

In Defence of our Present:

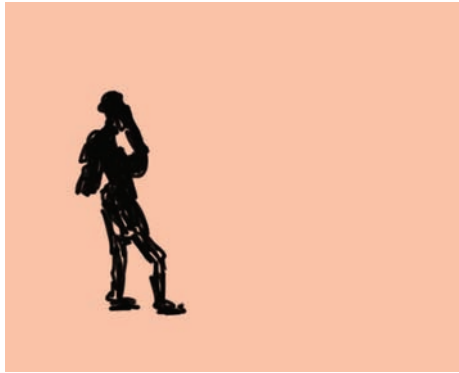
On giving up the National Awards



Issued by

Solidarity with FTII Students

Art
Nalini Malani



PREFACE

The publication of this volume marks an unusual moment in the cultural life of India's present. It began quietly enough in early September 2015, as an act of protest by a handful of writers, who chose to return the awards that the State had honoured them with. They did this to pointedly register their outrage at the cold-blooded killing of writer (and rationalist) M.M. Kalburgi, but they also connected it to the earlier murders of two well-known anti-superstition activists, Narendra Dabholkar and Govind Pansare.

This innocuous gesture of dissent seems to have touched an unanticipated chord, for the protest quickly snowballed, with dozens of writers – and eventually artists, performers, academics, and scientists – joining in to announce that they would also return their awards at the lack of an adequate response from the Government to these targeted hate killings. The focus of protests soon widened to include the cold-blooded lynching of Mohammad Akhlaq, who was dragged out of his home in Dadri on the outskirts of Delhi, and beaten to death by a mob. Not because of his ideas, but because he was suspected to have stored beef in his refrigerator at home – apparently intolerable to the feelings of the Hindu majority village he lived in. The casual, even dismissive, pronouncements by important figures in the party in power, the

BJP, was a brutal marker for the culture of extreme intolerance that was brazenly striding out to take its place in the sun in India.

A separate crisis had meanwhile been long brewing at the Pune based Film & Television Institute of India (FTII). Students at this important – if crisis ridden – institution had called a strike to protest the appointment of a new Chairman. The nominee, Gajendra Chauhan, was a political appointee with an embarrassing track record as an actor, and little else to show other than his unabashed proximity to the BJP. As the strike by the students of FTII entered a hundred days in the middle of September 2015, over a hundred filmmakers, all of them recipients of the National Award given in the President of India's name, wrote to the President, and the Minister for Information & Broadcasting, asking them to urgently intervene in the matter. The appeal was met with silence. A month later a number of these filmmakers joined the writers in returning their awards.

Put together, the enormous range of opinion represented by this diverse group of protesting artists, and their quiet influence over public perception in a large part of India, touched a raw nerve in the Government. Ministers and politicians of the BJP were quick to discount the protests as misplaced, motivated, and eventually, even anti-National. But it was clear to anybody who cared that the symbolic gesture of returning State awards had communicated a deep disquiet that had been brewing in India since the ascension of the BJP to power.

This volume brings together the statements written by a number of those who chose to return their awards – writers, artists, performers, academics, scientists – in the hope that their considered reasons will offer all of us a collective understanding of a present that is almost upon us. And from that insight, hopefully, will stem a way out of the shadows.



To
The President and the Prime Minister of India
New Delhi.

Dear Sir,

It is with a deep sense of dismay that we write to you. Many of the undersigned had written a letter to you barely a month ago in support of the demands of the students of FTII. We had urged you to intervene and ensure that FTII continues to be a stellar educational institution with a commitment to freedom of expression.

The student strike has entered the 4th month. The issue remains unresolved and our sense of apprehension about the fate of the institute has only grown. We have seen the students conduct their protest in a democratic manner with utmost dignity. We have also seen an attack on their credibility mounted in the most disgraceful manner in the press by the very people who were meant to be their guardians on campus- the director and the registrar. The ministry has seemingly offered a patient hearing to the students no less than 5 times over 4 months yet have made no attempt to put into place a transparent process to make key appointments to the people who are meant to give vision to the institute. They have expressed an inability to reverse the process

that provoked this strike. We see this as a blatant disregard for the voice of these students.

It has also become imperative that we see the government's stone walling of the students' protest in a context. The Information and Broadcasting Ministry has appointed people with a narrow vision in the institutions under them. FTII, Children's Film Society and CBFC are examples that the film fraternity has objected to.

Meanwhile, we have watched the murders of rationalists and writers like Dr. Narendra Dabholkar, Govind Pansare and M.M.Kalburgi with dismay. These are clearly not random acts of violence. People are being murdered for their beliefs and opinions. There seems to be no attempt to unravel the larger picture and bring to book extremist groups that believe in ruthless violence to eliminate those who hold a counter view from theirs. There has been no official condemnation of these groups and we question this silence.

The lynching and murder of an ironsmith, Mohammed Akhlaq, in a village at the edge of our national capital has shattered our faith in the spirit of tolerance that is the core of our robust democracy. The mob that stood at this poor muslim man's house had been empowered by the belief that this was an acceptable way to express rage. The current climate has validated this sentiment. Those who stand outside the circle drawn by the ruling elite are vulnerable in the most appalling manner. It has now come to light that members of the party that rule at the Centre led the mob. It is imperative that we take note of the impunity with which the mob was instigated. No condemnation is complete without naming the politically powerful who scripted this attack.

We are filmmakers who have been awarded by your most esteemed office. We hold that to be a high honour. Our cinema represents a rich diversity of political opinions and aesthetic ex-

pression. It was a matter of great pride for us that the government of India had awarded this plurality. If we do not stand up and register our protest now we are in the danger of being a part of the process that is flattening out our beautiful landscape of diversity. Freedom of expression are not mere words for us, it is a way of life we hold dear. Each life led differently from the mainstream is precious, we must fight for this right to pray, eat, love, work as we wish.

We feel compelled to return the honour that the State had bestowed on us. This is not an attempt to undermine your office but a heartfelt plea. Condoling deaths without interrogating the forces that scripted those murders reveals a tacit acceptance of the ugly forces distorting our country. The Government of India must urgently reveal its commitment to protect the freedom of expression of each citizen.

We, the undersigned, stand alongside the writers who have returned the country's highest literary honour and hereby return our National Awards. As filmmakers we stand firmly with the students of FTII and are determined to not let them shoulder the entire burden of their protests. They have mounted a historic struggle and we urge others within our fraternity to come forward and carry this protest forward.

List of signatories

Dibakar Banerjee	Film: <i>Khosla Ka Ghosla</i> (2007)
Anand Patwardhan	Film: <i>Bombay Our City</i> (1984)
Paresh Kamdar	Film: <i>Rasyatra</i> (1995)
Nishtha Jain	Film: <i>Gulaabi Gang</i> (2014)
Kirti Nakhwa	Film: <i>Lost & Found</i> (2008)
Harshavardhan Kulkarni	Film: <i>Lost & Found</i> (2008)

Hari Nair	Film: <i>Sham's Vision</i> (1997)
Rakesh Sharma	Film: <i>Final Solution</i> (2006)
Indraneel Lahiri	Film: <i>Aamar Katha, Story of Binodini</i> (2014)
Lipika Singh Darai	Film: <i>Gaarud</i> (2009) Film: <i>Eka Gachha Eka Mainsha Eka Samudra</i> (2012) Film: <i>Kankee O Saapo</i> (2013)
Prateek Vats	Rajat Kamal for Best Short Fiction Film for <i>Kal 15 August Dukaan Band Rahegi</i> (2010)
Vikrant Pawar	President's Gold Medal and Best Short Fiction Film for <i>Kaatal</i> (2012)

28 October 2015



*To
The President and Prime Minister of India*

Dear Sirs,

Last week the students of FTII withdrew their strike after a protracted struggle of 4 months. In those 4 months the students put forward their core demands of putting into place a transparent and tenable process with which key appointments are to be made at the institute. They asked for the contested society to be dissolved. We were amongst the 190 signatories who wrote to you, asking for the students' reasonable demands to be paid heed.

The students have taken the high moral ground by retreating from the appallingly non-committal meetings with the I&B ministry and by going back to class. They have not come onto the streets, despite the huge support they garnered from student groups and civil society, and have restrained from expressing their deep frustration through anarchic action.

In response to the students' call to the filmmaking fraternity, 12 of our colleagues lent strength to their protest, by announcing their intention last week, to return their national awards. Their gesture was a plea to the government, to take notice of the stu-

dents' demands and resolve the issue. It was also a protest against the growing intolerance in the country.

We watched with disappointment how the ruling party's leaders and supporters abused these filmmakers and belittled their gesture. This has been the consistent response by of the powers that be, towards the writers, academics, scientists, filmmakers, historians and artists who have expressed their dismay over the increasing climate of intolerance. Rather than see our fellow filmmakers mocked, we have decided to stand with them and yet again bring public attention back to the manner in which the current government is responding to dissent and debate.

A few days ago, a film made by 4 young students of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences was stopped from being screened in Delhi, by bureaucrats of the I&B ministry. The film was on the caste politics in Maharashtra and around the issue of beef. The film was to be screened at a film festival focussing on livelihood issues. The representatives of the ministry allegedly told the festival organisers that beef was a sensitive issue, so a film discussing it could offend people. Connect this diktat from the I&B ministry, to the setting up of a Governing Council at the premier film institute of India, with people who have little to do with cinema, art and culture. The students' apprehension about the new appointees is not misplaced at all. If a film that *discusses* the beef issue is blocked with ease, then we can imagine what culture of censorship will be put into place when students are learning and experimenting with the language of cinema at the FTII campus. If the learning process at FTII is in danger of being marred so brazenly, we have to speak up as members of the film fraternity.

In the last few days we have seen the police charge against the students who have been peacefully protesting against the new policies at the UGC. These new policies will thwart the ambitions of students from pursuing research in the arts and the sciences.

The intellectual integrity of so many academic institutions is being eroded. The threat to the academic culture at FTII and elsewhere, is what has brought us together here. Equally, it is the horror at of people being attacked and killed for their beliefs, for the food they eat, for whom they love, for what caste they are born into, that makes it impossible for us to sit back as mere observers. We carry a sense of hurt and outrage at the events unfolding around us.

We are concerned citizens of this country, whose work has been recognised by the Government of India. That is a great honour for us, and in returning this award, we are not rejecting the recognition that the jury has bestowed on us. Neither are we belittling the honour given to us by the people of our country in the form of the National Award. We are using the one possibility we have of making you pay attention to our plea, resolve the crisis at FTII, ensure that our precious right to Freedom of Speech is unambiguously protected.

We, the undersigned, return our National Awards, and hope that this symbolic gesture urges you to pay attention to our fears, that the warp and weft of our robust democracy might be coming apart in the current atmosphere.

Signatories

1. Virendra Saini
2. Saeed Mirza
3. Kundan Shah
4. Arundhati Roy
5. Ranjan Palit
6. Tapan Bose
7. Shriprakash

8. Sanjay Kak
9. Pradip Krishen
10. Tarun Bhartiya
11. Amitabh Chakraborty
12. Madhusree Dutta
13. Anwar Jamal
14. Ajay Raina
15. Irene Dhar Malik
16. PM Satheesh
17. Satya Rai Nagpaul
18. Manoj Lobo
19. Rafeeq Ellias
20. Sudheer Palsane
21. Vivek Sachidanand
22. Sudhakar Reddy Yakkanti
23. Dr. Manoj Nitharwal
24. Abhimanyu Dange

5 November 2015



Saeed Mirza

Friends, I sit before you because I believe we are living in a time where not to speak out would not just be mistake but a crime.

When the students of the FTII rose up in revolt against the ad-hoc and arrogant imposition of the Governing Council members of their institute by the Government of India little did they realize that the cause for which they were fighting would turn out to be so much larger: Joining them were a host of eminent writers, scholars, historians, painters, film-makers, musicians, theatre personalities, scientists, professionals and even industrialists who joined in the struggle to reclaim the soul and spirit of this land. The battle that the students had begun went beyond the manipulation of education to include intolerance, divisiveness and hate.

I would like to inform you that I am not an academic. I am a film-maker, television producer, writer, traveler and, hopefully, a thinker. Let me also inform you that this note of mine is written to open up a rigorous debate if we have to understand the nature of our country and where it is heading.

To understand what I am getting at, I have to go a little further back in our country's history. We have to go back to the time when India became a Constitutional Republic. It was the time

when our leaders defined the nation to the people of India and to the world. We were sovereign, secular and democratic.

Here was a country that was primarily feudal, caste-ridden, that was born out of incredible communal slaughter and the largest mass migration of peoples in history and yet had the courage to look into the future with a sense of purpose and, most importantly, a sense of poetry. It guaranteed freedom of expression, religion and equality and justice for all before the law of the land.

Left behind in the shadows were forces, though small in number yet potent in influence, that were vehemently opposed to this ideal. They had a different agenda and a far simpler notion of what our country was all about: they had little faith in democracy and far less in freedom of expression, religion and equality before the law.

And today we are well aware of what is happening in our country. How did all of this come to pass? There is a history to it

Let me now begin with the role of the Congress Party which was in power in most of the country up to the mid 1970's. What amazed me was the number of communal and caste riots that had occurred in state after state under its watch. Here was a party that professed to be secular and progressive and yet in Maharashtra, Gujarat, U.P., Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan regional party bosses were either helpless or colluded with communal forces in regular pogroms. If one calculates the numbers of people killed and the destruction of property it would shame any country in the world. And yet, no person or group was held accountable for these atrocities. This would have enormous consequences in the future.

There was one movement however, that really set me thinking. It was the beginnings of a political formation that started out in the city of Mumbai. It was the birth of the Shiv Sena. Everyone knows that this movement had the blessings of the politi-

cal warlords in the state of Maharashtra and also the blessings of a number of Industrialists. Mumbai, the nation's financial and entertainment capital was held to ransom for two decades by an organization that dealt with issues by turning the streets of the city into a battleground. And, by and large, in this violent journey of theirs, the political parties in power and the law enforcing agencies looked the other way. What message did all of this send?

These were the early stages when the idea of India as envisioned by our early leaders began to be dismantled. What would follow would be an onslaught on those ideals and yet nobody seemed to notice.

From the 1980's onwards that we graphically see how those broad ideals of the Constitution were being attacked. At one level we saw the Naxalite movement grow in Chhatisgarh, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, southern Bihar and Jharkhand to which the poor and marginalized had rallied because they had nowhere else to turn. The movement still exists. In the north-east of the country we saw insurrections in Manipur, Nagaland and Mizoram. Though there is calm in the areas now, one has only to go below the surface to experience the sullen anger. A large-scale and violent farmers' agitation began in western Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan demanding subsidies and economic relief. The state of Assam was in turmoil with a movement that railed against 'outsiders'. This movement manifested its anger in one of the most savage acts of brutality in which more than fifteen hundred old men, women and children were bludgeoned to death outside a village called Nellie. In Punjab a violent militant movement began that demanded a separate state for the Sikhs. The agitation and militancy was brought under control with the army storming the Golden Temple where hundreds of people died. The final act of this militancy unfortunately ended with the murder of a Prime Minister and then slaughter of more than three thousand innocent Sikhs in gruesome acts of revenge in Delhi and other

parts of the country. Once again no one held responsible. Thanks to a botched and rigged election, militants in Kashmir, aided by Pakistan, launched a protracted armed revolt. As the slogans of the militants got shriller and more communal, hundreds of Hindus were targeted and killed and the mass migration of Kashmiri Pandits from the Kashmir valley occurred. The people left behind were caught in the maelstrom of turmoil and retribution and thousands upon thousands have died. Adding to the unrest across North India was the release of the Mandal Commission Report.

By the late 1980's a large part of India was in an economic and social turmoil.

It was now that Bhartiya Janata Party seized a political opportunity. Till then it had been on the periphery of mainstream politics. It was considered a bit player with a communal agenda. And so the BJP began whipping up a frenzied demand for the destruction of a medieval mosque saying that it was built on the ruins of a sacred temple.

The movement struck a chord, specifically with large sections of middle and upper middle classes in North and Western India, because the idea was perceived as a unifying move amidst a sea of turmoil. And, the mosque became the symbol of the 'other' and the removal of it would be the launching pad for a proud and resurgent India. After the demolition, events culminated in the horrendous communal riots of 1993 in Mumbai, where more than a thousand five hundred people died, hundreds of homes and livelihoods were destroyed. Then followed a series of horrific bomb blasts set off by a Muslim warlord in which hundreds of innocent people died and hundreds more were injured. In a strange and macabre way, these two events faithfully served a purpose: they shocked the nation and polarized it. By the end of the last century the BJP rose from a party of almost nothing to a party of

plenty. It had stepped out from the cold and into political legitimacy.

There was much more happening at the academic and cultural level. We witnessed a series of attacks on seminars, art exhibitions, plays and libraries. Artists, musicians, theatre personalities and scholars were forced to retreat. Unheard of organizations suddenly appeared on the horizon to terrorize and instill fear in the minds of ordinary citizens. They were telling us what to wear, what to eat and even what to think. The Gujarat pogrom and slaughter was the final assertion of the new political and philosophical equation. How far had we, as a nation, travelled away from the ideals of the Constitution?

And this is where we are today. The forces that lay in the shadows at the time of our independence have emerged into the sunlight. They are in power both at the overt and covert levels. Will my handing over a National Award change things around? Frankly I don't know. All I know is I have to raise my voice against this state of affairs.

National Award for
Mohan Joshi Hazar Ho, 1984

National Award for
Naseem, 1996

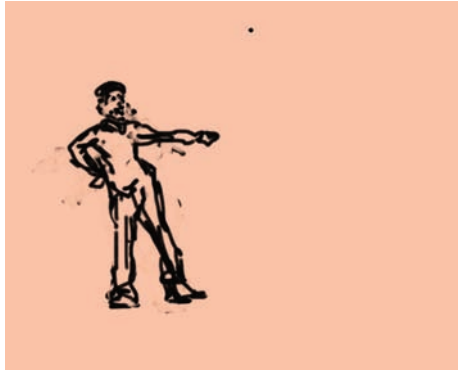


Virendra Saini

I am returning this award in sincere hope that the government will solve all the problems of the Film and Television Institute of India with an open mind.

National Film Award for Best Cinematography
Salim Langde Pe Mat Ro, 1990

National Film Award for Best Children's film
Kabhi Paas Kabhi Fail, 1999



Manoj Lobo

I received the National Award from Our former President Mr APJ Abdul Kalam for cinematography in 2005 for my F.T.I.I diploma film *Girni*. It still remains a most cherished and valued experience in my life.

My cinematography career subsequently was in a big way influenced by the recognition I received getting this award

Today, I return this award in protest of the devaluing of our academic institutions, specifically F.T.I.I., by appointing people without solid past commitment to cinema, culture and history of India. It is a humiliation I cannot bear .

I stand for an India that's multiculturally vibrant, secular and intellectually rich.

Am awaiting my country and my award back.

Jai Hind!

Director of photography of
Jaane Tu Ya Jaane Na,
Jhootha Hi Sahi,
Nautanki Saala,
Shaadi Ke Side Effects.



Vivek Sachidanand

I am an alumnus of FTII and I received a National Award in 2005 for Audiography. I have no doubt in my mind that I owe the National Award or any other award or recognition that I have received in my professional career, entirely to the time I spent in FTII and the education I received from my teachers and fellow students during that time.

So for me its heart breaking to see that the posts of Chairman and Governing Council members of such a reputed institute is being filled up with people with no qualifications whatsoever. It's indeed sad that a democratically elected government would distribute such posts, seemingly as gifts to undeserving people, for their affiliation to a political party or its wings with no transparency. What's even more disturbing to me is that this seems to be happening with many such institutes in the country, which have built their reputation over decades.

When I hear repeated instances of people in the government saying that FTII has not produced any real talent in years and that the students are 'naxals and anti-nationals', I feel it's necessary to make my voice heard and return the awards that the same Indian government has given me as an 'FTII product'.

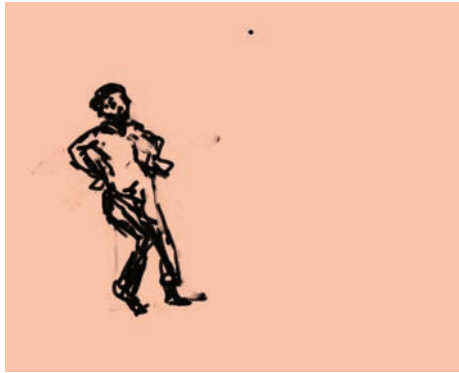
It goes without saying that this award means a lot to all of us and we are not rejecting the recognition that the jury has bestowed upon us, nor are we belittling the honour given to us by the people of our country in the form of the National Award.

I don't have any affiliation to any political party and my raising these questions at this point of time doesn't mean no wrong has happened before under any other governments. However, past mistakes cannot be used as justification by any current government. And when artists, writers, film makers, historians, scientists and general public are speaking in support of a cause, it should not be brushed aside by calling it politically motivated.

I understand that this is a democratically elected government and has the right to make appointments to government funded institutions but this cannot be without due process or transparency.

I urge you to find a solution to the FTII issue at the earliest and put a system in place for the selection of such posts so that this, or any future government cannot make such arbitrary appointments.

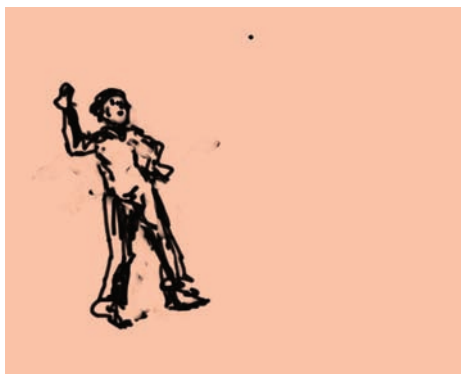
National Award for Best Audiography for
Ksha Tra Gya, 2005



Sudhakar Reddy Yakkanti

It is very disheartening to see so many eminent scholars who have been an inspiration for the following generations had given up the honors they have received from government of India. I received a 'Special jury National award' For a Short film 'EK AAKASH' (2004) which talks about the "Communication between cultures, communities and necessary for peace and dialogue". When I see there is no communication and dialogue happening for more than 4 months in spite of students strike at FTII and all the communities of one country are being pitted against another, I feel that any 'opinion' or 'belief' other than the 'office bearers' are not valued in this democratic country any more. Despite the High regard & respect I pay for these awards given to encourage the values imbibed in our constitution and culture, I will have to return it back to express my effort in showing solidarity to the enraged friends who are fighting for the 'Freedom of Expression'.

Special Jury National Award for
Ek Aakash (2004)
Director of Photography
Deool
Highway



Ajay Raina

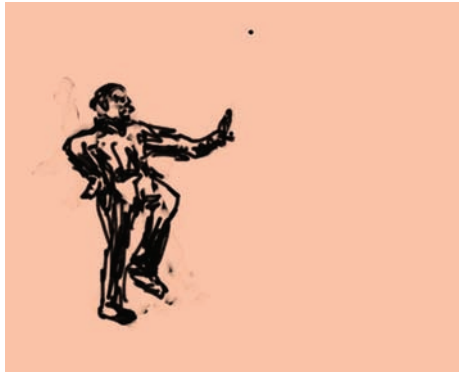
I return my National Award in support of the students of my alma mater FTII and also in solidarity with all the writers, filmmakers, artists, historians, scientists and people of eminence who have spoken up as one voice to protest the deliberate silence of the present government at the centre on the current regime of fear and intolerance being permitted against the vulnerable communities all over the country.

Giving up my National Award is not an easy decision for me. My cameraman Arun and I shot the documentary film 'WAPSI', for which I won the award in 2005, undercover, at grave risk and almost life-threatening circumstances in Pakistan without any official permission from the host government. In this film I revisit the events of Partition and the consequent effects of an engineered Hindu - Muslim divide upon Hindu and Sikh minorities living in Pakistan as well on the Muslim, Sikh and Kashmiri Pandit minorities in India. My earlier film in Kashmir (Golden Conch 2002, MIFF) shot in 2000 under similar circumstances of fear is about my journey home to Kashmir a decade after the forced exodus of my own community. Subsequently, all my work as a filmmaker and writer has been about documenting Kashmir and its devastation.

I have never shied away from speaking up for any minority issue in my films and writings, so I feel conscience bound to speak up even now as the idea of a secular, tolerant and pluralist India seems to be under threat once again. I do this with hope that many more people will speak up now so that the present regime is compelled to rethink its agenda of ‘manufacturing hate’ among communities that have strived to pull along each other in peace and harmony despite the tragedies of the past.

National Film Award (Rajat Kamal)

Wapsi, 2005



Irene Dhar Malik

I'm giving up my National Award in protest against the unmistakable interference of the present government in appointments to institutions of academia and culture. I am also protesting the general atmosphere in the country where the Prime Minister does not care enough to categorically and unequivocally condemn incidents of intolerance and take clear and swift action against members of his government and party who seek to belittle or justify such incidents. It's not been an easy decision. The National Award is very precious to me, and I have great respect and gratitude for the jury members who considered me worthy of this honour. I'm giving it up to join the group of people who are trying to get heard, a group of people who are voicing their worries about what is happening in the country, and who hope that things will change for the better. A lot of citizens had great hopes from the new government. I hope they are not let down by indifference, by attempts to justify present injustices by talk of what has happened in the past. Any wrong that happened in the past cannot justify a wrong being done in the present. The present is the time to undo wrongs. If a Gajendra Chauhan's appointment is a mistake, as it clearly is, is it so difficult to undo this?

I have thought long and hard and it has been a difficult decision to return the National Award. But as I was debating about this, my fourteen year-old daughter told me that she would be proud of me if I gave it up and joined the protest. And so, I made up my mind.

National Film Award for Best editing
Celluloid Man, 2013



Satya Rai Nagpaul

I forfeit my National Award, given to me for the cinematography of *Anhe Ghode Da Daan*, in protest against the systematic dismantling of Indian public institutions, including the Film & Television Institute of India [FTII]. The value of this award is not only for me but for all cinematographers, who as artists, struggle daily with the ugly & inhumane levels of commercialization that has taken over our practice, with the government continuing to recede from its responsibility to promote & produce public spirited cultural works.

It is not easy to give up a recognition, that means a validation from the most esteemed in the practice of our cinema. I do this in gratitude of the recognition and faith they have bestowed to such cinema, that continues to struggle and somehow sustain. I do it in solidarity with the writers, artists, fellow filmmakers, historians & scientists, who have registered their vigilance, by forfeiting to the current government, the recognitions bestowed on them.

I call upon the current government to state in no uncertain terms, that the highest standards of public welfare, institutional autonomy of public bodies, freedom of expression, freedom of

dissent, due process in law, right to privacy and constitutional values will be upheld.

I dedicate my award money to the emerging concerns of the trans-masculine, intersex & intergender communities, who barely survive at the cross-roads of discriminations of gender identity & expression, sex, class and caste.

National Award for Director of Photography
Anhe Ghoda Da Daan

A GRAFTII member, Satya is the Director of Photography for the following films: *Gattu, Zinda Bhaag, Chauthi Koot, Aligarh.*



PM Satheesh

I am returning my National Award protesting against the inappropriate appointments at the FTII, a premier academic institute of the country. The students of FTII are meticulously chosen by a panel of top most experts of the country based on merit, and the Chairman of FTII has always been an inspiration and guide to these students. It's appalling to see that the present appointments are based on sheer political affiliations rather than credentials.

Am also protesting against the larger inaction of authorities towards growing incidents of intolerance and gagging of independent voices at a scale that has never been seen before in independent India, threatening the very foundation of our secular and pluralistic nation. I evaluate the present situation in the country as alarming with the interference of the Govt. reaching the dining tables of private citizens. I hope the voices and worries of the individuals who have taken this extreme and painful step of returning the awards be heard and action be taken by the highest authorities of our country to maintain peace, and dignity of the citizens.

National Award for Best Audiography
Kumar Talkies, 1999



Rafeeq Ellias

After much thought and with deep regret, I have decided to return my national award for the film 'Legend of Fat Mama' in solidarity with my fellow film makers, film students at FTII and with concerned citizens of my country.

It is a simple, 'unmanufactured' protest against the current climate of intolerance, hate and violence and the curbing of the voices of dissent. It is by no means an endorsement of the actions and inactions of the previous government, whose own cynicism is well established.

It is in response however to the unprecedented scale and comprehensiveness with which the values and interests of the India we believe in, are being undermined.

National Award For Best Ethnographic Film, 2005



Anwar Jamal

The growing culture of intolerance and continuing government interference in academic institutions are matter of great concern for all those who hold freedom of expression and democratic values dear. Given the way things are panning out, there is a sword hanging over all filmmakers, artists and writers who do not believe in a narrow view of what India is and should be. I strongly condemn the distasteful manner in which the government and its foot soldiers are treating the students of India's premier film institute and all other dissenting voices.

National Award for the Best Investigative film
Call of the Bhagirathi, 1992

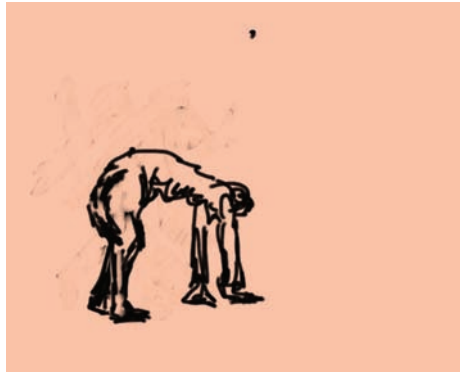


Dr. Manoj Nitharwal

Returning the most valued recognition from the country, the National Award, is not an act of bravery nor it is the rejection of the esteemed recognition of one's work. It is a lament of the angry and helpless soul, who is witnessing the unabashed degradation of fundamental human right of freedom for which our forefathers gave their blood and life. Its a humble cry of a heart troubled by the systematic terror perpetrated by a rabid mob brazenly as well as tacitly patronized by ruling powers whose primary role is the protection of citizens guided by principles enshrined in constitution. Returning the National Award is indeed a symbolic gesture as well as an echo of the inner voice of protest against government's selective apathy towards the plight of helpless artists, writers, scientists, intellectuals and certain activists who disagree with them in the true spirit of democracy but are dealt with an autocratic gesture. It is one of the last weapon in the civilized armory of an artist to make his voice heard. It is also an attempt to support and express solidarity with the valid and human voices of dissent against an oppressive culture perpetrated by state sponsored vigilante individuals and mobs in the garb of promoting religion or self professed narrow minded idea of 'tradition'. The governments before the current one have indulged in similar practices one way

or the other but that can not be an excuse for what is happening now. Inappropriate but deliberate FTII society appointments and subsequent failure to acknowledge the wrongdoing is just one of many transgressions of the current regime which undermine progressive education and pluralist culture in India. I return my coveted national award with all the humility of a student of life, along with my esteemed fellow artists to voice my protest against these transgressions and all other things which undermine human dignity, freedom of speech and breach of government's responsibility of ensuring transparency in its governance and securing innocent lives.

National Award
Seek & Hide, 2015



Lipika Singh Darai and Indraneel Lahiri

Receiving three National awards in the early stage of filmmaking career was a big boost for me. with all the respect to the jury who nominated my work, I raise my voice of protest in solidarity with the FTII students and Sahitya Akademi winners. The current Govt can not silence our freedom of expression, disrespect us in all aspects and at the same time honour our work of expression with medals and lines of praise.

The govt can not force an ideology on us what to eat, what to read , what to write, what to watch, what to wear, whom to love...

We two, Lipika and Indraneel Lahiri, from Odisha return our national awards with 10 other filmmakers.

I appeal to the filmmaking fraternity to stand beside the writers in Goa in their demonstration against the upcoming IFFI 2015 at Goa next month. Let the entire world know the real face of the I&B ministry.

Lipika Singh Darai:
 National Award for best Audiography
Gaarud, 2009
A Tree, A Man, A Sea, 2012

Kankee O Saapo, 2013

Indraneel Lahiri:
National Award for Best Cinematography
Aamar Katha, Story of Binodini, 2015



Prateek Vats and Vikrant Pawar

To

Hon. President Government of India

Your esteemed office awarded us for the work we did while we studied at FTII. We were awarded for expressing our unique vision in our films. As young students it was a great honour and encouragement before we left the safe cocoon of the FTII campus and headed out into the world as a filmmaker. The national award allowed us to walk into the world of filmmaking with confidence.

However, today we are forced to ponder - what is the point of awarding individuals while simultaneously eroding and undermining the very institutions that produce them? We write to you to convey our complete sense of dismay and hopelessness at the manner in which the Information and Broadcasting ministry has handled students' strike at FTII.

For almost five months now, students have been protesting the gross procedural violations, which led to dubious appointments at FTII- the premiere institution of film education in the country. The entire film fraternity along with artists, academics, and students from all walks of life across the country have made

numerous appeals and representations in support of the students. However, the issue remains unresolved and our sense of apprehension about the fate of the Institute has only grown.

The cynical indifference shown by the ministry in dismissing the grave issues at FTII betrays the same regressive attitude reflected in appointments made by it at other institutions like IIMC, CBFC and CFSI. Despite public outcry those heading the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting seem to be intent on destroying each and every institution under their governance.

Instead of correcting the faults in a dignified manner by fixing accountability and taking action against the persons responsible for these faulty appointments at FTII, the ministry has busied itself with sinister campaigns of character assassination against not just the students but also the institution at large. Students have been victimized and humiliated for trying to protect the integrity of a public institution, which has help put the country on an international map. It is shattering to hear vile charges being put against the students of our alma mater. What else are educational institutions supposed to do if not encourage students to think critically and be proud of the renewed wealth and relevance of their heritage?

We cant help but notice that the situation at FTII is symptomatic of the sustained assault on educational and cultural institutions of our country, which are the safe keepers of the moral and intellectual fabric of our plural society.

It is our responsibility to speak out now or then history will remember as those who stood by mute, while the grave for their institution was being dug up. As young filmmakers we have to register our protest by returning the very honour that gives us the confidence to face the world. We, the undersigned, have decided to return our national awards. We have faith in your office and

believe that this gesture of ours will speak to you of our sense of despair.

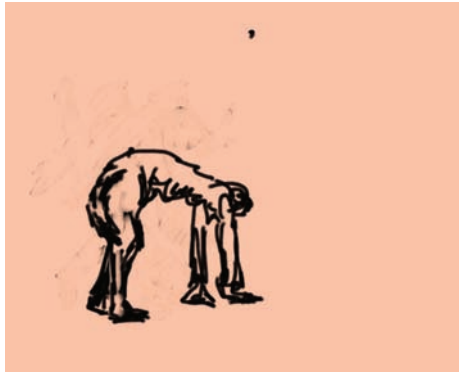
We stand in solidarity with students across the country who are raising their voice for preserving the universal tenets of freedom of thought, expression, and the right to dissent – something which FTII has stood for and epitomized over the past 55 years.

Prateek Vats:

Rajat Kamal for Best Short Fiction Film
Kal 15 August Dukaan Band Rahegi, 2010

Vikrant Pawar:

President's Gold Medal and Best Short Fiction Film
Kaatal, 2012



Nishtha Jain

With much sadness I give up only my national award. It has meant a lot to me as it helped to gain recognition for my film *Gulabi Gang* and the issues it raised about gender discrimination in our country. But today this award has become a daily reminder of the the gap between the way the state looks at us as filmmakers and how they treat us as citizens who dare to dissent. Together our films are watched by hundreds of thousands of people, much lauded and awarded, as citizens of this country and while raising our voices against the increasing commercialization and saffronisation of educational and cultural institutions, increasing religious polarization and resultant violence and fear, our voices are ignored. I refer to the letter that 200 eminent filmmakers sent to the president almost a month ago to bring to his attention the concerns of the striking students of our premier film institute. Our letter was not even acknowledged by the office of the president. Clearly the film is over. The curtains are down and time to suspend our disbelief and face the dark reality. It's time we treat the various episodes of violence and protests throughout the country not as isolated events but as various manifestation of a fascist state in the making.

Today I give up my award not just in solidarity with my alma mater FTII but also with the occupy UGC movement. I give up in this award in the memory of our slain leaders like narendra Dabholker, giving Pansre and kalburgi. I give up this award in the memory of Mohammad iklaqh who was killed due to communal hatred. And in the memory of the two Dalit children who were made victims of caste hatred. I give my award to protest the silence and indifference of our government to all these events.

National Award
Gulaabi Gang, 2014



Dibakar Banerjee

I am not here out of anger. Not out of outrage. Not to blame anyone. Those emotions have been exhausted. I am here to draw attention. Returning my national award for *Khosla Ka Ghosla* is not easy. It was my first film, and for many, my most loved. Those who loved it had families, sons, daughters – who went to schools, colleges, institutes and wanted to become successful and proud Indians – whatever that definition may be.

I am here to draw the attention of those citizens of India, if they are listening, if they care, if they think I am one of them – and not an outsider.

What we teach, what we learn today – is what we live tomorrow. India has had a proud tradition of teaching and learning for thousands of years. Central to that tradition was the Guru, and their shishyas. It is not for nothing that famous names like Drona, Kripa and even religious teachers like Shankara, Gautam Buddha, Mahavir, Nanak live between us even today, in scriptures and legends. Before they were anything, they were teachers, who taught, lead, and inspired a group of students.

They did so in forests, dusty roads, humble huts and under a tree.

Teaching is not classrooms. Not gadgets. Not shiny buildings. Those are the equipment of teaching. Teaching is the imparting of the right knowledge. To impart it, one must have it. The greatest teacher of painting in the world will be the most unsuitable to teach a group of aspiring carpenters.

Further, the most ancient Indian tradition known to us is - debate. Many Upanishads, Itihasas, and darshanas are propounded as a series of questions and answers between the guru and the shishya.

The reason I take these lofty examples is the fact that as our past glory is repeatedly cited as the reason for many acts and deeds today – I feel that glory needs to be spelt out. That glory was an education system that encouraged questioning, argument, debate and give and take of ideas.

As the students of FTII have questioned, debated and pleaded to bring to attention the fact that the appointment of its governing body has to be transparent and relevant to film teaching and nothing else – they have come up against obstacles. That is natural. But what is not natural is the way they have been portrayed. They have been called names, criminalized, convicted, arrested, with an aim to trivialize and misrepresent.

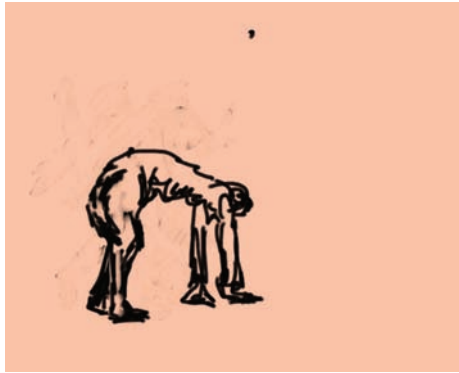
The FTII students are asking for the right gurus. They are asking for the right shiksha parampara. They are not asking for money, or more equipment, or less exams, or quotas, or any privileges. Why should they suffer months of indecision, harassment and stress to go through this? And why should they become criminals when they are protesting against the unfair, the unethical and unprofessional? Every year, the FTII churns out a student who becomes a legend later. Why should we presume that there aren't a few right now in this bunch? And why should we not give their questions the respect now we will give them once they are famous?

Through the return of my award, I want to appeal to the students, teachers and parents of India to pay attention to what the FTII students are saying. If they do, they will know that their contention is far bigger than FTII. What they are protesting against is happening at a much larger scale in educational institutes all over the country. As citizens, students, parents – I appeal to them to become interested custodians of our shiksha parampara – of how we run, govern, and nurture the institutes of excellence that will one day deliver Indians that make us proud.

I also appeal to the sane, fair and unbiased elements amidst the political, executive, legislative, judicial and legal constituents of the Indian society to give this protest a fair hearing and a fair solution.

Through my humble return of this august award, I aim to speak for all Indians who want our classrooms to become true source of learning – and not of mediocrity.

National Award for Best Popular Film
Khosla Ka Ghosla, 2007



Anand Patwardhan

Returning an Award:

National awards have always meant a lot to me. They were more precious than International awards and awards from private institutions precisely they represented those rare moments when the Government of India became willing to uphold the spirit of our secular, socialist and democratic Constitution.

Today this spirit is evaporating. Our nation is at a crossroads. On one side is the secular path that our freedom fighters laid out for us and on the other, the path towards majoritarian fascism that the present regime seems bent upon. I am not saying we are already a fascist state. I am saying that the early warning signs are unmistakable.

It is the duty of all thinking citizens to speak out before it becomes too late. Filmmakers are thinking citizens who cannot look away. When the government attempted to foist unqualified saffron administrators on the FTII, students there went on strike. The strike has lasted an unprecedented 4 months. In this period people from all walks of life began to wake up to the unmistakable reality that the India they knew was on a dangerous new path. The killing of rationalists, the hounding of whistleblowers like Teesta

Setalvad and Sanjiv Bhatt, the denial of justice to victims of religious pogroms and caste based massacres, the emboldening of the religio-lunatic fringe and the impunity of those who kill or advocate killing in the name of religion is accompanied by the wholesale rewriting of history, the denial of scientific enquiry and the consequent production of a generation of dumbed down consumers for whom having an enemy to hate replaces their thirst for knowledge.

So it is with a heavy heart I am returning my very first National award for “Bombay Our City”. Back in 1985 even as we won this award the homes of people I had filmed were demolished. I did not go to receive the award. Instead Vimal Dinkar Hedau whose home in Bandra had just been demolished went to Delhi to receive this award and distributed leaflets about the cause of the homeless. The prize money went to the slumdweller’s movement. Today I am returning the medal.

What do we want from this government? Not much. Just its resignation. Will that happen any time soon? Not likely. What do we want from the people of India? Not much. Just eternal vigilance.

National Award for best Non-Fiction Film
Bombay, Our City, 1984



Ranjan Palit

In Nazi Germany, everybody looked the other way. We will be allowing a similar situation to develop in India if we do the same. Over the years, I have directed ten documentary films and worked as the cameraperson for around a hundred. I have received four National Awards (including one that I won jointly). I'm today returning three of the National Awards in protest. My empathy lies with the agitating students of the Film & Television Institute of India in Pune, where I was a student as well. For months, the students of FTII singlehandedly stood against the saffronization of education and the rising Fascism of the Narendra Modi government. The FTII students were among the first to protest and my solidarity is with them. To me, returning the National Award is significant because it should come across as a slap in the face of the government. And there is no doubt that the current government under Narendra Modi needs to be slapped in the face.

National Film Award, Best Cinematography

In the forest hangs a bridge, 1999

Kaya Poochhe Maya Se, 2004

National Film Award, Best Voice Over

In Camera, 2009



Rakesh Sharma

Why I returned my National Film Award:
An open letter to the President of India

Mananiya Rashtrapatiji,

Some weeks ago, many of us – national film award winners - had written to you on behalf of the film-making community, urging your direct intervention. We never had the courtesy of even an acknowledgement, let alone a considered response either from your office, or from the Government of India, to whom you presumably forwarded our letter.

Since then, the climate of fear and intolerance has only become worse – even those protesting against the brutal killings of writers and intellectuals have been subjected to harassment and intimidation.

Hate and bigotry seem to have become the defining characteristics of our times. A not-so-subtle majoritarian agenda appears to mark the actions (or inaction in some instances) and words of the ruling dispensation – which seems to include not just their Ministers and MPs, but also the emboldened cadres of

the various organizations aligned with, allied to and supportive of the ruling party.

The reign of terror, hate and bigotry unleashed by cadres of the various organizations of this hydra-headed political formulation, now exercising power through the institutions and agencies under direct government control, threatens the very idea of India as envisaged by our Founding Fathers and the countless millions whose sacrifices brought to us Independence and created the Democracy we proudly proclaim as being the world's largest.

Sir, I believe, as per our Constitution, the Prime Minister and his cabinet serve at the pleasure of the President of India. As an anguished citizen, I do wonder why you have not yet dismissed this government for failing to safeguard the right to life - foremost among our constitutionally-guaranteed fundamental rights? I sometimes wonder whether you have formally advised the Prime Minister to sack those of his Ministers who justify barbaric acts by their cadres, or worse, stoke fires and ignite fundamentalist passions rather than ensure peace and harmony.

Sir, I believe India has been shamed in the eyes of the entire world in recent times. During my travels, I'm now asked about the lynching of suspected beef-eaters, about the fundamentalist zealots and their grip over our governments, about the rising brazen crimes against Dalits and women and about the Republic failing to protect its own children. While I try to rigorously defend my country, I do so with a heavy heart, driven to despair by the seeming apathy on the part of most institutions and the major pillars of our Democracy.

As you are the first citizen of India and the foremost custodian of its Constitution, I have looked to you, hoping that you would act promptly, or at least speak directly and bluntly, rather than broadly. I understand that most of the past Rashtrapatis have seen the office as being largely ceremonial, but you, Sir, can and

must intervene directly in a crisis that threatens the Republic itself.

I wonder, Sir, about why you do not exert moral pressure through your High office – after all, if you were to visit Akhlaq’s family or any of the families of other countless victims of senseless - private or institutional - violence or declare a day of mourning and atonement after a heinous incident like the desecration of a recently-buried woman’s body, all citizens would accord it the due importance and consideration a Presidential act warrants.

I’m disappointed and disheartened by the seeming failures of the Executive, the Legislative and at least some parts of the Judiciary in discharging their constitutionally-mandated functions in service of the people of India.

This collective failure and/or a series of resounding silences have now prompted me to return my National Film Award, the recognition by your office of my contribution to cinema.

I hope, Sir, that you take serious note of the deep anguish, dismay and despair that marks this act.

Yours,

Rakesh Sharma

National Award
Final Solution, 2006



Tarun Bhartiya

Today, I wish to return my National Award for Best Editor Non Fiction for *In Camera – Diaries of a Documentary cameraman*, 2009, in protest against the dark times this country is being made to go through. Times are truly dark and one must be honest to say this darkness was in the making for long: it hasn't descended suddenly upon us. There was unease in me even when I took the Award – the Rajat Kamal – in 2009. There was enough to cry about even then. The award itself was an accident, since I never actively sought for the award by submitting the film I had edited for consideration of National Award, since that privilege is always with the producer. But I took the award anyway and even felt some pride. It meant recognition from a peer group, a sign of appreciation of my work from other film makers whose work I admired and had learnt a great deal from - a fraternity to which I belong. Today the unease has grown and examples of the truly greats – the ninety year old Krishna Sobti, for instance – returning their awards gives me a feeling that I don't need to keep mine either.

The destruction of Babri Masjid and the Gujarat genocide are not the only sores that plague this republic. In Kashmir the bul-

lets never stop, the north-east too is an army zone with draconian AFSPA, the State is waging a war against the people in Chhatisgarh. The everyday assault on democratic rights and people's livelihoods, the theft of their resources, the unrelenting violence on Muslims, Dalits, Christians are instances of a process by which the Republic is redefining itself. One cannot escape the realization that one is part of a nation-state that has turned against its own people, and is now rapidly moving to become a Hindutva Reich.

These are not 'aberrations' of Indian Democracy but are being institutionalised into a vision of India supping from the chalice of majoritarian views and opinions.

As a political filmmaker, I can be blamed for waking up too late to these times. Perhaps I was naïve to think that the kinds of film I make, edit, shoot, or direct and the nature of the dissenting politics I have been actively involved in are challenges enough to the nationalist consensus of this and previous Governments. This can no longer be an excuse to hold onto a recognition from the Indian state which on a daily basis makes it clear that dissenting ideas, politics, lifestyles, food choices, choices of whom to love, how to be, will have to be forcibly marshaled into a narrow mainstream. I refuse to be part of any mainstream identity.

Some have told me, why give away that heavy, nice looking silvery medal. Just keep it and continue to do what you do. I am tempted, who doesn't want to keep the bauble. But then you read that another film is being denied the permission to be screened in a festival by the ministry of Information and Broadcasting - the co-ordinating ministry for these national awards - and my acquisitive temptations vanish in anger and irritation and a bit of unparliamentary swearing too.

I wish to leave you with a story from the land where I live and work - The Khasi-Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya. In the Western part of these hills, there is a village of seven households called Domia-

siat. Domiasiat sits atop India's largest Uranium deposits which the Indian State covets. Kong Spelity Lyngdoh Langrin, 90 year old matriarch of Domiasiat, for many years has refused to move away from her land to allow the Indian state to mine the Uranium because she experienced the radio-active pollution created by test mining in the village. She has been offered millions in lease fees by UCIL, but she is happy in her hamlet cultivating tympew and sohmarit. I have been doing a documentary on Uranium mining issues in Meghalaya for sometime. One day when Kong Spelity was tired and complaining, I asked her why doesn't she just give up her land and with the millions being offered to her move away to modern comforts? She looked at me and smiled, "Give up my freedom? Can money buy me the freedom which this land gives?"

And Sir, I want to have my freedom back, unencumbered by any recognition from the Indian state.

National Award for Best Editor (Non Fiction)
In Camera, 2009



Amitabh Chakraborty

With all humility and as a last resort I return my National Award to the nation.

I wish to draw attention to the pogrom that is destroying the FTII. Belief in the Hindu Rashtra is the neo nationalists' war cry. Therefore Gajendra Singh Chauhan, Dr Narendra Pathak, Anagha Ghaisas, Rahul Sholapurkar and Sailesh Gupta. And if you resist them because they are not qualified for their posts, you are anti nationals, you have to be cleansed out of the system. Gajendra and gang have been appointed to clean out the FTII and make it compatible with the Hindu Rashtra. Accept this or else... This is 'muh mein Ram aur bagal mein churi'.

I would like to appeal to the nation. I thought we were voting for development – we would all get rich quick but if I do not commit to the Hindu Rashtra then I am not part of the nation. The word secular in the Constitution has to be replaced by the word 'Hindu'. Only then can we walk this path.

The previous government stole our money and this one will steal our Constitution. Both of them have scammed us. Let us all peacefully stand up to the tyranny of the elected.

Special Jury National Award

Kaal Abhirati, 1990

Best Nonfiction Film

Bishar Blues, 2008

Best Editing Award

Bishar Blues, 2008.



Madhusree Dutta

With a heavy heart I relinquish my three national awards. I am very sad that I have to do it, for these are honours bestowed on me by the nation and adjudged by fellow filmmakers. The National Film Awards of India is a great institution that has acknowledged diverse film practices across genres, languages and scales. I am truly humbled to have received these awards.

The National Award, named after the nation and not the government of the day, has nothing to do with the ideology or control exercised by ruling political parties. It is an award of excellence in the field of creativity and hence it cannot be, even by manipulation, linked with the short-sighted concerns of players in the field of electoral politics and their short-term berths of five years. The National Award is far more durable and perennial. Hence I am not returning my National Award, there is nobody to whom I can return it. I am only relinquishing my claim on it.

I believe I have lost the right to hold such an award. When my fellow citizens do not have the right to food of their choice, when artists of the next generation are denied their right to a decent education, when rational thinking is declared a life-threatening activity, when parochialism and coercion become an alibi

for upholding cultural traditions, I believe that I too have lost the right to an award of excellence.

The National Award is not only an honour but also a responsibility – to work towards upholding the conscience of the country; to fight the dominant forms of social amnesia; to foreground the stories that are being strategically and systematically erased; to enhance the ethos of democracy in order to let creativity bloom; to toil to make this country a little healthier and richer with each film, each poem, each cuisine and each debate. In recent months we have witnessed an erosion of the space from which such initiatives can stem. I believe that the murder of Muhammed Aqlaq, M.M. Kalburgi, Govind Pansare, Narendra Dabholkar and others has substantially tarnished the meaning of such awards that celebrate excellence and critical thought.

Yet, I also believe if we who belong to the community of artists and intellectuals continue to “keep the faith” and work hard, we shall be able to restore the honour of the National Award. We shall be able to bring about a time when all Indians can eat, love, think, debate, campaign and make films the way they want to; and then, the nation will be ready once again to honour excellence among its citizens. Resistance to intolerance is the both crucial and fundamental to bringing about that time of abundant creativity. I hope I shall receive some National Award ‘then’.

National Award for Best Film on a Social Issue
Memories of Fear, 1996

National Award for Best Anthropological Film
Scribbles on Akka, 1991

National Award for Best Film on Culture as Producer
Friend Fish, *Chicken Soup* and *A Premiere Show*



Pradip Krishen

I don't work – or perhaps even think – as a filmmaker any more. But many years ago, someone in their folly or wisdom thought to give National Awards to two of the films I made. Today, in solidarity with the students of the FTII who are being bullied and humiliated into accepting third-rate people to preside over their destinies, I wish to return both these Awards to a Government that is taking this country down several wrong paths.

What is happening to the FTII today is only a symptom of what this government has systematically tried to do with a large number of educational and professional institutions of excellence in India, filling them with their own appointees purely on the basis of their saffron identity.

All across this country, artists and writers and academics have come together to forge this movement of protest. The government says it is 'manufactured' and the work of a small minority that is not in touch with reality. But it will discover soon enough that we are just the tip of the iceberg. A tsunami of resentment and anguish is building up against the tenor and policies of this government. We just happen to be the visible tip of the movement.

People of many different shades of opinion have called for ‘Tolerance.’ This is a sad euphemism for what we should really want and strive for. Do we simply want to “tolerate” our Muslim or Christian brothers and sisters? Of course not! We want a country where religious faith recedes into a private, individual sphere and is not a badge of identity. We wish for a country where we can trust our government to strive for peace and social justice, instead of actively fanning the fires of communal identity (because it believes this will win them elections).

I work today in the sphere of the Environment, where this government’s policies are even more nakedly regressive. In sphere after sphere – forest clearance, wildlife conservation, river-linking, and the various ways in which all these aspects impact forest-dwelling adivasis – we see this government pursuing reckless policies that are crafted to suit the needs and appetites of mining companies and greedy corporates.

I am returning my Awards because I am deeply concerned and ashamed of what this government is doing to this country and to its own people.

National Film Award, Best feature film in English
In which Annie gives it Those Ones, 1988
Electric Moon, 1992



Sanjay Kak

With the recent return of awards that have been given to them by the State a range of writers, poets, scholars, artists and filmmakers have have deployed their visibility – and credibility – to articulate the growing anxiety of a vast number of Indians, those who may remain less visible but are no less perturbed at what is going on around them.

In raising their voices through this symbolic act these Indians have simply done what their work enjoins them to do: join the dots, make the connections, and help us to understand what the meaning of seemingly unconnected incidents may be. It is unnecessary to repeat here the widespread fears triggered by the growing air of majoritarian menace that surrounds us, especially for those the self-appointed majority considers marginal – Muslims, Christians, Dalits, Adivasis. This cancerous fog threatens everything that makes India a place of plurality and difference. Already people have been assassinated for a disagreement with their views. And now with the lynching in Dadri of Mohammad Akhlak, even on a suspicion of what the food in their refrigerator might be.

This fog affects everything: which is why the brave and historic strike by the students of the Film & Television Institute of India has revealed in all its starkness the systematic manner in which educational and research institutions are being bludgeoned under this Government. The disregard with which the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting has dealt with this already enfeebled institution of national importance is very much a part of a hurried attempt to foist a narrow, reactionary and regressive ideology on us all. The ruling dispensation must be told that this will be resisted, for their view of the world does not truly belong to this land.

Through this past year the deathly silence of the Government of India has been broken only to justify or condone these tragic developments, or to trivialise them. Faced with the unprecedented upsurge in public opinion represented by the return of awards, they are now suggesting that this is all part of a well thought out conspiracy. The villain is that old shadow –enemies of the people.

In solidarity with these protests, and in particular to protest at the way the students of the FTII have been treated, I too join my fellow filmmakers in returning the two national awards that I have received. My own belief in the sanctity and meaning of these honours is moderated by the fact that for filmmakers to be even eligible for the National Awards our work must have first been passed by the censors, a colonial era mechanism that has not significantly changed in its essential purpose. No surprise then that this circumscribes the universe of issues on which films can be made if they are to be even acknowledged by the State, let alone be honoured by it.

Thankfully an entire ecosystem of filmmaking and viewing has mushroomed autonomously, and well below the all seeing gaze of the State, which is why we can continue to contemplate making films that carry question about the holy cows of our time

– the sanctity of the nation state, and issues of sexuality and difference, to take just two. The writers, poets, scholars, artists and filmmakers who have raised their voices in protest are being accused of playing politics. Now is the time for them to acknowledge that they are – and this is not an accident, it is what the times are forcing upon all of us. Our politics must now include rising in defence of our right to an India different from the one being pushed down our throats by this Government and its storm-troopers.

National Film Award, Best Non-feature Film

In the forest hangs a bridge, 1999

Best Non-feature film on Social Welfare

Geeli Mitti, 1984



Paresh Kamdar

I am not returning my National Award, I am sacrificing it. I am very anguished by the manner in which the government has been treating FTII and several other Institutions, as well as by the shocking instances of communal violence in the country. I am sacrificing my award to draw attention of the larger society towards this growing crisis and to register my protest.

National Film Award for Best Editing of a Non-Fiction Film
Rasayatra, 1994



Shriprakash

Respected President of India,

I am compelled to return, with a heavy heart, the prestigious National award conferred on me for my film. Government appointing its loyalists for responsible positions of the state and institutes is not a new phenomenon. Against one such appointment the students of the Film and Television Institute of India, Pune have been protesting from nearly 150 days now and their protest has been in the most peaceful and democratic manner. How is one supposed to decipher the silence and indifference of the Government towards this resistance and protest? The people in power, it appears to me, know that the middle and lower middle class students' protest when met by such indifference will lose their patience and possibly be compelled internally and along with external pressure and arm twisting, to take to aggressive methods. This, for which the Government will long, will make it easy for the Government to defame the protest and break it. This method of the state is not new, not unknown. From the battle for the aboriginals and tribals for land, water and forest to the battle of Irom Sharmila all battles of the right against the might have faced the same or similar response from the state.

On the other hand writers and thinkers are being harmed, insulted, humiliated and also brutally killed in this country. Personal and mundane things such as food and clothing are becoming the reason to kill the most common of people by the religious extremists and fanatics. In such an atmosphere of intolerance those in power and the power itself is either silent, irresponsibly, or worse in many occasions in tune and in hand in glove with such anti-social religious extremist forces which are unleashing violence across the country.

In 2004 I had an opportunity to visit Pakistan for a conference in Lahore. At the same time the then President of Pakistan survived a murderous attack. I was asked to leave Pakistan for India immediately. Then I had to travel from Lahore to Karachi alone by train and in that train journey I felt connected to my co-passengers culturally and historically. But the rise of fundamentalism and fanaticism with its flaunting presence in public life was such that I hesitated to reveal my identity to my co-passengers to whom I felt connected, though they said no word which made me feel insecure or alienated. The house in Lahore where I was staying had witnessed four murders by religious extremists because a girl in that family was practicing classical dance. When I crossed the border I felt extremely relieved. But that feeling did not last long for I immediately realized what the condition of living in India must be for the minorities here with the rise of militant Hindutva extremists and fundamentalists.

In the land of Kabir, Gandhi and Bhagat Singh there should be no space for such intolerance and every responsible citizen should resist and fight extremism, fanaticism, intolerance and also the indifference of the state. But it is but natural that the common man in such dark times feels extremely helpless. Yet, the pessimism of the intellect has not overpowered the optimism of the will.

With a heavy heart I am returning the national award that I received for a film which I made with all my heart under difficult circumstances as a mark of protest against intolerant and indifferent society and Government.

National Film Award, Best Film on Social Issues
Buru Garra, 2008



Tapan Bose

Fundamental freedoms, freedom of conscience, freedom of expression, freedom of movement are under serious threat in our country. Never in the history of independent India, were we told what kind of food we may eat and what we cannot eat, what kind of music we may hear and what we cannot, which books we may read or not read. Groups of self-appointed cultural and religious police aligned to the ruling party are roaming the streets intimidating, threatening and killing people with impunity. This murderous spree has been continuing unabated the last 18 months as the government has done virtually nothing to reign in these fanatics. Even more frightening aspect is that several ministers of the central and state governments have been clearly encouraging these street gangs. And now, the Chief of the RSS, the chief mentor of our Prime Minister has asked the government to formulate a population policy to check the growth of the population of people belonging to “non-Bharatiya” religions – meaning Muslims and Christians. Our country has become a dangerous place for Muslims, Christians and all those who believe in freedom and democracy.

Writers, artists, filmmakers, musicians, scientists and business people have been protesting against this violence, the killings and attacks on our freedom. A large number of them have returned the awards that the nation had bestowed on them in the past in recognition of their work. They had done so in the hope that the government would be motivated to take action against the murderers. The ruling party completely failed to recognise the anguish of these people. Instead of taking steps to stop the fanatics, and restore the confidence of the people, the leaders of the government turned against the writers, filmmakers, scientists and artists, blaming them for raising the bogey of intolerance when there was none. Ministers of the government abused the protesting writers, filmmakers, scientists and artists calling them agents of foreign agencies which want to denigrate India. In the latest incident, responding to Shah Rukh Khan's comment that intolerance was a crime against patriotism, a BJP leader suggested Shah Rukh's "soul lives in Pakistan". I am most amazed by Mr. Arun Jaitly's assertion that it is the writers, filmmakers, scientists and artists who were intolerant and there was no intolerance in India. Self-righteousness is a serious disease. It afflicts the victim's vision, hearing and his mental faculties. I hope that he would soon recover from the ailment.

I have decided to join my peers who have been anguished by the spreading culture of intolerance and return the two National Awards that I received for my films during the 80s. The films are, *An Indian Story*, a documentary on the blinding of the under trial prisoners by the police in Bhagalpur during 1979-80 and *Bhopal: Beyond Genocide*, a documentary on the world's biggest industrial disaster which killed nearly 2500 people in 1984 and the victims struggle for justice. Both these films were virtually banned by the governments of the day. We got the censor certificates through lengthy process of litigation. The fact that these two films received the National Awards for "Best Non-Fiction Film" shows

that the members of the National Award jury in those days were free to exercise their judgement and were not afraid of incurring the displeasure of the government. Clearly such freedom does not exist today. I am sure that the jury who awarded these films will appreciate my decision to return these awards as a protest against the failure of the government to end this atmosphere of fear and intolerance. I sincerely hope that the government will take steps to protect the life and liberty of all citizens. A government's failure to protect the life and liberty of citizens raises questions about its legitimacy, and we may soon descend into chaos.

National Film Award, Best Non-feature Film

An Indian Story, 1982

Bhopal – Beyond Genocide, 1987



Arundhati Roy

Although I do not believe that awards are a measure of the work we do, I would like to add the National Award for the Best Screenplay that I won in 1989 to the growing pile of returned awards. Also, I want to make it clear that I am not returning this award because I am “shocked” by what is being called the “growing intolerance” being fostered by the present government.

First of all, “intolerance” is the wrong word to use for the lynching, shooting, burning and mass murder of fellow human beings. Second, we had plenty of advance notice of what lay in store for us—so I cannot claim to be shocked by what has happened after this government was enthusiastically voted into office with an overwhelming majority. Third, these horrific murders are only a symptom of a deeper malaise. Life is hell for the living too. Whole populations—millions of Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims and Christians are being forced to live in terror, unsure of when and from where the assault will come.

Today we live in a country in which, when the thugs and apparatchiks of the New Order talk of “illegal slaughter” they mean the imaginary cow that was killed—not the real man that was murdered. When they talk of taking “evidence for forensic

examination” from the scene of the crime, they mean the food in the fridge, not the body of the lynched man. We say we have “progressed” – 5 November, 2015 but when Dalits are butchered and their children burned alive, which writer today can freely say, like Babasaheb Ambedkar once did that “To the Untouchables, Hinduism is a veritable chamber of horrors,” (Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Volume 9 pg 296) without getting attacked, lynched, shot or jailed? Which writer can write what Saadat Hassan Manto wrote in his “Letter to Uncle Sam”? It doesn’t matter whether we agree or disagree with what is being said. If we do not have the right to speak freely we will turn into a society that suffers from intellectual malnutrition, a nation of fools. Across the subcontinent it has become a race to the bottom—one that the New India has enthusiastically joined. Here too now, censorship has been outsourced to the mob.

I am very pleased to have found (from somewhere way back in my past) a National Award that I can return, because it allows me to be a part of a political movement initiated by writers, filmmakers and academics in this country who have risen up against a kind of ideological viciousness and an assault on our collective IQ that will tear us apart and bury us very deep if we do not stand up to it now. I believe what artists and intellectuals are doing right now is unprecedented and does not have a historical parallel. It is politics by other means. I am so proud to be part of it. And so ashamed of what is going on in this country today.

P.S. For the record, I turned down the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2005 when the Congress was in power. So please spare me that old Congress vs BJP debate. Its gone way beyond all that. Thanks.

National Film Award, Best Screenplay
In which Annie Gives it Those Ones, 1988



Kundan Shah

This is the only National award I have for Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron and I feel very very sad to part with it. I owe this award to my alma mater i.e. FTII – there would've been no JBDY if I had not studied at FTII. The gesture, the act, the protest is primarily for the appointment of an inappropriate person as the Chairman of FTII and some 3-4 members appointed on the Governing Council. We've raised the protest several times during 139 days of the FTII strike but the government has failed to listen to reason – many nationally and internationally have joined in this protest including Noem Chomsky.

Is Gajendra Chauvan the right choice? This appointment is an insult to our intelligence and standing by this choice is kind of a slap on the thinking populace of this country. I want to ask the bureaucrats at the Broadcasting Ministry, the Minister of the State Mr Rathore and Minister Mr Arun Jaitley – what face can they show to their family, their children when they make and stand by such an appointment to a very prestigious institute? The appointment of 3-4 other members on the Governing Council suggests thirsting and forcing upon students a different ideology – in fact, this is a part of a larger design of this ideology to take over the

cultural, educational and various other institutions of our country.

This is not a protest against BJP only – we’ve protested through our works, JBDY, films and serials against the Congress government too. In fact, one of our serials “Police Station” got banned in 1985 with the remark “Incendiary” by Doordarshan. BJP has a majority and mandate from the people of India to be in government – all stratas and classes of our society of haves and have-nots have voted them to power – but they’ve been voted for development and alleviation of poverty and suffering of the people – not to push their agendas which will take the country to doom and darkness and where everyone’s freedom will be threatened.

The victory of AAP winning 67 out of 70 seats is a historical event – not only nationally but internation-ally. It will be a mistake to think that this victory belongs to AAP, it belongs to the people – the Hindus, the Muslims, the Sikhs and all others who voted them to power. Arvind Kejriwal was labeled “Bhagoda”, they were brandished day and night on television and other media and made to be the laughing stock and yet the people rewarded them with 67 seats – why? Because AAP admitted to its mistakes and to deliver on all their promises if a mandate was given to them again. – THERE’S A BIG LESSON FOR ALL OF US IN THIS FEAT. Let Mr Modi genuinely try to achieve all his schemes for the development by taking the opposition and the populace “Mann Ki Baat” se “Development ki Baat” and confide to them their problems and their difficulties and they will get overwhelming support. Everyone knows there is going to be no overnight change – but they want an honest government working for the populace than for the crony capitalists. Recently when CAG declared the electric cos in Delhi were truly overcharging the consumers, why the BJP at Centre has kept quiet? Why it has not backed this govt report and initiated such reports in other cit-

ies? Stop favoring our Corporates who are the real draculas – the blood suckers. Instead of trickle down theory let's try trickle up theory – we've already missed the bus of "Make in India" where China has a lead of 2 and a half decades. (PPP or PPPP as per PM Modi has failed according to Naik CEO of L&T – reference his article in TOI or Economic Times) But are there not other ways to development and progress? Let's invite fresh minds, many economists and many out of the box thinkers like me who have wonderful ideas of taking India forward with a GDP growth which is only possible in our dreams.

National Award
Jaane Bhi Do Yaaron, 1984



Devi Prasad Mishra and Jyotika

“We, Devi Prasad Mishra and Jyotika, have decided to return our National Award for the best documentary on social issues for the year 2008.

“We have done so to register our protest against (i) the appointment of people of anti-modern and parochial mindset in the Films Censor Board and FTII, (ii) the serious assaults on the freedom of expression, rationalism and rational thinkers, (iii) alarming rise in social polarisation and religious intolerance, and (iv) the systematic attempts to re-write the history by the communalists.”

National Award for the best documentary on a social issue
The Female Nude, 2008



Naresh Saxena

I am returning my National Award as a Film Director which I got for my short film *Sambandh* in 1991 at National Film Festival, New Delhi by the then President of India. I liked and loved this award as it underlined my another dimension as a film maker because till then I was known as a Hindi poet, I still respect the award and the jury who selected for their special mention award. But It has become necessary to be able to stand with numerous Scientists, Writers, Historians and Artistes who have also returned their awards.

Also want to underline the fact that I had opposed emergency enacted by Mrs. Indira Gandhi and also the treatment meted out to Tasleema Nasreen by CPM and I do not belong to any political party.

This is to express my anguish against the creation of a climate of communal violence and chain of murders of innocent people like Mohd. Akhalaq of Dadri and prominent persons of scientific temper like Kalburgi, Pansare and Dabholkar for their creative activities to suppress superstition, it is also to oppose the climate of intolerance and rejection of reasons against which Kalburgi and Pansare were fighting.

I am unable to understand the irresponsible statements of the Government and its selective silence in such sensitive situation.

Special Mention by the Jury for a short film
Sambandh, 1991



For a government that's impervious to FTII protest,
a warning from 1968 France
Aspi Mistry

September 19, 2015 *scroll.in*

Of course, that's how life is. A turn of events may seem very small at the time it's happening, but you never really know, do you? How can you? – Tom Xavier, *Dark Curses and Faerie Dreams*

It happens all the time. But it never fails to surprise us. For me these reflections began a few weeks back when I saw Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Dreamers*. How serendipitously the dots seemed to connect the present with the past.

Bertolucci's film is set in the Paris of 1968, and begins with the agitations around the abrupt removal of the director of the Cinémathèque Française, the now-legendary Henri Langlois. The struggle was for his reinstatement and for the removal of a man named Pierre Barbin. Barbin was an obscure and relatively inexperienced film-festival organiser, and Langlois was a culture hero even in the eyes of his adversaries.

This agitation in February 1968, which had the support of the world's greatest film-makers, including Satyajit Ray, was the first shot fired across the bow of the Fifth Republic of France. It culminated in the larger student and trade union protests of May 1968 and the brief "exile" of President Charles de Gaulle, who fled from what seemed to be a revolution in the offing.

But I am getting ahead of myself. As I watched *The Dreamers* and saw the parallels with the agitation at the Film and Television Institute of India in Pune, I was at first reluctant to put it down. The hunger strikes at the FTII had not begun, and a committee from the Information and Broadcasting Ministry had met with the striking students. It seemed at some point the government would back down. I decided to wait for a bit.

But as the agitation reaches its 100th day on Saturday, the analogy doesn't seem so stretched. And so this might be a good point to pause and do a recap of the FTII story.

A students' movement

The students of FTII have been on an indefinite strike since June 12, protesting against the Information and Broadcasting Ministry's appointment of actor-politician Gajendra Chauhan as the institute's chairman. The pinnacle of his career, according to him, is that he played Yudhisthira in the TV series *Mahabharata*. That was 25 years ago. Since then he has appeared in numerous television soaps and several "B" grade Bollywood films, which many describe as soft-porn.

Apart from this, the students are also protesting the appointments of four of the eight members of the reconstituted FTII panel. These include Anagha Ghaisas, who has made several documentary films about Prime Minister Narendra Modi; Narendra Pathak, a former president of the Maharashtra Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad; Pranjal Saikia, an office bearer of a Rashtriya

Swayamsevak Sangh-linked organisation; and Rahul Solapurkar, who is intimately associated with the Bharatiya Janata Party.

However, as Voltaire had warned, “It is dangerous to be right in matters on which the established authorities are wrong.”

On July 17, Prashant Pathrabe, the former director of the National Film Archive of India, was appointed as the new director of FTII. Matters truly came to a head after that. On August 3, as many as 30 students were asked to vacate their hostel rooms. The administration set a six-day deadline for students of the 2008 batch to finish their pending films. This, despite the protests of the faculty, and it being well known that the blame for the delay in the projects lay with the administration.

When their voices were not heard, a month later on August 17, nearly 50 students gheraoed the director and kept him confined in his office. The next day, acting on a complaint by Pathrabe alleging that the students had menaced and threatened him, the police arrived on campus around midnight with an arrest warrant for 15 students.

On September 10, three students went on an indefinite hunger strike, and as their health deteriorated, they were hospitalised one by one, the third one on September 14.

From September 14, students from various educational establishments have been participating in token hunger strikes in solidarity with the agitating students of FTII. Students of the Jadavpur University, Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute, Presidency University and Calcutta Medical College launched a six-hour hunger strike at the Jadavpur University campus.

Now that the cops have had their party, raiding and arresting students at midnight, and the students are on a fast unto death, while the government maintains a deathly silence, the story of the Cinémathèque Française might be worth retelling.

The Cinémathèque movement

Are films more important than life?" asks Jean-Pierre Leaud (who plays the immature, spoiled and needy Alphonse) in *Day for Night*, François Truffaut's loving tribute to filmmaking. For Truffaut the answer was in the affirmative.

The film of tomorrow will not be directed by civil servants of the camera, but by artists for whom shooting a film constitutes a wonderful and thrilling adventure... – François Truffaut in *Art* (1957)

The retelling is necessary, not least of all, as a tribute to the courageous students of FTII, who seem to have grasped the significance of cinema in the life of a liberal, civil society. Though it is debatable whether society understands its debt to cinema.

Gaston Roberge, often described as the "father of film studies in India", has a wonderful description of this phenomenon in his classic book on film appreciation, Chitra Bani:

Films are the collective dream of society. They provide society with mythologies or patterns of behaviour. Contemporary films do not necessarily convey the entire mythology of the present time. However...most people today respond in one way or another to the dream-like fantasies projected on the screen. For these fantasies relate to various areas of human life: war, politics, sex and violence, death, conscience, and the future of man.

In the spring of 1968, all these fantasies came together on the streets of Paris. It began as a protest by film-makers, students, film lovers, and the public at large demanding the reinstatement of Henri Langlois as the director of the Cinémathèque Française, but the movement grew into a popular revolt involving all sections of society.

The Cinémathèque Française holds one of the largest archives of films, movie documents and film-related objects in the world. Langlois had acquired one of the largest collections in the world for it by the beginning of World War II, only to have it near-

ly wiped out by the German authorities in occupied France, who ordered the destruction of all films made prior to 1937. He and his friends smuggled large numbers of documents and films out to protect them until the end of the war.

And he was, after his own fashion, an artist – a collector and curator with the temperament of a poet. Jean-Luc Godard, one of many French New Wave directors for whom Langlois's Cinémathèque Française served as clubhouse and film school, declared that Langlois, who never shot a frame, was a great maker of movies. This was because, in Mr. Godard's apt words, Langlois 'produced a new way of seeing movies.' – AO Scott in *The New York Times*

But Andre Malraux, who was then the Culture Minister, and an artistic icon in his own right, had his own way of seeing things. Along with the Gaullist cabinet, he wanted to convert this "film school" into a national institution, but failed to carry with him Langlois and his colleagues. Administration was not one of Malraux's many talents. In a ham-handed manner, the organisation was taken over, and within 24 hours the locks were changed and Barbin installed as director.

Within (the same) twenty-four hours, forty filmmakers, including Gance, François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Jean Renoir, and Robert Bresson, had withdrawn permission for their films to be shown at what was soon referred to as the Barbinothèque. They were quickly joined by dozens more, including Charlie Chaplin, Roberto Rossellini, Fritz Lang, Richard Lester, Carl Dreyer, Orson Welles, and Jerry Lewis. On Wednesday, a crowd of three thousand showed up at the Trocadéro, in front of the Palais de Chaillot. The demonstration was broken up by a police charge, leaving a number of people slightly wounded, including Truffaut, Godard, and Bernard Tavernier. – Louis Menand in *The New Yorker*

As the protests spread across other institutions, universities and factories, there were violent clashes with the police, barricades across Paris, firebombs, and an all-pervasive belief that the day of revolution had arrived.

As international support grew for the Cinémathèque movement, there was a call for the boycott of the Cannes Film Festival that was to be held later:

The Information and Action Assembly of the French Cinema, bringing together on May 17, 1968 more than a thousand professionals at the National School of Photography and Cinema on the rue Vaugirard, occupied by its students since May 15, asks that all directors, producers, distributors, actors, journalists and jury members at Cannes, in collaboration with their foreign colleagues and by the means proper to them, oppose the continuation of the Festival so as to show their solidarity with the striking workers and students, to protest against police repression, and to express their determination to contest Gaullist power and the current structures of the film industry.

Barbin, of course refused to step down (which sounds familiar), but finally engineered his own downfall when he made the absurd demand that “a copy of every film distributed in France be donated to the Cinémathèque, at a cost of a million francs (about a thousand dollars today). Immediately, the head of the Motion Picture Export Association of America, Frederick Gronich, informed the French government that not only would no prints of American movies be deposited at the Cinémathèque until Langlois was reinstated but all prints already on deposit must be returned within twenty-four hours. Barbin was advised to back down”.

With the intervention of influential persons who exercised financial clout with the Gaullist government, Henri Langlois was finally reinstated.

The world in darkness

In the *Mahabharata*, in order to bring his dead brothers back to life, Yudhisthira has to answer the Yaksha’s questions and must get all of them right.

Yaksha: *What is the most amazing thing in the world?*

Yudhisthira: *The most amazing thing in the world is that even though every day one sees countless living entities dying, he still acts and thinks as if he will live forever.*

These are words that should haunt our latter-day Yudhisthira. They will help him and his patrons remember and reflect on the impermanence of all phenomena. After all, Yudhisthira stands for duty and righteousness. He is also known as Dharmaraja, and he is the son of the god Dharma. Unfortunately, his rulers in Delhi prefer to emulate the blind king Dhritarashtra's wife Gandhari. Dhritarashtra was born blind, but Gandhari bound her own eyes with a cloth, determined to see the world as her husband saw it, with darkness.

The writer is the coordinator and founder member of the Dharma Rain Centre for Buddhist Studies.



Going hungry under the wisdom tree

Samrat Chakrabarti

From *The Hindu*, October 28, 2015

Every campus has a special spot. It's usually an in-between kind of place, undesignated and seemingly without a purpose, but to which students invariably gravitate when there is not much happening. It's a place to rendezvous and converse, complain and gossip, daydream and make plans. In time, as generations of students come and go, the accumulated weight of human memory lends this place a mythical quality. It becomes a symbol, and it is to this symbol that students turn when they, as a community, are faced with a crisis. In the Film and Television Institute of India, this place is a tree. The students call it 'The Wisdom Tree.'

Finding myself under the Wisdom Tree one afternoon, in search of answers to the FTII crisis, I run into batchmates and friends Swapnil Ninawe and Gyan Gaurav. They are both Direction students from the now infamous 2008 batch.

It is common for film schools around the world to have delayed graduates since the final year project, usually a lengthy diploma film, is susceptible to inordinate delays. But in FTII, a paucity of infrastructure and equipment means numerous work-

flow bottlenecks, that need little to get out of hand. Hence, it takes routinely five years to fully graduate from the three year FTII course. In the case of the 2008 batch, it has taken a record seven and counting. It's no surprise then, that these two share an easy camaraderie forged over many seasons of tea and conversation; and in sitting down with them in the leafy glade of the FTII canteen, I've caught them in their natural habitat.

Protests that doesn't seem to end

Now in its fifth month, the strike that began on June 11 continues despite protest marches and public meetings, ministry talks, and midnight raids.

Forced to open a dialogue with the students recently, the Information and Broadcasting Ministry seems largely to have used the talks as a delaying tactic, counting on the strike to end out of student fatigue. The latest meeting on October 20 has left the students feeling 'dejected' and convinced of the 'callous nature of the government' towards FTII.

Meanwhile, 12 students are facing arrest after their anticipatory bail was rejected by a lower court on the charges of forcibly confining and 'mentally torturing' the institute's director, Prashant Pathrabe. The students have now resolved to continue their strike and pressurise the government by taking their protest to the International Film Festival of India — organised by the I&B Ministry — in Goa next month.

The day before I met with Gyan and Swapnil, this strike was described to me by faculty member and alumnus, Lalit Tewari, as the 'mother of all FTII strikes'. "Never before have they so directly fought the state and its cultural agenda," he had said. What has kept this going?

“Everyone is sacrificing something. It’s that willingness to sacrifice, be it time or money or opportunity, that has fuelled this into going ahead,” says Swapnil.

Gyan says, “There is a lot at stake for people here. But somehow they believe that what they are doing is beyond just themselves. That this needs to be protected and if we don’t question now, we will lose this place.”

The nation is by now abreast of the basic facts. We know that the student strike began in response to the appointment, as the Chairman of the institute, of Gajendra Chauhan; known to TV audiences as the actor who played the embodiment of wisdom, Yudhishtir, in B.R. Chopra’s ‘90s epic Mahabharatha, and to single-screen theatre, soft-porn audiences as the protagonist of films such as *Khuli Khidki*, which Wikipedia describes as “the story of an (sic) handsome chap and his masculine instincts that brings atomy (sic) changes in him after his love relationship.”

We also know that in selecting him as chairman of FTII and sticking to the decision, the I&B Ministry is steadfastly defending his place in the same cohort as R.K. Laxman, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Girish Karnad, Mrinal Sen, and U.R. Ananthamurthy.

We have also learnt subsequently that the student strike is not just about Mr. Chauhan’s appointment, but actually a set of them Anagha Ghaisas, Narendra Pathak, Pranjal Saikia and Rahul Solapurkar, who have been nominated to the reconstituted, eight-member FTII society and who, were their appointments to go through, will have much say in matters both administrative and academic at the premier film institute. If you hadn’t heard of them before, you weren’t alone. Neither had the film fraternity.

We’ve learnt for instance that Anagha Ghaisas, a RSS loyalist and documentary film maker whose filmography includes *Shri Narendra Modi - Gatha Asamanya Netrutva Ki* (A Tale of

Extraordinary Leadership), has had to suffer the embarrassment of a court observation which said [she] does not have technical knowledge regarding making of a film and even does not know the difference between fiction and documentary.”

We’ve also for instance learnt about Narendra Pathak, whose nomination under the ‘person of eminence’ category seemingly rests on his past work as the chief of the Maharashtra unit of Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad and whose previous known connection with FTII comes from when the ABVP thrashed FTII students during his tenure because they were about to screen *Jai Bheem Comrade* -- a film about contemporary Dalit activism against caste injustice.

Incidentally, in the kind irony that only real life can produce, the ABVP violence on that day was directed not just at the FTII students, but also members of the Dalit cultural group Kabir Kala Manch (KKM), whom you may have heard of because of the Marathi film *Court* -- which, according to many, may be our best effort in decades, at winning the foreign language film category at the Oscars this time around. KKM provided the inspiration for *Court*, which is a film about how voices of dissent are silenced in our country.

I ask Swapnil how his parents reacted to the strike. “Don’t get too involved. Stay on the periphery.” That was their initial advice to him, Swapnil says. What changed their minds was the treatment of the students at the hands of the administration and the police. “It was so uncalled for. One night they are watching a Marathi news channel and Anagha Ghaisas comes on and says that all these students need is a good beating. That we need to be taught a lesson. Who talks like this?” What parents failed to understand was why their kids were being branded as anti-nationals. What’s so threatening about a bunch of film students that they attract police action, they asked in public forums.

Support for the students have often come from unlikely sources. Like the two people who offered them emergency housing when they were facing the prospect of being turned out of the campus. One, a nun and former FTII aspirant who offered them church facilities. The second, the son of a former security guard who on the instructions of his father turned up at a press conference to offer the students a couple of rooms at his chawl. Support has also come from the more quotidian sources closer to the campus; like the local tapri owner who offered the students muscle support if the police came calling at midnight again, or the panwala who bought up dozens of copies of Outlook Magazine (when it featured a cover story on the strike) to inform his customers about the issue.

Swapnil and Gyan tell me the story of Rakesh Shukla, a direction and screenplay student from the 2009 batch. Shuklaji, as the 36-year-old is known on campus, broke his arm during the Delhi protest march when he tripped over the bandobast rope on Parliament Street following a crowd surge from behind. Later, under general anaesthesia on the operating table, this former UPSC aspirant from Behrai in UP, who finds inspiration in Ritwik Ghatak's mis-en-scènes, puzzled the surgeon operating on him. Throughout the three-hour operation the semi-conscious Shukla-ji, kept muttering 'Ghatak-Ghatak' like a mantra. "And the surgeon, he is like who is Ghatak? So it's explained to him that Shuklaji is a film student and a hardcore Ritwik Ghatak fan and so he learns about the whole FTII issue and about the protests. As a result, the surgeon gets him a discount on the plates that are inserted (to mend the broken arm) and so instead of the Rs. 30,000, Shuklaji had to pay only Rs. 18,000. Stories like these have happened with all of us." says Swapnil.

The importance of this support, for the students, lies not in their materiality but rather in the spirit in which it is offered. Empathy from strangers who are not stakeholders in the strike, has

added to the psychological resources of the students. It validates their cause and tells them that they are not alone in this fight.

The birth of a strike at GBM

The General Body Meeting is the fundamental democratic process within the student body. It is through a GBM that they deal with issues that concern them on the campus. Anyone can call one and the attendance may range from a few people to technically the entire student body. The elected representatives act primarily as moderators. They have no veto powers and cannot act unilaterally.

The issues that these GBMs typically deal with are the kind of quotidian concerns common to campuses anywhere; from solving a stray dog menace to improving the mess food. Once in a while, it may even include something bigger, like a campaign against the cutting down of trees on campus. In each case, the basic principle of these meetings is to build consensus before a plan of action is implemented. If fundamental differences of opinion remain, then the issue carries over into future meetings until a consensus is reached.

These GBMs, which were a small part of the FTII students' life, has over the past four months, transformed entirely by becoming the heart and conscience of a resistance. It is here, over meetings routinely lasting several hours and attended by large numbers, that the students have built consensus over the strike. It also became the place where they reaffirmed each other and their cause.

One in particular stands out. Swapnil recalls the meeting conducted by Fareeda Mehta, film director and FTII alumnus, in the week after the meeting with Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley. "She said forget strategy and all that. Just each one speak about what he or she holds dear about this institute. Why this

issue bothers them and how it affects them. There were over 80 people in that GBM. Everyone spoke. People we've never heard speak in a public forum spoke. There were issues of language. People were falling short of words. People had tears rolling down their cheeks. But everyone came forward and spoke. It was like everyone was opening their hearts up. This happened for 14 hours and everyone stayed put and listened."

If the GBM provided the heart, the hands provided the voice. If you were to walk into FTII today you would see that the campus — from its walls to its roads — have been turned into a powerful canvas of protest. From graffiti and paintings, to wall murals and sculptures, art came to provide the expressive force of the protest on campus.

Despite strike, students continue to learn

Gyan recalls the observation Sambhaji Bhagat, the Dalit activist and balladeer, made about the protest art during his visit to the campus, "He said 'it's so beautiful to come and see you guys paint and colour and write. You guys have a powerful tool. I have seen students agitating in commerce and science colleges, and at some point they will say, what now? To which someone will say lets throw stones or something.' They don't necessarily know how to translate their anger into something constructive. We didn't either before we came here."

During the strike, with the classes at a halt, the students decided to keep themselves occupied in other ways. Lectures and seminars. Poetry and music. Film screenings under the Wisdom Tree. And workshops. Lots of workshops. Including one conducted by a doctor from the Institute of Naturopathy, who lectured the students on fasting; how to prepare the body for it, the scientific benefits of it, the socio-cultural history of it and Gandhi's thoughts on it. This in preparation for the hunger strike. "By the end of it,

everyone was so charged up that by evening it became common to hear people say ‘I’m not eating in the mess. I have started eating fruits and drinking lots of water,’ says Swapnil laughing.

Swapnil says that the experience of the strike has in his mind recast the larger societal role of the filmmaker as a court jester — who through his art and humour, talks truth to power. But talking truth to power takes courage. Aren’t the students afraid? Gyan says, “It’s not like we are not afraid. We are afraid. When we were in Delhi and we were facing 200 cops, I was scared. I was at the rope. I knew that the first blow will be on me. I was very scared, but I had to do it.”

What is it really, that these students are fighting for?

Despite all the media coverage the FTII strike has got, the nation has still been left with a few questions. Like, who are these students really? Is it simply that FTII catalyses an environment that produces rebels without much of a cause? Is this strike one such example of it? In a sentence, what is it really, that these students are fighting for?

FTII’s quirky admission process reproduces India’s cultural heterogeneity on campus. The process is agnostic of language proficiency of any kind, least of all English. It does not believe in relevant experience either. You could be applying at age 40 after having spent the last 15 years being a doctor, say. If anything, that only makes you interesting. The result is that homogeneity of any kind, whether class or culture or training, is banished right at the gate. The hostel rooming policy consciously avoids sameness of specialisation and background. Swapnil says it is very common to find mismatched roommates, say for example a Malayali editing student living with a cinematography student from Bhopal. “Now imagine. The Mallu guy can’t speak Hindi and the northerner can’t speak Malayalam and they both know only rudimentary Eng-

lish. By the third year, they'll be the best of friends." It happens all the time, he says.

Add to this the fact that the first year has the common foundational course in which everyone learns everything. From editing to cinematography to direction, the foundational component, critical to the holistic pedagogical approach of FTII, (the defence of which has itself been the source of protests in the mid-90s) is designed to produce a fully-rounded film maker.

The reason, according to Ajithkumar B and Rajeev Ravi – both national award winners as editor and cinematographer respectively – that FTII produces the best technical specialists in the industry; someone like, say, a Resool Pookutty. It's a tight schedule that keeps the first-years busy from 10 am to 10 pm. It's the year where you are made to dive off the deep end, and the most baffling component of your day comes at the very end with what is called the General Screenings.

Every evening during the academic year, the campus holds film viewings that are open to everyone on campus, and are mandatory for the first years. Over the course of a year, the students are exposed to every kind of cinematic form and visual grammar that has found expression in the medium from the time of its invention; across time and film cultures, from the better known to the obscure, these include films only a serious film scholar would know. And because the medium is cinema, the exposure is not just to the full expressive range of an art form, but also to its anthropological content – the way people live and see the world across cultures and at different times in history.

Picture then the combined effect of all of this on the Hindi-only speaking boy, who since his day began has had to communicate with his Malayali roommate through hand signals, followed by a day's worth of a multi-variable technical course, who now at the end of that day, is struggling to catch the fast moving Eng-

lish subtitles of an obscure Hungarian film. In a visual language completely alien to his Bollywood sensibility and set in a socio-cultural context that is far removed from his native town, just off the national highway on the outskirts of Bhopal. Imagine this happening to him every night over a year. “His worldview until then has been cocooned. He comes here and learns of a larger world and the walls in his mind therefore break down,” says Rупак Das, ex-student and until recently, direction faculty at FTII. What breaks down is also any previous monochromatic renderings of the world and what is gained is a de-centering of one’s own perspective. Gyan says, “When you come here, you come with your own baggage. You think you are a hot-shot because you got into the nation’s premier film institute. But instead you are humbled. You learn that you are nothing. That you know nothing of the world.”

The combined experiences of this first year, act like an anthropological intervention. You gain perspective and in the hole that remains, where once your own convictions stood, is the space made for the next phase of your learning — an experimentation with your own identity. Faculty member Lalit says, “the critical engagement with cinema begins in the second year. That’s when the larger political engagement with the world begins. The zeitgeist of the place enters them and they begin piecing together the socio-cultural context of the cinema they have just seen.” Says Swapnil, “we finish learning how a film is made in the first year. But (learning) how do you see this world? How do you look at things? Discovering that aberration in your lens that lets you perceive events in your universe in a certain way, that becomes the most important learning.”

By this time the only mode left to the student is to question and find the answers for himself. “The greatest threat you can be is when you start questioning yourself. Most of the time we question others. We ask, how dare you raise your voice instead of

stopping to think and question ourselves and giving the person a benefit of doubt. We are not taught to entertain doubt by our education system,” says Gyan. But they learn it here and through that seeding of doubt they begin to find the aberration in their lens. Says Lalit, “The striking students here are trying to find their socio-political vision. Where they stand vis-a-vis their own identity and voices and artistic vision. At any given time, roughly half the students are in this state.”

This well established zeitgeist of FTII is located in the need to question, debate and recognize the plurality of human experience. It has been passed on from seniors to juniors, across generations. Every protest and strike in FTII, since the first one in 1968, over issues big and small, has at some fundamental level a concern with protecting this ethic. Says Rupak, “the students are bound together by a collective dream. It seeps into the consciousness here. FTII pass-outs become the cinematic conscience of this country. It’s something they can’t help. And they have also always been the moral keepers and guardians of FTII. This place is our ghar, sasural and ma, altogether.”

The creative expression that has come out of the strike, is not merely the listing of demands and the declaration of resolve. The graffitied walls and the banners also wear totems of a larger idea of art and its place in a society. Take for instance the white banner seen in so many news pictures of the protest, which in red lettering states ‘we shall fight, we shall win’ under the names ‘John, Ghatak, Tarkovsky’.

These are three legendary film makers who serve as symbols not just for their cinematic accomplishments, but also because their individual lives essayed a larger role for cinema in a society; as a tool for socio-political engagement through the voicing of social truths and marginalised experiences.

The students see this in the Bengali director Ritwik Ghatak's 1960 film *Meghe Dhaka Tara* set in a refugee camp outside Calcutta with the Partition of Bengal as a backdrop. They see this in the Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky's 1962 film, *Ivan's Childhood* about a 12-year-old orphan caught in the midst of the Second World War. And they see it, perhaps most poignantly, in Malayali director John Abraham's *Amma Ariyan*. A gold medalist from FTII who, along with his friends, travelled door-to-door, from village-to-village, performing plays on street corners and to beating drums raising money for a 'people's cinema', that sought to be free of the limitations imposed by the needs of the box-office. The result was Abraham's greatest (and last) film that rewrote the then established conventions of cinema – *Amma Ariyan*; about the incidents following the death of a young Naxalite, upon whose demise his friends travel back to his village, to inform his mother of the death of her only son.

Why do we need an FTII?

When the question is asked, as it was this time, and as it has been increasingly asked since the market imperative entered our collective consciousness in 1991, about whether the government should be spending our money on a film institute such as the FTII? In order to answer it, we must decide first on another related question. What role do we see in our society for the artist beyond the terms of reference provided us by commerce and industry? Because FTII is in essence an art school, as opposed that is to a trade school. It is built around the idea that cinema is an art form and that it must be engaged with as such, in order to produce artists who happen to work in the cinematic medium. Artists. As opposed to technicians.

The difference is an important one. A technician is a specialist whose training need not go beyond the technical aspects of

his craft. A technician concerns himself with only the 'how' of his craft. An artist on the other hand is a more troublesome objective. For her the questions proliferate beyond the 'how' to the more expansive 'what' and the 'why'. The training needs a more holistic and deeper engagement - with the craft, with the world, and ultimately with the self, to produce an individual, resolute in her individuality, tooled with a larger vision, both for herself and the world that she inhabits.

FTII does this for its students. It is the reason why they fight so hard to protect it. Because the fact is that despite its tortuous and innumerable problems, FTII still remains a place where anyone, from anywhere, regardless of the size of their pocket and what they did before, can come and find themselves.

It is certainly true of Swapnil who was a well paid area manager for Indian Oil, who decided in his late 20s that he needed more from life and now, having spent more than 7 years in FTII and with his struggle as a nameless film director just beginning, can feel nothing but gratitude for the place.

It is true of Gyan, who ran away from home to come to FTII to find the social engagement he didn't find in economics. And it is true of the 26-year-old Abhijeet Khuman, a TV student from Gujarat and a former social media campaigner for Modi, who felt the need to serve in the hunger strike because scripting a bar conversation between Osho and a Jihadi, that no one in his class quite understood, was more fulfilling than his engineering degree.

At a time when difference — of culture, faith, food — is being met increasingly with violence instead of debate, the need for the above becomes even more urgent. How then should we respond to the students of FTII, who having found themselves caught in a cultural war not of their own making, responded in the only way they know how - with the art of questioning and

debate? How do we value those among us who stand up and question under the Wisdom Tree?

As the Ghatak fan Shuklaji says, “We need to question. This is such a time that the need is to question. Through the medium of our art, through the medium of ourselves, till such time as we can.”



Ramachandra Guha on FTII protest and closing of the Indian mind

Shortly after the UPA came to power in 2004, a senior Cabinet minister took a senior journalist out for lunch in Delhi. The directorship of a prestigious centre of historical research had fallen vacant; and the minister wanted suggestions as to suitable candidates. The first name the journalist offered was mine. “Guha has written critically about Indiraji,” said the minister, “we can’t have him”.

The journalist next suggested the name of the distinguished political theorist Partha Chatterjee. “Chatterjee has written critically about Jawaharlalji,” said the minister, “so we can’t have him either”. The journalist now prudently shifted the conversation to other subjects.

The anecdote is worth recalling for two reasons. The first is that contrary to the impression Congressmen may now convey, academic appointments during the UPA regime were often influenced by political considerations. The second (and less important) reason is that whatever their other deficiencies, some Congress ministers read scholarly books, if only to sniff out heresies about the First Family.

At least since the time of Indira Gandhi, the Central government has sought to undermine the autonomy of institutions that promote culture and scholarship. Two Congress education ministers were particularly culpable: Nurul Hasan and Arjun Singh, both of whom cultivated and promoted scholars of a Marxist or socialist persuasion.

Hasan and Singh may not have chosen the best, but at the same time they stayed away from the worst. What is new about the appointments made by this NDA regime is that they have chosen individuals held in contempt by their fellow professionals. The most egregious examples may be those of Y Sudershan Rao, a chairperson of the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR) whose publications are unknown to historians; and Gajendra Chauhan, a chairperson of the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII) who is likewise far from being regarded as a leader in his field.

Between 1998 and 2004, the first NDA regime was in power. It packed the governing councils of academic bodies with RSS sympathisers. On the other hand, when it came to the most important post, that of chairperson, it paid at least some attention to scholarly credentials. Thus, AB Vajpayee's government appointed the historian of ancient India, GC Pande, chairman of the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies in Shimla, while the historian of modern India, MGS Narayanan, served as chairman of the ICHR. Meanwhile, the diplomat-turned-academic ML Sondhi was chosen chairman of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR).

That none of these three scholars were Marxists, and at least two had publicly confronted Marxists, was perhaps not incidental to their appointments. But other criteria were also at play. For both Pande and Narayanan were serious and well regarded schol-

ars. And Sondhi was a senior professor in the country's best department of international studies.

Move further back in time, to the United Front government in which HD Deve Gowdawas prime minister and SR Bommai HRD minister. This regime chose S Settar chairman of the ICHR and D Nanjundappa chairman of the ICSSR. Again, the fact that these scholars were from Karnataka, the state to which the HRD minister and the prime minister also belonged, may not have been a coincidence. At the same time, no one could deny that professor Settar had done pioneering work on Hoysala temples, or that professor Nanjundappa was a celebrated teacher actively involved in public policy.

This brief survey leads to three broad conclusions. First, that nepotism and patronage have been endemic in academic or cultural appointments in the gift of the Government of India. Second, that while previous governments have not been shy of using ideological criteria, they have at least sought to seek people of credibility. Third, that this present NDA regime has abandoned the pretence of credibility altogether.

This last quality (if it may be called that) is evident in the two appointments mentioned earlier, and of a third; that of Baldev Sharma as chairman of the National Book Trust. Apart from having edited the RSS mouthpiece, Panchajanya, Mr Sharma's contributions to either literature or scholarship lie unrecorded.

Consider, on the other hand, the names of some past chairmen of NBT. They include the historian Sarvepalli Gopal, the critic Sukumar Azhikode, and the novelist UR Ananathamurty. All were left-of-centre politically, yet all had written books that were widely read, discussed, and debated.

To head bodies like the ICHR, ICSSR, FTII or NBT, one requires (a) to have the respect of one's professional peers; (b) to be a competent and fair-minded administrator. It is in the first,

crucial, respect that the appointments of Sudershan Rao, Gajendra Chauhan and Baldev Sharma so manifestly fall short. Even if all are good human beings and good administrators, they remain (to put it politely) professionally under-qualified for the jobs assigned to them.

The appointments made by the current NDA regime are far worse than those made under NDA Mark I. Why is this so? One reason may be that while Mr Vajpayee's government had some ministers with connections to scholars and scholarship, the present government has none. A second reason may be that as chief minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi had little respect for intellectual or cultural creativity, and this has now been transferred to the Central government. A third reason may be that the Prime Minister has left this space entirely to the RSS, so that it does not trespass on his pet subjects, the economy and foreign policy.

Whatever the reasons, the fact is that the present government despises writers, scholars, artists and filmmakers. That is the melancholy but inevitable conclusion one must draw from the choices it has made in these fields.

<http://www.hindustantimes.com/ramachandraguha/some-thoughts-on-the-closing-of-the-indian-mind/article1-1370821.aspx>

