

Students and artists protest attack on Indian-born filmmaker Deepa Mehta

20 April 2000

A sustained campaign by religious extremists and other right-wing forces in India recently forced filmmaker Deepa Mehta to suspend temporarily filming of her latest work, *Water*. Mehta intends to resume filming under more favorable conditions later in the year.

In late January Hindu fundamentalists—in league with members of the state government of Uttar Pradesh led by the Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP)—wrecked her set in Varanasi, claiming that the film, about the plight of poverty-stricken widows in the 1930s, would be anti-Hindu. The thuggery resulted in \$650,000 in damages.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has taken up a campaign to defend Mehta, insisting that fundamental issues of democratic rights and artistic freedom are involved. We have already posted dozens of letters and statements of protest in three parts, beginning on April 5 with Filmmakers and artists protest the attack on director Deepa Mehta.

On April 14 and 15, 64 students and other filmgoers attending showings of *Earth*—one of Deepa Mehta's previous works—at Rutgers University in New Jersey signed a statement condemning the attack. We reprint the statement below, followed by more letters of protest from Germany, Sri Lanka and Australia. We urge our readers to write letters of protest to the Indian authorities:

Atal Bihari Vajpayee
Prime Minister of India
South Block, Raisina Hill 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

E-mail: cmup@upindia.org & cmup@up.nic.in

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

Statement signed at Rutgers University

To the Prime Minister of India:

We, the undersigned students, faculty and staff from Rutgers University denounce the campaign by Hindu fundamentalists to stop production of Indian director Deepa Mehta's latest film, *Water*. We call on your government to take measures to ensure that production of Mehta's film resumes.

It has been brought to our attention that Mehta was forced last month to suspend production of *Water* after violent attacks against

cast and crew by Hindu fundamentalists associated with the Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP). On January 30, Hindu extremists led by local BJP politicians destroyed the film set. The BJP government in the state of Uttar Pradesh then blocked filming, forcing Mehta to withdraw from that state on February 6.

The growing attack on artistic freedom is an international phenomenon. In New York City, Mayor Giuliani attempted to cut off funding for the Brooklyn Museum of Art and shut it down because he deemed that an exhibit there—*Sensation*—was “Catholic-bashing.”

We regard these attacks with the utmost seriousness and demand that your government and members of your party cease its provocative campaign against Deepa Mehta immediately! History has repeatedly demonstrated that governments that attempt to restrict freedom of artistic expression do so because they cannot tolerate any democratic discussion of their policies. The BJP's thuggery against Mehta aims to silence all those artists and intellectuals who oppose present-day attempts to divide the Indian masses on the basis of caste and religion.

We stand in solidarity with Indian students and all those who have demonstrated against the growing wave of attacks on artistic and intellectual freedom by the BJP and religious extremists.

Letters of protest

10.04.2000

Dear Sir or Madam,

I wish to express my astonishment and sadness that Ms. Deepa Mehta is being prevented from carrying out her work. I hope that Deepa Mehta will be able to continue despite the limitations being placed on her work and I call upon the appropriate authorities to do everything in their powers to ensure that an important filmmaker can undertake her artistic activity in India.

With friendly greetings.

Ines Ruf / Videodrom

Berlin

To the Prime Minister of India and the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh:

That art as a medium is more powerful than either politics or religion in building up humane relationships is recognized by intellectuals around the world today. Therefore it is an undeniable truth that the task of art is not merely to give pleasure but also to develop man's intellect and knowledge and to make him more aware of his rights as a human being. Then how are the boundaries and rights of art decided? By whom are they decided? How should one be bound to obey and carry out these decisions?

It is the just and reasonable right of civilians belonging to any nationality or country to explore these issues—because in a democratic country, which is not under a totalitarian regime the political leadership belongs to the people. In a country where the rulers have been invested with political power by the people through a system of election acceptable to them, the people have a sacred right to question whether the civil rights of the people of that country are properly secured. If either the government in power or any other ruling class institution with the aim of putting into practice its own narrow views gives reins of power into the hands of a few of its followers, who would then pose as the people—and thus engage in an attempt to carry out narrow religious, political or racist views against the rights of the people—then the people should consider it their own task to “raise a voice” to safeguard civil rights.

The people consists of all humanity with democratic rights and is not limited to a small group belonging to a country, nationality or caste. Therefore we cannot consider this superficially as a problem limited to Indian nationals living in India. This will today be a problem of the Indians and tomorrow will become a problem of the Sri Lankans. We must approach this problem not as Indians, Americans or Sri Lankans but generally as men and women with human rights. Art belongs to all; If any political party or government, which has come to power in a country—takes art under its control, then art becomes “their property”. It would no longer “belong” to the people. No longer a *pure* art, it would come to the people as a ruling class “art”, conditioned according to some political or religious design.

An artist does not belong to a country or nationality, neither does he belong to a party nor to a caste. He is a human being. A work of art, which through this artist, independently provides a penetrating vision of the social mechanism, is brought under the control of the ruling class then the truth in it will be taken away and it will be formed according to somebody's political needs. The artist himself is a political being who lives in society; but an artist sees things from a better vantage point than a politician. Therefore, a great wrong is done when a ruling class attempts to take away the right of the artist to have a clear view of things by burdening him with unwanted spectacles. This is infringing again and again a right of the people.

This is the situation faced by the Indian film director Deepa Mehta. We should protest in a place where our raised hands would be clearly seen—our raised voices would be clearly heard, against the attempts of the Hindu extremists who are bound up with the Bharatiya Janatha Party to disrupt or to censor Mehta's artistic work, because this is a situation where a democratic right which belongs to the people in general is infringed. The authoritarian infringement of a sacred right like art is not an injustice suffered merely by one nation; it is an attack on a human right, which belongs to all of us—human beings in general. Today we should not allow the ruling class to take into their grip the valuable resources of the world as well as the human rights of the people like art and keep silent because then we would be investing that very silence with power for the ruling class to take into their grip our other rights too.

Who created war? Who gave life to racism and religious

discord? We should not allow these same people to take our right for art too into their control. Art born of freedom of thought—even before developed man evolved—bears witness for itself even within rock caves which belong to the pre-historic period. Centuries have passed since developed man emerged and we cannot give up that freedom to become a property of the ruling class. As the director of the film *Water*, Deepa Mehta has stated: “Various incidents are taking place in the world. This cannot be hidden. History records the truth of these incidents; but the right of the artist to visualize these incidents again and to express them to the world is infringed in various ways.”

This reveals one truth clearly to us. Are we to speak about our rights only when they have passed into history, which does not belong to us? We are not capable of correcting anything in history; but we can correct the present and by doing so we can change our future and make it different to what exists today. We should align ourselves against the attack. This noble task has become one of our responsibilities.

Inoka Satyanganee Mahadivulveva—film director

Sudath Mahadivulveva—film director

Sri Lanka

We support the campaign launched by the *World Socialist Web Site* against the state oppression of the film artist, Deepa Mehta.

Nanda Malinee—singer

Professor Sunil Ariyaratna—songwriter and film director

Sri Lanka

Dear Minister,

I protest vehemently against the persecution of Deepa Mehta by right-wing forces which aim to suppress her making of the film *Water*.

I am a freelance musician working in Sydney, Australia, and I am deeply interested in the development of literature, film and music internationally. Under the present conditions which threaten and endanger—indeed have already jeopardised—the work of artists like Mehta, I demand that your government act to restrain the communalist and reactionary forces which are carrying out this agenda.

Governments around the world today are on a slippery slope into dictatorship. Democratic rights are under threat in a manner which recalls the 1930s. You must take a political stand in defence of Deepa Mehta and mobilise your government against the reactionary elements which wish to silence her work.

Yours sincerely,

Adrian Falk

Australia



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact