

While Indian government remains silent:

A reply by the Hindustan Times to WSWs campaign in defence of filmmaker Deepa Mehta

Linda Tenenbaum
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Neither Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee nor Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Pradesh Shri Ram Prakash Gupta have made any reply to the statements of protest sent to them by supporters of Indian-born filmmaker Deepa Mehta during the past three months.

Prominent filmmakers Ken Loach and Mohsen Makhmalbaf have joined with scores of artists, filmmakers and intellectuals from around the world to express their opposition to the suppression of Mehta's right to artistic freedom.

Mehta was forced to suspend production of her new film *Water* after the set was destroyed in late January by Hindu extremists aligned with members of the Uttar Pradesh state government, which is led by the Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP). Claiming the film, which deals with the plight of impoverished Indian widows, was anti-Hindu, the thugs caused more than \$650,000 damage.

On February 6, Mehta withdrew from Uttar Pradesh after the government blamed her for civil disorder. When governments in West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh expressed interest in having the film made in their states, the Hindu fundamentalists shifted their approach. First they accused Mehta of plagiarism to blacken her name and destroy her credibility, then attacked the film script for being not anti-Hindu but "anti-Gandhi". This was aimed at whipping up animosity towards the film in areas such as Madhya Pradesh that are dominated by the Congress Party.

Mehta has taken a public stand against these attacks, refusing to bow to intimidation and initiating court action against the charges of plagiarism.

Her insistence upon proceeding with the film, and the public statements supporting her, have further enraged the

religious extremists. While the BJP-led national government has chosen to remain silent, a response has been forthcoming from another quarter. The *Hindustan Times*, the major daily newspaper produced in the Indian capital New Delhi, published a scurrilous article on May 3 attacking both Mehta and the *World Socialist Web Site*, (WSWS) which has organised the international campaign in her defence.

Entitled "Water-scarred Deepa Mehta spews fire" the front-page article likens Mehta to "an India-basher in Pakistan" and accuses the WSWs of "exhort[ing] visitors to post hate-India letters" to the Prime Minister and Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister.

The writer, Archis Mohan, pointedly describes Mehta, who now lives in Canada, as "Canadian". He says nothing about the physical violence conducted against her film set in Uttar Pradesh, or about the hysterical campaign waged to prevent her filming elsewhere. In a blatant apologia for the Hindu fundamentalists he refers instead to "public angst against the shooting of *Water*" and implies that Mehta is somewhat deranged for coming to the conclusion that she has been fighting a huge conspiracy.

The article includes the full website address of the WSWs and is accompanied by a cartoon of a wild-eyed Mehta carrying a briefcase marked "Fire & Brimstone".

Designed to foment further extremist bigotry towards Mehta, the article appears to have succeeded. On the day it was published and the next, May 3 and 4, the *World Socialist Web Site* received a spate of hostile e-mails denouncing Mehta in racist and nationalist terms.

One fumed: "Deepa should have been charged by the police and locked up. Her movies and her travelling should be banned in India. She has brought all the Indians

ONLY shame via her movies portraying India and Indians as beggars (sic), poor and socially backward, so that she can make a few bucks in the name of art.” She was a Hindu, “but a rotten one”, the writer concluded.

Another attacked Mehta for “infringing the rights of the common people” because she dealt with India's social problems. The anonymous writer went on to demand that she stop making films on India at all, since she no longer lived there.

“Kris” denounced the WWSWS for falling for Mehta's “trap” of “cheap publicity”, and reiterated that Mehta “is not based in India ... and is out of sync with Indian culture and values ... so she should make a film in Canada.”

If one were to pursue this logic to its conclusion, some of the most beautiful and powerful works of art produced over the past several centuries would never have seen the light of day, including plays by Shakespeare and operas by Puccini.

None of the letters refers to the *Hindustan Times* article, nor do they associate themselves with any organisation. But they fall directly in line with the Hindu fundamentalists' campaign to intimidate Mehta, and deny her the basic democratic right to produce her film.

In a letter to the *Hindustan Times*, Mehta declared: “I have never thought of myself as a controversial filmmaker and neither are my films intended to be controversial... Sadly, the tirade of the Hindutva Brigade wants my films to be seen only in this context. This irresponsible article propagated the 'controversial' label and generated hate mail from irate Indians the world over. From a false premise, Mr. Mohan fanned the flames of nationalist indignation—was this his intention when he wrote his sensationalist piece?”

Also writing in response to Mohan's article, Bapsi Sidhwa, author of *The Ice-Candy Man*, which formed the basis for the screenplay of Mehta's film *Earth: 1947* pointed out:

“This is pre-censorship, a role that the cultural police seems to be adept at playing in the present BJP-led government. Minister of Information and Broadcasting Arun Jaitley, who had officially approved the script, has been quoted as saying that he is now likely to withdraw the permission to shoot *Water* because it is a plagiarized work. If this is true, he will be using this charge as a convenience to get rid of the offending ‘anti-Hindu’ script, giving in to the pressure of the RSS.” (May 7, *Hindustan Times*)

(The RSS—Rastriya Swayangsevak Sangh—is an extreme right-wing organisation involved in the 1948 murder of

Mahatma Gandhi.)

“And all this cacophony”, Sidhwa continues “has taken place before the film has even been made. One could easily see the humour in this fiasco, if it were not for the fact that the hand that orchestrated this mess is the hand of fascism. To garner more support from their electorate, these people are using Deepa. One cannot help but wish they would use a fraction of this fervour to eradicate the poverty, disease and ignorance that stalk the country.”

In launching its campaign in defence of Deepa Mehta, the *World Socialist Web Site* warned that the Hindu extremists' campaign was no isolated incident, but “part of efforts to impose a right-wing nationalist state ideology in India based on aspects of the Hindu religion. Under conditions where the living standards of the vast majority are deteriorating and the social chasm between rich and poor is deepening, the BJP has been in the forefront of whipping up communalist sentiments to divide the Indian masses along caste and religious lines.”

Again we call on all those in the film industry, all artists and writers, and all working people to take a stand in defence of Deepa Mehta and oppose this vicious attack on democratic and artistic rights.

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 WWSWS at: editor@wsws.org



To contact the WWSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact