

Letters in support of Indian filmmaker Deepa Mehta

11 May 2000

A sustained campaign by religious extremists and other right-wing forces in India recently forced filmmaker Deepa Mehta to temporarily suspend filming of her latest work, *Water*.

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. Mehta intends to resume filming under more favourable conditions later in the year.

The WSWs urges readers to write letters of protest to the Indian authorities:

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

The WSWs has received copies of the following statements in support of Deepa Mehta:

To Vajpayee, the Prime Minister of India and Shri Ram Prakash Gupta, the Chief Minister Uttar Pradesh:

As an artist and actor, I strongly condemn the action of your government against the making of the film *Water* and the internationally well-known film director, Deepa Mehta.

The reaction of your government to the attacks of Hindu extremists against Indian born filmmaker Deepa Mehta shows clearly the dangers not only for artistic freedom but the fundamental rights of all people.

Based on law, I believe your government has become a defender of criminal actions against people, artists and their fundamental right to freedom of artistic expression. I understand about India's social conditions and the political

situation. I believe your action in defending the Hindu extremists has nothing to do with defending Indian culture or religion, but is related to the social and political problems your government confronts.

As the WSWs has reported [“India at fifty: a damning indictment of bourgeois rule,” <http://www.wsws.org/news/1997/oct1997/ind-o11.shtml>], “the poverty that engulfs India today is deeper even than that which prevailed under the British Raj. Some 320 million Indians live in absolute poverty—i.e., they lack the daily calorie intake needed to support a full day's labor. Some 186 million people do not have access to clean water and close to 650 million lack sanitary facilities. Of India's 625,000 villages, 125,000 are without electricity, as are more than two-thirds of all rural households.”

“Two out of every three children under the age of five, or a total of 70 million pre-school children, are malnourished. Of the 26 million children born annually, 2.3 million will die before they are a year old, and another 1.2 million will perish before they reach five. Over 90% of these deaths could be prevented through the provision of clean water, adequate food and minimal health care facilities.”

“Some 130 million Indians have no access to health care. Complications in child birth—only one in three births in India is attended by a doctor or nurse—resulting in the death of 1.2 million women per year.

“Barely half of the adult population (64% of men and 39% of women) is literate. The extent of child labor is indicated by the fact that a third of the 105 million Indians who are between the ages of 6 and 10 do not attend school. In rural India, home to two-thirds of the country's population, 45% of children never receive any schooling.”

And as the economics professor Dipak Basu wrote [“Child labor and child slaves,” <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/jan2000/chld-j07.shtml>], “The greatest numbers of child laborers are in Asia,” and “among the 10 to 14-year-old children the working rate is 14.4 percent in India.”

And according to P.N. Mari Bhat “the mortality rates among widows in the 45 plus age group are 85% higher than

those for married women in the same age group.”

This is a living example of how Indian widows’ basic rights are suppressed and how they are exploited by the Indian ruling elites in the name of religion and culture.

Deepa Mehta’s film criticizes without any compromise this burning problem that Indian widows’ confront, and confront all over the country. From this fact it is easy to understand why the VHP and the extremists are involved. They do what ever they can to cruelly suppress fundamental rights and all the social questions that erupt from working people.

Under these social conditions your government and Hindu extremists attack the fundamental rights of artists and people who try to criticize these social conditions.

I urge you, the Prime Minister of India, Vajpayee, to respect internationally accepted fundamental rights of freedom of expression.

Let me to point out to you that according to articles 19,14 and 21, your government is under obligation to provide security to Deepa Mehta and should remove all obstacles to the making of the film with full freedom and full compensation for her losses.

If not I will continue to speak internationally to get support from the people of the world and artists against your brutal attack on the artistic and democratic rights of Deepa Mehta.

Cheliyan

France

9 May 2000

To the Indian Prime Minister:

I read an article on the *World Socialist Web Site* and was shocked to hear about a female artist who was attacked by Hindu extremists or religious fanatics. I want to recall here what Marx said about religion, “religion is the sigh of the person overwhelmed by misfortune, it is the heart of a heartless world just as it is the soul of a soulless world, it is the opium of the people.”

I chose the quotation because I have heard that Mr.Singh Parvar, the Hindu fundamentalist, has said “it’s nobody business if we oppress our own women since it is our right.”

I was ashamed to think that he could say that. I think he wants to say that the religious people have the right to spoil the widow’s life. He means that he wants to go back to a time when women were buried with their husbands. I find it ridiculous that you wish to prevent an artist from showing the reality of a widow’s life. Alain said that “all the arts are like mirrors in which man can discover and recognize things about himself of which he was unaware.”

Artists have a right to express their feelings so let them do their work freely. You declared that India is a one of the “world’s largest democracies.” If you prevent Mehta’s work, you prevent also freedom of expression in your

country. It is really a shame to say that a country like India is dominated by fascist elements in every field.

I demand that you immediately act to provide the conditions for Mehta to continue her work on *Water* and that she is compensated for her losses.

Sivasakthy

France

10 May 2000

My name is Ricardo Kalessar, a filmmaker living in Jersey City, New Jersey, USA.

Although I am not famous, I have a voice to express my views when it comes to a fellow filmmaker being not only censored but harassed for her freedom of expression, as is the case of Deepa Mehta. She has already made two films, *Fire* and *Earth*, with this film *Water*, being last of a trilogy. Why isn’t she just allowed to resume making her film about people whom she appreciates and respects but many in this world do not know?

In a country that prides itself on being the world’s largest democracy, why is it practicing the kind of brutal and repressive policies that would make its former master, England, proud. I know she’ll probably never make a film in India again seeing the current climate towards artists and that would be a crime.

It is shame as I am a descendant of those who emigrated from India to Guyana to see fellow Indians do this to one of their own. I wonder what it would be like if I ever had the opportunity to make a film in India? I probably would not if this kind of thuggery existed in the future.

Thank you.

I am appalled to hear of the harassment of Deepa Mehta and the attempts to stop her filmmaking. The suppression of free speech is never conducive to the achievement of any just cause. While the circulation of unfamiliar ideas can seem alarming to many people, the only true way to resolve such differences is through more free and open cultural exchange, not less.

Chris Berry

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Australia

Berry is a regular correspondent for CINEMAYA: The Asian Film Quarterly, a former member of the NETPAC advisory board, and a board member of the Melbourne International Film Festival during 1990s.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact