

India:

Hindu chauvinists block filming of Deepa Mehta's *Water*

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Deepa Mehta, director of the films *Fire* and *Earth*, has been forced by Hindu communalists in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh to halt production of *Water*, the third in her trilogy, and look for a new shooting location. The movie was due to commence production in Varanasi on the Ganges River on January 30.

Set in the 1930s during the rise of the independence struggles against British colonial rule, the film examines the plight of a group of widows forced into poverty at a temple in the holy city of Varanasi. It focuses on a relationship between one of the widows, who wants to escape the social restrictions imposed on widows, and a man who is from a lower caste and a follower of Mahatma Gandhi.

A coalition of Hindu extremists aligned with the Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), which rules in Uttar Pradesh and is the majority party in India's National Democratic Alliance coalition government, claims that the film besmirches India and is part of an organised plot by the Christian church against Hinduism. On January 30 fundamentalist thugs destroyed the film's sets. They have since threatened the cast and crew and pledged to drive Mehta out of India.

Her decision to withdraw from Uttar Pradesh came after a series of violent demonstrations and government provocations. These culminated in the state government ordering a two-week suspension of production on February 6, the second delay within seven days, claiming that it could not control the protests. Behind the scenes, in fact, the state government and senior figures in the central government have encouraged the provocations. Riot damage and shooting delays have cost the production company more than \$US650,000.

On January 29, a day before shooting was to commence, the central government's liaison officer suddenly demanded a Hindi language version of the script and said he needed a fortnight to study it before the film could proceed.

According to Indian law, before foreign films can be shot directors must submit scripts and all production details to the government. If a film is approved, the government appoints a special liaison officer with wide powers to monitor all aspects of the production.

The following day about 500 supporters of Sangh Parivar, the alliance of Hindu fundamentalist organisations associated with the BJP, marched to the Ganges River where they destroyed the set. BJP officials, including a state MP, Shyamdeo Roychowdhary, the state branch treasurer, Ashok Dhawan, and Jyotsna Srivastav, the wife of the Uttar Pradesh Finance Minister, led the demonstration.

Among the participants were members of the Rastriya Swayangsevak Sangh (RSS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP or World Hindu Forum), Shiva Sena (Shiva's Army) and the Kashi Sanskriti

Raksha Sangharsh Samithi (KSRSS), an amalgam of several Hindu fundamentalist organisations. After wrecking the set, the mob held a meeting and vowed to stop the film. Police officers made no attempt to arrest any of those responsible.

The next day the state government suspended production, declaring that it could not guarantee law and order and that Mehta had failed to meet the legal requirements for the film. Mehta, who had fulfilled all government conditions, rejected these claims and flew to New Delhi where she met with Arun Jaitly, the Information and Broadcasting Minister.

According to some press reports, Prime Minister Athal Behari Vajpayee, although not in attendance, proposed that sections of the script be changed. Mehta agreed to change five words, the film was re-approved, and the Uttar Pradesh government lifted its suspension.

But fundamentalist agitation continued with a demand that the script be submitted to Kashi Vidvat Parishad (KVP), a group of religious leaders and academics, for approval. Mehta refused, but as pressure and threats intensified she and scriptwriter Anurag Kashyap met with the group and read them the entire script. The extremist cliques responded to such conciliatory measures by Mehta with more protests and a threatened *bandh* (strike and general closure) in Varanasi on February 8.

VHP leader, Ashok Singhal, told the press Mehta should get out of Varanasi and that any attempt to make the film would be completed over his "dead body". He described the acts of vandalism and ongoing threats against Mehta as "the regeneration of Hindus" and said the film's script "smacks of the conspiracy by the votaries of Western culture to tarnish the image of widowhood in India".

A few hours after the filming resumed on February 5, amid growing threats, a Shiva Sena member tied rocks to his body and jumped into the river in protest. According to press reports the man, who is known for staging suicide protests, leapt into the river three times before he was able to attract media attention.

The stunt was a signal for KSRSS-led thugs to begin damaging property and threatening the production crew. KSRSS secretary Narayan Mishra declared he would fast to the death and several Shiva Sena activists threatened to set fire to themselves unless the state government suspended the film's production. The state government immediately seized on these antics and on February 6 ordered the suspension.

A number of intellectuals, artists, filmmakers and sport stars have issued statements denouncing the Uttar Pradesh government, describing the attacks as "cultural fascism." Signatories to one

statement include Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, musician Ravi Shankar and writer Mahashweta Devi. Their statement said: “[I]t is not merely a question of this particular film. Step by step, incident by incident, the encroachment of mob mentality into the freedom of social criticism in art is becoming a matter of serious concern.”

Veteran film director Mahesh Bhatt denounced the thug attacks, saying Vajpayee had failed to ensure artistic freedom and that his government had “succumbed to cultural terrorism.” “What is appalling,” he continued, “is that despite clear instructions by the prime minister, the state government is not falling into line. The system is not working...”

There are no essential differences between the BJP-dominated state and central governments. If Vajpayee felt compelled to give permission to Mehta to film, it was only because he was concerned at possible adverse reaction internationally and by his coalition allies. The central government did not oppose the actions of its allies in the state government. Local BJP leaders, in turn, mobilised and led the extremist hooligans against the film production. After the thugs had done their dirty work, the state government piously claimed that it had to “keep the peace” and halt production.

The BJP is a Hindu chauvinist party, which rests on various extreme right wing fundamentalist formations, in particular the fascistic RSS. The RSS was responsible for the murder of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948, claiming that he was too conciliatory towards Indian Muslims.

Vajpayee and Home Minister L.K. Advani are life-long members of the RSS, while Heavy Industry Minister Manohar Joshi is a leader of Shiv Sena, a quasi-fascist organisation that attempts to outdo other fundamentalist groupings affiliated to BJP. Bal Thackeray, Shiv Sena's leader, is an open admirer of Adolf Hitler.

Joshi publicly endorsed the shutdown of *Water*. Advani said the protests against the film had to be given “due consideration” and the film could only go ahead if it was based on a consensus between Mehta and her opponents. Advani and Joshi led the campaign that resulted in the destruction of Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya in 1992 and unleashed the worst communalist violence since the 1947 partition of India. Advani still faces charges over his defiance of a Supreme Court ruling opposing any attack on the mosque.

The BJP and the Sangh Parivar insist that India must become an exclusivist Hindu state with strictly observed religious traditions, blaming all the ills of society on foreign influences and other religions, particularly Islam, for the breakdown of Hindu norms. Like the extreme rightwing and fascistic movements that have appeared elsewhere around the world, the Hindu communalist organisations seek to exploit the discontent and disorientation produced by economic change and deepening poverty, social inequality and dislocation, and turn it in a reactionary direction by dividing the Indian masses along religious and caste lines.

The BJP extended its influence in the early 1990s as the Indian government began to scrap national economic regulation and open up the economy to foreign investors. Backed by powerful business interests the BJP in government is committed to further economic restructuring, privatisation and cuts to social spending—processes which will inevitably produce widespread opposition.

The attack on Mehta's film is a danger sign of what the BJP and its allies have in store for anyone who challenges any aspect of its ideology and actions. Because it is about Hindu widows and involves an “inter-caste” relationship, *Water* touches on issues at the core of the Hindu fundamentalist ideology.

In the past, Hindu widows were encouraged to perform sati (a ritual

suicide in which they burnt to death on their husband's funeral pyre) or were thrown out of the family home and forced to eke out a miserable life as beggars in and around temples in the holy cities. While sati was officially abolished in the first half of the 19th century, strict religious custom dictated that widows shaved their heads, wore rags, ate one meal a day and slept on a grass mat.

Today the oppressed position of widows remains. Many are forced to leave their families and lead a precarious existence living on the margins of society. According to a recent report, an estimated 16,000 West Bengali widows live as beggars in the city of Vrindavan.

According to the fundamentalists, the establishment of Hindu norms would lead to a peaceful and harmonious society. But the lot of widows in India is just a particularly repulsive example of the way in which religious traditions are exploited to defend existing forms of oppression. Defence of the caste system, which bars sexual relations or any direct physical contact between the higher castes and “untouchables,” meets up with the requirements of the ruling class to justify the country's yawning social divide between rich and poor and to keep the “lower castes” in their place. Far from being a recipe for a harmonious society, Hindu fundamentalism fuels caste-related violence, which is endemic in India with countless acts of violence and murder against the “untouchables”.

Through her works, Mehta, who is a thoughtful filmmaker, expresses her concerns about religious divisions and social relations. In 1998, the organisations that are now demanding *Water* be stopped organised riots in New Delhi and Bombay outside cinemas showing *Fire*, the first of her trilogy. Films by other Indian-based directors have also come into conflict with Hindu fundamentalists and the authorities, including *Bombay* by Mani Ratnam, *Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love* by Mira Nair and *Bandit Queen* by Shekhar Kapur.

On Tuesday the Madhya Pradesh government offered shooting locations for the film in that state. While it is not clear whether Mehta will take up this offer, the campaign against the film will continue. Straight after the Madhya Pradesh offer, Uma Bharti, a central government MP and a former minister, told the press that Mehta and her crew “would be stoned” if they attempted to make the film. Mahant Shankara Bharti, president of the Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad (ABAP), another Hindu chauvinist grouping, declared: “We can go to any extent, even sacrifice our lives and take others' lives to stop this film.”

The ongoing attempts to intimidate Deepa Mehta and her cast and crew, makes clear that the BJP and its communalist allies are planning deeper assaults on the democratic rights and social conditions of all working people. When they dictate in advance what filmmakers, artists and writers produce they are attempting to control what everybody should think and do. The historic parallel that immediately springs to mind is the burning of books carried out by Hitler's brownshirts in the 1930s.



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