

A letter from Madras

Indian film societies federation protests attacks on artistic freedom and democratic rights

19 February 2000

Internationally-known director Deepa Mehta's efforts to make her film Water in Uttar Pradesh in northern India have come under attack by Hindu fundamentalists, with the tacit or open support of the Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), the main party in India's National Democratic Alliance government and the party in power in Uttar Pradesh.

Gangs in Varanasi, led by local right-wing politicians and religious extremists, attacked Mehta's film set and destroyed it late last month. The fundamentalist thugs accuse Mehta of insulting Hinduism.

The filmmaker is attempting to find another location in India in which to complete her film. She has denounced this attack on democratic rights. Water, the third in an Indian trilogy (Fire [1996] and Earth [1998]), is set in the 1930s and deals with the plight of a group of widows in Varanasi.

The WSWS has received the following letter from Madras:

Most of you must be aware that filmmaker Deepa Mehta recently came under attack by Hindu fundamentalists and was prevented from shooting her film *Water* in the city of Varanasi.

On February 15 the Sparc Film Society, an affiliate of the Federation of Film Societies of India, based in Trivandrum, organised a seminar on "Communal Politics against Visual Media".

The speakers at the seminar were P. Govinda Pillai, chairman, Kerala State Film Development Corporation; filmmakers P. T. Kunhimohammed (also a Member of the Kerala State Assembly); Harikumar, Sreekumar and V. K. Joseph, film critic and secretary of the film society. When Sreekumar began speaking, a handful of

people began shouting: "Bolo Bharat Mata Ki Jai," "RSS Zindabad," "Shiv Sena Zindabad." The group also tried to assault the speakers and some members of the audience.

Although the protesters were pushed out, it was not before some chairs were smashed, the film society's banner was destroyed and abuse was hurled at the speakers and the organisers. The protesters then held an impromptu demonstration outside the venue, but fled on the arrival of the police. Mr. Govinda Pillai stated later that the incident was orchestrated by the RSS-Shiv Sena combine and that fascism is asserting itself in the media exactly in the fashion it had done in Italy and Germany. Cultural and civil liberty activists ought to unite and fight to resist these onslaughts on basic fundamental freedom, he said.

A procession was held in Trivandrum by cultural activists two days later. The procession, starting from Martyrs column, culminated in front of the Secretariat and was addressed by among others P. T. Kunhimohammed, V. K. Joseph, Kadammanitta Ramakrishnan MLA, Sreekumar, etc. In this context Ms. Vijaya Mulay, President of the Federation of Film Societies of India, has issued the following statement:

"I understand that at the seminar organised by one of the constituent societies of the Federation of Film Societies of India, the Sparc film society, on February 15 on 'Communal Forces against Visual Media', some anti-social elements tried to disturb the meeting by entering the venue, shouting slogans like 'No Discussion on *Water* Film,' 'Shivsena Zindabad,' 'This is Bharat,' etc. Film Societies are cultural organisations and holding discussions on any aspect relating to films,

media, culture is part of their activities, when they are being done peacefully. Others have the same rights to express their point of view, but nobody has any right to disturb a peaceful assembly and tell it what it could or could not discuss. This is attack on freedom of expression and as the President of the FFSI and a citizen of this country, I strongly condemn it.”

Your comments/statements on this issue may kindly be sent to ffsisr@yahoo.com

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