

Deepa Mehta speaks out against Hindu extremist campaign to stop her film

Richard Phillips
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Deepa Mehta, the Indian born, internationally acclaimed film director has been subjected to a series of vicious attacks by Hindu fundamentalists who, working hand in hand with the Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), have shut down production in Uttar Pradesh of Water, her latest film. The BJP is the main party in India's National Democratic Alliance government and holds power in the state of Uttar Pradesh.

Rioting gangs in Varanasi led by local BJP politicians and rightwing Hindu extremists attacked the film set and destroyed it in late January, claiming that the proposed film denigrates Hinduism and Indian widows. After the BJP state government suspended the film's production twice in one week, declaring that it threatened civil peace, Mehta decided to withdraw from that state and seek another location in India.

Mehta has rejected this attack on democratic rights and stood firm in the face of an unrelenting campaign of intimidation and threats by fundamentalist thugs. Water, the third in an Indian trilogy, is set in the 1930s and deals with the plight of a group of widows in Varanasi.

Fire (1996) and Earth (1998), the two other films in the trilogy, have also brought Mehta into conflict with Hindu communalists. When Fire, which deals with a lesbian relationship between two married women, was released Hindu extremists organised violent demonstrations, forcing the closure of several Bombay and New Delhi cinemas. They also denounced Earth, which is set during the 1947 British partition of India, and have demanded the government ban the film.

Although production of Water has been suspended in Uttar Pradesh, Mehta has said that she is determined to shoot the film in India and will not be intimidated. She spoke by phone last week from India with Richard Phillips.

Richard Phillips: Before I ask you to detail what has happened over the last few weeks let me say that we support your determination to produce *Water* and regard its closure in Uttar Pradesh by the Hindu fundamentalists as a serious attack on democratic rights that should be opposed by filmmakers, artists and all working people.

Deepa Mehta: Thank you. We've received support from several Indian filmmakers and many others that I deeply respect over the last week. We've also heard that there is going to be an advertisement in *Variety* supporting us. I've been really touched by all this support.

RP: Can you begin by explaining the legal requirements to produce a film in India?

DM: To produce a foreign-funded film in India you have to first apply to the Minister of Information and Broadcasting. You must submit your script, which they scrutinise, and then they decide whether you can film or not. They can give you permission with or without cuts. This, according to the government, is to make sure that

the film in no way compromises India.

After that you apply to the Home Ministry to get appropriate visas for any overseas crew, and then, when you've given them all this information and the approvals are made, the government attaches a liaison officer. He is a representative of the Ministry and his job is to make sure that you are shooting the script submitted. He has a copy of the script to ensure that there is nothing surreptitious. After the film has been edited and completed for release in India it has to go through the censor board, where they can also make cuts.

RP: So you fulfilled these obligations and were preparing to shoot when the Hindu fundamentalists began their campaign. Can you explain what happened?

DM: Yes, we went through all the legal procedures required, submitted our script, which was approved without a single cut, and then we went to Varanasi where we had permission to shoot.

You don't have to consult the state government but we also decided to do that. They told us it was OK and that it was wonderful that we were coming to make the film. The Uttar Pradesh (UP) state government is currently trying to encourage film investment and they wanted people from all over the world to come to the area. They told us they would assist in every way possible.

Everything appeared to be just great until one of the state government people, someone who doesn't have an official title but is like a lackey to the UP Minister for Tourism, came to Varanasi and told us that we could shoot the film if we used his friends to cast the film. I told him that the film was already cast. He said OK, but could we use his friend's wife to star in the film and also use this friend to find all the extras.

The final straw was when he demanded I give him distribution rights to the film. So I basically told him to buzz off. We'd been working for about four weeks doing pre-production at that stage.

Two days after I'd told him to take a hike, murmurs began in the city that I was making a film that was anti-Hindu, and which denigrated the widows, the ancient Indian culture and the people of Varanasi. And within days it catapulted into something massive. We were amazed how organised and well-oiled the machinery was.

When the state government decided to suspend production the first time, after the demonstration, I came back to Delhi to meet the minister who had given me permission originally. To his credit he stood by me and said that the centre had given permission and we should definitely do the film.

The UP state government claimed it was a law-and-order issue and that we could not do the film. This was totally ridiculous. Yes, the first day the fundamentalists were extremely organised and they destroyed our sets. There was complete vandalism, which threw the country into

a bit of a shock, and we had some concerns.

The second time the state government stopped production they claimed that the people of Varanasi were really upset, that thousands of people were protesting, someone had tried to commit suicide, and the law and order situation had got out of hand so the film couldn't go on. This was completely fabricated. We'd recommenced shooting and could not hear any protestors. They claimed there were 10,000 protesting so we went outside and all we could see were 12 people protesting.

As for the guy who tried to commit suicide, we found out that this guyâ€”and this is a fact because the police have a case against himâ€”is a professional suicider. No pun intended, but he does it for a living. People pay him and he makes a bid for his life, goes to hospital for one night and the next morning is back home.

RP: Who are the political forces behind this campaign and what role do you think the central government has played in this?

DM: I am not clear on all the political issues and people involved but the centre has been supportive so far. And I don't believe that everybody in India is a walking talking censor board. It's a case of the state versus the centre. But if the centre says the film can go ahead, why won't the state allow it, after all these people all belong to the same party? I suppose it has something to do with the fact that the elections are just around the corner and obviously all sorts of pressure is being applied and of course the fundamentalists are behind all of this. The VHP [World Hindu Forum], in particular, has been rabid. VHP leader Ashok Singhal has been saying the film will only proceed over his dead body and similar sorts of things. We were told by the UP Chief Minister that they didn't want someone of this stature killing himself, that it would produce rioting and therefore the film should be stopped.

RP: The VHP and others have said that they will prevent the film being made anywhere in India. Do you anticipate further attacks?

DM: We are currently looking at offers from some other states and so we hope that there will be no more trouble, but I am determined to make this film.

RP: There have been quite a number of attacks on filmmakers and artists by the Hindu fundamentalists over the last few years. When did this begin to develop?

DM: It has worsened in the last eight or nine years, with the rise of fundamentalism. I don't know all the details. I suppose the requirement that you must submit your script to the government has existed for many years and people become used to it. But what we've had to deal with now is something elseâ€”it's pre-censorship demanded by thugs. This is something not heard of before in the history of cinema. All I can compare it to is being like an author who is confronted with reviews of a book before it is published.

RP: The fundamentalists claim that *Water* attacks Hinduism and that you, as a filmmaker, make lots of money by exploiting the problems of India. What are your comments?

DM: These arguments are completely ridiculous. How can they say this, they haven't even read the script? This is the irony of it. They also say that *Earth* was an anti-Hindu film. This is ludicrous. *Earth* deals with problems created by the British partition of India. You've seen it, you know what it's about. And those that claim that I am making lots of money should take a look at my bank account to see that this is nonsense.

The situation in India at the moment is that if you produce films with song and dance routines or unserious films, you are fine. It doesn't matter how violent and vulgar they are. But if you want to

make something even slightly introspective it is a no-no and you are accused of exploiting Indian culture. I keep on saying: is Indian culture so weak that one film can destroy it?

Those that declare that the film I am going to make will tarnish the image of India should also explain what has happened to me. If that doesn't tarnish India's image, I don't know what else will.

RP: Did you ever imagine this film would encounter such problems?

DM: No, not at all. We've done everything by the law. I submitted the script, it was passed and I did everything to keep a low profile. I didn't even want to have press conferences so we could shoot our film quietly and finish it. No director wants this sort of hype about a film before it is made. The expectations are enormous. You don't want to work with that kind of baggage and all the associated pressures on the actors and crew. I've always said, allow us to make the film and then judge whether it is good or bad or be indifferent to it. Let it be made and then judge me as a filmmaker.

RP: What is now the schedule for the film? Have you found new locations?

DM: The crew is winding up for a few weeks but we hope to find somewhere else in India to shoot as soon as we can. It will probably take about a month or so to regroup and start again. Luckily my producer is really behind me. He has been amazing and very supportive through all this. Although the whole experience has been really awful I am damned if I am not going to make this film. I'm really determined about this now.

RP: Finally, what do you think these events say to you about the political situation facing filmmakers in India?

DM: Everyone has some theoretical understanding of what happened during the Inquisition. You can read about it in the history books, but to live through it as we have done over the last weeks is something else. What does it mean politically? It's like neo-Nazism, very dangerous and raises a lot of questions about democratic rights. And I suppose it also brings home to me that we tend to underestimate the impact of films. The fact that all sorts of forces are being organised to stop me shows that film is a very powerful medium.

I've been accused of undermining Hinduism. This is totally ridiculous. I am a Hindu, but the Hinduism that I know has always been one of tolerance. There is such a dichotomy between the Hinduism I know and the actions of those trying to stop the film. Of course what we face is not about religion, it's political.



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