

# India bans BBC documentary on 2012 Delhi gang rape

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In a blatant act of censorship, India's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has banned *India's Daughter*, a documentary about the notorious December 2012 gang rape of a Delhi physiotherapy student, Jyoti Singh, and the widespread protests it provoked.

Made for BBC's "Storyville" series, the 58-minute-long documentary was to be released on March 8 by the BBC and India's NDTV to coincide with International Women's Day.

But, acting on a complaint made by Home Minister Rajnath Singh, the Delhi police obtained an order from the courts on March 3 barring media from broadcasting the film and publishing interviews contained in it.

The government also subsequently took steps to prevent *India's Daughter* being disseminated on the Internet in India. On March 6, a senior government official boasted to the press that Google had bowed to a government order to remove *India's Daughter* from its video sharing site You Tube. "As and when the police tell us of other sites who are carrying it," added the official, "we are directing them to remove these."

"We can ban the film in India," BJP Minister Venkaiah Naidu told India's parliament, "But this is an international conspiracy to defame India. We will see how the film can be stopped abroad."

The BBC did show the documentary in the UK on March 4 and again on International Women's Day. It has also been broadcast by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and screened in the US, and several other countries including Switzerland and Norway. The documentary was gaining a global audience via You Tube, till BBC asked Google to remove it, citing copyright reasons.

Made by British-Israeli filmmaker Leslee Udwin, *India's Daughter* is disturbing, but not sensationalist.

It sheds light, albeit only in a limited way, on the social reality behind the infamous "Delhi rape" in which six Delhi slum dwellers, most of them young adults, brutally raped a 23-year-old woman before throwing her and her male companion from a running bus. After a painful, days-long ordeal, Jyoti Singh succumbed to her injuries.

The documentary, which was shot in 2012 and 2013, includes interviews with Mukesh Singh, the driver of the private bus and one of Jyoti's assailants, and two lawyers who participated in

the legal defense of the six assailants.

The views of Jyoti Singh's parents, who supported Udwin's project to make a documentary about their daughter's fate, as well as those of relatives of the assailants, doctors, and leaders of the protest movement that erupted in the aftermath of the Delhi rape are also presented.

In the documentary Mukesh Singh, who now languishes on India's death row, seeks to excuse his actions by saying "a decent girl won't roam around at 9 o'clock at night" and claiming "a girl is far more responsible for rape than a boy."

Defense lawyers Manohar Lal Sharma and A.P. Singh also in effect justify the horrific attack on Jyoti Singh. A.P. Singh says that were his daughter or sister to engage in premarital sexual activities, "I would put petrol on her and set her alight."

The police and the BJP government have cited these abhorrent comments to justify their banning of *India's Daughter*. In their request for a court order to suppress the film, the police stated that it shows one of Jyoti Singh's assailants making "offensive and derogatory remarks against women." The police then go on to argue that if these remarks were broadcast it would create "an atmosphere of fear and tension with the possibility of public outcry and law and order situation" similar to that in December 2012.

This is a reference to the mass protests that erupted in Delhi in response to the gang rape of Jyoti Singh—protests to which the Indian authorities responded, as they invariably do when confronted with social unrest, with violence and repression.

The claim of India's Hindu supremacist BJP government to be opposing the denigration of women by banning *India's Daughter* is a transparent fraud.

Its real objection to the documentary is that it points to some of the harrowing social issues that surround the Delhi rape case and, in so doing, cuts across the government's drive to whip up an aggressive "Hinduized" Indian nationalism, based on veneration of a mythologized Hindu tradition and culture, and to market India to foreign investors as an ideal place to do business.

The government's swift action against *India's Daughter* stands in marked contrast to its repeated failure to stem communal outrages against India's Muslims, Christians and other minorities.

Moreover, it is part of a widening attack on the right to free speech in India, with governments at both the national and state levels conniving in the campaigns of the BJP, the RSS and other of its Hindu nationalist allies to censor and intimidate writers and artists.

In February last year, Penguin Books India withdrew a book titled *The Hindus : An Alternative History* by academic Wendy Doniger in the face of opposition and legal threats by Hindu supremacists. World-renowned Indian painter M.F. Hussain was forced to live in self-imposed exile in Doha from 2006 until his death in 2011 due to a series of legal and physical threats by Hindu extremists who charged that his paintings "hurt Hindu sentiments." In January 2015 Tamil writer Perumal asked publishers to withdraw all his books and announced that he was giving up writing after Hindu supremacists, including the BJP and RSS, demanded his arrest and the banning of his latest book, *Madhorubhagan*.

*India's Daughter* rejects the view that those who carried out the Delhi rape were aberrant monsters or psychopaths, pointing to some of the social circumstances out of which their crime arose.

It provides graphic evidence of the extreme deprivation in which all six of the assailants grew up at Ravidas Camp in R.K. Puram, a Delhi slum.

The home of the 17-year-old boy who participated in the rape is shown to resemble more an animal hut than a house. The boy's mother, a farm laborer, sleeps in the same room as goats. She explains that their lives have been marked by hunger. Whenever it rains they have no work and hence no food. Her son left home at 11 and cleaned dishes in a hotel for 300-400 rupees (US \$6 to \$10) a month.

Mukesh Singh's mother says, "We are by birth poor and helpless." Mukesh himself says that "beating and violence" was "the story of every house" in the neighborhood.

Dr. Sandeep Gopal, a psychiatrist who treated some of the assailants, says: "They all actually came from very deprived conditions, where surroundings are not good...and they (lived in) overcrowding. And it is a very common scene that women have been tortured and beaten, or sexually abused by their male partners or husbands."

Police arrested all six in the days immediately following the attack. With the exception of the juvenile, all were sentenced to death after expedited trials. Authorities claim that one of the five adult assailants, Ram Singh, took his own life in March 2013, but his family and lawyer contest that claim, arguing that he was killed.

Udwin says she was inspired to make *India's Daughter* by the mass protests that erupted in response to Jyoti Singh's rape and murder. She has likened the protests to the Arab Spring.

In fact, they were socially and politically very different phenomena. In Tunisia and then Egypt, the working class erupted onto the scene, defying police-military violence to sweep away decades-old US-backed dictatorships.

The Delhi anti-rape protests, which were echoed in other urban Indian centers, were, by contrast, overwhelmingly middle-class. They did express genuine widespread anger over patriarchal attitudes toward, and abuse of, women, but viewed them in isolation from the social reality of contemporary India—a society marked by immense and ever-growing social inequality, where the remnants of pre-capitalist forms of oppression, like the caste system, are intertwined with the horrors of 21st century capitalism, producing a toxic social environment in which an elite of fabulously wealthy businessmen, landowners and corrupt politicians presides over mass suffering and deprivation. This venal elite enjoys veritable impunity for daily crimes of omission and commission, while employing the state's repressive apparatus—police, courts, etc.—to suppress and brutalize the masses.

Many of the anti-Delhi protesters, including prominent protest organizers, sided with the BJP, then in opposition, in promoting more repressive laws and bigger police budgets as the answer to rape.

It was within this climate that the Congress-led government carried out in Feb. 2013 only the second execution in India in nine years, hanging Afzal Guru, a Kashmiri Muslim who had been tortured and framed up for the 2001 terrorist attack on the Indian Parliament. (See: "A legal lynching: Indian government executes Afzal Guru")

Udwin herself does not advocate a reactionary "law and order" agenda. Her sympathies lie rather with those anti-rape campaigners who stress education to overcome "socially-learned" behavior.

Given Udwin's liberal feminist views it is not surprising that in the US and other western countries all sorts of reactionary figures, including the Clintons, have sprung to her defense, condemning the BJP government's ban on *India's Daughter*. These elements' cynical posturing as defenders of free speech should in no way cause working people to lessen their opposition to the BJP government's brazen act of censorship, tied as it is to the Indian elite's widening attack on democratic rights and promotion of Hindu supremacism.



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