

Sydney Film Festival

The danger of war on the Indian subcontinent

War and Peace, directed by Anand Patwardhan

By Richard Phillips
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War and Peace, a three-hour documentary directed by Anand Patwardhan on the danger of nuclear conflict between India and Pakistan, is one of the few Indian anti-war films. Screened at the recent Sydney Film Festival, Patwardhan's film skillfully uses war-mongering speeches by political leaders and the mass media in India and Pakistan to highlight the serious dangers posed by the chauvinist sentiment whipped up by governments on both sides of the border.

Patwardhan began shooting *War and Peace* in the aftermath of nuclear weapons tests by India and Pakistan in 1998. In 1999, armed Islamic militants backed by the Pakistan army seized parts of the key Kargil Heights area of Indian-held Jammu and Kashmir. The confrontation, which continued for months, threatened to precipitate an all-out war between the two countries.

During these events and over the next couple of years Patwardhan interviewed peasants, workers, school children, Dalits or untouchables—India's lowest and most oppressed caste—and anti-war organisations in both countries.

His film contrasts the situation facing the vast majority of people on the sub-continent with the billions of dollars spent annually by Indian and Pakistan on nuclear weapons research. India spends 2.5 percent of its GNP on the military and only 0.7 percent on health, yet half the country's children under four are malnourished and 60 percent of women are anemic. As the film reveals, the cost of one Indian Agni-II nuclear missile could provide 15,000 public health centres or safe drinking water to 37,000 villages.

War and Peace contains testimony from rural villagers living near Indian nuclear test sites and uranium mines about increasing incidences of cancer and other serious health complaints caused by exposure to excessive radiation. There are also interviews with Pakistani opponents of General Pervez Musharraf's regime, with revealing comments by students from a Pakistani private girls' school. After delivering classroom speeches supporting military action against India, the girls later admit on camera that they were deeply concerned about the danger of war but had been encouraged to write anti-Indian speeches to get better grades.

Patwardhan's documentary provides chilling examples of how the Indian mass media and government officials whip up jingoism, war fever and glorify nuclear weaponry. Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, Home Minister L.K. Advani, religious leaders and well-heeled middle class people are shown proclaiming the country's nuclear arsenal as a symbol of Indian wealth and technological superiority. There is footage of government-sponsored music videos, military promotional films and semi-religious multi-media reenactments, complete with smoke, explosions and other pyrotechnics, of Indian military action against Pakistan.

The Hindu extremist Shiv Sena and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) or

World Hindu Congress are shown whipping up patriotic fervour. Speakers at a VHP rally call for the nuclear annihilation of Pakistan, while declaring that India can "hold its head high in the world" because it has nuclear weapons. Dr P.K. Iyengar, a former head of India's atomic research program, is also interviewed. He claims to oppose the use of nuclear weapons against Pakistan but states that long-range nuclear missile research must be developed because China may be India's "next possible enemy".

War and Peace contains footage of last year's *Tehelka* web site exposure of Indian government and military officials involved in arms purchases. Posing as arms dealers, *Tehelka* journalists secretly videotaped meetings with Indian state officials, some of whom were filmed accepting cash bribes.

Patwardhan warns of the dangerous consequences of increasing US militarism and the "business of defence" where "war is profit, where enemies are reinvented [and] where 'religion' and 'patriotism' are names of the greatest danger our world has ever known." The film concludes with images from the September 11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and an appeal for disarmament and non-violence by Mahatma Gandhi.

Some commentators have criticised *War and Peace* for its length, suggesting it be scaled back for television. The documentary certainly has a wide range of material, perhaps too much, including interviews with survivors of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and footage on the 1996 Washington exhibition of the Enola Gay, one of US planes that dropped atomic weapons on Japan. These elements could easily be the subject of separate films.

A more significant problem, however, is the failure of *War and Peace* to critically examine the historical roots of the drive to war, which lies in the partition of India in 1947 into Muslim Pakistan and Hindu dominated India. The communal division of the region has already led to three major wars between the two countries as well as the current tense standoff, with more than one million heavily armed troops confronting each other along the border.

War and Peace begins with the 1948 assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by Nathuram Godse, a member of the fascist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) but fails to mention that Gandhi and the Congress party endorsed the British devised partition. Patwardhan is a trenchant opponent of Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its Hindu extremist allies such as the RSS, but he does not critically examine the role of Congress in encouraging chauvinism and militarism. In fact, the three wars and India's nuclear weapons program took place under Congress-led governments, not the BJP.

During the Kargil crisis in 1999, Congress, the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) and the Communist Party of India (CPI) criticised

the BJP government from the right, denouncing it for failing to act aggressively enough to defend India's borders. Patwardhan chose not to include any reference to this.

The film tends to blame nuclear power for the danger of nuclear war rather than the deepening political crisis of Indian capitalism. In the interview below, Patwardhan also criticises the so-called lefts—the CPI-M and CPI—for their opposition to India signing the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). While it is certainly true that these Stalinist parties opposed the CTBT from a thoroughly nationalist standpoint, the treaty has done nothing to halt the threat of nuclear war.

Without minimising these political deficiencies, Patwardhan's film remains a disturbing work, which points to the dangers posed by the rise of religious fundamentalism on the Indian subcontinent. The director is one of the few Indian filmmakers openly critical of the BJP: prepared to use his cinematic skills to expose the implications of its communalist program.

Incapable of tolerating any criticism, the BJP-led Indian government and its fundamentalist allies have reacted sharply against the film. In early June, India's Censor Board, which is dominated by Hindu extremists, ruled that *War and Peace* could not be released until the director agreed to extensive cuts. The cuts initially demanded the deletion of all visuals of Indian flag burnings, while allowing footage of Pakistani flag torchings; cuts to all footage on the *Tehelka* exposé; and removal of "all visuals and dialogues spoken by political leaders including Minister and Prime Minister".

These demands are clearly politically motivated and aimed at preventing *War and Peace* from being screened in India. The Censor Board's actions are part of wide-ranging government and Hindu fundamentalist attacks on artistic expression and the democratic rights of artists, writers, filmmakers and academics in recent years. They are an attempt to silence any dissenting voice and must be opposed.

Anand Patwardhan has been making documentaries for almost 30 years. Some of these include *Waves of Revolution* (1974) on the Bihar anti-corruption movement; *Prisoners of Conscience* (1978) on political prisoners jailed under Indira Gandhi's State of Emergency in 1975-77; *Bombay our City* (1985) about Bombay slum dwellers; *In the Name of God* (1992); *Father, Son and Holy War* (1995); *We Are Not Your Monkeys* (1996) and *Occupation: Mill Worker* (1996). He spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about the censorship of *War and Peace*, the rise of religious fundamentalism, and the danger of nuclear war on the Indian sub-continent.

Richard Phillips: What is the current situation with the attempts to ban *War and Peace*?

Anand Patwardhan: Last June the Censor Board asked for a large number of cuts in the film. It then went to a revising committee and they asked for a complete ban. A second revising committee was resorted to. They did not ask for a ban but want 21 cuts, which will effectively destroy the film. Now I have to go to a tribunal in Delhi and if I lose at the tribunal stage I will have the opportunity to take it to a proper court. At the moment though the film is effectively banned. They can't really stop me showing it at festivals outside the country—I don't think they have legislation for that. But I can't do any public screenings in India.

RP: What has local response to the film been like?

AP: This ban only started in the last two months, so before that we had shown it quite widely in India and the response was great. Even now as I've been showing the film to smaller audiences in people's homes it has been very good. The problem, however, with private screenings is we're only mostly reaching people already sympathetic to us. It needs to be shown and discussed by people who are not yet convinced or are on the other side.

RP: *War and Peace* has strong material on Hindu fundamentalists—footage which Western audiences rarely see. Could you

comment on this?

AP: I've made two other films about the rise of fundamentalism. *In the Name of God*, which I made about 11 years ago dealt with the demolition of Babri mosque, which really set the ball rolling for the Hindu fundamentalists. After 1992 and 1993 and communalist riots in Bombay I also made a film called *Father, Son and Holy War*, which is about the connection between masculinity and religious violence.

RP: I heard that Hindu fundamentalists stopped one of your films being screened in New York this year.

AP: Yes they stopped *In the Name of God* at the Museum of Natural History in New York. The VHP protested against the screening and effectively had it cancelled by calling me a communist and issuing threats of disruption. When secular Indians protested the cancellation, the museum feebly compromised and it was shown at the New York University, outside the museum premises.

RP: On what grounds has the Censor Board banned *War and Peace*?

AP: They don't really have any grounds. The real reason is that there has been a saffronisation process of many key institutions in our country. Saffron is the colour of the Hindu fundamentalists and they have put their hardcore people in many important positions. This has happened to the Censor Board. Over a period of time as people retire from the board they are replaced by people connected with the BJP or other rightwing Hindu formations. More than 70 or 80 percent of those on the Censor Board are either members or sympathisers of the ruling party.

Of course they are obliged to justify their actions and refer to Censor Board guidelines. The guidelines are very broad and in my case they have ordered me to cut all footage of government politicians, ministers and the prime minister. The guideline they referred to was defamation but my film simply records these politicians speaking. How is it defamation when all I'm doing is presenting what they have said? It is reportage and if they go against the principle of reportage then newspapers and television will be out of business.

RP: You've had previous conflicts with the Censor Board.

AP: Yes, with most of my films, but the battles weren't as bitter as this one. I usually had trouble in the first round but by the second stage, which was the revising committee stage, there would be a few sensible people on the committee and the film would pass without any cuts. Up until now I've never allowed a single frame to be cut, and that's in over 30 years of documentary filmmaking.

RP: How do you estimate this politically? What does it say about how far they are prepared to go in the conflict over Kashmir?

AP: It is a measure of the desperation that has set in and the fact that a hard-line lobby has taken control of the government and its institutions. As you know, the new Deputy Prime Minister is L.K. Advani and he is from the hard-line of the BJP.

Everybody recognises that the violence and the pogroms in Gujarat in the last few months indicate that this party is desperate and willing to go to all sorts of measures. It simply doesn't care about what the liberal and secular forces might say. I'm not sure how to gauge it but maybe they believe that the only way they can survive is with this approach.

The other thing that is going on at the moment is the government attack on *Tehelka*, which is the web site that did a sting operation using hidden cameras to expose dirty arms deals. They have come under attack from the government and this is one of the sequences the government wants out of my film.

RP: Can you give an indication of the support you've received so far?

AP: There is a lot of support. There is an online petition and a signature campaign. I should also explain that last month my 11-year-old film *In the Name of God* was stopped in one district in Kerala. Congress rules the state and there is a strong left opposition but a collector or administrator issued a ban order and stopped screenings because Hindu rightwing elements said screenings would cause a law and order problem in the

district. The local administrator banned it for 15 days and then extended the ban for another 15 days. This film has a universal certificate, was shown on television about seven years ago and won a national award.

Luckily in Kerala the secular movement is very strong and thousands marched and demonstrated on two or three occasions. There was street theatre and some illegal “protest” screenings, so there was a huge movement building up in the defence of the right to show the film. Finally the ban order had to be lifted by the local administrator so people’s pressure succeeded in overturning the ban order.

RP: At one point in *War and Peace* you speak about fundamentalism rising with the collapse of socialism and mention the liquidation of the Soviet Union. Could you explain what you mean?

AP: Of course I’m over-simplifying things here and couldn’t get into detail in the film. I don’t mean that socialism is dead or has collapsed as a whole but as the influence of socialism waned the vacuum was filled by fundamentalist elements, not just in India but all over the world.

RP: We don’t support the view that the Soviet Union and other so-called socialist states represented socialism.

AP: No, I agree that neither China nor the USSR were genuinely socialist states and clearly one of the factors behind the collapse in the USSR was that it was not at all democratic. But I’m suggesting that the concept of socialism itself has been devalued in the last 20 years or so. When I went to school and college, socialism was a very exciting idea, now it is regarded by many as a failed ideal.

The danger is that the world throws out the baby with the bath water, that they throw out the positive values of socialism and the vacuum is filled by fundamentalist elements. You have kids growing up who think that the only choice is a free market economy and a “me-first” generation where money is god. None of this is spiritually satisfying and so you have religion coming into the picture to fill the spiritual vacuum.

RP: I wanted to ask you about historical context in *War and Peace*. One criticism of the film is that it doesn’t provide historical background to the partition of India. Secondly, you don’t have any footage on the Congress or the communist parties in India and yet they have supported the government against Pakistan and have been vocal sabre-rattlers in all this. Can you comment?

AP: Let me deal with your first question. I don’t deal with partition—I take that issue for granted because it is already a three-hour film and it would be very long if I included all that material. The starting point for the film is the murder of Gandhi by Hindu fundamentalists. I’ve never used the first person in the narratives in my films before but in *War and Peace* I began by starting out by explaining that my family was involved in the struggle for independence, that they went to jail because they fought the British. I knew I would be attacked for being anti-Indian or unpatriotic so I wanted to start by establishing my “nationalist” credentials.

The belief system *War and Peace* emerges from is closer to the outlook of those who fought for independence than the belief system of those ruling the country today. If you examine the historical record of the Hindu rightwing and the Muslim rightwing, the truth is they did not fight for independence. None of them went to jail against British rule. It’s the irony of the situation today that those who claim to be Indian patriots supported British rule.

On your other question, let me say that I have a strong but constructive critique against parts of the traditional left with regard to their attitude to the bomb and nuclear power. There is a big difference between my position in the film and what large sections of the left have traditionally maintained. Many of them have not criticised nuclear power at all. So I try to stress in the film that the issue of nuclear weapons and nuclear power are inseparable. I’m showing the victims of uranium mining and uranium is common to both.

I don’t want to go out and criticise the left publicly because I believe

there has to be a rainbow alliance of people against nuclear weapons and red is very much a part of this rainbow. But I am not compromising my position on the issue of nuclear power or on CTBT [Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty].

I’m not sure whether you’re aware but in 1996 sections of the Indian left played a role in ensuring that India refused to sign CTBT because of their knee jerk nationalistic positions. They talked of not surrendering sovereignty, saying America wants us to sign CTBT and we are not going to do it, we stand for Indian independence and so on. They helped to feed into that nuclear nationalism. The result was that India and Pakistan did not sign and soon the right-wing republicans in America got their way and refused to ratify CTBT, making our world that much more dangerous.

So in my film I make an issue about CTBT and nuclear energy. These are diverging points with the traditional left and whenever they see the film they get the point. I don’t have to go out and criticise them openly. I think the film works in this framework and is being received well in left circles, which it wouldn’t be if I went out and abused them for the things that I think they went wrong on. It is important to get these issues across in a more subtle way, while building alliances and keeping principles alive.

RP: Isn’t the essential question, however, the establishment of a new political sensibility, one that rejects nationalism per se and fights for the unity of the world’s peoples on socialist foundations?

AP: Absolutely. I think the film would be a useful tool in this direction. The film functions best in its role as a critique of militarism, jingoism and fundamentalism. Although I’m not talking about socialism directly, through the Gandhian socialists in the film, the peace marchers, the Dalits, one does get a glimpse of what can be.

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