

# Indian Filmmakers Feel Sting of Censorship

Growing Intolerance Blamed as Documentaries About Violence in Gujarat Are Banned

By Rama Lakshmi  
Special to The Washington Post  
Saturday, January 17, 2004; Page A18

NEW DELHI -- The camera closes in on a shy 6-year-old Muslim boy standing in his classroom. He tells the story of how his grandfather and aunt were killed by angry Hindu mobs in the Indian state of Gujarat almost two years ago.

"When my father went to save them, the Hindus chopped his fingers off," he says and stretches out his tiny fingers, enacting what he saw on that day.

The boy's story is the opening shot in "Final Solution," a documentary film about a deadly wave of religious violence in Gujarat. The four-part film details the atrocities directed at Muslims and the politics of Hindu fundamentalism that stoked the violence.

The film opened at a small private screening in New Delhi last week. As it ended with the boy vowing to become a soldier and kill Hindus, the shocked audience let out a collective gasp.

The film, made by Rakesh Sharma, has been invited to be shown at festivals in Berlin, Munich and Hong Kong this year but was rejected by the Bombay International Film Festival for documentary films, scheduled for next month.

Several documentaries that investigate the horrors of the brutal bloodshed that lasted for weeks in Gujarat in 2002 have been rejected by the film festival's organizers, banned by India's censorship board or faced threats from Hindu extremist groups.

Filmmakers claim that such instances raise important questions about freedom of expression and signal a growing intolerance in Indian democracy. They say their films about Gujarat are secular weapons in a fight against the rise of Hindu nationalism in mainstream Indian politics and national discourse in the past decade.

The Gujarat violence broke out in February 2002 when a Muslim mob torched a train carrying Hindu pilgrims and activists, killing nearly 60 Hindus. The incident sparked weeks of reprisals, including arson and murder by Hindu mobs that killed more than 1,000 people, most of them Muslims. Human rights observers have charged the government of the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party in Gujarat of looking the other way as Hindu mobs went on a rampage.

"I don't want our society to live in denial and silence about the horror of Gujarat violence. I want to generate a debate through my film. That is the only way we can ensure such events are never repeated," said Sharma, 39, a Bombay-based independent documentary filmmaker.

"But attempts at political censorship and intimidation by hate groups have deepened in the past five years," he said. "The only platform open for us is to show at international film festivals or at small private gatherings within India."

Sharma spent 18 months in Gujarat shooting the film. He said he faced an "atmosphere of fear and intimidation" after he was branded an Islamic militant and that police interrogated him and insisted on seeing his footage.

Another 20-minute film, "Anguish," by Ramesh Pimple, was banned last year by the censorship board on the grounds that the film "depicts violence and reminds the people about the Gujarat riots last year. It shows the government and the police in a bad light. The overall impact of the film is negative as it leads to communal hatred among the communities." His film was the first documentary to be banned in India by the board; he has appealed the decision in court.

"I need a censorship certificate to show my documentary to a larger public audience," Pimple said in a telephone interview from Bombay. "It also prevents the police from arbitrarily turning up to stop the screening or seizing the prints." His film contains a collection of narratives by survivors about their traumatic experiences. "I have not used any names, I have not named any political parties. I have not shown any gruesome images of burnt bodies and rape victims. Even then the film was banned."

Pimple's film, however, was screened at film festivals in Locarno, Switzerland, and Milan. He said he planned to make a fictional movie about the communal carnage as a protest against what he called the silence of Bombay popular cinema on the disturbing events in Gujarat.

The most recent incident of intimidation took place at a media screening in Gujarat of the film "Godhra Tak: A Terror Trail." Angry Hindu activists surrounded the filmmaker, Shubhradeep Chakravorty, and demanded an apology for making the film.

Chakravorty, 30, an independent filmmaker based in New Delhi, said that police later showed up and demanded to see his prints. He picked up the prints and fled the city. The 50-minute film investigates the incident that triggered the train fire that killed the Hindu passengers and raises questions about how the victims treated Muslims and how the train was torched. His film has been shown at festivals in Pakistan and Nepal.

"These documentary filmmakers are biased and want to defame Gujarat," said Jaideep Patel, a leader of the World Hindu Council in Gujarat. The council also produced a short film that focused exclusively on the Muslims setting fire to the train car. The film was shown extensively during the election campaign of the BJP in Gujarat, and the party swept the vote last year.

Documentary filmmakers say their films are a statement against the politics of hate and will not incite passion.

"We are living in intolerant times," said Gauhar Raza, whose private screenings of the film "Evil Stalks the Land" about Gujarat were disrupted by Hindu vigilante groups in Bombay and Goa. "Democracy offers space for opposition and dissent. Unfortunately that space is shrinking in India because of the right-wing turn in Indian politics."

© 2004 The Washington Post Company