

Filmmaker speaks with the WSWS

Hindu extremist campaign forces director Deepa Mehta to suspend filming in India

David Walsh
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As the result of a sustained campaign by religious extremists and other right-wing forces, Indian-born filmmaker Deepa Mehta has been forced to temporarily suspend production of her latest work, *Water*, in India.

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.

When Mehta demonstrated that she was not intimidated by the physical violence and sought a new location in which to make her film, the right-wing gutter press began claiming that she had plagiarized her script from a well-known novel, *Those Days* (*Shei Samay*) by Sunil Gangopadhyay. She has also been accused of being “anti-Gandhi” and a publicity-hunting opportunist. Mehta is taking those who accused her of plagiarism to court.

In a telephone conversation Mehta, now back at her home in Toronto, described the viciousness of the attacks and her decision to halt production for the time being.

“It’s been a difficult and ongoing battle,” she said. “We couldn’t film in Varanasi. And the crew had to be disbanded. We couldn’t afford to keep people hanging around. The key crew had other commitments. I plan to resume in September or October, if things calm down. Everywhere these forces threatened to organize mass rallies or stone me. I can’t film right now. I have to retreat for the time being. There was no way we could do it.

“We have to work out the logistics, so we can resume in October. We lost half the budget in Varanasi. This is

a low-budget film. We have a budget of \$2 million Canadian. Now we have to make the film for half of that.”

I asked Mehta if she had received support from intellectuals and artists in India. Her response suggested that the support was lukewarm. “We received a lot ... not a lot, *some* support from intellectuals,” she explained. “Basically everyone’s petrified.”

The smear campaign against her apparently helped provide excuses for those not anxious to stand up to the religious extremists. “Most people were being told that it was a publicity stunt on my part,” Mehta said. “There was a campaign to discredit me. They said I made lousy movies anyway. *Earth* was lousy. *Fire* was lousy. They said I was a vulture that fed on Indian culture, that all I want is controversy. I’m a bad filmmaker, creating controversy so the West will buy my films. It’s very bad.”

I asked about support from various political forces, including the “left.” Mehta remarked that the governments in West Bengal (Stalinist) and Madhya Pradesh (Congress Party) had expressed interest in having the film made in their states. At this point the plagiarism charge was made, which apparently further eroded support for her. “It’s in the courts,” she explained, of the charge. The next court date is May 4, but Mehta will not be returning to India for the trial. The matter is in the hands of her lawyers.

The entire affair begins to take on an *Alice in Wonderland* character. She noted that the script was accused of being “anti-Hindu,” while the book from which it supposedly stole material is “pro-Hindu.” She went on, “Madhya Pradesh was another alternative.

Then a huge article appeared saying that the script wasn't anti-Hindu, neither was it plagiarized, but it was 'anti-Gandhi.' Madhya Pradesh is a Congress Party stronghold. Things in the script were taken out of context."

Mehta declared, "It's a huge, huge conspiracy. I was fighting and I'm continuing to fight an incredibly well-organized force. I'm totally against the whole concept of pre-censorship. These people are trying to divert attention from the social conditions, fanning mob sentiments in the name of 'protecting' Hinduism."

"While I was there I was such an obvious target, it was bad for the film. The constant death threats ... it was worrisome for my parents. These people want to break you. They would be thrilled if I said that I wasn't going to make the film. I told the press when I left India: 'It's very important that the film is made.'"

She returned to the role of the intellectuals. "Even the left-wing intellectual opinion was divided. The plagiarism charge didn't help, nor the so-called anti-Gandhi script. But it's uncanny how the plagiarism issue was exploited to such an extent that the crux of the matter, the role of the [extreme right-wing] RSS, freedom of expression, all that became deflected. Most of the intellectuals don't want to take a stand. You know *The Garden of the Finzi-Cortinis* [Vittorio de Sica's 1971 film about an aristocratic Jewish family in Mussolini's Italy]? The attitude is: 'It's not going to happen to us.'"

Referring to the hackneyed phrase with which India is often described, she observed, "The 'world's largest democracy,' what a load of crap! Nonetheless I believe the truth will prevail. But it won't by simply wishing it, only by hard work."

The filmmaker expressed appreciation for those who had responded to the attacks on her with letters and statements of protest. "It's very important, because at times you feel all alone."

Mehta's determination is inspiring. But she is up against sinister right-wing forces, representative of an international trend, who are the deadliest enemies of artistic expression and democratic rights. She must receive the widest support. The international film community has not sprung to her defense, much to its shame. We strongly urge readers to send statements of protest to the Indian authorities, and to send copies to the WSWS for posting.

Letters of protest should be mailed or faxed to:
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



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