

"A terrible violation of basic rights"

Australian film technicians defend Deepa Mehta

Richard Phillips
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As regular readers of the World Socialist Web Site will be aware, Hindu fundamentalists stopped production of Deepa Mehta's film Water in India last February, working with the tacit or open support of the Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), the main party in India's National Democratic Alliance government and the party in power in Uttar Pradesh.

Water, the third in Deepa Mehta's trilogy of Indian films, is set in the 1930s and deals with the plight of a group of widows in Varanasi. Fire (1996) and Earth (1998) are the first two films in Mehta's trilogy.

After months of preparation, including securing special permission from the Indian government, Mehta planned to begin production in late January. But in a carefully orchestrated campaign, right-wing Hindu thugs began claiming that Mehta was insulting India and the Hindu religion. They demanded that the government shut down production of the film. On the first day planned for shooting, fundamentalist gangs, led by local right-wing politicians and religious extremists, attacked and destroyed the film set. Within days the Uttar Pradesh state government ordered closure of the production and demanded that Mehta and her crew leave the state.

Mehta, an internationally acclaimed director, was subjected to a barrage of hate mail, including numerous death threats, and then accused by Indian newspapers of plagiarism and other baseless allegations. The director, who has strenuously denounced these attacks, has vowed to complete the film. She is planning to resume production in the near future.

The WSWWS issued a statement in February calling on filmmakers, artists, writers and workers to oppose this attack on democratic rights and freedom of artistic expression. Recent responses to this appeal have come from two Australian film technicians—Brett Matthews and Jasmine Yuen-Carrucan—who worked on Water with Mehta and witnessed the hysterical campaign by Hindu fundamentalists against the film. They spoke about their experiences with the WSWWS.

Brett Matthews is a highly skilled technician who has worked in the film industry for 15 years. Employed as a focus puller for *Water*, he was an assistant camera operator for *Muriel's Wedding* (1994), *The Thin Red Line* (1998), *The Beach* (1999) and is currently working on the latest *Star Wars* production in Sydney. Jasmine Yuen-Carrucan, a film technician for five years, worked on *Shine* (1996), *Dark City* (1998) and was employed as a clapper loader for *Water*.

Richard Phillips: What were the first indications there would be problems with *Water*?

Jasmine Yuen-Carrucan: We didn't think there was anything wrong at first. We tested all the equipment and then, the evening before we were due to shoot, were told there would be a day's delay because of problems with parking permits. No one was surprised and I thought this is probably how things work in India, so we had the day off and did a bit of sight seeing. When we arrived back at the hotel we were told that protestors had

pulled down the set, burnt it and threw the remains in the river.

RP: What did you think about this?

Brett Matthews: I was a bit surprised but I've been through hurdles like this before in other countries where you might hear whispers about a political issue, or that the local landlord hadn't been paid off, but somehow things were usually worked out. Some of the crew who had worked with Deepa before told me they had similar problems with *Earth* and they were all fairly optimistic, so we didn't worry. It seemed to be just a hiccup that the powers-that-be would sort out. But the next day things got worse.

JY-C: In fact, the next day the press got involved and began sensationalising things with exaggerated reports about how many were involved in the demonstration. We first heard it was about 1,000 but some newspapers reported 6,000.

BM: The television broadcast footage of the sets being thrown in the river and the protestors burnt an effigy of Deepa Mehta. This provoked a lot of interest and there was also some skilful media distortion. There were very tight television shots of about half a dozen people in order to make it appear to be a very large protesting crowd. Footage was used that wasn't even connected to the protest.

JY-C: There was also a series of interviews with Deepa and Shabana Azmi and Nandita Das. Shabana and Nandita are very well-known actresses in India—in fact Shabana is a member of parliament.

BM: So by the end of the next day, we still weren't able to get parking permits for our trucks, which meant that we could not get our equipment in, and so what looked like a one-day delay, became two.

JY-C: And then it turned into a three-day hold because Deepa was forced to go back to Delhi to regain permission to make the film. Anyway she came back with the permit reissued and so we thought we would begin the following day.

BM: A call sheet was issued with a schedule on it, but late that night we were told we couldn't film the next day and this became the running course of events. There would be meetings, threats were issued against the production, various officials would be consulted, and this went on day after day. Somehow the protestors also got hold of our email addresses and whenever we would pickup our mail there would be dozens of letters denouncing the film.

Then the person whose river house we were going to film in, a very nice man, got nervous. He never thought that he would be involved in something so public—there were security guards all round his house—and so he started worrying about his own safety and whether his house would be burned or destroyed by the protestors. And this was a real issue. We could shoot the film and leave, but he lived in Varanasi and could be attacked anytime.

RP: When did the government officially stop production?

JY-C: The national government reissued the permit and we were ready

to begin but then there was concern about the crew getting to the river house location. The crew was reduced and the equipment stripped down to a bare minimum and transported by mini-buses. We were determined to show that we were not intimidated and got to the location at about 11 or midday. Everything was set up, we shot a little bit and then some people came in saying they had the final piece of paper to shut the film down. The government claimed it couldn't guarantee law and order and the crews' safety.

BM: On the way to the river house we were nabbed by security and escorted in, so any attempt to move in unobtrusively was lost. By the time we got there the security forces had blocked-off the street and we had to carry all the gear up to the house. There was a huge number of security personnel—the army, police and the Rapid Action Force dressed up in their blue fatigue overalls.

JY-C: And the army had teargas and water cannons—they were heavily armed. It wasn't just a show of bodies.

BM: By the time we got to the house there were lots of people in the street, although most of these were simply curious. The house had an open courtyard and you could hear the protestors chanting down the street.

JY-C: All they had was just a plain piece of white paper declaring that they had permission to shut us down. It wasn't on an official government letterhead or anything. They were agitated and said that women and children had to get out first and that we could only leave half a dozen people behind to collect the equipment.

By the time I left, and I followed Shabana out of the building, there were masses of people in the street and on the buildings. The majority of these were fans who waved to Shabana as she left. So although there were hundreds of people. I didn't actually see any protestors.

BM: Indian film fans are very passionate and so most of the photos and television footage that night was not of protestors but fans. A good example of how the media distorted things was a photo published the next day of Shabana in an animated pose. It looked like she was denouncing someone, possibly a protestor, but if you looked closely at the photo she was speaking to Giles [Nutgen], the DOP [Director of Photography], who was loading some equipment.

JY-C: The excuse given by the government as to why they couldn't ensure law and order was that a guy had attempted to commit suicide. He had swallowed poison, tied a rock around his waist and jumped into the Ganges. A few days later it came out that he had done this sort of thing several times for a number of different political parties.

BM: Actually he jumped in the river three times. The first time the television crew wasn't ready, so they dragged him out, put him back in the boat and he jumped again. In the meantime more television camera turned up so they dragged him out and he did it again.

RP: This was all part of an orchestrated campaign by the fundamentalists to stop the film.

BM: That's right. The state government talked about law and order but they did nothing to stop the protests, and so it was obvious to us that we faced a well-organised campaign. Our hotels were in an up market part of town, a place that most local people wouldn't normally visit, but every day the protestors would be bussed into the area. These weren't ordinary people but politically motivated elements.

JY-C: The day after we were shut down, the police told Deepa that unless she left she would be arrested for aiding an attempted suicide. But the protestors who destroyed our sets weren't charged, they could do what they wanted. We also heard that some people in Varanasi who supported Deepa and the film were arrested when they held a demonstration.

But it wasn't enough that the state government shut down the film. We were given two or three days to wrap everything up and get out of town. But the following morning the state government said we had to leave that day, that they would not protect us any more and we had to leave immediately.

RP: What was the response of the crew to all this? I read somewhere that you organised a protest.

BM: I think Shabana, Nandita, Deepa Mehta and her brother Dilip organised the protest. Everyone was furious that the local fundamentalist factions had shut us down and the way the government, at every level, had handled itself. So Deepa and others thought that we should stage a silent protest and march from the hotel to the district magistrate. There were quite a number of people, the Indian crew, local people and some of the international crew. A protest statement was written and people marched to the district magistrate's office—a 20-minute walk—by which time a large number of people were there to greet us—lots of military, lots of security and TV crews. We sat on the steps for a couple of hours and waited for a reply, which we never got.

JY-C: The district magistrate was the one who refused to give us parking permission for the film equipment trucks.

BM: I don't know who all the political parties, factions and others involved in the campaign to stop the film were, or which groups control the Indian press, but as the protesting went on, more and more political parties got involved. In fact new organisations or branches of parties were formed just to protest against the film.

JY-C: The KRSS, which claimed it was protecting the image of Varanasi, was formed out of the RSS specifically to fight Deepa and *Water*.

BM: They claimed to be religious guardians and said there were no widows' houses in Varanasi. But the fact that there were three houses for widows right there in Varanasi was a bit ironic.

JY-C: One was a government widows' house and the other two were private. We saw one of the private houses. It was in a building which had a guesthouse and a restaurant, all done up very nicely, but the place where the widows lived was run down, the shutters were always closed. The position of an Indian woman is determined by the status of her husband, so if he dies she loses that status. In fact, in India the wife exists to maintain the husband, and if he dies there is no reason for her to be around, especially in the family environment. Obviously the powers-that-be are sensitive to this and don't want the rest of the world to know that this sort of thing still exists. One of the locals told us that some widows are forced into prostitution.

BM: To become a widow in India is something you would not wish on your worst enemy. You not only lose your husband but the right to be with his family. Your own family has handed you over and received a dowry in exchange for your marriage and when he dies the family of the departing male is not interested in supporting the wife. Widows are seen as bad luck and forced to shave their heads and wear white.

This sort of stigma drives them into the widow houses for companionship. Obviously the treatment of widows is not as bad as before, but a widow's life in India is still very difficult. It can happen at any age. In fact, some women are married very young and if their husband dies at an early age it is a disaster.

Most families will not allow their sons to marry a widow. This is one of the issues in the film. A young gentleman from a wealthy family and able to have any bride, falls in love with one of the widows. His family will not allow him to marry her.

RP: Did anything prepare you for this?

BM: I certainly didn't think it would be easy in India, but I was surprised by the lack of support from the national government and how the Uttar Pradesh government allowed these fundamentalist groupings to run amok.

At one point the religious protestors demanded the script, but Deepa was adamant that they should not read it, and she was right to stand firm on this. The last thing any director wants is to hand out their script to everyone for responses before they've made the film. If you agreed to that you would never be able to make a movie.

Deepa constantly told the media, "Let me make the movie and then

criticise me". "Hang me up on the cross later but let me make the film first". I think this is really important.

To censor or ban *Water*, before it was made, is the most serious violation of basic rights that I've experienced. In fact, the film itself is not that controversial. It is an interesting topic and something very relevant today but not worthy of the sort of protests that went on. But whether you agree with the film or not, whether it is good or bad, whatever the content, it should be made and then judged.

All sorts of films are made in India. There is Bollywood, and there is a place for that, but there are also filmmakers who have concerns about Indian society, the problems of the caste system and where the country is headed. Artists and serious filmmakers should be allowed to offer their opinions. India has had fantastic writers, artists and filmmakers and people should be given access to their ideas.

RP: How would you sum up your experiences?

JY-C: My freedom of speech had never been challenged before and so I went into the film on a very basic level, as a technician. Although comparison can be made with attempts to ban films here, it was a bit different with *Water*. At least films they tried to ban here were already made. Deepa didn't even have a product to be judged. What happened in Varanasi really concerned me and made me realise how much Australian people take freedom of speech for granted. They forget, or don't realise, that there are countries in Asia, and other places, where freedom of speech is challenged all the time.

BM: I'd never worked for Deepa before, so I went into this like any other job. But the way she was shut down was a terrible violation of basic rights. My attitude is that everyone should have the same airtime. Let it all be made, let it all be heard, and then let the artists, directors or writers be challenged on their work.

Deepa is as tough as nails and deeply concerned about women's rights in India. You knew straight away that she wasn't in it for the money. She could have folded up at the beginning but she stood and fought and would not be compromised. She stood up against government officials, the news media and all sorts of politically motivated people who knew nothing about films.

Some people said to her, why don't you do a film about good things in India, why not a love story? But the social questions anger and inspire her to make these films. To make a film like *Water*, which has a very low financial return, if any, is not a small issue. There is no doubt about her commitment. We would both work with her again if given the opportunity.

The producers and Mehta kept us informed step-by-step. There were regular meetings and we felt right in the middle of this. Most productions that have problems keep you in the dark. With Deepa we knew exactly what was happening, and so everyone on the crew showed their full support. Deepa has a very, very infectious way of involving her crew.



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