

Film directors and critics at Singapore film festival oppose Hindu extremist attempt to stop Deepa Mehta film

24 April 2000

Last January Hindu fundamentalist thugs, with the tacit support of the Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), the main party in India's National Democratic Alliance government, attacked and destroyed Deepa Mehta's film set in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh. Mehta, who was about to begin shooting her latest film, *Water*, the last of her Indian trilogy, was accused of insulting Hinduism by the fundamentalists. The BJP state government in Uttar Pradesh claimed Mehta was responsible for the disorder and banned production of the film in that state. Mehta has vowed to make the film and plans to resume filming at another location in India later in the year.

The *World Socialist Web Site* is campaigning to defend Mehta, insisting that fundamental issues of democratic rights and artistic freedom are involved. At the Singapore International Film Festival held between March 31 and April 15, several film directors and critics voiced their support for Mehta and the *WSWS* campaign.

We reprint their comments below and urge all our readers to write letters of protest to the Indian authorities:

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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,
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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

Mohsen Makhmalbaf, internationally-acclaimed Iranian director. His films include *Nassoh's Repentance*, *The Peddler*, *Marriage of the Blessed*, *Salaam Cinema*, *Gabbeh*, *A Moment of Innocence*, *The Silence*, *The Door*.

"I strongly believe in the right and freedom of Deepa Mehta and all other filmmakers and artists to do their work. Everything should be done to encourage freedom of expression.

"There is a very interesting motto that is used today by those who want real reform in Iran. It is: 'Long life to those who are

against us'. This is an important expression because it says people should be tolerant. For many years the most common approach was down with this or down with that.

"I believe that even if people attack or criticise me, even though I may disagree with them, I am obliged to defend their right to criticise me. This is my responsibility and it is a principle that should apply to everyone, including my opponents. Without variety of ideas or thinking, then art, philosophy and life itself is endangered."

Bernice Chaully, Malaysian-based film writer/director. Chaully has been widely praised for *Semangat Insan—Masters of Tradition*, a documentary on Malaysian art forms, and her recent play, *3 Lives*.

"I support Deepa Mehta's right to produce her film and any attempt to prevent her making this movie has to be strongly opposed.

"I feel that this issue—the suppression of artistic freedom of expression, along with many other artistic and creative questions—is politically motivated and becoming a more and more common problem. Any examination of the truth always comes under fire because the people in power are threatened by any voice that is not theirs or does not support their political agenda.

"And this is not just happening in film but in writing, music and art. It is a global issue. Artists have to rally together and become a strong force in order to defend their basic rights. We have creative license as artists and we must defend this right. The campaign for freedom of artistic expression also has to include all artists, not only filmmakers.

"I agree with the point at the end of your statement that genuine artistic creativity cannot develop without full freedom of expression and investigation. This is true. If I look at Malaysia alone there are so many stories that need to be researched and told. If we don't tell these stories then there is a huge chunk of culture and voices that humanity will never hear.

"The government has an incredible ability to create fear among people and it is fear that creates silence. The challenge to writers, artists and filmmakers, is to defend creative freedom and be brave. It is not going to be easy, and it is not going to get any easier, but a stand has to be taken.

“Once a writer, filmmaker, dancer or artist of any kind decides to talk about real human issues they have a certain responsibility to create awareness, to provide an insight into what is real and what is true. There are so many problems right now but I am currently trying to do as much work as possible in Malaysia to overcome these problems and the dominant mindset. This is a big issue. Even established artists are very, very scared and only willing to go so far. Some have the attitude that as long as they have a play that sells out and makes money, then that's it. This is not just good enough.

“There is so much work that writers, filmmakers and other artists have to do but once you have decided to highlight certain issues, then you have to deliver. All those artists, like Deepa Mehta, who have come under political attack for taking this path, have to be defended.”

Aruna Vasudev, president of NETPAC (Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema) and editor of *Cinemaya—The Asian Film Quarterly*.

“It would be shameful for India if Deepa Mehta is not allowed to make *Water*, her new film. We have been a free and tolerant society in the past but if the country stops people making films or expressing what they want artistically then we have pre-censorship of the most serious kind. This is a dangerous turn of events, which I am very, very worried about, so any demonstration, any way of protesting this, I will support and take part in with the greatest commitment.

“I think what the Hindu fundamentalists did to Deepa Mehta over her film *Fire* was also terrible. Previously we have always been able to say what we wanted to say. What is worrying is the rise of intolerance and refusal to tolerate anyone who doesn't agree with a particular point of view. And now we see attempts to stop these views being expressed.

“Possibly Deepa did not realise the depth of this current of intolerance and the degree to which it has taken root in Indian society. It was a very big risk to take on something like *Water*, which leant itself to fundamentalist agitation and demonstrations. Perhaps if she had been living in India over the past period she might have realised that it would be difficult to make a film on this subject or to do it in Varanasi.

“However, at the same time I think it is good that she decided to proceed with the film and let all the trouble to come out. Let it all erupt into the open and let's fight it. Unfortunately she has had to pay a price.

“There is a rising wave of intolerance against anything that doesn't conform to the view of the ruling party and the extremist Hindu wing of this ruling party who are really getting the upper hand on education and cultural issues.

“This is very dangerous and we have got to oppose it in a very organised way. The intelligentsia has to take a stand, confront these forces and say very openly that it will not accept this. They are not a majority, they are a small group, and their actions do not confirm to the Hindu view of life. Why should we allow them to appropriate Hinduism and use it to their own

political ends? Hinduism is not theirs.

“We have to organise protests, demonstrations, write letters and so on. And although we are not necessarily street activists we can protest in our own fields by producing more films, plays and articles opposing this trend. This is what we know how to do.

“This is a global problem and you can see how the rise of ethnicity is connected to the rise of intolerance. It is also a political question. In the past the disaffected young used to join communist parties in the different countries, but now communism or at least Stalinism and the ends to which the name of communism had been misused has been discredited. But how do young people express their anger and disaffection? Out of their frustrations some have become religious extremists or get caught up in extremist agitation. This is part of what has happened.

“Your statement mentioned the suppression of the Indian history books. This is true and before that it was the attack on the artist M.F. Hussein. There are many of these sorts of incidents and they are all growing. This and the current attempts to stop Deepa Mehta making her film show that people cannot remain silent. They have to fight this intolerance now.”

Toh Hai Leong, film critic and controller of Singapore Film Society.

“I, Mr Toh Hai Leong, film critic and controller of the Singapore Film Society, am in full agreement and endorsement of Deepa Mehta's new film, *Water*. This is the last part of her trilogy—the other two being *Fire* and *Earth*, which I saw in Singapore. I was impressed by her sincerity and commitment.

“As such, due to the publicised story of the Hindu fundamentalist's intolerant campaign against her new effort, *Water*, I came to know of her plight.

“I'm very saddened that there is such intolerance and hatred, and the wielding of absolute power against almost defenceless film artists, writers or whoever is telling the truth. Deepa Mehta deserves all the support and endorsement befitting this committed artist's stature and must be allowed to make her film.”



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