An interview with Shonali Bose, director of Amu

David Walsh
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David Walsh spoke to Shonali Bose, the director of Amu, *and her husband, Bedabrata Pain, the film's producer, in Toronto. The film centers on the riots in Delhi in 1984, organized by the highest levels of the Indian state, that led to the deaths of thousands of Sikhs.*

WSWS: What is the history of your concern with this atrocity?

Shonali Bose: I was a freshman in university in Delhi when it happened, I worked in the camps after the riots, we did a street play and took it all around the colleges and schools in Delhi and the kind of response that we got was so powerful. Working in the camps and hearing the stories first-hand was an unforgettable thing for me. In 1987 I came to the US and met my husband there and he had written a play on the Punjab, on the terrorism act in Punjab. This issue of state terrorism in India was something that we consistently took up, the denial of justice and 1984 was very much on our radar, whether through cultural means or through discussion forums. So through the years we've always carried out activities on this. When I graduated from film school we both felt very strongly that no film had been made on the events of 1984 and it was a watershed in our country and this was a film we should make.

WSWS: You were in the city at the time, how aware were you of what was going on?

SB: It was exactly three days. The killing suddenly started and it suddenly stopped, because it was organized. We were locked in to residence. It was very surreal, because on television at that time there was only the government channel, we saw only Mrs. Gandhi's body lying in state and all the mourners around it. And vague little whispering, saying, "blood will be revenged with blood," which they were carrying on television. Girls were crying and things like that, there was this peaceful green lawn. It was surreal. There was one public telephone. My aunt is a journalist and I heard from her and other relatives what was happening in the city, and we could see smoke around us. I heard that she had gone out in a press car and there was this attack taking place and she went to the police to get them to stop it, and they said they had orders and they refused. And she couldn't do anything and she was so overwrought. I said, what are you talking about? I could not believe this was happening. Rumors were filtering in to the college, they were deliberately spreading rumors that the Sikhs were distributing poisoned sweets and poisoning the water supply. Girls came out from dinner and started throwing up. They felt they were going to be attacked, because there was a Sikh college across from us.

After those three days, my history department immediately organized to go and work in the camps. On the way to the camps I remember one of the slums that had been very badly burned down and there was still blood on the streets and the stench of death. I had never really encountered death till that point. Then going into the camps and meeting hundreds and hundreds of people, and then hearing their accounts. That was my experience of it.

WSWS: Why did you choose fiction over documentary?

SB: My thesis film was on the impact of the new economic policy, of globalization, on India. And it was very well received, but it could never really reach the kind of audiences that I would have hoped it would reach, just because documentary to this day does not get that kind of a release. We really felt that this story is not being made for the victims and the survivors who have been courageously carrying on the fight for 20 years. They don't need to be educated, they are the ones who are carrying on the battle. Their story needs to be taken outside. We felt a documentary would possibly draw activists and Sikhs, and people who know about the issue. We wanted to reach the widest audience possible. Therefore the story is crafted in a way like a mystery. So that it draws in anybody, who doesn't even have a relationship with 1984.

For me as a filmmaker, I wanted to know if I could make a fiction film, because I had only made short films and I'd made a documentary. I needed to know whether I could make a full-length feature film.

WSWS: Has there been opposition in India, or denial that these events took place?

SB: The censor board gave it an A certificate, which is an adult certificate, and the reason they gave, because there is no sex or violence, was why should young people know a history that is better buried and forgotten.

They took out certain lines. When the widow is asked by the male protagonist, was it one or two ministers [who organized the atrocities], and she says, no, it was the entire state, the bureaucracy, the government, the politicians, the police, all. They removed that line. So what we did, we let the characters go silent at that point. We had to debate among ourselves whether we should challenge it in the courts, because that's what you tend to do. Why should it get censored? Five lines removed. We thought for the widows of 1984 to be silenced in this manner, that their silence spoke louder than words. Ironically, that's the first thing we get asked in India. They asked, what did they say? And in the press, all the lines were reported.

Bedabrata Pain: The ninth government report on the events was recently issued, given to parliament, and that report said that one or two ministers were responsible, not the other institutions, this film says exactly the opposite. That the entire Indian state, with all its organs, were involved in this killing. That's why it's important that this enters the mainstream. The government would like to get out of the situation, by making a scapegoat out of one or two people while exonerating the entire establishment.

After 21 years, with governments of right and left persuasion going in and out of power, still the victims have not been rehabilitated. That's an issue that has been scuttled by the various commissions of inquiry.

WSWS: Could you briefly give the background to the events?

BP: Factually, Mrs. Gandhi was assassinated October 31, 1984, supposedly by her two bodyguards. Immediately after that, these so-called riots break out all over Delhi. There are unwarranted references to what was happening in Punjab, that somehow an impression is created that these bodyguards assassinated as a kind of revenge for what had happened at the Golden Temple in June. Often this is used as an excuse to avoid going to the heart of the matter, that in the capital city of Delhi in full view of the government and foreign dignitaries, who were there for the funeral, some 5,000 people were massacred in a very organized fashion by the highest echelons of the Indian state. That to my mind is the biggest context that needs to be taken into account even today.

These things are portrayed as Hindu-Sikh violence, or Hindu-Muslim violence. Far from it, these events are always politically organized. Or people simply talk about fundamentalists, or terrorists, but that also doesn't capture the fact that the state, which has a mandate to protect people, actually attacks people.

The seeds of the politics of the last 20 years were sown in 1984.

Islamic terrorism has been used as an excuse in the US to carry out anything the government wants to introduce. In the 1980s, in India, it was exactly the same thing. They blamed everything on Sikh fundamentalism and terrorism. When we made this film we were very clear that we were not going to go that route. In 100 minutes, not all complications can be dealt with, but certain fundamental questions, that you have to take a stand against violation of rights and state terrorism, that state terrorism is disguised as communal violence, should be put in their proper place.

WSWS: The Indian subcontinent has been the scene of terrible consequences of floods, and most recently, the tsunami, which have not simply natural, but very definite social causes. How did you react to the events in New Orleans?

SB: The US response is outrageous.

BP: In these cases, they always make it a matter of incompetence, as you saw with Brown being removed from FEMA. Far from it, it's a matter of neglect. It's a fact that the state, whether in America or India, just does not care for its own people. Everyone knew what was going to happen in New Orleans, it was not some big mystery. If the federal government had a real interest in defending its own cities, then it could have done so. It did not do so, because it did not want to do so. Then it turns around and invades another country in the name of 'security' of its people. How hollow must that sound!

As people who have seen lots of these events, our heart goes out to the people of New Orleans. When a disaster like that strikes, people are really left with nothing. On top of that, to know that your government is not really going to take care of you ...

SB: They are the first to be sending off planes to other countries in the name of so-called 'disaster relief.' They use those disasters also for their own political ends

BP: If they stopped the war in Iraq for one day, New Orleans could be rebuilt.