

India's film certification board censors award-winning *The Voice of Hind Rajab*, citing "harm" to India-Israel relations

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India's Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) has blocked the screening of the award-winning, Oscar-nominated docudrama *The Voice of Hind Rajab* in public theaters. The CBFC brazenly cites the harm this would bring to the strategic partnership that the Hindu-supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has assiduously cultivated with the genocidal Zionist regime of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

In India, every film, whether domestic or foreign, must first pass the scrutiny of the CBFC, whose certification is a prerequisite for its public release. The CBFC has, for all practical purposes, become a de facto enforcer of the Bharatiya Janata Party's Hindu-supremacist and autocratic political ideology. The chairman and all 10 board members, despite nominally being involved in the arts, are willing political appointees of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.

When *The Voice of Hind Rajab* was premiered at the Venice Film Festival last September, the audience was so moved that they gave it thunderous applause for more than 20 minutes. It won the second-highest award, the Silver Lion – Grand Jury Prize. It was also nominated for an Oscar for Best International Feature Film but did not win. The film, after some difficulty of finding a distributor in the USA, has now been released through Willa, the production company's distribution arm.

The Modi government has, from the very beginning, extended its staunch support to mass murder of Palestinians in Gaza. It has also unleashed police violence against every peaceful protest in India against this atrocity.

This film, written and directed by the talented Tunisian filmmaker Kaouther Ben Hania, depicts the harrowing fate of five-year-old Palestinian girl Hind Rajab. She was desperately pleading for help by phone from Palestinian first responders after being trapped in a car in Gaza containing the dead bodies of her uncle, aunt and two cousins. Her

uncle, aunt and cousins had all been deliberately murdered by Israeli army tank fire as they were fleeing Gaza City to a safer place. This child, along with the one remaining cousin in the car, was subsequently murdered by the same Israeli tank on January 29, 2024. The decomposing bodies of Rajab and her close relatives were only discovered 12 days later, on February 10, 2024.

According to Indian film distributor Manoj Nandwana of Jai Viratra Entertainment, who spoke to *Variety*, the film was screened for the CBFC on February 27. He said he was hoping to release the film on March 6, ahead of the Oscar ceremony on March 16, for which the film had been nominated. His hopes were dashed after the CBFC refused certification without any explanation. He was purportedly told by a CBFC member that it was "very sensitive" and that "if it gets released it would break up the India-Israel relationship."

This ban is completely illegal, since The Cinematograph Act, 1952 mandates that "A certificate granted or an order refusing to grant a certificate in respect of any film shall be published in the Gazette of India." [Emphasis added]. No such announcement was made by the CBFC in the Gazette of India, which is an official legal document of the Government of India.

On her Facebook page, Kaouther Ben Hania, who expresses great love for India, sarcastically questioned the motivation for this vile act of censorship:

"I grew up loving India. Bollywood was part of my childhood. At some point I even imagined I had Indian roots just to feel special. ==> Is the honeymoon between the 'world's largest democracy' and the 'only democracy in the Middle East' so fragile that a film could break it? Would love to hear your opinions."

The CBFC's ban has also been condemned by more than 90 filmmakers, academics and activists from around the world, including from India, Israel and the United States. They issued a statement denouncing the open censorship of

an artistic work. They state:

We are, variously, Israelis, Indians, filmmakers, journalists, academics and activists. We write in support of pluralism, democracy and freedom of expression in India and in Israel — for both Jews and Palestinians. And we condemn the Central Board of Film Certification's invocation of Indo-Israeli relations to justify its banning of The Voice of Hind Rajab.

They note:

First, the ban is a plainly unlawful attack on freedom of expression, protected by Article 19 of the Constitution of India.

Second, self-censorship is a vicious cycle. It encourages others to expect similar self-censorship in future. Israel would likely not even have thought to concern itself with film certification in India before these incidents. Now the Indian authorities have shown themselves willing to censor films in foreign powers' interests.

Both India and Israel have the misfortune to be in the international vanguard of democratic backsliding. Governments in this vanguard have learned to skillfully cooperate to silence dissenting voices in their own countries.

The Indian authorities have shown that their idea of friendship is appeasement of the government of the day, to the point of censoring films bringing to light their most appalling crimes.

Earlier, in January, the Indian embassy in Tel Aviv denied visas to the anti-Zionist Israeli actor, playwright and theater director Einat Weizman and her theater group. No doubt this was done in concert with the Netanyahu regime. They were to stage the play *The Last Play in Gaza* at the 2026 International Theatre Festival of Kerala (ITFOK), held annually in the southern Indian state of Kerala. In the words of Weizman: “The play is about the erasure of Gaza and the desperate attempt to recreate what has been destroyed through theatre.”

The CBFC was created under the Cinematograph Act of 1952 (CA1952), which replaced the British colonial-era legislation of 1918 that banned any negative portrayal of government authorities and was intended to maintain “public order”—meaning the suppression of all dissent. The CA1952 was passed by the post-1947 nominally independent Indian parliament.

It largely retained the content of the reactionary 1918 colonial legislation, including imprisonment for three years and a fine of Rs. 100,000, or both, for certain violations. It also used the wording “Board of Film Censors” in the legislation. It grants the Indian bourgeois state total control over what is and what is not permissible as artistic expression in film. Thus, it is more appropriate to call the CBFC the Central Board of Film Censors.

Under the Modi regime, the CBFC has been transformed into a more explicit instrument to impose the government's Hindutva agenda. The term “Hindutva” refers to Hindu-hegemonic rule as defined by the BJP and was first coined in 1921 by the arch-reactionary Hindu-fascist “intellectual” Damodar Savarkar, an admirer of Hitler and Mussolini.

In 2017, for instance, the CBFC demanded that Suman Ghosh, the director of *The Argumentative Indian*—a documentary on Nobel Prize-winning Indian economist Amartya Sen—remove the words “Hindutva,” “Gujarat,” “Hindu” and “cow.” This was to prevent Modi's reputation from being further tarnished. As Chief Minister of Gujarat from 2001 to 2014, he imposed Hindu-supremacist rule. In Gujarat, he also presided over and directed a brutal massacre of innocent Muslims in 2002. *The Argumentative Indian* was finally cleared for release after the word “Gujarat” was removed.

The Hindu-fascist Modi regime deeply admires the Zionist apartheid regime in Israel and seeks to replicate its repressive apartheid policies against Muslims, Christians and other religious minorities in India. Hence it goes out of its way to conceal the genocidal policies of the historically doomed Zionist regime.

As the Israeli playwright Einat Weizman correctly observed in her column in *The Wire*:

It exposes the true face of the increasingly tight partnership between India and Israel – between Zionism and Hindutva – a partnership built on military, economic, and technological cooperation, but also, on a “shared culture” – if one can call such racist nationalism culture – here manifested in silencing political and artistic voices. India doesn't only buy weapons from Israel – its partnership is deeper, seeking to replace authentic cultural production with nationalistic top-down state “culture”.



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