

Protests against the attack on Indian filmmaker Deepa Mehta

6 April 2000

We reprint below a second 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 tomorrow.

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

The Prime Minister of India
Sir,

I strongly denounce the ongoing Hindu fundamentalist attacks against the production of Deepa Mehta's latest film, "Water." It goes without saying that it is a violation of a basic democratic right—the right of expression.

Nevertheless, it circumscribes the freedom of art and is also a decree forced on the artist.

As an artist living in your closest neighboring island, I cannot keep silent in this regard. So, I demand an immediate action to remove all the obstacles and make the grounds clear, enabling Deepa Mehta to continue with her artistic work, without any disturbance.

I remain,
Darshana Medis
Sri Lanka, poet & art critic
Hon. Sir,

The Attack on Deepa Mehta's "Water"

It's a pity in the 21st century when communication has become the most powerful and effective way to get through to people around the world, artists who are talented and brave enough to bring reality through films, music and other sources—media—to the public, have been tied and held back by a gang of people.

It is up to the common spectator to judge, comment and praise or criticize the work of the artist, and the artist should have the freedom to express his/her feelings through the art form that they know best, especially through a powerful and most effective method—CINEMA.

I would be glad as an artist, if you could take action to lift all the bans and barriers set against the film "Water" and do justice to the artists who work for the human race.

Thank you,
J. de Silva, musician
London
Shri Ram Prakash Gupta, chief minister, Uttar Pradesh
March 6, 2000
Dear Sir;

I want to voice my support of artistic freedom within all countries of the world, even as I understand the significance and value of differences of culture and tradition.

Please stay mindful of the critical value of protecting differing and perhaps challenging expressions and points of view as you respond to the conflicts surrounding the attempted production of Deepa Mehta's film "Water."

Thank you.
Sincerely,
Ellen Cornfield
Artistic Director CORNFELD DANCE

New York, New York

SOCIAL SCIENTISTS ASSOCIATION

The disruption of the filming of Deepa Mehta's latest film, "Water" and the burning of its set material on 30-1-2000 by activists of Kashi Raksha Sangharsh Samith (KRSS) is a violation of the democratic right to freedom of expression in a free country. We are concerned that this was done in defiance of permission given by authorities to conduct the shooting. Such arbitrary acts of destruction and violence create insecurity, fear and terror, endangering life and property and jeopardizing freedom of creative expression.

Mehta is unjustly accused of defaming Hindu culture by her negative portrayal of Kashi as a city where child widows are forced into prostitution. The issue of child widows was at the center of a continuing reform campaign in India dating from the late 19th century.

The attack is an attempt to suppress open discussion on practices oppressive to women in Hindu society. The Hindu fundamentalists seem to defend their right to oppress widows in the name of religion and culture. I appeal to the government of India to allow the shooting of the film and to thereby publicize the social evil of child marriage in India. The state government must also bring criminal charges against the perpetrators of violence.

V. K. Jayawardena

Professor V. Kumari Jayawardena is a prominent Sri Lankan historian. There are several books to her credit, among which History of the Working Class Movement in Sri Lanka is best known. She is the secretary of the Social Scientists Association.

Siege on artists

The protest in the Hindu heartland of Varanasi (Benares) against Mehta's latest film "Water" on January 30 by activists of Kashi Raksha Sangharsh Samiti (KSRS), which led to the disruption of shooting and burning of her set material, constitutes a violation of democratic rights of freedom of expression in a free country. We are concerned that a group of religious extremists in the State of Uttar Pradesh resorted to violence to thwart shooting of the film in defiance of clearance, directives and permission to begin shooting by the highest government authority. This speaks volumes about the growing intolerance and xenophobia of those who seek to police culture, control flow of information and stifle debate. We are deeply disturbed that the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh took no measure to either stop the orchestrated "unrest" from spreading and turning into violent vandalism or to condemn the attack as undemocratic and unlawful. Such arbitrary acts of destruction and violence create insecurity, fear and terror, endangering life and property and jeopardizing freedom of creative expression.

The protesters accused Mehta of trying to defame Hindu culture by her negative portrayal of Kashi as a city where child widows are forced into prostitution. The theme of Varanasi widows in the 1930s is not a terribly new idea invented by Mehta. The issue of child widows and their devalued status in traditional Hindu society was at the center of a 19th century reform campaign in India. There have been several films done on the theme of widows in Varanasi ranging from "Sangharsh", "Ram Teri Ganga Maili" to "Jaya Ganga". These were allowed to be shot without protest.

The attack on Mehta's film "Water" is an attempt to suppress any open discussion on cultural practices that are oppressive to women in Hindu society. By the anti-Water offensive, the Hindu fundamentalist Sangh Parivar seems to defend their right to oppress widows in the name of religion and culture. "It is nobody's business if we oppress our own women since it is our right", seems to be their ominous message. If these religious purists get away with violence against creative expression, the struggle for democratic freedoms will be crushingly defeated. By taking no effective action against those responsible for the disruption as well as by remaining silent in the face of incitement to violence, both the central

and state governments have displayed a shocking indifference to the fundamental rights of artists.

As concerned citizens, we appeal to the Government of India to revert to its earlier decision to permit shooting of the film and fulfill the rights of public access to information. We demand that the district administration in Uttar Pradesh respect the decision of the central government and I & B Ministry which endorsed Mehta's script and that she be allowed to shooting the film under the most peaceful circumstances. The state government must also bring criminal charges against the perpetrators of violence and those who issue threats as well as encourage others to harass or attack Mehta's crew and cast. The district administration that enjoys the legitimacy of state power must make reparations to all affected by the attack.

Women's Coalition for Peace, Sri Lanka

Mangalika de Silva

Lisa Kois

Yoland Foster

Deanne Uyangoda

Kumari Jayawardena

Darim Rajasingham

Dear sir,

I am writing with great concern both as an Indian citizen, and a person who sees the great value in freedom of thought and expression. I oppose and protest the extremist agenda of your fundamentalist government, especially its recent manifestation in the form of attacks on filmmaker Deepa Mehta.

More than a flawed political agenda, your campaign is a blatant attack on the Indian people, and our basic rights as human beings. This is nothing short of government-sanctioned terrorism, the use of repressive and oppressive measures by the state to crush the individual, and to create a climate of fear in the country. This disgusting build-up of fascism in my country is something I can never accept or tolerate, and I urge you to stop these policies immediately.

Yours sincerely,

Pranjal Tiwari

Dear Sir(s)/madam(s),

I am appalled that you and your government would allow such blatant attacks on the democratic and artistic rights of your noted filmmaker, Deepa Mehta. Of course, these aren't attacks against just one individual; they are attacks against the world's people, in particular artists, intellectuals, and workers who are struggling to make sense of a very oppressive world. How can any society advance the interests of its people when it allows right-wing thugs and religious fanatics to impose their ideology on its artists and scientists, people, who by the very nature of their work, can only better the lives of the masses?

I urge you to take all necessary actions to insure that artists, workers, scientists, and intellectuals be allowed the freedom to pursue their truth as they see fit without fear of reprisal from bands of religious fanatics, be these Hindu, Moslem, Christian, Hebrew, or what have you. You owe Deepa Mehta that much. You owe her world colleagues the same.

Sincerely,

R. Rizik

actor, USA



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact