

Hindu extremists stop publication of Indian history volumes

By Richard Phillips
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The Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR), which the Indian government has stacked with Hindu chauvinists, last month stopped publication of two volumes of *Towards Freedom*, a projected multi-volume collection of historical documents concerning the struggle against British colonial rule. The suppression of these volumes of scholarly research is a serious attack on academic and intellectual freedom in India.

Moreover, it is part of a broader assault on basic democratic rights by Hindu fundamentalist organisations associated with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the dominant partner in India's coalition government. Last month the BJP government in the state of Uttar Pradesh forced film director Deepa Mehta to suspend work on her latest film *Water*, after communal organisations allied with the BJP mounted physical attacks on the film set.

Edited respectively by K.N. Panikkar and Sumit Sarkar, two of India's most eminent historians, the *Towards Freedom* volumes were to be the third and fourth in a project initiated by the ICHR in 1972. Initially, the *Towards Freedom* project was conceived of as a counterpoint to a 12-volume series of documents published by the British government under the title *The Transfer of Power*. Subsequently, however, the purpose of the series was broadened from providing evidence of the mass popular movement against colonial rule to documenting all the major political processes in the last decade of the British raj, including the rise of communalist parties and the role of the peasant, labour, and socialist movements.

Panikkar, who is Professor of Modern History at Jawaharlal Nehru University, edited the volume devoted to 1940, whilst Sarkar, a Professor of Modern Indian History at Delhi University, was responsible for the 1946 volume. Although they had worked on the project for more than a decade, the ICHR failed to inform Sarkar and Panikkar that it had ordered work on the volumes to cease. Instead, they only learned of the decision when they received letters on February 11 from Oxford University Press, which has been commissioned by the ICHR to publish the volumes.

After news of the stop-work order reached the press, the ICHR felt compelled to issue a "fact sheet" justifying its decision. It claimed previous volumes in the series were "shoddy", "subjective" and an attempt to "sanitise" the role of leftwing organisations. It also accused Sarkar and Panikkar of sending the edited work to Oxford University Press without submitting it to the ICHR for approval. When these crude lies were quickly exposed, ICHR chairman, B.R. Grover, announced he would publish a "white paper" explaining why production was stopped.

There are two basic reasons why Grover and the other BJP

supporters and Hindu communalist academics in the ICHR have stopped publication of the latest *Towards Freedom* volumes.

Firstly, they contain material exposing the reactionary role played by the Hindu communalist organisations—the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Hindu Mahasabha. Many of the leaders and a majority of the cadres of the BJP are drawn from the ranks of the RSS. Although the Hindu Mahasabha is no longer prominent, V.D. Savarkar, who served as its president from 1937 through 1944, was the principal ideologue of Hindutva, the Hindu supremacist doctrine that India is a Hindu nation.

The 1943-44 *Towards Freedom* volume (which was published in 1998) reproduced British intelligence documents that reported the RSS had been reorganised in the early 1930s along the lines of the Italian fascist movement, after B.S. Moonje, a top RSS and Hindu Mahasabha leader, had visited Italy and met with Mussolini. Other documents revealed that Savarkar had urged his supporters to oppose the Indian National Congress's 1942 Quit India movement and had opposed Gandhi's release from British custody when he fasted in 1943.

Second, the BJP-led government, and the Hindu fundamentalist forces on which they rest, are anxious to wipe out all record of the fact that the movement against the British was of a broad-based, secular character. The rewriting of Indian history in communal terms is part of the BJP's broader project of putting a Hindu stamp on all aspects of politics and culture.

This is illustrated in the political record of those now heading the ICHR and its so-called review committee. Last year, India's Minister for Human Resources and Development (HRD), Murali Manohar Joshi, retired several prominent and secularly-minded historians from the ICHR, replacing them with people known not for their scholarship, but for their support for the BJP and its causes.

Joshi, a BJP member and lifelong RSS cadre, is one of three sitting ministers in the Indian cabinet currently under criminal investigation for their role in inciting the demolition of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya in December 1992. As minister in charge of education, he is also playing a leading role in pushing through a revision of the Indian school curriculum on Hindu communalist lines.

ICHR head B.R. Grover is a supporter of the fundamentalist Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Forum), one of the organisations recently involved in stopping production of *Water*. He has a well-documented record of communalist politics and has consistently defended the razing of the 400-year old Babri Masjid mosque, an act that launched the worst round of communal violence in India since the 1947 partition of the subcontinent.

At a meeting of the World Archeological Congress in New Delhi in 1994, Grover opposed a resolution condemning the destruction of the mosque and two years later urged delegates of the same organisation to oppose a resolution condemning

the “manipulation of archeological evidence to justify destruction of historical structures.”

Only one member of the three-member committee that will review *Towards Freedom*, is trained as an historian. The others are a retired bureaucrat and a former director-general of the Archaeological Survey of India who is a well-known supporter of the destruction of the Masjid mosque.

The ICHR's decision to stop publication of *Towards Freedom* was immediately denounced by leading Indian academics, including S. Gopal, general editor of the series. Gopal described the ICHR's actions as a “clear violation of the terms under which the project was conceived and executed” and an “infringement of the academic rights and freedom” of the historians involved.

Three former heads of the ICHR, all renowned historians, R.S Sharma, Irfan Habib and Ravinder Kumar, issued a statement on February 16 describing withdrawal of the *Towards Freedom* volumes as “the grossest form of censorship”. The statement, which was signed by over 30 academics, demanded that the volumes be published immediately.

On February 25, over 1,500 students, artists and intellectuals demonstrated outside the ICHR's offices in New Delhi. Several busloads of students participated carrying placards attacking the ICHR and denouncing the BJP-led government in Uttar Pradesh for stopping shooting of Deepa Mehta's film, *Water*. The protestors chanted slogans comparing the RSS with Hitler's Nazis and accused the Sangh Parivar, the RSS-led alliance of Hindu fundamentalist organisations, of attempting to “communalise” India.

Sumit Sarkar, who addressed the demonstration, later told India's Frontline magazine that *Towards Freedom* was suppressed because it showed that the RSS and other Hindu fundamentalist formations were “absent” from the anti-colonial struggle.

“These right-wing Hindu movements share with the Muslim League a particular honour—they were the only groups that were never repressed by the British... This is one kind of absence of the Hindutva forces from the movements towards freedom. The bigger absence, of course, is that they had no role in the broadening of the content of the struggle for freedom.”

Sarkar also warned that the ICHR's actions were an attempt to suppress “all notions of intellectual and cultural freedom.”

“Basically what these people want to bring back,” he said, “are old-fashioned, discredited notions of what history is all about, that is, Indian history is divided neatly into Hindu and Muslim periods, defining periods by the religion of the rulers. That was the dominant way in which, partly due to colonialism

and partly on account of our own contributions, history was taught and studied for a long time. The national movement would then be understood like a story of cops and robbers, of great leaders and great villains.”

Professor Panikkar told the magazine that the ICHR decision was “rooted in a fear of history” and constituted a new stage in communalist attempts to refashion Indian history.

“So far they have been using history in order to stigmatise Muslims. Their entire communal enterprise was based on that stigmatisation. Now communalism has entered a new phase in which aggressive steps are on to define India as a Hindu nation. As part of this project, they have developed this concept of cultural nationalism, which is based on a reinterpretation of the past. Therefore in the present circumstances, particularly in the context of the recent socio-economic developments, the reinterpretation of the past in religious terms has become more crucial. All secular voices have to be marginalised or suppressed. So history is going to be a major arena of contest. These are the forewarnings of greater attempts, sponsored and supported by the state, to change our notions of the past.”

The suppression of the two volumes of *Towards Freedom* is another sharp warning of the implications of the extreme rightwing political agenda of the BJP and its associated Hindu chauvinist organisations. In the name of defending Indian culture—in fact its own supremacist interpretation of Hinduism—the BJP is attacking basic artistic and academic freedoms which are crucial to broader critical thought and discussion.

For decades, support for the BJP's communalist agenda was marginal. But the Indian ruling class can no longer employ anti-imperialist rhetoric to try to claim it is pursuing a people's development program. Having been forced to abandon the pretense of “Congress socialism,” sections of the bourgeoisie have turned to the BJP with its Hindu chauvinist, militaristic and virulent anti-socialist ideology to ram through its economic agenda of subsidy and social spending cuts, deregulation, privatisation and layoffs. The whipping up of religious tensions serves to divert attention from the country's growing social inequality and rising levels of poverty and to divide the working class and Indian masses along communalist and caste lines.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has launched a campaign calling on artists, writers, intellectuals and all working people to take a stand against the attacks on Deepa Mehta and to oppose the onslaught on democratic and artistic rights both in India and elsewhere.

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