

Indian film and television students protest over fee hikes and course structure

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Students at the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) at Pune in Madras, in western India, have contacted the World Socialist Web Site to draw attention to the campaign they are waging against fee hikes and a major run-down in course training and artistic content at the prestigious school.

Students have correctly warned that the school is being reorganised to train filmmakers for commercial Hollywood-style films, not serious and artistic cinema. The FTII "restructure" occurs amid escalating attacks on freedom of artistic expression and other democratic rights by the Hindu fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the dominant party in India's coalition national government.

Early this year, the BJP in Uttar Pradesh state, working in conjunction with members of the national government and Hindu chauvinists formations, forced film director Deepa Mehta to suspend work on her latest film Water . Hindu extremists wrecked Mehta's film set and issued a series of death threats against the director.

Jay Krishna Gummed, a FTII student, sent the following letter:

The recent drastic and arbitrary changes in the syllabus and course structure of the Film & Television Institute of India, India's premier film training institute, are diluting the cause it once stood for. At stake are the aims and objectives on which it was established. The changes are not peripheral but hit at the right of free expression and individual thinking. The institute has become a target of privatisation and is being viewed by the decision-making authorities as a means of for generating profits rather than as a centre of learning. If the changes are not immediately halted and the tide reversed, the country will lose the only training ground for people committed to meaningful and socially relevant cinema.

Established in 1961, with the aim of promoting good alternate cinema and setting new standards in filmmaking, both aesthetically and technically, the institute has provided free space for thinking and learning to generations of would-be filmmakers. It has provided the film industry with highly professional, focused and specialised people in various aspects of filmmaking and, along with the National Film Archives of India (NFAI), the Films Division (FD) and the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC), the institute has been a pillar for promoting a plurality of voices via the cinema. It is unique in the world among film schools in providing real scope for experimentation and exploration.

The FTII has also exposed aspiring filmmakers from all strata of society and the remotest parts of the country to the best of world cinema, provided access to hands-on experience with world-class equipment and, in conjunction with the excellent collection of films at the National Film Archives, provided a rich resource for an all-round cinematic education.

Today, unfortunately, all these organisations are in a state of decay and their achievements questioned, not on any grounds of excellence or competence, but on the basis of commercial considerations.

The latest proposal by India's Ministry of Information & Broadcasting (I & B) aims at dissolving the NFDC, FD, FTII and NFAI. Only the Censor Board is being spared the axe!

This change in thinking has not been an overnight process but the result of government decisions over recent years. The FTII has seen arbitrary course changes: dilution of syllabus; compression of the course structure; new courses established without any requisite resources or preparations; a stagnant in-house faculty; numerous important faculty teaching positions lying vacant; falling standards of teaching; poor

maintenance of costly professional equipment acquired over the years; and a complete shift from aesthetics of filmmaking to operational matters.

FTII students who have resisted these changes, and there has been general opposition and discontent at every stage of dilution and decay of the institute, have been vilified by the authorities. So much so that the recent changes stem from a desire for control over students rather than any considerations for academic and professional excellence. Should that be the framework for designing the syllabus of an institute of the FTII's repute?

In 1996, a committee comprising of outside experts, practising professionals, faculty and the students, prepared a new syllabus called the "Revised Syllabus". It was a much-needed improvement on the then existing syllabus and provided for increased inputs from visiting professionals and was flexible and interactive in nature. This proposal hung in suspension for three years before being unceremoniously shelved. No new students were admitted for three semesters.

In February this year a new course structure was implemented called the "Restructured Revised Syllabus". Some of its highlights include:

- * Three individual courses of one-year duration each, replacing the integrated three-year diploma.

- * Elimination of students at each yearly stage.

- * Doubling the intake of students from the earlier 40 to 80, without increasing the budget or resources, thus reducing the resources available to each student by half.

- * Ten-fold fee hike with provision for further increase at regular intervals.

- * Students prevented from deciding on the area of their specialisation. Admission dependant on the availability of seats in the second year and on teachers' recommendations.

- * Disciplinary measures in the guise of assessment: marks for attendance; professional behaviour; and application (with no clear definition).

- * Drastic reduction in film theory, history and appreciation.

- * A clause called "Recognised Prior Learning" that allows people direct entry into the second year, without any clear definition what this learning entails.

- * Arbitrary changes in daily functioning: cutting down film screenings from eight per week to a mere three; reduced access to library books (one library card

as against four cards previously).

These measures have not been introduced for pedagogic reasons but are aimed at stifling the spirit of questioning and experimentation and creating conformist filmmakers. As the syllabus says, its "aim is to train junior level assistants for the industry". This has led to fear, insecurity and an unhealthy competition between students.

The shift from the aesthetics of cinema to its technical and operational requirements thus leaves students incompetent to judge differences in the artistic concerns of their times.

Denied an historical perspective, a lack of knowledge of the preceding movements in the arts, and particularly the cinema, leaves students stranded and operating in a vacuum where they will be unable to find their place in the multifaceted discipline chosen.

The current fee also ensures that only a particular profile of students (largely metropolitan) will have access to the training, thus in the long-term determining what sort of films will be made in India.

Today, the majority has no say in the content of current media. The proliferation of television and umpteen numbers of channels has not meant a plurality of voices being heard or seen. In fact, all portray the same economic class, put across the same viewpoints, look alike, and cater primarily to the need of the rich metropolitan audience. Shouldn't we pause for a minute and think what price we are paying for this blind privatisation and commodification of education.



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