Amid war crisis, Pakistani actors hounded out of India

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A number of popular Pakistani actors who routinely work in "Bollywood"—India's Mumbai (Bombay)-based film industry—have been hounded out of the country after the MNS (Maharashtra Navnirman Sena), a fascistic, Hindu supremacist party, issued an ultimatum for all Pakistani actors and singers to leave the country or be "pushed out."

The MNS issued this vile threat amid the clamour for military action to "punish Pakistan" that was whipped up by India's political establishment following the September 18 attack on the Indian army base at Uri in disputed Kashmir.

Without so much as a cursory investigation of the attack, which killed 18 Indian soldiers, India's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government declared Pakistan responsible, labeled it a "terrorist state," and vowed a "befitting response."

As if on cue, the corporate media, the Congress Party and other opposition parties responded with an avalanche of bellicose threats and denunciations of Pakistan.

It was in this poisonous atmosphere that the MNS issued its ultimatum. The Shiv Sena, the far-right party from which the MNS broke away and the BJP's junior partner in the Maharashtra state government, quickly endorsed the MNS's threats of violence against Pakistani actors. "We reiterate our stand that the Shiva Sena has always been against Pakistani actors and cricketers," declared Manisha Kayande, a prominent Shiv Sena spokeswoman. She went on to add that the Shiv Sena will ensure two new Bollywood productions, the Hindi-language films, *Ae Dil Hai Mushqil* (*O! Heart, It's Difficult*) and *Raees* (*Wealthy*) are not shown in India, because they feature Pakistani actors.

Not to be outdone in this foul chauvinist campaign, the general secretary of the BJP's Maharashtra state unit said films with Pakistani actors will only be allowed to be screened if their "artistic roles are deleted."

In a further indication of the extreme right-wing, bellicose mood that has been incited by India's elite, the Indian Motion Picture Producers' Association (IMPPA) unanimously passed a resolution at its annual general meeting calling on its members "not to work with any artistes, singers or technicians from Pakistan until the situation of hostilities between Pakistan and India subsides and the Government of India declares that all is well with Pakistan and India."

The IMPPA general meeting convened on September 29, only hours after the BJP government had announced in triumph that on the night of September 28-29 Indian troops had mounted cross-border military strikes inside Pakistan-held Kashmir and inflicted "heavy casualties."

These strikes, the first India has admitted to carrying out inside Pakistan in more than four decades, were a flagrant violation of international law and risk sparking the first-ever war between nuclear-armed states. However, the Indian media and political establishment have hailed them as a master coup that has demonstrated India's prowess and readiness to take risks in aggressively asserting its interests, especially against its arch-rival, Pakistan.

The IMPPA has justified its ban on hiring Pakistani actors, singers and others on the ultra-reactionary grounds that they have not issued statements supporting "our troops." That is, they have not endorsed the self-serving narrative of the BJP government and the Indian elite that Pakistan is solely responsible for the reactionary military-strategic conflict that has pitted the Indian and Pakistani ruling elites against each another since the 1947 communal partition of South Asia into

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an explicitly Muslim Pakistan and a mainly Hindu India, and that the unique cause of the current war crisis is Pakistani-backed terrorism.

"The meeting unanimously decided," declared an IMPAA press release, that "the total silence of the Pakistani artistes was an insult and humiliation of our armed forces and the country at large."

Needless to say, the IMPPA was silent about the gross human right violations—including torture, disappearances and summary executions—that India's armed forces have committed during the past quarter century to suppress opposition to Indian rule in Jammu and Kashmir, the country's only Muslim majority state. Nor have they denounced the BJP government for its promotion of communalism, including giving Hindu vigilante groups, working under the cover of "Gau Rakshaks" (Cow Protectors), carte blanche to attack Muslims and Dalits (the former untouchables) connected to the cow-slaughter and leather trades.

Going even further than the IMPPA motion, its president, producer T.P. Aggarwal, said. "No Pakistani will be hired by (IMPPA) members forever."

Yesterday's *Indian Express* reported film director Abhishek Jawkar has decided to drop Pakistani actress Mawra Hocane from his upcoming film *Not a P rostitute*. "After the Uri attack and India's surgical attack," said Jawkar, "I strongly feel I should support my country and the soldiers fighting for our nation."

Several prominent Bollywood actors and filmmakers have spoken out against the ban. Salman Khan, one of India's best-known actors, issued a statement last Friday in which he indicated support for the military raid on Pakistan, but opposed banning Pakistanis from Bollywood. "Pakistani artistes are just artistes and not terrorists," said Kahn. "Art and terrorism should not be mixed."

For saying this, Khan has been mercilessly vilified with both the Shiv Sena and MNS suggesting he should "migrate to Pakistan"—a communally-charged attack as Khan is a Muslim.

Bollywood movies are very popular in Pakistan and many Arab countries as well as India. Despite their often formulaic themes of family intrigues and heroes battling villains, Bollywood cinema has traditionally reflected the confluence and mixing of cultures that is part of India's social fabric. This is especially true of songs, dances and costumes. Overall there has been an absence of explicit communal themes. Many of Bollywood's biggest stars are Muslim and intercommunal marriages among Bollywood stars is common.

However, as with Indian society as a whole, since the 1980s, and as a result of the Congress Party's active pandering to and encouragement of Hindu communalism, Hindutva ideology has started to make important inroads in the film industry. Several famous actors, such as Hema Malini and Shatrughan Sinha, are prominent BJP supporters.

Predictably, Pakistan's elite has responded to the chauvinist campaign against Pakistani actors and musicians in kind. To show "solidarity with the armed forces of Pakistan," movie houses across the country have again stopped showing Indian films. Bollywood productions were officially banned in Pakistan from 1965 to 2008, although once the technology became available they circulated widely via video cassette.

"We were left with no option but to reciprocate [the] IMPPA" ban, claimed Mandviwala Entertainment Chief Executive Nadeem Mandviwala.

Pakistan's government has also told cable companies they must cease broadcasting Indian TV channels after October 15, adding that "strict action would be taken according to the law after October 15 if TV channels and distribution networks fail to follow the directions of the regulatory body."

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