

World Socialist Web Site issues appeal: Oppose Hindu extremist attacks on Indian filmmaker Deepa Mehta

The Editorial Board
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The *World Socialist Web Site* denounces the Hindu fundamentalist campaign in India to stop production of *Water*, Deepa Mehta's latest film, and calls on filmmakers, artists, intellectuals and workers internationally to take a firm stand against this attack on democratic rights.

Mehta was forced to suspend production of *Water* after a sustained campaign of violent attacks, bureaucratic provocations and physical threats against the film's cast and crew by a coalition of Hindu extremists aligned with the Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP). The BJP is the main party in India's coalition government and holds power in several Indian states.

Water, which dramatises the plight of poverty-stricken widows at a Hindu temple in the 1930s, was due to commence shooting in Varanasi, in the state of Uttar Pradesh, on January 30. On that day rioting by Hindu extremists led by local BJP politicians destroyed the film set, causing more than \$650,000 damage. They claimed the film would denigrate Indian widows and was part of a Christian plot against Hinduism.

Mehta withdrew from Uttar Pradesh on February 6 after the BJP state government blocked the film twice in seven days, saying it was provoking civil disorder. While Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee claims to support Mehta's right to produce her film, he has done nothing to stop this attack, which is being orchestrated by the state government working in league with communalist forces.

Vajpayee and Home Minister L. K. Advani are life-long members of Rastriya Swayangsevak Sangh (RSS)—an extreme right-wing formation involved in the 1948 murder of Mahatma Gandhi. Heavy Industry Minister Manohar Joshi is a leader of Shiv Sena, a fascistic organisation, which is an ally and coalition partner of the BJP. Advani led the campaign that resulted in the destruction of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya in 1992, which produced the worst communalist violence since the 1947 partition of India. A judicial commission of inquiry found that Joshi's Shiv Sena used the Masjid issue to foment and organise riots in Bombay in January 1993, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of Muslims.

Shiv Sena and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Forum) have vowed to drive Mehta out of India and some communalist groups have threatened to kill or be killed in order to prevent Mehta's film being produced.

Mehta, whose previous films— *Fire* (1996) and *Earth*

(1998)—have brought her into conflict with Hindu extremists, has declared that she will not be intimidated by these threats and described the campaign as “pre-production censorship imposed by thugs”. She told one newspaper that if the film were blocked it would represent “the end of democracy in India”.

These warnings should be taken seriously. The campaign by the Hindu extremists to stop Mehta's film is not an isolated incident, but part of efforts to impose a right-wing nationalist state ideology in India based on aspects of the Hindu religion. Under conditions where the living standards of the vast majority are deteriorating and the social chasm between rich and poor is deepening, the BJP has been in the forefront of whipping up communalist sentiments to divide the Indian masses along caste and religious lines.

Cinema plays a powerful role in India. Hence the BJP and its Hindu extremist allies have increasingly targeted filmmakers who have in any way critically examined aspects of Indian society.

Already under existing Indian law, foreign-funded filmmakers seeking to make films in India must submit their scripts to the central government for approval. If the film is approved, the government appoints a special liaison officer with wide powers to monitor all aspects of the production. The liaison officer can shut down the film if the director is deemed to be departing from the approved script.

Restrictions on artistic expression are not just limited to foreign filmmakers. Indian filmmakers—including Mani Ratnam, Mira Nair and Shekhar Kapur—have also been subjected to government censorship and extremist rioting during the production or screening of their films. Nor are such attacks confined to filmmakers. The campaign against Mehta is one of a series of attacks on the democratic rights of creative artists and intellectuals that have escalated with the rise of the BJP over the last decade.

Violent protests have been organised against artists, the most recent against M.F. Hussein, one of India's leading painters. Hussein was charged with obscenity for his nude paintings of Hindu goddesses Saraswati and Draupadi. At the same time, BJP forces in state and central governments have demanded that the education system be “Hinduised” and have forced changes in school curricula and textbooks.

In mid-February, just days after the communalists drove Mehta out of Uttar Pradesh, BJP-RSS forces dominating the Indian Council of Historical Research ordered that the publication of two

volumes of *Towards Freedom*, a projected multi-volume collection of historical documents of India, be stopped. The two volumes in question were edited respectively by leading historians, Professor Sumit Sarkar and Professor K.N. Pannikar.

The author of *Modern India* and numerous other historical monographs and articles, Sarkar is arguably India's leading historian and an intellectual of international stature and acclaim. He told the media that the BJP was attempting to refashion the past to "suit its fascist agenda" and that it constituted a "move towards the elimination of democracy" in India.

Pannikar, who is chairman of historical archives at Jawaharlal Nehru University, warned that the BJP was attempting to restructure India's entire educational system and control its syllabus.

Political intimidation of artists and intellectuals by governments and extremist forces is not unique to India, but a graphic expression of what has become commonplace throughout the sub-continent—the whipping up of communalist forces to silence political dissent.

Bangladeshi author Taslima Nasreen is described as an "enemy of Islam" in that country, where her books have been banned. The exiled author faces blasphemy charges and has been threatened with death by Islamic chauvinists. Last year Islamic extremists almost succeeded in assassinating Shamsur Rahman, one of Bangladesh's leading poets. Rahman was attacked with an axe.

Indian-born, internationally-acclaimed author Salman Rushdie still faces *fatwa*, a decree issued 11 years ago by Iranian cleric Ayatollah Khomeini, urging Moslems to kill the author over his satirical *Satanic Verses*. Khordad-15, an Iranian fundamentalist group, has offered a \$2.5-million reward for the death of Rushdie.

In Sri Lanka, the government is so fragile that it cannot tolerate any criticism. Death threats, house bombings and bashings have been launched against musicians, actors, artists and intellectuals opposing the ruling Peoples Alliance government.

Attacks on freedom of artistic expression extend into the advanced countries, where Christian fundamentalists and other conservative lobby groups exert their influence. Last September in the US, New York Mayor Giuliani attempted to close *Sensation*, an exhibition of British artists at the Brooklyn Museum, claiming the art on display was "Catholic bashing" and anti-religious. A few weeks later in Michigan, authorities closed an exhibition of contemporary art at the Detroit Institute of Art.

In late November, the National Gallery of Australia cancelled its scheduled exhibition of *Sensation* after the gallery's director received a few letters of protest and discussed the show with the conservative Howard government. In Australia filmmakers have also had to confront government moves to impose a stricter film censorship code.

Last year in Berlin police raided and confiscated films from a video rental company that specialised in classic and art house cinema.

Why is artistic freedom of expression under such serious attack? It is connected to the increase in social tensions produced by the growing disparity between rich and poor on a global scale, and the necessity for the ruling elites to silence those exposing this reality.

The most serious filmmakers and artists deeply explore the

world around them. This creative process poses a danger to the powers-that-be because all honest artistic work forces its audience to more carefully examine social reality and its contradictions. Creative freedom, the basic democratic right to artistically explore any phenomenon, is a threat to those attempting to impose their own retrogressive political and social economic agenda. A conscious population aware of its own history and social rights is a stronger political opponent than a superstitious or confused one.

The current fundamentalist campaign against Deepa Mehta in India recalls the methods used by Hitler's Nazis in the 1930s, when fascist thugs burnt thousands of books deemed unacceptable by the regime. As the 19th century German poet Heinrich Heine prophesised: "Where they have burned books, they will end in burning human beings." The fundamentalist mobilisation against Mehta poses the same dangers and demands a determined response.

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on all those in the film industry, all artists and writers, and all working people to take a stand in defence of Deepa Mehta and oppose this escalating attack on democratic and artistic rights. If the Hindu fundamentalists' campaign goes unchallenged, it will embolden extremist elements elsewhere. Just as scientific research cannot advance if its work is restricted by political interference or determined according to government policies, so genuine artistic creativity cannot develop without full freedom of expression and investigation.

Letters of protest should mailed or faxed to:

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Prime Minister of India
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New Delhi, India-110 011
Fax: 91-11-3019545 / 91-11-3016857

Shri Ram Prakash Gupta,
Chief Minister,
Uttar Pradesh 5,
Kalidas Marg Lucknow, India
Fax: 91-522-239234 / 91-522-230002
Email: cmup@upindia.org & cmup@up.nic.in

Please send copies of all statements and letters of protest to the WSWs at: E-mail: editor@wsws.org

This appeal is available as a PDF leaflet for downloading and distribution



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact