

The conflict between the desire for freedom and backward religious traditions

Deepa Mehta speaks with WSWS

By Richard Phillips
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*India-born director Deepa Mehta spoke with World Socialist Web Site journalist Richard Phillips during a recent visit to Australia to promote *Water*, her latest film. As the accompanying links explain, production of the movie began in India six years ago but was shelved following a vicious political campaign by right-wing Hindu extremists. The film was completed last year and premiered at the 2005 Toronto Film Festival. It is currently screening in several countries, including the US, Canada and Australia, with others to follow.*

Richard Phillips: Firstly, let me congratulate you on finally completing the movie. It certainly is an important exposure of the plight of Indian widows and the sort of social values currently espoused by the Hindu extremists. What has been the response?



Deepa Mehta: Thanks. We have been knocked out by the reaction, especially in Canada where it is the highest grossing foreign language movie in English-speaking Canada. This is hard to get used to, especially given all the political hysteria we endured.

RP: Did you expect this reaction?

DP: No, not on this scale. In India my father was a film distributor, so I learnt from an early age that this is a strange industry and almost impossible to predict. Naturally you always hope that your work will reach people but this response has been tremendous.

RP: Six years on, what impact did shelving the film have on you artistically and do you think there has been a change in the political climate?

DM: In some ways I think the situation is getting worse for artists. Attacks on democratic rights are going on everywhere but there are also filmmakers speaking out and some good movies like *Syriana*, *Good Night, And Good Luck* and *Munich*—which reflect this. That someone like Spielberg made *Munich* certainly indicates a change.

RP: That's true, but what impact did the Hindu fundamentalists' campaign have on you artistically?

DM: It depends what you mean. When the BJP state government in

Uttar Pradesh shut down the film I was very isolated.

We had some supporters in India but, as I explained to you at the time, it stopped being about *Water* and became part of a political agenda of the fundamentalists that was aimed, not only against me but anyone that was speaking out against their cultural policies.

Although you knew it was a tiny group of right-wing troublemakers and not the majority, it was confusing and at times frightening. When you and the WSWS came along it was support that I sorely needed, not just intellectually, but on an emotional level. This sort of assistance, and from half way across the world, was very encouraging and I was extremely grateful for it.

But I decided to put aside *Water* and did two other films—*Hollywood Bollywood* and *Republic of Love*, which were romantic musical comedies and great fun to do. I wanted something completely irreverent and different.

I told myself that I couldn't make *Water* until I stopped being angry and that took four years. I was definitely going to make the movie, there was no doubt in my mind about that, but I couldn't impose my anger on the script. So the other films helped me in many ways—on an emotional level and a professional level—and when I look back it prepared me to resume making *Water*.

RP: Did you make any script changes?

DM: No, but I'd changed. My take on the characters and the amount of dialogue and the way I wanted to shoot certain scenes was different. And of course the actors were changed.

The young girl originally planned was now 12- or 13-years old. Kalyini was to be played by Nandita Das, who is strong character, but I wanted someone more vulnerable. Lisa Ray was more the type I wanted. Shabana Azmi was also to play the role of Shakuntala but I decided that I wanted a far more earthy character and the best choice for that Seema Biswas and someone I've always wanted to work with. She was tremendous.

RP: And Sarala, the young girl?

DM: We found her in Sri Lanka. She comes from a small hamlet just outside Galle, which is south of Colombo. I'd met a lot of young girls in India but most of them had acting experience and even those who didn't were very much influenced by Bollywood. They had all sorts of misconceptions about how the lines should be delivered. All the emotions and everything else in from Bollywood framework are generally over the top, cranked up, and that's not what we needed.

We visited schools in Sri Lanka and had someone tape a lot of girls. This is how we found Sarala. She came for an audition and the minute I saw her I knew she was what we needed.

RP: She doesn't speak Hindi. Did that make it difficult?

DM: No. In fact, it was a blessing in disguise. Although she didn't have many lines she was told exactly what she and others were saying and how to react. Once we got over that hurdle she was tremendous and a real actress. Of course, there were minor adjustments—a little bit more, a little bit less, no Bollywood—and she was fine.

RP: Were special security measures required in Sri Lanka?

DM: No. We had very good local people and they hired "anti-publicists", which meant that hardly anyone knew the movie was being made. Actors were told not to provide any details on what they were doing or give interviews and the movie had a completely different title. Someone came up with the name River Moon and so we used that.

RP: What led you to this story?

DM: I was first exposed to a widows' ashram during the nineties while I was shooting one of the *Young Indiana Jones* television segments in Varanasi. It was early in the morning and I saw an old widow, about 80-years old, bent over like a shrimp and wearing a one-piece sari cloth.

She was quite blind and had dropped her glasses. I helped her find them and took her back to the ashram where she lived. This was my first exposure to the institutionalisation of widows and was shocked by what I saw and promised myself that at some point in my life I'd do a film about their plight.

When a woman's husband dies then she really only has half a life. She really has to wait around for her own death in order to rejoin him. So widows have to live as ascetics and deny themselves all the things that a normal human should have. I've tried to show this in the film.

RP: What is the current situation facing widows?

DM: Well the ashrams are still there with quite a number in Varanasi and other places. There are no child widows anymore and young women widows don't have to shave off their hair in the ashrams.

There is opposition, of course, to the oppression of widows but it's very much on a grass-roots level. For widows to have any lasting gains there has to be economic independence and an atmosphere that gives them confidence that if they leave they will not be denounced as bad Hindus.

RP: What is the central issue you want people will take from the movie?

DM: The kernel for me is the movie's exploration of the difference between conscience and faith. People must listen to and be honest with themselves rather than accept intolerant ideologies which are at odds with their moral conscience and the realities of life.

RP: What impact do you think the film will have in India?

DM: I don't know. To wipe out two thousand years of imposed training is difficult and obviously won't just happen with a film. *Fire*, *Earth* and *Water* were essentially about the conflict between the desire for independence and freedom and religious tradition, or at least the most backward forms of these traditions. If I've made some progress in that direction then I'm satisfied.

India has changed to some extent since the BJP lost the elections and there is a Congress government. It is now hailed as a nuclear power, software giant and there is Bollywood, and the big corporations are moving in to take advantage of the cheap labour. I find this all pretty scary because although there are Indians who will make a lot of money it is not going to trickle down and change anything much for those at the bottom. Those without education won't benefit and it won't bring clean water and proper facilities.

Bush was recently on the cover of *Newsweek* with a headline saying something like "India Rising". But what does all this mean and where will it end? Is a country defined by how many cars it has or how much nuclear power, millionaires or high-priced nightclubs. They ignored us for years and now suddenly the US government is becoming very cosy. Why?

RP: When you made *Earth*, which was before September 11 and the so-called war on terror, you were attempting to explain the consequences of nationalism and sectarianism. How do you see the situation today?

DM: Obviously it's much more serious than the issues I faced with *Water* but fundamentalism is on the rise everywhere, it's not just an Indian question. Look at the US right now—the Christian fundamentalists are right up there in the White House. I'm very concerned about what's going on.

The power of religion, when it is used for personal or political benefit is extremely destructive. This is the most potent tool that politicians have to divide people and pursue their aims. They talk about germ warfare but this is the real germ warfare we face and its being unleashed by politicians around the world everyday.

RP: How should filmmakers respond to this?

DM: Films are very powerful tools and should be used for the good of the majority although I'm not sure that they can change all the things we would like—that's a much more complicated process. But they can challenge people to think and help to push back some of the superstition and ignorance.

If filmmakers have clout, whether its Spielberg, Clooney or whoever it is, they should use their skills to entertain and educate and present another point of view from that of the mass media or governments.

RP: Your next project?

DM: My next movie is called *Exclusion* and I'm sure you'll be fascinated with the subject.

It's a true story and is about a group of Indians—Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims—who attempted to immigrate to Canada. They arrived in 1914 traveling on a Japanese coal ship called the Kamagata Maru but like many before them were barred by the racist immigration policies. They then mounted a legal action to try and get asylum. It lasted two months, they lost and they were sent back to India.

When they disembarked at Calcutta the British army opened fire and killed most of them. One of the survivors eventually went back to Canada and shot an immigration officer responsible for barring the group. It's an incredible story.

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