

Filmmakers and artists protest the attack on director Deepa Mehta

5 April 2000

We reprint below a selection of the letters and statements that have been sent to the Prime Minister of India and the Chief Minister of the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh protesting the decision to block the production of Deepa Mehta's latest film Water in that state and against the ongoing campaign by Hindu fundamentalist organisations to prevent the film from being made anywhere in India. We will be posting more letters and statements over the next two days.

Water, which dramatises the plight of poverty-stricken widows at a Hindu temple in the 1930s, was originally scheduled to begin shooting in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh in late January. It was stopped after Hindu extremists, working hand-in-hand with members of the Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) state government, wrecked the film set claiming that the work was anti-Hindu. The Uttar Pradesh government seized on the riot to halt the filming in early February, claiming it was provoking civil disorder.

Since then Hindu communalist organisations such as the Rastriya Swayangsevak Sangh (RSS), the Kashi Sanskriti Raksha Sangharsh Samiti (KSRSS) and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) have intensified their vicious crusade against Deepa Mehta, threatening protests wherever she attempts to make the film. Islamic fundamentalists also joined in. They have prevailed upon religious authorities to issue a fatwa against one of the film's actresses Shabana Azmi, claiming it was a sacrilege for anyone from a Muslim family or with a Muslim name to perform Hindu rites on the screen.

*Last month the national government, which is also led by the BJP, seized upon spurious allegations, first aired by the RSS, that Mehta had plagiarised her script from *Those Days*, a well-known Indian novel by Sunil Gangopadhyay. Information and Broadcasting Minister Arun Jaitley declared that he was considering withdrawing permission for the production because Mehta "did not tell the whole truth" when seeking clearance for *Water*.*

The campaign against Deepa Mehta and her film is a fundamental attack on democratic rights and artistic freedom that has far reaching implications for the working class in India and internationally. The BJP and associated Hindu extremist organisations are deliberately stoking up communalist tensions to divide the oppressed masses and divert attention from the widening chasm between rich and poor being created by government policies. The WSWS urges all its readers to take a stand against the witch-hunt of Deepa Mehta and send letters of protest to the Indian governments responsible:

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91-11-3019545 / 91-11-3016857
Shri Ram Prakash Gupta
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Uttar Pradesh 5

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

The campaign against Deepa Mehta's film shows how far the multi-ethnic, multi-religious character of Indian society has eroded.

It is a tactic of the ruling class to incite chauvinism and religious conflicts to divert the mass movement that grows against it as the economic and political crisis intensifies in a country. As a cinema artist living in a country which is going through such an experience, I protest against the mob violence leveled against Deepa's film, even without seeing it, and I also take a stand in defence of the democratic right of Deepa to express herself as an artist.

*Prasanna Vithanage
Filmmaker, Sri Lanka*

I read the appeal by the *World Socialist Web Site* and learned that in India the shooting of the new film of Deepa Mehta, *Water*, has been prevented by brutal attacks, physical threats to the crew and actors, destruction of film equipment and bureaucratic provocations—and this from Hindu extremists who are allied to the BJP, the leading party in the current coalition government in India! The government pretends it is on the side of the filmmaker, but, in fact, does everything necessary in order to assert its right-wing, nationalist state ideology.

All over the world there are examples of the prevention of truth-seeking, critical-creative activity. When such activity has already born fruit then they are prevented from reaching the public. Concern about or the questioning of current power structures, opinions and images of human life are not really welcomed.

In New York there was pressure to cancel the exhibition "Sensations" because of offence to Catholics—I saw the exhibition in Berlin and could see no harm in it. In Berlin the art house-Videothek, "Videodrom," was closed because of two or three pornographic videos. For a director/author such as myself the "Videodrom" is an indispensable pool of inspiring works of art.

There are continual attempts to find excuses to avoid the irritation which arises from insights into the depths of society and the human psyche.

Pasolini once said that art had to serve the greatest of all arts.
The art of life.

Despite its development and reliance on technological progress, the world has ever increasing problems with the art of life.

We need therefore art which affords new insights!

TO THIS END WE REQUIRE FREEDOM AT EVERY LEVEL!

For the art of life there is still much to be done !!!!

Maren-Kea Freese (author/filmmaker [*Zoe*]), Germany

LET HER DO IT!

It has been an established fact throughout history that independent artistic expressions, whether controversial or not, play a vital role in the process of social development.

Imposition of any restrictions on such attempts is treated, by every civilised society, as inhuman. I join the worldwide campaign against the violation of Deepa Mehta's right to free expression and I as a film maker, who loves the artistry of Indian film classics, demand the government LET HER DO IT!

Asoka Handagama,

Director/writer, Sri Lanka

The American naturalist John Muir once said, "Whenever we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe." This is true for the natural world, as well for the arts and all other aspects of human endeavor. For this reason, attacks against any individual artist threaten the rights to universal free expression. In India, the government campaign against filmmaker Deepa Mehta threatens artistic freedom everywhere. So the protest on Mehta's behalf involves and concerns all of us.

John Nichols

Novelist and screenwriter, USA

After the attacks leveled against journalists, judges and progressive intellectuals the oppressive arm and witch-hunting violence in our region is now aimed at the artists.

Violence in this region was used to intimidate the Literary Arts tendencies of the writers as well in the past period. We know that Thaslima, Rushdie and Arundathi have faced this terror.

Violent acts perpetrated against the creative attempt of Deepa Mehta shows that the drama and cinema artists who could express their views attractively and creatively are also aimed at by these witch-hunters.

In Sri Lankan society too, where we live, we see the inhuman attempts to attack artists.

We must push back these mad attempts through a program developed by the artists in this whole region coming together.

Dharmasiri Bandaranayaka

Drama and film director, Sri Lanka

[His latest work is an adaptation of the Greek classic *The Trojan Women* by Euripides.]

It might seem a cliché to describe as cowardly the attacks on Deepa Mehta and her new film production, which have both been subject to assault. But what word other than "cowardice" will do, when a government, a political party, and a religious body all feel threatened by an unarmed woman and the colored shadows she might throw up on a screen? If the powers ranged against Mehta have no regard for the arts, for democratic values, or for the good opinion of people elsewhere in the world, let them at least be self-regarding. Have they so little faith in their gods that they think Mehta's "Water" will wash them away?

Stuart Klawans

Film critic, *The Nation*, USA

Dear Sir,

These early actions against Deepa Mehta in India are deplorable. Such preemptive censorship is the most despicable, because it attacks ideas. By silencing her artistic voice before it is allowed to speak, (by disrupting her film and destroying its set), disallows any dialogue before the fact. It refuses discourse at any level and stifles all freedoms. And, if left unchallenged by world opinion, these factions

will only feel encouraged to continue and to expand such suppressions.

Jef Bourgeau, artist

Pontiac, Michigan

To the Prime Minister of India Atal Bihari Vajpayee,

To the Chief Minister Shri Ram Prakash Gupta,

With great concern I have taken notice of the persecution of the filmmaker Deepa Mehta and the destruction as well obstruction of her work which is to my understanding a serious attack on democratic and artistic rights, on genuine artistic creativity and the freedom of expression and investigation.

I herewith protest energetically against the persecution and repression of Deepa Mehta and her work and I asked you to shelter her work and prevent any kind of violence towards herself and her crew.

Peace to You

Cornelia Müller

Artist

Berlin, Germany

Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Prime Minister of India

Prime Minister,

I was appalled to learn of the recent violent attacks against Indian filmmaker Deepa Mehta in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Myself and many colleagues in my industry are incensed by this flagrant violation of the fundamental democratic rights of this artist.

The physical attacks of Hindu fundamentalist mobs, with the compliance and lead of local Bharatiya Janatha Party politicians, against Mehta and her efforts to shoot her new film *Water* in the city of Varanasi is the most vile form of censorship and threat to artistic expression and must not go unanswered. The state government of UP has given these rioting extremists the upper hand, not only by its refusal to guarantee the protection of Mehta and her set and crew, but by its active participation in a campaign of violence and intimidation culminating in the eventual mandatory suspension of the film production itself.

These are facts that I am sure you are well aware of, but I feel need to be underscored because of the ominous picture that it presents concerning the democratic rights of artists and citizens alike, not only throughout India, but internationally.

What kind of precedent are you attempting to set by allowing these reactionary mob-rule tactics against a serious artist to go unchecked? What lies ahead? Will filmmakers and artists with anything to say be silenced by violent threats and eventually murder? This is a political environment that more resembles 1933 Germany than that of a country that calls itself a democracy.

As a well-established American photographer, I feel that I speak for many in the artistic community in condemning these repressive attacks against Deepa Mehta, and demand that you take action to bring them to an instant halt.

Jeff Riedel

Photographer

New York, New York



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact