployment, widespread state repression and Indian "expansionism", at the time of the Indo-Lanka Accord of 1987 and intervention of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF).

Having drawn acclaim at many international film festivals, *Paangshu* is perhaps the first mainstream Sinhala film to foreground the struggle of a missing person's family. Enforced disappearances in Sri Lanka have a long and dark history, beginning well before the period shown in the film. They continued well after, especially in the island's Tamil-majority north and east, during and after the civil war years. Hundreds of Tamil women are agitating for years, braving intimidation, demanding the truth about their disappeared loved ones, including those who surrendered to the Army and never returned.

## **Reluctance to speak up'**

Sri Lanka has one of the world's highest number of disappearances, Amnesty International notes, pointing to an estimated 60,000 to 1,00,000 alleged disappearances.

"The trauma of 2009 is engraved in my mind. But there is a silence in Sri Lanka around the 2009 massacre, in which scores of civilians died. It is as if the country is in denial. There is mass amnesia. I thought about it and felt may be a country that was silent in one instance, cannot break it in another," says Mr. Chandrasekaram, speaking to *The Hindu*. He turned the spotlight on the 1980s, as there was a "similar refusal" to talk about what happened at the time.

“First, the J.R. Jayewardene government turned its guns southward, against the insurgent youth, and when the Indian Army left the country in 1989, the government [subsequently led by R. Premadasa] turned its guns 180 degrees against rebels in the north. Much of the Sinhalese society was silent all through.”

All the same, an ethnically charged narrative didn’t speak to him. Raised by a Sinhalese mother and Tamil father and having spent 17 years in Australia before returning to Colombo two years ago, the filmmaker saw how any conversation about the country’s turbulent past tended to further polarise people on ethnic lines. His work as a human rights lawyer took him closer to the individual stories of the most vulnerable and he saw similarities — in their pain, helplessness and relentless quest for justice. “I began questioning the ethnic construct,” says Mr. Chandrasekaram, who teaches law at the University of Colombo.

Over time, he also began reflecting on the dynamic between the JVP and its support base, or the LTTE and the Tamil society that the movements’ critics deem hegemonic, with little room for any questioning, and even less for dissent. “I have a strong critique of the JVP of the past,” says the filmmaker, who is currently an activist with the JVP-led political alliance, the National People’s Power. “There was a dilemma, but as a liberal artiste, academician and activist, backing the NPP seemed the only prudent choice at this point, especially since they were the only one to take up the rights of women, the LGBT community and persons with disability.”

The JVP of today is aware of the discomfort some feel about its past. In addition to leading cinemas, the film was also screened at the party’s headquarters for discussion. “The party should not avoid confronting its past, we must reflect on our path,” says Bimal Rathnayake, former JVP MP. At the same time, while the film tells the story of an individual, it doesn’t capture the “true nature” of the struggle or the socio-political context that led to it, in his view.

Regardless of the different views on the insurgencies, appreciating the context of the uprisings, the filmmaker notes, is crucial, particularly in this political moment in Sri Lanka, when the Rajapaksas — whose earlier government faces accusations of grave rights abuses — are back in power, with a super majority in Parliament. “I worry that the current context is not too different to those that sparked past conflicts. I am not predicting another armed struggle, but knowing the government’s authoritarian tendencies, I am very concerned about those on the margins of our society and the minorities,” says Mr. Chandrasekaram.

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