Deepa Mehta calls off production of her film Water

Richard Phillips
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In a serious setback for freedom of artistic expression, Indian-born film director Deepa Mehta has announced that she will not resume production of *Water*, her film about the plight of widows in India. Prevented from filming in India last year by a violent political campaign organised by Hindu fundamentalists associated with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the dominant party in India's coalition government, Mehta told the Canadian media late last year that she has dropped the idea of making the movie elsewhere.

Mehta said that although she regretted the decision and "felt incomplete," she would concentrate on filming *The Republic of Love*, a romantic comedy by Carol Shields. The Canadian-based director said she hoped to complete *Water* at a later stage.

No doubt it was a difficult decision to abandon the film, the last of a trilogy set in India (*Fire* and *Earth* were the first two), and one that explored the poverty and social restrictions facing a group of widows at a Hindu temple in the 1930s.

Filming of *Water*, which brought together Indian actors Shabana Azmi, Nandita Das and Akshay Kumar, and a talented crew of international technicians, was first stopped in February last year. The production was initially scheduled to begin in the city of Varanasi, in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, on January 30, 2000. Hindu chauvinist organisations, which had attempted to stop screenings of *Fire* and *Earth* when these films were released in 1996 and 1999, denounced the film and, without having read the script, declared it "anti-Hindu" and "anti-India".

On the first day of production a gang of thugs, encouraged by members of the BJP state government, took to the streets and, unchallenged by local police, wrecked the film set causing thousands of dollars worth of damage. The Uttar Pradesh government falsely blamed Mehta for the turmoil and banned the production, ordering the director and the international crew out of the state.

Over the next weeks Hindu fanatics unleashed a frenzied campaign against Mehta who was falsely accused of plagiarising the film from an Indian book, portraying Indian women as prostitutes, opposing Gandhi, being part of a Christian plot against Hinduism, and even supporting western oppression of India.

The filmmaker defied slander and even death threats, accurately describing the campaign to stop the film as "pre-production censorship imposed by thugs." But with money running low and press reports indicating that the Indian government was planning to withdraw permission to film, she left India vowing to resume production later in the year.

During the next months she attempted to find suitable locations outside India. Sri Lanka and Durban in South Africa were two possibilities. But Mehta, like hundreds of independent filmmakers who receive no financial backing from the major film corporations and international distributors, faced significant financial difficulties reassembling her cast and crew and restarting the project. When Indian distributors refused to support the film or promise to screen it when completed, Mehta came to the conclusion that she could not proceed.

While Deepa Mehta doggedly defended her film with a courage and determination rarely displayed by contemporary filmmakers, the fundamentalists were nevertheless able to prevail. One key factor was the Indian press, which played a despicable role. From the outset, the media attempted to create maximum confusion about the film, portraying Mehta as an "anti-Indian" publicity seeker and circulating all the slander and lies generated by the chauvinists. As one senior journalist cynically replied when challenged by *Water*'s producer David Hamilton, "This is a democracy, we have the right to lie."

The refusal of key Indian filmmakers to rally behind Mehta and defend freedom of expression was another crucial factor. With the notable exception of Aparna Sen, Mrinal Sen, Shyam Benegal and one or two others, most Indian filmmakers ignored her plight. The most deafening silence came from Bollywood, Bombay's multi-billion dollar film industry, where only two actors and the composer A.R. Rahman bothered to contact Mehta and offer their solidarity. The rest of Bollywood, to its eternal shame, said and did nothing.

Some refused to defend the filmmaker on the basis that she was a "foreign filmmaker," others kept their mouths shut fearful that their personal careers would be jeopardised if they rocked the boat. Whatever their rationale, the silence of the Bollywood filmmakers strengthened the Hindu extremists.

India's Congress Party, communist parties and trade unions, however, played the most significant role. While

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fundamentalist thugs destroyed film sets, threatened a filmmaker and demanded the right to vet or control her work, these organisations, all of which claim to oppose Hindu chauvinism, refused to lift a finger.

The Congress Party state government in Madhya Pradesh and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) regime in West Bengal offered to provide alternative film locations but gave no guarantees that they could or would prevent any future physical attacks by the fundamentalists. Despite their extensive resources, they organised no counter-campaign in Mehta's defence or made any attempt to answer the BJP's slanders.

The *World Socialist Web Site* was the only organisation to launch an international campaign to rally support behind Deepa Mehta. In a statement issued on February 28, 2000, the *WSWS* called on filmmakers, students and workers—in India and internationally—to defend her right to make the film in India. The statement explained that the chauvinist campaign was connected to attempts by the BJP and other right wing elements to impose a nationalist state ideology based on aspects of the Hindu religion, divide the country along caste and religious lines and deepen their attacks on the democratic rights and living standards of the Indian masses as a whole. The fundamentalists' campaign against Mehta, it warned, if not challenged by a broad-based campaign in India and elsewhere, would have serious consequences.

During the next months, internationally acclaimed directors Ken Loach and Mohsen Makhmalbaf, independent filmmakers, artists and film festival organisers responded to the *WSWS* appeal. But these voices, as well as those of Hollywood film director George Lucas and award winning authors Bapsi Sidhwa and Taslima Nasrin, who independently protested against Mehta's treatment, were exceptions.

Key European and North American filmmakers chose to ignore the basic principles at stake in the fundamentalists' campaign—the necessity to defend Mehta and the right of all artists to conduct their work free from religious or government control. Their silence let India's opposition parties off the hook, emboldened the fundamentalists and discouraged Indian artists and directors, who may have found their voices if confronted with principled statements by leading international filmmakers. Mehta was left to confront the fundamentalists virtually alone.

With no organised defence campaign in India and Mehta back in Canada, the fundamentalists stepped up their campaign, launching new attacks on filmmakers and artists.

* In late November, Kashi Sanskriti Raksha Sangharsh Samiti (KSRSS) and Ved Prayam Kendra (VPK) members in Varanasi demanded the deletion of scenes from *Mohabbatien*, a new film by Aditya Chopra. Extremist thugs claimed the movie offended the Hindu religion and forced a local cinema manager to cut the film and sign a statement agreeing to "honour and display immense respect to the religious minded people of the abode of Shiva". Since then the KSRSS and VPK have established a 21-member "vigilance committee" to monitor all film and television productions and "ensure that Hindu sentiments are not hurt in the future".

* On December 28 members of Bairang Dal, the youth wing of Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Forum), forced the indefinite cancellation of the world premiere of *Gajagamini*, a film by noted Indian painter M. F. Husain. The gang vandalised a multiplex cinema in Ahmedabad where the film was to be screened, and destroyed a special on-stage set created for the screening. Two years ago VHP officials vowed to stop Husain entering the city after he painted a nude portrait of a Hindu goddess. Hussein still faces a charge of "disturbing communal harmony" as a result of the painting.

* In late March, three jury members resigned in protest from India's 48th National Film Awards after declaring that the country's main film awards were rigged by a "cynical political cartel" pushing "the philosophy of Hindutva [the Hindu extremist agenda]." The 16-member jury included Tarun Vijay, editor of *Panchjanya*, a mouthpiece of the fascistic Rastriya Swayangsevak Sangh (RSS); Shashi Ranjan, a BJP member; Nivedita Pradhan, a BJP parliamentarian; Parvathi Indusekhar, a campaign manager for India's Minister for Information and Broadcasting; Mac Mohan, an uncle of Raveena Tandon, who won the best actress prize; and jury chairperson Vyjayantimala Bali, who recently joined the BJP.

But artistic censorship, thug attacks and the growing role of religious extremists in key artistic and cultural bodies go far beyond India. In the US, Europe and throughout Asia, religious fundamentalists and the extreme right wing increasingly demand the right to dictate what artists can or cannot produce. The attempt to silence filmmakers and artists is aimed more generally at burying all critical thought and dissent.

While Deepa Mehta has been forced, for the time being, to abandon her film, the campaign initiated by the *WSWS* in defence of the filmmaker, and her right to freedom of artistic expression, constitutes an important first step in the development of an international counter-offensive against this agenda.

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