

Ban of India's Daughter and other films silences debate on key issues

By **Bob Dietz/Asia Program Coordinator**



A poster advertises a screening of *Timbuktu* at the Pan-African Film Festival in Burkina Faso. The Oscar-nominated film on Islamic militancy was barred from a Paris suburb. (AFP/Ahmed Ouoba)

What do Delhi, Beijing, and Villiers-sur-Marne have in common, but Ouagadougou does not? The first three recently banned access to films their governments deemed inappropriate. But a film festival in the fourth, the capital of Burkina Faso in West Africa, is stepping up security to show an acclaimed but controversial movie about Islamic militancy in neighboring Mali.

In Delhi, the BBC documentary "**India's Daughter**" has been ordered off **Indian media** by the national government, which also ordered the BBC not to air it in India. The reasons vary depending on which official deigns to hold forth on the matter, but the underlying motive, at least from here, looks like concern for India's international image as a place where rape is too taboo a subject to be discussed frankly and openly. Disappointing for a country that claims to be the world's most populous democracy,

but CPJ research shows that outright **anti-media policies** are on the rise under the Modi government. It is worth noting that the **Editors Guild of India** called for the government to lift the ban. After the BBC aired it in the U.K. on March 4 and it became available quickly on **YouTube**, the government reacted angrily, promising investigations into whether "norms have been violated" in the making of the documentary, **the BBC said**.

Not so surprising as the India ban is the *Wall Street Journal* piece reporting that a documentary about air pollution has apparently been barred in parts of China. **Pollution Documentary Pulled From Chinese Websites**: Viewers trying to watch 'Under the Dome' saw error messages, broken links, the *Journal* headlined. "Under the Dome" dealt with something much of China's population has to deal with every day--toxic levels of air pollution. A former China Central Television reporter, Chai Jing, said she produced the film on her own initiative after having to deal with her daughter's poor health and the compromises they had to make to keep her indoors and healthy. The *Journal* reported that the video had more than 100 million views before it was pulled down this week from major video sites run by Chinese multimedia companies Youku Tudou and Tencent Holdings, as well as the website of the *People's Daily Communist Party* and others. Maybe the real question here is why the government would allow it to be distributed in the first place, given the **strict media controls** that began falling into place after President Xi Jinping came to power in 2012.

On to the Parisian suburb of Villiers-sur-Marne where, shortly after the attacks in the city in January, Mayor Jacques-Alain Benisti stopped the screening of the 2015 Oscar foreign language film nominee "**Timbuktu**" citing safety reasons, despite it having played in **many theaters in France**, according to **news reports**. Villiers-sur-Marne is where **Hayat Boumeddiene**, the wife of an extremist who shot a police officer and four others during his siege of a Kosher supermarket outside of Paris in January, was from.

And now to Burkina Faso, where the Panafrican Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou will show "Timbuktu" **today** despite security fears, **Agence France-Presse reported**. The country's Culture Minister Jean-Claude Dioma said security will be stepped up when the movie by Mauritanian director Abderrahmane Sissako is shown. The film depicts the lives of those living in Timbuktu after militant Islamist groups took over northern Mali in 2012. And even though the militants are at times portrayed sympathetically, it is sure to aggravate some of the groups. A full review of the film, **A Movie That Dares to Humanize Jihadists**, is in *The New Yorker*.

India in South Asia doesn't want to have a public discussion about rape. In Northeast Asia, China's government is worried that it is losing control of the public discussion of one of the major public health hazards its population faces--the air it breathes. In France, a European bastion of free speech traumatized by January's attacks on the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in which 12 people, including eight journalists were shot dead, and a killing spree in a Jewish supermarket, local leaders backed away from a frank portrayal of Islamic militancy.

But in West Africa's Burkina Faso, **just emerging from a dictatorship**, film festival organizers take a risk, tough it out, step up security, and show the film. And well they should. "Timbuktu" won the **2015 César awards** in Paris for best picture and six other categories. "India's Daughter", ostensibly not available in India, is frank and moving. "Under the Dome," told by a mother moved by the plight of her daughter, dares to tackle a problem that is shortening the lives of people in China.

It doesn't make a difference where or what kind of government you're dealing with-- it is easy to ban media, no matter how legitimate and important the topic. A ban takes pressure off governments for not dealing with demanding issues such as public attitudes toward rape or deadly air pollution. And in a French suburb, an artistic portrayal of the reality of militancy was set aside, reportedly in an attempt to avoid riling public sentiment or attracting the wrath of militants. Banning media in any form is not just India's problem, it's not just China's or France's. It is a global problem.

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