

India: Art student targeted by Hindu right and Gujarat authorities

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All those who care for and defend artistic freedom and basic democratic rights should condemn the attack that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its Hindu supremacist allies have mounted, with the support of the Gujarat authorities, against Maharaja Sayajirao University (MSU) fine arts student Chandramohan Srilamantula and the acting dean of the MSU's fine arts faculty, Shivaji Panikkar.

On the afternoon of May 9, Niraj Jain, an advocate and BJP activist, led a gang of Hindu supremacist thugs from the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP or World Hindu Council) in invading the MSU fine arts faculty, manhandling Chandramohan, and tearing down paintings and art installations exhibited in the annual appraisal show for final-year students. The Hindu supremacists also hurled abuse at faculty and students.

The Gujarat state authorities were complicit in this attack. The police at the Sayajiganj police station were informed by the Hindu supremacists of their plans to invade the university, but the authorities did nothing to stop them. So confident were Jain and his associates that they could trespass onto the university, attack Chandramohan and vandalize his work with impunity, they brought local press photographers with them.

When the police did arrive, just minutes after the attack, it was the 23-year-old Chandramohan, a previous winner of the prestigious Lalit Kala National Akademi award, not his fascist victimizers, whom they arrested!

Chandramohan was subsequently charged with "hurting the religious sentiments of Hindus and Christians in the district" under sections 295 A and 153 B of the Indian Penal Code on the grounds that his nude depictions of the mythical Hindu god Shiva Linga, Goddess Durga, and Jesus Christ offended religious sensibilities.

Chandramohan was released on 5,000 rupees bail (about US\$100), a not inconsiderable sum for a student, almost a week after his arrest and only after his prosecution had provoked a national outcry.

The highest levels of the MSU administration have solidarized themselves with the Hindu rightist thugs. MSU Vice-Chancellor Manoj Soni refused to condemn the attack, let alone press charges against Jain. He then suspended Dean Panikkar for defying an administration order that he publicly apologize

for allowing Chandramohan to display his works.

Panikkar's spirited defence of Chandramohan made him the target of death threats from the Bajrang Dal (the VHP's youth wing) and he was forced into hiding. In an interview with *Frontline*, Panikkar said, "This ... is about the larger issue of freedom and autonomy of academic institutions. We cannot allow them to be taken over.

"The university authorities did nothing to support the student who was jailed. They remained silent, even when students and faculty were protesting. I could resign and leave, but what will happen to the institution?"

Turning reality on its head, the police and university authorities have accused Chandramohan of threatening the secular atmosphere. In truth it is the Gujarat's BJP government and its accomplices in the police and judiciary who have created a communally toxic environment in the state by stoking Hindu supremacism and victimizing the state's Muslim minority.

MSU is located in Vadadora, a city that in recent years has repeatedly been convulsed by communal violence. Vadadora was home to the Best Bakery, whose torching came to exemplify both the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in Gujarat—a pogrom that was incited by the state's BJP chief minister, Narendra Modi—and the subsequent failure of India's police and judicial authorities to successfully prosecute those known to have committed horrific acts of communal violence.

Last year there was further violence in Vadadora after authorities pulled down a 300-year-old mosque that they claimed was blocking development plans.

Much of the best art provokes, and in so doing, frequently offends. No less than other forms of cultural expression and scientific inquiry, art can only flourish if those engaging in it are given unfettered freedom to explore their ideas. Defenders of artistic freedom and democracy have thus always opposed attempts by the state and self-appointed moral guardians to censor art.

It should be noted, however, that the claims that Chandramohan's paintings were offending the public are even more threadbare and contrived than usual in that his works were not hung in a public gallery or exhibition, but rather were part of an appraisal show whose intended audience were the

student and instructors of the MSU fine art faculty.

Jain admitted as much, when he told reporters, “Someone told us about the paintings, and I thought it was unacceptable to have such things on display.”

The attack on Chandramohan Srilamantula and Shivaji Panikkar has been widely condemned by artists, filmmakers, and writers across India and there have been many well-attended protest meetings and rallies.

“I think everyone has had enough,” said MSU graduate and painter Chintan Upadhyaya. “Rather than let fear set in, artists have realized that we have to take a stand.”

“Of course,” continued Upadhyaya, “they can get away with it in Gujarat because of what Gujarat is today. It is a law unto itself. Maybe they will not do it in Mumbai now. But if they get away with it so easily here, it will be Mumbai or Delhi next. We cannot sit back and let this continue.”

Artists and works of art have repeatedly been the target of Gujarat’s BJP government and their Hindu supremacist supporters. Notorious cases include the vandalizing of the Ahmadabad gallery of M.F. Hussain, arguably India’s best-known artist, and the preventing of the screening in Gujarat of the films *Parzania* and *Fana*. The former film riled the Hindu right because it depicted the BJP state government and its role in the 2002 pogrom unfavorably, the latter because it starred Aamir Khan, a Muslim actor who has criticized the Narmada dam project.

The attack on artists and intellectual freedom is by no means restricted to the state of Gujarat or to the BJP, however.

To appease the Hindu right, Maharashtra’s Congress-Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) coalition government banned historian James Laine’s book *Shivaji: Hindu King in Islamic India* and sought to have him arrested.

In response to petitions from “concerned” members of the public—i.e., Hindu rightists and fundamentalists of various faiths—India’s lower courts have initiated tens of thousands of cases against artists and writers for offending public morals and/or religious sentiments.

Recently three criminal cases were filed against a popular Indian actress Shilpa Shetty and Hollywood actor Richard Gere for a “kissing incident” during an AIDS telethon.

In an editorial May 16, the liberal daily the *Hindu* said “The Chandramohan incident—which follows the M.F. Hussain and Shilpa Shetty controversies—points to a rising tide of intolerance and fanaticism.” Conceding that the lower courts have been complicit in the assault on artistic freedom, it concluded by urging the public to look to “the higher judiciary for the protection of artistic freedom and the freedom of expression guaranteed in the Constitution.”

But time and again in recent years, the Supreme Court has issued judgments running roughshod over the right to dissent—including forbidding public comment on the controversy over the demolition of the French ship the Clemenceau—and restricting workers’ rights.

The Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) has condemned the attack on Chandramohan Srilamantula and Shivaji Panikkar. At the same time, it is continuing to justify its parliamentary support for the national Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, on the grounds that it constitutes a “secular” bulwark against the BJP, even as the government implements the neo-liberal agenda of big business.

The Congress Party has a decades-long record of adapting to, and conniving with the, Hindu right, going back at least to the 1947 communal partition of India, and has worked closely with Gujarat’s blood-soaked BJP regime.

Although Congress-led governments, including the current UPA coalition, have frequently made use of the “president’s rule” provisions of the constitution for brazen political motives, it has refused to sack the Gujarat government despite its evident complicity in mass murder.

There are three reasons for this. First, Congress fears the response of the Hindu right. Second, because it has spearheaded neo-liberal reform, the Gujarat government has strong backing from the same big business elite that constitutes the Congress’ principal social base. (Indeed in 2005, the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, which is closely connected to the Congress Party and especially Sonia Gandhi, honored Narendra Modi for leading India’s best-governed state.) Last but not least, there is much sympathy in the Gujarat Congress for Modi’s Muslim-baiting and Gujarati-chauvinist politics.

Things in the neighboring state of Maharashtra are little different. Soon after the Congress-NCP state government responded to a series of violent Hindu supremacist protests against the historian Laine by banning his book, it welcomed into the cabinet Narayan Rane. Previously Rane had been the chief minister of the state for the Shiv Sena (literally Shivaji’s Army), a Hindu supremacist ally of the BJP.

The struggle in defence of artistic freedom and against communalism will not be won by appealing to the state institutions and parties of the India’s bourgeoisie—parties and institutions that defend a social order in which the vestiges of feudalism and casteism are overlain by ruthless capitalist oppression. Rather the defence of democratic rights and an expansion of democracy will only prove possible through the development of a genuine egalitarian and anti-capitalist movement based on India’s toilers and the international working class.



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