

More protests against the attack on Indian filmmaker Deepa Mehta

7 April 2000

We reprint below a third 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.

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 WWSW 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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*Shri Ram Prakash Gupta
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Please email copies of all statements and letters of protest to the WWSW at: editor@wsws.org

*His Excellency, The Prime Minister of India
Atal Bihari Vajpayee*

*It is horrifying to learn of the Hindu fundamentalist campaign against the production of Deepa Mehta's new film *Water*, and the violent attack on her destroying the set of that film. This attack is not only an attack on a single individual artist of international fame in India, but a clear demonstration of the extreme communalist and the fascist program of destroying art and literature and hence the freedom of expression. A clear proof of this campaign with a large agenda is the BJP-RSS inspired Indian Council of Historical Research's banning of two volumes of historical documents by leading Indian historians Professors Sarkar and Pannikar. There are reasons to believe that these cowardly acts by extremists have the sympathy and backing of the ruling BJP.*

Intensified attacks on artists and intellectuals in India are, in fact, paralleled with similar attacks in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and even in the West where the freedom of expression is believed to be well protected and respected. While denouncing and condemning with utter contempt the extremist attacks on Indian filmmaker Mehta and historians Sarkar and Pannikar, we also urge all those who stand for the freedom of art and literature to be alarmed by the forces lined up against the freedom of expression. In history, all dictators have resorted to destroying art as an integral part of their campaign against freedom of thought and expression. Their accomplices throughout the world are aware that it is a necessary precondition for the establishment of fascist dictatorial regimes, which would degrade humanity into slavery.

It is the duty of all artists, professionals, intellectuals and students to vehemently protest against the dastardly attacks on artists and intellectuals and to defeat extremist fascist groups, in order to protect the freedom of expression and to ensure the advancement of arts and sciences.

*Professor M.G.A. Cooray
Head of the Department of History and Political Science
University of Colombo
To the Prime Minister of India,*

*We, the undersigned history honours students from the University of Melbourne, 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.*

*Deepa Mehta is an internationally acclaimed director. Her most recent film *Earth* shows the tragic consequences of the 1947 partition of India—a partition imposed by British imperialism along religious and communal*

lines. 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 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 which attempt to restrict freedom of artistic expression do so because they cannot tolerate any democratic discussion of their policies. 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.

Yours sincerely,

Hunter Keith, Shannon-Kate Archer, Marie Stack, Colin Goswell, Barnaby Smith, Peter Carolane, Laura Mitchell, Peter O'Toole, Allie Douglas, Nicole Starbuck, Tom Stringer, Sianan Healy

I join the petition of the *World Socialist Web Site* to stop the act of intolerance and the persecution of Deepa Mehta. I regret to learn that about the country with an ancient civilization such as India. It is a shame on the memory of Gandhi and his legacy, and all of the tradition of free speech and expression.

Nicola Caroli,

Italy

For the attention of The Chief Minister:

We write to express our opposition to the Hindu fundamentalist campaign in India to stop the production of Deepa Mehta's latest film "Water".

It is a fundamental human right to express oneself artistically without political/religious censorship. To prevent an artist from doing so is an attack upon the artist's democratic rights.

We condemn the attacks on Deepa Mehta and call upon you to take a stand against them. The way must become clear to enable this exceptionally talented, internationally renowned filmmaker to practice her art.

Sincerely,

Teni Burns and Robyn Habel

(RT Productions Australia, scriptwriters, songwriters, recording artists)

Dear Sir,

I have read of the attacks aimed at preventing filmmaker Deepa Mehta from completing one of her films on the grounds it might denigrate or offend some members of your society. Is this the case? You see I'd like to be clear here that Ms Mehta is not actually undertaking robbery, or assassination or poisoning the water supply. She is only making a film, i.e., a series of photos sped up, accompanied by sound and usually shown on large screens. What danger can this, in itself, possibly pose to your society?

If people don't like it, they don't have to go. For them to get upset about the mere thought of it occurring is, not to mince words, a "neurotic" response. It is valuing the world of emotions and thoughts as if they were real events. It is like a form of primitive taboo. (It's not there if we don't say the name ...)

You see I don't think that the problem is in the film. I think the problem is that things are falling apart in your society and you people can't see anyway out of the whole stinking mess except for saying it's not happening and it won't happen. The problem is not in the movie, it is the society itself and you don't want people to see Ms. Mehta's artistic perspective and start to think, question and draw their own conclusions. You want to keep on pouring out the same old toxic separatist and communalist rhetoric. You want people to actually have no choice but what you say.

How long do you think you can do this for? Don't you ever think, "This is going nowhere, here I am acting like one of Mountbatten's or Hitler's stooges, actively trying to hold back the advance of humanity's cultural

and artistic aspirations? Is this why I was born? To stifle and prevent basic democratic rights?" Ask yourself what good did it do Mountbatten, what good did it do Hitler ... or their stooges?

You have no right to act the way you have done. You have acted against the interest of humanity's curiosity and imagination. You must rescind all orders immediately. Apologise to Ms. Mehta and her audience worldwide for the inconvenience and make amends by giving Ms. Mehta all and any assistance she needs to complete her film.

Yours sincerely,

Tony Cornwell, RN

Sydney, Australia

Shri Ram Prakash Gupta

Chief Minister, Uttar Pradesh

Dear Chief Minister:

It is with great consternation that I have learned of the attacks by thugs in Uttar Pradesh which have forced Deepa Mehta and her crew to cease production there of her latest film, "Water". Having seen her recent film, "Earth", I can attest to the universal human values which she movingly brings to the screen. I have learned that the government of Uttar Pradesh, of which you are Chief Minister, took the side of the criminals who destroyed Ms. Mehta's set and threatened the lives of the crew, by blocking filming twice within seven days. In a classic case of blaming the victim, Ms. Mehta and her crew were blamed for provoking disorder! Of course, they were only guilty of peacefully filming based on a script that had the full approval of the central government censors.

The rioting and intimidation which has been orchestrated against Ms. Mehta recalls the methods of the Nazis in 1930s Germany. Why is the BJP government so afraid of the ideas of this artist?

I call on you to rein in the real criminals in your province, the thugs and their supporters in government who have unjustly attacked Ms. Mehta, her crew, and their property.

A copy of this statement will be faxed to Prime Minister Vajpayee in New Delhi.

James Baker

Brooklyn, New York

19 March 2000

Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Prime Minister of India

cc.

Shri Ram Prakash Gupta, Chief Minister, Uttar Pradesh

Sir:

I call for your action to correct against the recent attacks on artistic, cultural, educational and democratic rights that have taken place in India. I refer to the campaign and physical attacks against the production of Deepa Mehta's latest film, *Water*. Additionally, publication of the first two volumes of *Towards Freedom*, a projected six-volume history of India written by Professor Sumit Sarkar and Professor K. N. Pannikar, has been prevented. It has been reported in the international media that a coalition of Hindu extremists aligned with the Bharatiya Janatha Party, including the Rastriya Swayangsevak Sangh, were responsible for the attacks on Mehta's film and on the history project, the latter through their domination of the Indian Council of Historical Research.

As a teacher in New York City, the history and culture of India are an important part of the curriculum of Global History I share with my students.

Furthermore, as a teacher I am concerned with the free flow of information and the creative process of the individual. The shared nature of our global culture today is a beneficial development for humanity. Similarly, any blow against democracy and free expression in one part of the world impacts on the rights of all the world's people.

These are serious works of art and education which are meant to provoke thought and discussion as must exist in a democratic society. Publication of all materials of the past are also invaluable to a truthful

account of history, without which an understanding of the present must suffer. This censorship demonstrates a fascist agenda that can only serve the domination by those who hold power in their hands over the masses who would be denied the opportunity to view and study them. They further the communalist division that has plagued India and the working class.

I am sure that there will be more expression in the world community demanding a halt to any such further attacks. Rather, these projects should be supported.

Sincerely,

Harvey S. Lichtman

New York, New York



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact