

## A Dissent on “Fire”\*

The video copies of Deepa Mehta’s “Fire” available for rental in video stores in the United States since January prominently announce on the back: “Banned in India.” The fact is it was *never* banned. Except for Delhi and Mumbai, where its screenings stopped after two violent demonstrations, “Fire” continued to be shown in several major towns in India, including Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh where the Bharatiya Janata Party has ruled since December 1997. I saw it there in a packed hall two weeks after the trouble in Delhi on December 4, 1998. In fact, it ran in Lucknow for many more weeks, four shows daily, with an average of 80% attendance much of the time. But the American distributor knows what will sell the film locally, and so does his Indian counterpart. According to the *Times of India* of February 24, 1999, the Indian distributor, J. Sughand, carried out the changes “suggested by Mr. Thackeray,” and the film was to be screened again “from Friday onward.” (Unfortunately, the report did not indicate what changes were “suggested” by the Shiv Sena leader.) Another report in *India Abroad* (March 19) indicates that the Censor Board, after reviewing the film, again did not ask for any cuts. Notwithstanding all this, I have no doubt that the film’s videotapes will soon be available for purchase at a discount here in the United States, still proclaiming: “Banned in India.”

Mehta’s film was much written about in December and January, mainly with reference to the two protests against it in Delhi and Mumbai by people who described themselves as defenders of Hindu/Indian religion and morality, and who condemned the film for showing two Hindu women become lesbian lovers. The press identified the protesters, mostly women, mainly as members of Shiv Sena, a rightwing group politically allied with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party but also engaged—at the time of the protests—in a tussle with it for power and bounty in Mumbai and Delhi. (Bajrang Dal, a sister organization to BJP and the other group mentioned in the news in connection with the protests, likewise felt itself being marginalised by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpeyee and his particular supporters within the Hindu Nationalist political family generally referred to as the “Sangh Parivar”.) Before the protests, there had been the usual reviews and notices, all, to my knowledge, laudatory. They particularly praised the film for presenting female homoerotic feelings on the Indian screen for the first time. None found anything wrong even in the manner those feelings had been packaged. Then the two protests three weeks later turned the film into a liberal cause. The dual projects of defending artistic freedom and countering the self-appointed protectors of Hindu family and culture claimed all the energies of progressive commentators and activists in India and the diasporic Indian media in the United States.

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Now that some time has passed and the film is back on Indian screens—that is what counted then and also counts now—a dissent on the film itself, I hope, might not be unwelcome. My comments below are arranged under three headings: (1) the audience of the film and its reactions to it during the viewing I attended at Lucknow; (2) the film, and its alleged main concern, lesbianism; and (3) the protests against the film, and the reactions to the protests.

### **The Audience**

As will become clear in my subsequent comments on the film itself, it is important to bring quite explicitly into any discussion of “Fire” the Indian audiences of the film and their actual or possible reactions to it. I saw “Fire” in December in Lucknow. It was in its sixth week of release in a large movie house in the best part of the city, with four daily shows. I went to the first show, at 1 PM. The cheapest ticket cost fifteen rupees, the most expensive forty. Nevertheless, *all* sections of the hall were almost entirely full.

I sat in the balcony, in the ‘best’ seats. There were quite a few women there, all seemingly accompanied by men. A few couples as they came in were loaded with bags and bundles of purchases. One couple in their thirties came in carrying suitcases, as if they had broken their journey just to see the film. No woman was dressed in jeans, though many men were. I couldn’t be sure if there were as many women downstairs too. From where I sat I could see only the cheapest, front section below, and that seemed to be an all male crowd.

Once the movie started it soon became clear that there were many in the audience, particularly on the main floor, who had come a second time. As commonly happens in India, or at least in North Indian movie houses, the audience frequently anticipated the narrative by making loud comments and by noisily jeering or cheering some still unfolding scene. (These loud vocal responses were by no means restricted to the ‘lower’, i.e. cheaper, sections.) As I jotted down soon after, the jeers were mainly aimed at the pastoral memory bits and the two ‘unmanly’ husbands who couldn’t ‘control’ and ‘satisfy’ their respective wives—more particularly at the older brother when he discovered the two women in bed but didn’t physically assault them, as the audience noisily urged him to do, or when he visited his swami mentor and massaged his leg, at which time some in the audience loudly expressed their desire to do unmentionable things to both men. The cheers, equally loud, came for the servant’s masturbation scenes and the assault by the younger brother on his wife, and also when the two women separately denied intimacy to their respective husbands. (See below.)

Clearly a great many men in the audience found much sexual excitement and voyeuristic pleasure in the film, which they expressed with exuberance. At the same time, I heard no comment, either during the screening or while coming out of the theatre, that could be called a denunciation of the film itself. It was clear that a good time was had by all, that everyone’s expectations had been well met.

No doubt one shouldn’t draw too many inferences from what happened at one screening, but an awareness of what transpired at that occasion would help the reader understand my response to the film. Secondly, it is also important to put on record my impressions of that one audience because several defenders of the film made a point to report that, at Delhi showings, no catcalls and voyeuristic giggles, “even from the frontbenchers,” were to be heard. Obviously the matter of audience response is of some significance. To my mind, it directly relates to a number of critical issues. How can one be

explicit in representing sexuality without the representation being seen as pornography? What is the social context in India of a film that tries to do that for lesbianism? Equally importantly, for my particular purpose here, what is the 'filmic' context of such a film there? How will such a film be 'read' by an audience accustomed by years of Bollywood Hindi films to having its expectations met in certain ways?

### **The Film**

I must begin by stating that the film grabbed my interest from the beginning and held it all the way through, primarily due to the superb performances of Shabana Azmi and Kulbhushan Kharbanda. Azmi, with her amazingly expressive eyes, again uses silences to delineate more subtleties of feelings than any dialogue ever can—I kept thinking of her role in "Ankur". Kharbanda, whose task is the more difficult because he must work against the sympathies of the audience, is equally riveting as he communicates through speech and body language a tragically faulted but complex personality. The younger actors in the ensemble also hold their own in such demanding company. Deepa Mehta, the director, must be congratulated for enabling out these performances.

The film's story deals with a middle class Hindu family in Delhi, living perhaps in Karol Bagh or Lajpat Nagar. The family consists of two brothers, their mother, their wives, and one male servant. The brothers own a fast food place, above which they live. The younger brother also runs a video rental business on the side. In other words, the folks have both property and money, but they are not the 'modern' kind who would have moved to a fancier housing colony. Their lives revolve around the business—though the men do have outside interests, the wives work in the food store, as does the servant/cook, and do not venture away from home on their own.

All is not well, however. The older brother, Ashok (Kharbanda), has been married to Radha (Azmi) for several years, but they don't have a child because Radha has "no eggs in her ovary". As a result, Ashok has submerged himself entirely in a kind of personal-devotional religion. He is being 'good' in his own way—he has not sent Radha back to her parents, nor has he taken another wife, but the couple no longer have sex. The brothers' mother lives with them, but she is an invalid—though alert to the world around her, she can neither move nor talk. The servant, who lives with the family and who is not allowed any time away from it, is often asked to take care of the mother by himself, at which times he watches pornographic videos—the younger brother keeps them in his collection to rent to school boys—and even masturbates in the mother's full view. As the film opens, the younger brother, Jatin (Jaaved Jaffrey), who is infatuated with a Chinese-Indian girl, has just married Sita (Nandita Das)—she is named Neeta only in the Hindi version—but he utterly neglects his lovely wife on their honeymoon in Agra. Their marriage is consummated—it is more like a rape—only later in Delhi. Thus, what appears as a 'respectable' and 'normal' middle class family is in fact seething with sexual frustration.

The focus on Sita continues in the second sequence, when the honeymooners return to the family home in Delhi. After the men leave, Sita goes into her and Jatin's bedroom. There she puts on Jatin's jeans and dances wildly to western music until Radha knocks on the door and gently rebukes her. Thus by the end of this sequence we have rather forcibly been told that Sita speaks English, can wear jeans and dance to rock music, and knows about sex though still a virgin.

Here it may be important to remember that Mehta, a resident of Canada, originally made the film in English, and only subsequently dubbed it into Hindi. There is a certain problem inherent in such a process. When the language of a film set in India is English, watching the various characters interact solely in English requires from the audience, a suspension of certain expectations of ‘realism’. In which case, the odd Hindi word or phrase thrown into the English acts only to create a semblance of linguistic realism, *without any reference to social categories*. In other words, the Hindi mixing with English enhances realism in terms of the Indianness of its characters, and not in terms of their class origins, education, or cultural orientation and values. On the other hand, given the status and prevalence of English in India, a radically different effect is produced when English words, phrases, or short sentences are thrown in with realistic Hindi dialogue. Now the English tidbits indicate status, ‘modernity’ and ‘Westernness’—another well-known convention in Hindi films. Consequently, the ease with which Sita uses English only adds to her being perceived by an Indian audience as a ‘modern’ girl.

This impression is enhanced by what happens in the most explicitly sexual scene in the film, the very first physical contact between the two women. Radha comes to a distraught Sita, and tries to be consoling by assuring Sita that things would soon work out between her and Jatin. Sita replies, “No, it’s not that.” Then she leans forward and kisses Radha full on the lips. What are we to conclude? Evidently Sita has already been attracted to Radha. She understands her own homoerotic feelings and is not surprised by them. In other words, she knows about lesbian love. That, in the English version of the film, would imply to its audience in the West that she was married against her wishes, in fact against her sexual orientation, while to the audience of the Hindi version she would only appear more negatively ‘modern’—she knows about ‘these things’ too. These twin images of her are further confirmed when she alone repeatedly initiates physical contact, eventually bringing about the final crisis. In another scene, Sita puts on western *male* clothing to dance with Radha, which not only affirms this perspective but also underscores her ‘manly’ role in the relationship as perceived by the writer-director.

Thus in terms of the established markers in Hindi cinema, Sita is no innocent soul; she, in fact, is a ‘modern’ or ‘westernized’ girl, who, according to the convention, can be at best a misguided person and at worst an evil vamp. Further, in terms of the rules of expectations in popular Hindi films, she comes into a ‘decent’ family and, true to her screen image, destroys its precariously held balance once her own sexuality is denied by her husband.

To my mind, therefore, the Hindi film “Fire”—yes, the Hindi version retains the English title—projects two, and only two, conclusions about lesbianism:

1. Female homoeroticism is ‘caused’ by a denial of women’s natural heterosexual desires—i.e. a sexually denied heterosexual female becomes a lesbian. That was also the curious message in the Urdu story, “The Quilt,” by Ismat Chughtai, which has been much translated and uncritically anthologised as perhaps the first modern Indian story on this subject, and which was quite ignorantly mentioned by at least one newsmagazine writer as the film’s source (*Outlook*, December 14, 1998).

2. Lesbian love is a ‘Western’ thing—girls who speak English, wear jeans and dance to rock music are more likely to be so inclined than a girl who is ‘truly Indian’.

In other words, on the issue of causality, the film simply reinforces the general belief that homosexuality is not natural, that it has social, not biological, causes, and that given

proper education and environment, it can be ‘cured’ by any worthy member of the opposite sex. The latter was exactly the sentiment expressed by several members of the audience in Lucknow when the two wives refused to have sex with their husbands; the hecklers denounced the husbands as ‘weaklings’, and loudly proclaimed their own sexual prowess and physical endowment. This, of course, is one of the favourite themes in pornographic writings in Hindi, where often a ‘well-endowed’ heterosexual hero ‘cures’ coeds and neighborhood girls of this ‘unnatural’ habit. It has a long history too. In Urdu, Sa’adat Yar Khan Rangin had his hero do the same in a late eighteenth century poem.

My second problem with this film is in regard to its reinforcement of some of the prevailing and not so pleasant concepts of ‘manliness’ and ‘Indianness’.

Jatin neglects his dusky Indian wife because he is infatuated with a fair-skinned Chinese girl, who has no desire to marry him—she hates joint families, and she wants to work in Hong Kong films. She also has a brother who hates India. In a scene in a Chinese restaurant, the brother makes several denigrating statements about India and Indians. Jatin listens silently and does nothing. To an Indian audience, he thus proves himself once again to be ‘impotent’ or ‘unmanly’. (His refusal/inability to make love to Sita on their honeymoon; the eventual, quite embarrassing consummation of their marriage; his failure to control the Chinese girl—these are the other several ‘unmanly’ things that Jatin does.) The ‘westernised’ Chinese girl, who practices ‘free love’, thus becomes a second negative female in the film, reinforcing all the existing prejudices. One fails to understand why Deepa Mehta chose to introduce these Chinese-Indians in her film. Was she unable to conceive of a ‘regular’ Indian girl having an affair with another Indian? Bear in mind that strong anti-Chinese sentiments have existed in India since 1962, when Indian army lost to the Chinese in the Himalayas and much harm was done to the local Chinese in Calcutta and elsewhere.

And what is one to make of the servant? His life is very lonely and very hard. He works in the shop and in the house, just like the two wives. And like them, he too does not get any chance to get out into the larger world. In fact, he is more house-bound than the wives; he must take care of the invalid mother when they go on shopping trips and such. So he passes time watching sexy videos and masturbating in Ma-ji’s presence. Is he just another despicable male, or is he an exploited human being? Or is there a parallel suggested here between him and the two women: they are all exploited and rendered sexually frustrated by the two brothers.

Perhaps the idea is to suggest a profounder parallelism, that between class-based and gender-based oppressions, and the sadly frequent inability of the victims of the one to stand in solidarity with the victims of the other. Perhaps. Such easy profundity is also attempted at (1) by bringing in several disparate cultural ‘texts’ in the form of *ram lila*, *katha*, and *qawwali*, which are supposed to be metaphoric adjuncts to the film’s main narrative in an attempt to raise it beyond the story of two contemporary women; (2) by naming the two wives Sita and Radha, and by linking the elder brother’s religiosity with his denial of Radha’s sexual feelings—he starts on his devotional path when he learns that Radha cannot bear him a child; (3) by naming the film “Fire” and making repeated references to the ordeal-by-fire that the Sita of Ramayana had to undergo due to the societal concerns of her divine husband, Rama; and (4) by situating the union of the two women at the end of the film at a brightly lit but empty shrine of the great 13-14th century sufi saint, Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya.

The last, I must confess, refused to reveal its purpose to me until I read Shohini Ghosh's "From the frying pan to the Fire" in *Communalism Combat*, of January 1999. Ghosh teaches Video & Television Production at the distinguished Mass Communications Research Centre, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, and her article originally appeared in the *Journal of the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies*, Simla. According to her: "Radha and Sita are reunited at the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin famed for his intense and homoerotic bond with the legendary poet Amir Khusro. The film ends with the women in embrace within this symbolic space." (And here I had thought that the Chishti saint was actually famous for his piety, and that people, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, went to his shrine to seek his miraculous help.)

This last 'profundity', however, is the more egregious; it not only terribly distorts Sufism, it sets up a totally false and possibly dangerous dichotomy between Hinduism and Sufism/Islam. The former becomes all cold, unfeeling and hypocritical; the latter all warm and caring. Perhaps, as another Shohini Ghosh might declare, Deepa Mehta meant the initial visit to the Muslim sufi shrine and the final meeting in it to be a secular 'intervention', an anti-communal gesture. In that case, I'm afraid, Mehta seems to have ended up merely communalising her own otherwise valid critique of Indian masculinity—and for nothing. As everyone knows, Islamic patriarchy is no less oppressive of women than the Hindu version. Mehta's need to find an alternate 'symbolic space' for the two lovers could have been more properly served if she had looked into some of the Bhakti and other devotional traditions available within the umbrella of Hinduism.

### **The Protests**

When the film was presented to the Censor Board of India, they made only one suggestion: change the name of the younger woman in the Hindi version, from Sita to Neeta. That the English version, however, was allowed to be shown in India without any alteration is clear from the review by Nikhat Kazmi which appeared in the *Times of India* of November 15, 1998, in which she repeatedly referred to the character played by Nandita Das as 'Sita'. The two attacks by the Shiv Sena men and women occurred on December 4, three weeks later. The screenings in Delhi and Mumbai immediately stopped, but continued elsewhere—even when the film was sent back to the Censor board for a second look. The movie, no doubt, was released in a limited manner, as is the case with off-beat movies in India, but more extensively than had been the case, say, with the movies of the New Indian Cinema earlier. It was simultaneously released in many major cities all over India and was screened four times each day of the week—those earlier 'new' movies were mostly shown once a day, in special morning screenings, and hardly ever in several cities at the same time.

The charge against the film came down to two counts: (1) its alleged promotion of lesbian love, and (2) its alleged attack on Hindu faith by naming the two women Sita and Radha. Bal Thackeray, the Shiv Sena supremo, while denying that he instigated the demonstrations, thundered: "Lesbianism is not Indian." He then asked: why were the women named Radha and Sita, and not Saira and Shabana? (The reference being to Shabana Azmi and to Saira Bano, the actress wife of Dilip Kumar (Yusuf Khan)—Kumar had demanded judicial action against the violent protesters—both belonging to the Muslim community.) To my best understanding, the Shiv Sena-led attacks in Mumbai and in Delhi, where they were supported by Bajrang Dal, were primarily political

moves—a way to flex their muscles—aimed against the BJP, with which both were having problems at the time. It was their way to appear ‘holier’ than the BJP and be openly threatening at the same time.

Most of the defenders of the film, however, followed the lead set by the protesters and pitted their own version of Hindu culture against Shiv Sena’s and Bajrang Dal’s. According to the defenders, lesbian love was as ‘Indian’ as Kama Sutra, Khajuraho, and Sanskrit court poetry. Hardly any considered the issue in terms of the human condition, that homosexuals, male and female, could be as helpless and normal in their desire and orientation as any so-called ‘normal’ heterosexual. Perhaps that’s why at least one lesbian activist group in Delhi called “Ekangi” is reported to have stayed away from taking a public position on the film.

Most importantly, something else got excluded in the noisy defence of the film as a bold statement on lesbianism, namely the all too pervasive violence against women in India. Only one example will suffice to make the point. The same week that every national newspaper carried opinion pieces and numerous letters on the film and its detractors, only the Lucknow edition of *The Pioneer* published the news that truly represented the anti-women agenda of the Hindutva brigade and its democratic facade, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party. It seems that one of the very first things that the BJP government in U.P., led by Kalyan Singh, did after coming to power in December 1997 was to abolish the State Women Commission set up by the previous government just four months earlier. Since then, the paper reported, the rate of crimes against women had sharply increased. Between January 1 and August 31, 1998, there were 1468 registered cases of ‘dowry deaths’, 929 cases of rapes, and 1817 cases of abduction. As to the ‘Final Reports’ on these cases, the figures were 64, 45, and 286 respectively. Not necessarily to be fair to Kalyan Singh but to fully understand the size of the problem, the figures for these three categories in full years of 1995 and 1996 were 1747 and 1883, 1582 and 1574, and 2099 and 2225 respectively. It is these horrors, these massacres, that have to be concentrated upon. It is these we must protest ceaselessly and stop at any cost.

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