Asoka Handagama's *Rani*: Diminishing Struggles Against Enforced Disappearances

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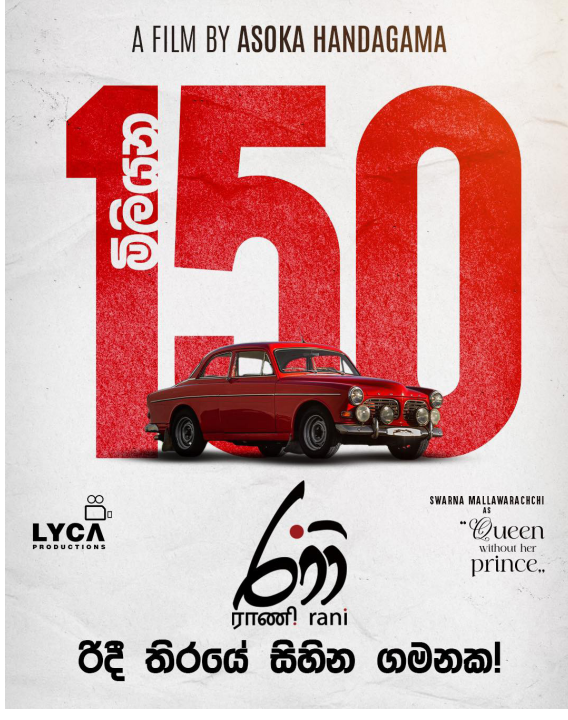

The film *Rani* (2025, Lyca Productions) by Asoka Handagama based on the character of Manorani Saravanamuttu, a medical doctor and a social activist, was released recently with a major marketing effort. Saravanamuttu (1930-2001) was a key activist within the Mother's Front movement (1990-94), consisting of mainly Sinhala mothers demanding justice for the forcible disappearance of their sons (mainly by state forces). She was the mother of Richard de Zoysa, playwright, actor, and journalist, who was abducted and murdered by state forces in February 1990.

The director Asoka Handagama is a well-known theatre, film, and TV show producer, who studied at the University of Kelaniya in the early 1980s, and produced two award-winning plays, called *Thunder* (1987) and *Magatha* (1989). His last film was Alborada, another biopic about Pablo Neruda's stay in Ceylon from 1929 to 1931. Magatha was a popular play in the 1980s that was critical of the judicial system and it was staged across the island.

Handagama's recent film *Rani* depicts the life journey of a professional upper middle-class woman who struggles for justice amidst an escalation of state violence under the ruling United National Party (UNP) government. The story is framed within a specific period, from February 1990, when Richard was abducted, to May 1993, when President Premadasa along with Senior Superintendent of Police Ronnie Gunasinghe, identified by Manorani Saravanamuttu as one of the abductors of her son, was killed by a Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) suicide bomber. A scene near the end shows Saravanamuttu spending the final years of her life in a care facility for the elderly.

Even as fiction (based on real events)—the director's caveat in the opening credits—when real events are appropriated and framed in a particular way it is important to consider how markets and politics relate to the cultural production of aesthetics and entertainment. How do aesthetic cultures contribute to or detract from struggles towards democracy as well as justice?

Missing: Key actors of state violence and death squads

Manorani Saravanamuttu was thrust into political activism as a consequence of state violence. This violence erupted following the 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom, launching the war against Tamil militants in the north

and east, which overlapped with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) insurrection (1988-90) in the south. The JVP insurrection was a Sinhala-Buddhist ethno-nationalist militant movement that reacted against devolving power to the North and East, where the local majority are Tamil and Muslim communities.

The UNP government (1977-94), introduced an authoritarian presidential system in 1978, along with the brutal Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA)—passed in 1979 as a "temporary" measure and made permanent in 1982—which gave the police and military unprecedented powers, enabling torture, enforced disappearances, and assassinations. The PTA was used to target Tamil and Muslim minorities, along with dissenters within opposition political parties, civil society, and the media.

The launch of death squads and torture chambers under then President Ranasinghe Premadasa (1988-93) is a key background theme in this movie. Richard de Zoysa was abducted and murdered by a death squad, but the death squad itself is portrayed as relatively independent of command and control from above. This positioning of the death squad essentially absolves the ruling UNP government of any responsibility and accountability.

A scene at the end of the film portrays a conversation among death squad members while travelling in a jeep, when they decide to abduct de Zoysa. Drunk and in a cheerful mood, this group of killers assert their heterosexual masculinity with homophobic comments, implying the reason for the abduction was to harass a journalist who is also gay. While this sort of "rogue" death squad is a possibility, the film avoids associating politicians and key state actors with responsibility for these death squads.

The main state actors at the time, the president, heads of police and military, and powerful ministers allied with the president at the time (such as Ranil Wickremesinghe, minister for industries and science, and Ranjan Wijeratne, minister for defence) are mostly absent in this storyline. Ranjan Wijeratne was instrumental in coordinating state violence and was killed by an LTTE car bomb in March 1991.

Similarly, there is a scene when a powerful minister—Lalith Athulathmudali's character—promises Saravanamuttu that he would find her son within 24 hours but fails in his efforts. In a later scene, the same politician conveys to Saravanamuttu that his life is also in danger, from forces within the ruling party to which he had until recently belonged. But even this politician's character and the power struggles within the UNP are depicted without the ethical dilemma of benefitting from a regime that launched state violence against its opponents. By omitting some of the key actors at the time, and by implying that the killing of de Zoysa was related to a 'rogue' death squad, the storyline of the film reinforces a culture of impunity.

Homophobic masculinity blended with violence

While 'Rani'—an abbreviation of Saravanamuttu's first name, and also a title for 'Queen' in Tamil—the central character in the film, is an upper middle-class English-speaking professional woman, the depiction of her son's sexuality as a homosexual man is framed within a homophobic gaze merged with homoerotic violence. The scene conveying Rani's tolerance but discomfort with Richard's homosexuality taps into a common homophobic cultural code.

The film's homophobic gaze normalises sexual violence. After accidently interrupting a moment of affection between de Zoysa and his male human rights activist friend, Rani later asks, "You didn't rape him, did you?" and de Zoysa responds, "He's not my type".

This underlying theme of blending homosexuality with violence in the story line is grounded in a heteronormative frame, reaffirming cultural hierarchies of sexual orientation. In a Sri Lankan context where homosexuality is criminalised, this homophobic narrative seems to justify state violence. In effect, the film ends up normalising this sadistic culture of homophobic sexual violence, particularly within policing and military cultures, portrayed by the death squad in the film.

The patriarchal gaze at a female activist and the women's movement

Even as a mother, who is a professional middle-class Tamil woman, the Saravanamuttu character is not relatable and engaging. With neither a rich backstory nor character growth through a compelling arc, she lacks depth.

The patriarchal gaze in this movie, represents Rani as a chain-smoking, alcohol-drinking, single middle-class woman, particularly in the early parts of the film. In her conversations and interactions with characters around her, her professional identity is downplayed and her Tamil ethnicity remains unexamined.

The ways in which the film portrays the Mother's Front, not only misrepresent the activism of the broader women's movement at the time but also devalues civil society activism of women. The Mothers' Front, consisting mainly of Sinhala women, emerged from the south of Sri Lanka, particularly in Matara in May 1990. This was also the electorate of opposition politician

Mangala Samaraweera. However, the Mothers' Front in Jaffna was organised by Tamil women in 1986, following the arrest of around 600 Tamil boys. Meanwhile, there was a broad network of women's groups called Mothers and Daughters of Lanka, launched in 1990, which built alliances among different ethnic communities. While the southern Mothers' Front facilitated by then opposition Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) politicians, mainly Mangala Samaraweera and Mahinda Rajapaksa, is referenced, the broader women's movement is made invisible in the narrative of the film.

Rani is only seen in conversation with politicians and not with any feminist activists who were engaged in women's rights as well as human rights issues at the time. The broader human rights activism, linking local with global networks, was central to women's activism around disappearances. The film locates the Mothers' Front isolated from local and global women's activism at the time, providing a narrow, diminished view of the women's movement.

As the film conveys, the southern Mothers' Front was co-opted by the SLFP coalition that came to power in 1994. Manorani was frustrated by this shift from activism in movement politics to representative politics, subordinated to a political party. Deeply disillusioned by the Mothers' Front, she went on to establish the Centre for Family Services (CFS). Established in 1992, the CFS' main focus was to provide holistic psychosocial support and counselling for women and children affected by the political violence in the south. The patriarchal gaze in this movie makes no effort to explain the challenges women face, in both private and public spaces, in order to remain committed to activism.

The country with the second largest number of enforced disappearances

The underlying message in the movie is that civil society activism, or the mobilisation of non-violent democratic movements, is futile because they are often co-opted by political parties. From this dominant elite perspective, the centres of power are political parties and not social movements. Given the 2022 popular uprising, the Aragalaya, a broad social movement that achieved a regime change while exposing the powerlessness of political parties, it is disappointing that the narrative of the film discourages and devalues non-violent activism of movement politics.

More importantly, the ways in which this story is told, make no effort to link the past with the present. There are ongoing mobilisations by mothers and loved ones of the disappeared, demanding justice amidst multiple forms of state harassment and intimidation (*Human Rights Watch* 2024). The main culprits of these disappearances are the politicians that militarised the state while creating consent through actors in civil society (religious leaders, media personnel, actors, artists, academics, professionals, and businesses). Particularly during the Premadasa era, the UNP colluded with criminal networks in order to murder, harass, and threaten opponents.

Addressing the issue of enforced disappearances and government accountability directly relates to the militarisation of the state. The integration of the military with the economy as well as culture, also applies to censorship of films as well as the promotion of specific favourable storylines reinforcing the ruling elite. Handagama (2025) in an interview reveals how the STF (Special Task Force) rented out Elphinstone Theatre to stage one of his plays (*Magatha*) in the 1990s. The military is integrated with diverse civil society actors from sports and arts to religion. The military is also engaged in a range of commercial activities, including international arms trade. The deployment of 'death squads' is an imminent strategy of state terror, as illustrated by the episodes of 'white vans' used for abductions and disappearances under the Rajapaksa regime.

In 2021, Sri Lanka was listed as the country with the second largest number of enforced disappearances recorded by the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearance (UNWGIED) at 6,259—second only to Iraq (Amnesty International 2022). According to Amnesty International (2017, 2022), the actual estimates of cases of enforced disappearance in Sri Lanka since the 1980s is between 60,000 and 100,000. Tamil women are the main voices of the families of the disappeared, while there are also Sinhala women with similar experiences during the 1988-90 JVP insurrection. Some Muslims were also similarly disappeared during and after the war and during the southern insurrection. Meanwhile, the Office of Missing Persons (OMP), established in 2018, remains mostly inactive. In 2023, the OMP had nearly 15,000 complaints filed. The difficulty of prosecuting these cases directly relate to a complex web of alleged perpetrators within security forces, with a history of protecting each other while reinforcing institutional cultures of impunity.

Film, entertainment, and politics

The film, as a product of cultural entertainment, also operates within flows of money and capital. This film is produced by Subaskaran Allirajah, for Lyca Productions, which has produced other popular culture films with social justice themes in Tamil Nadu.

Founded by Subaskaran in 2006, Lycamobile sells pay-as-you-go cards to individuals—often low-paid migrants—wanting to make cheap international phone calls. Since 2007, Lyca has also been a major donor to the Conservative Party in the UK. In 2023, a French criminal court fined the company for tax fraud and money laundering. In 2024, the UK tax authorities demanded the company declare bankruptcy in order to pay overdue taxes.

Since 2016, Lyca entered sports entertainment by becoming the owners of a Tamil Nadu T20 league cricket team, Lyca Kovai Kings. In 2021, Lyca became the owner of Jaffna Super Kings T20 cricket team. In 2018, Lyca acquired the EAP group in Sri Lanka with interests in media and entertainment including television and radio channels and movie theatres. Last year (2024), the Sri Lankan government blocked Lyca from bidding for ownership shares in Sri Lanka Telecom and Lanka Hospitals.

During the November 2024 general election, Lyca is alleged to have bankrolled at least one newly formed political party, fronted by actor and former parliamentarian Ranjan Ramanayake; as well as financing the election campaigns of independent lists and individuals across the north and east.

This is a major transnational company with a history of tax-evasion and money laundering. In locating the film *Rani* within circuits of capital and money flows, it is important to consider how meanings created by artists, the subjects they consider, and the way they express those subjects contribute to specific public conversations about art which reproduce the status quo.

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The way in which Saravanamuttu's story is told in this film about a mother's struggle in search of justice for a son's disappearance and murder, is mostly about entertainment (enjoyment and distraction) rather than art (evoking deeper emotions and provoking thought). The film underplays the culpability of the UNP government at the time. By glossing over gross human rights violations, the film unintentionally or intentionally contributes to cultures of impunity, undermining public confidence in the criminal justice system.

By ignoring the on-going struggles of Tamil families of enforced disappearance for justice, the film reinforces the militarised state. By implying that movement politics inevitably gets co-opted by representative party politics, the coded message in this film is about the futility of non-violent direct action.

The film reaffirms the heterosexual patriarchal gaze in Sinhala cinema by normalising homophobic violence, while devaluing collective action by women. By locating the film within financial flows and a militarised state, it is important to recognise how films such as *Rani* undermine aesthetic cultures and meanings created by artists—that emerged during the *Aragalaya*—capable of strengthening struggles towards democracy as well as justice.

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