

Now that the heat generated by *Fire* has cooled down and the Shiv Sena's antics have backfired on them, it is time to take stock of the film. Had I said one critical word about it while the controversy was raging, I might have been damned forever as a Hindu fundamentalist. Now that I have already passed my *agnipariksha* by defending, in public, the right of Deepa Mehta to screen such a film in India without threat of violence from the lunatic guardians of Hindu morality, I want to take the debate beyond the issue of censorship.

If I had seen Deepa Mehta's *Fire* without first being subjected to the whole barrage of propagandist hype surrounding it, I would have simply dismissed it as a naive and boring film about two unhappy housewives compelled to seek emotional and sexual satisfaction from each other because their husbands provide none. The film depicts the growing friendship and eventual sexual intimacy between Radha and Sita, married to two brothers who are living in a joint family. The laboured attempt to exploit the lesbian aspects of the Radha-Sita relationship to the neglect of other aspects of their lives is both immature and schematic, indicating that the director lacks an understanding of family life and emotional bonds in India.

Most amazing of all, even the sex scenes between the two women were dull and insipid. It was almost like watching two Egyptian mummies presented in a series of tableaux. It does indeed require special genius to transform love-making into such a lifeless act and yet sell the film as a hot, sensuous and radical statement on women's sexuality. One of my aunts made a rather perceptive comment after having yawned all the way through it: "Normally film directors add sex for titillation. In this film, the sex scenes are amazingly boring.

## Naive Outpourings of a Self-Hating Indian

Deepa Mehta's *Fire*

○ Madhu Kishwar

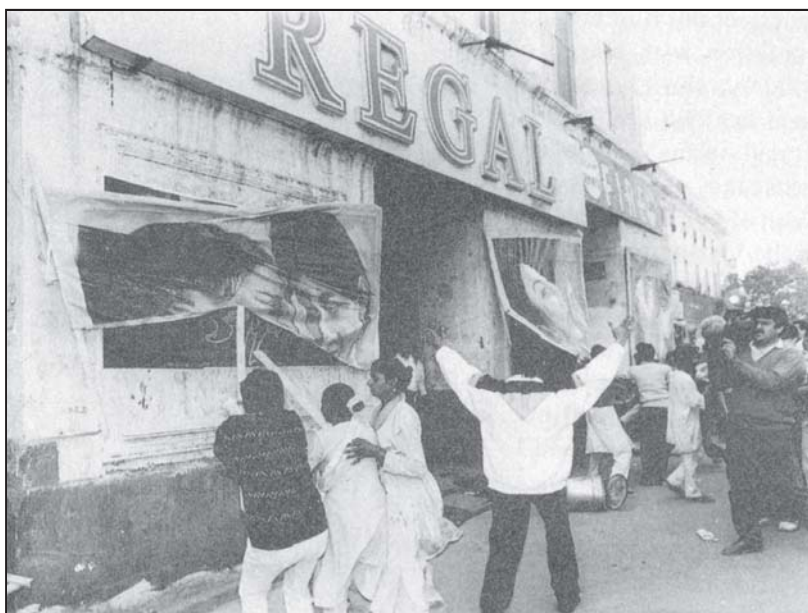
Perhaps that's why the director had to add controversial scenes from the Ramayan in order to provoke the audience into taking notice of her film." Many of those who have seen the film shared my sentiments about *Fire*. Yet most were not willing to say a word of criticism even before the Shiv Sainiks polarised the debate. We had been brainwashed into thinking that it was a smash hit at international film festivals, that it had won applause in Toronto, London and elsewhere. When Gloria Steinem herself had called it a landmark film, how dare feminists and other cultural czars of India do anything but applaud it ?

I am sure Ms Steinem would not be so generous in judging films made

in the US on this theme. Third world feminists are to be given grace marks because they belong to the underdeveloped category, in the same way that we set lower qualifying criteria for SC—ST candidates.

### Politics of Fire

The film would have been less irksome to view if the director had at least given her theme a creative cinematic treatment. From the way she went about promoting *Fire* from the very start, it seems Ms Mehta did not want her film to be judged on aesthetic merit. From the time of its first screening at the Toronto film festival in 1996, she began insisting in carefully planted



**Shiv Sainiks on a rampage at Delhi's Regal Cinema: A mere handful of hoodlums make national headlines!**

interviews that *Fire* was not merely a movie to be judged on how well it showed the lives of the characters portrayed. Instead, she introduced the film as a political statement intended to combat the maltreatment of women inherent in Indian culture. Mehta repeatedly emphasised that her film was meant to throw a challenge to what she considers as oppressive for women among Hindu traditionalists. I give a few quotes where Ms Mehta describes her intent:

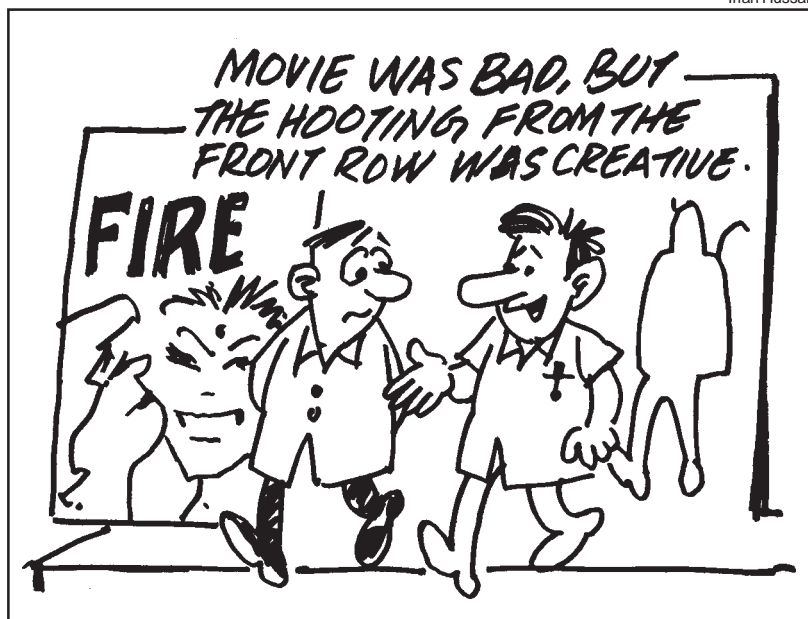
- “For me *Fire* is about... fighting tradition when oppressed. My favourite dialogue in the film is when Sita tells her sister-in-law Radha that the concept of duty is over-rated.”

(*The Hindu*, Dec. 4, 1998)

- The film is about desire and control and the choices we make in life. And it’s about India. That is why I have used the colours of the Indian flag throughout the movie.”

(*The Sunday Review of the Times of India*, September 15, 1996)

On other occasions, she let it be known that she deliberately highlighted the colour saffron throughout the film because of its association with Hindu culture. Similarly, she claimed that she named her two heroines after the cultural icons Radha and Sita because they are “the two wronged women of Indian mythology.” Also, that the idea of “two goddesses in bed together” was bound to provoke a certain set of people (*Outlook*, October 2, 1996). Repressed wives rejecting their respective spouses and becoming lesbian lovers was bound to have shock value. In the publicity blitz that was organised around this film, Mehta kept announcing that the film was bound to have trouble with Indian viewers and the Indian Censor Board because the film shows how oppressive India’s



religious and cultural traditions are, and how miserable Indian family life is.

As if that were not enough, the title *Fire* is given an add-on subtitle *Trial by Fire* in a laboured attempt to link the domestic melodrama in her film to Sita’s *agnipariksha* in the epic *Ramayan*. To hammer into our heads that the film is about the harmful, even murderous, effect of the continuing hold of Indian traditions, the film ends with the crudely contrived *agnipariksha* of Radha to prove the heroine worthy of her new found lesbian love.

To make sure we do not miss the point, there is the repeated visual replay of the mythical Sita’s *agnipariksha* scene from Ramanand Sagar’s TV serial *Ramayan*, as well as repeated enactments of Deepa Mehta’s scripted pseudo-folk *Ramlila* spiced with lots of cheap melodrama. To quote her: “[the *agnipariksha*] happens three times in the film, to make sure that... it wasn’t just me indulging in the *agnipariksha* for Radha and Sita, but that [the film is set] in the whole context of tradition, and the stereotyping of Indian women, that we, I, the actors

understood where they were coming from.” (*Trikone*, October 1997)

### A Crude Caricature

If we take her version of the *Ramayan* seriously, we would be led to believe that there are only two purposes behind the writing of this popular Hindu epic :

(a) to condition women into accepting servility and even death by torture without protest; and  
 (b) to encourage men to be crude and insensitive in their relationships with women, to feel righteous about inflicting insults and cruelties on them and to have no compunction about burning them to death because, after all, they are supposedly following the glorious tradition set by Lord Ram.

Deepa Mehta also let it be known that her ire is not just confined to icons from the epics, but that she also aims to show up poor Mahatma Gandhi as a sexual-moral hypocrite. Gandhi is brought under her critical scrutiny through the character of Radha’s husband, Ashok. After Radha fails to bear children, Ashok takes a vow of celibacy under the influence of his guru in his pursuit of *moksha*. This

becomes the take-off point for a crude, lifeless and superficial caricature of Mahatma Gandhi's experiment with sexual abstinence. It also offers her an opportunity to ridicule some of the philosophical tenets of Hinduism as for example the quest for *moksha*.

However, the film labours hard and unconvincingly to be politically correct. Mundu, the servant has hardly any redeeming qualities. Yet he must be shown in a sympathetic light because a "progressive" film maker knows she better not take liberties with leftist sensibilities. After all, Mundu is not a mere male, but a representative of the poor working class. Therefore, even when he is acting as a low level blackmailer, words of sympathy must ooze out for him in Mehta's script : he is overworked, has no job security, no avenues for entertainment except masturbation and sexual fantasies. Therefore, even Radha turns sympathetic to his plight when she gets this brilliant insight as to why he inflicted his masturbation on the old woman and watched blue films while pretending it was the *Ramayan* and says word to this effect : "It is really so bad what he was done? He was being selfish and caring only about his own desires—just like us."

You don't have to be a Shiv Sainik to feel offended and hurt by the gratuitous insults aimed at Indian culture in this crude caricature. Yet an overwhelming majority of those who saw the film or heard about its contents chose not to be manipulated. I wanted to ignore it as an exercise in self-flagellation by a self-

hating Hindu and a self-despising Indian—a very common type among the English—educated elite in India. Some people even mistakenly celebrated this film as path-breaking.

But by and large I found that most people I discussed it with found it unexciting, and pretentious. The media reviews, however, were virtually all favourable, even gushy, and on the whole defensive and politically correct. The Censor Board gave it clearance without any tampering or cuts.

**...You don't have to be a Shiv Sainik to feel offended and hurt by the gratuitous insults aimed at Indian culture in this crude caricature...**



Photo : National Museum

One would have thought this would be interpreted as a sign of the cultural maturity of the Indian public. It was, after all, not too long ago that people in western Europe and North America faced hostility, social ostracism, and even threats to life and limb when suspected of homosexual inclinations. Long after writers like Oscar Wilde were jailed and hounded as criminals for their sexual orientation, this harassment continued. It has not yet fully ended. It took many decades for homosexuals to organise themselves as a political force, an articulate vote bank to counter this social hostility, before western societies began to yield a limited space for assertion of a homosexual identity or open discussion on this subject.

### **Homosexuality in India**

By contrast, our society has no comparable history of persecuting homosexuals. In every culture and society throughout history, there are people who attempt every anatomically possible form of sexual stimulation and gratification. The difference in patterns of sexual expression among societies derives from their history, culture, present circumstances and power relations. These factors also determine whether their actual patterns of sexual behaviour are open or hidden.

In India, homosexuality has usually been treated as one of the many expressions of human sexuality. For example, our celebrated poet Firaq Gorakhpuri was known to be a homosexual, yet no one made much fuss about it. Nor was he attacked or

humiliated for it. And he lived in a supposedly conservative small town in Uttar Pradesh.

Jayalalitha, the former chief minister of Tamilnadu and the president of AIDMK is known to have a long-standing intimate relationship with her friend Sasikala. But that has not come in the way of her being deified by her party cadres who are forever falling at her feet. Despite Jayalalitha having grown into one of the most tyrannical and corrupt politicians of India, even her opponents have not made her sexual life the target of attack, either in the media or on other public platforms. The following comment of an auto rickshaw puller in Chennai pretty much sums up the popular attitude on the subject: "We don't care who she rolls in bed with, as long as it is not a bed of gold made with money stolen or looted from the public."

Deepa Mehta herself acknowledges that her inspiration for this film came largely from a story called *Lihaf* written in 1941 by one of India's foremost women writers, Ismat Chughtai. A small section of conservative Muslims did attack Chughtai and even made her the target of obscene fan-mail. Some even filed a case demanding a ban on her book on the charge of obscenity using the British enacted penal code which had declared homosexuality to be a criminal offence. But those who took her to court could not build a worthwhile case and the ban had to be lifted. Progressive writers like Manto stood firmly in her defence. But most important of all, far from facing social persecution, right from the start Ismat Chughtai became an admired cultural heroine for the bold themes of her stories, her uninhibited linguistic style, her iconoclasm, her subversive sense of humour as also her unconventional lifestyle and beliefs. (See box)

Whenever we have published a poem or story on this theme in (see for example MANUSHI, *Naya Gharvas*

by Vijaydan Detha in issue No. 98), we faced no hostile criticism, nor upset readers. In fact, we received letters of appreciation from both male and female readers. Before MANUSHI got it translated into English, it had already been published in Rajasthani and in Hindi, and even enacted on stage in Delhi by one of our leading directors. It played to packed houses and received rave reviews.

India, despite more than two centuries of western influence and indoctrination, has still not become homophobic. While there is pressure on all to get married, this has not resulted in the extinction of sexual engagement with persons of the same gender. A space for bisexuality usually remains. There is relatively less of a demand here that people acquire a unidimensional frozen sexual identity.

I personally know any number of gay men and women, many of them in high profile professions. Not one has been fired from his or her job or made the butt of public ridicule. Male homosexuals do get fleeced by the police who use the Victorian anti-gay laws to extort bribes from gay men

found cruising in public places. But to the best of my knowledge, there have been only stray public attacks on gays after they have begun openly organising themselves around their sexual identity. Some years back when two policewomen from a small town in Madhya Pradesh got married to each other in a public ceremony with the full support of their respective families, the entire national press rallied around their right to sexual-marital choice after it was found that their police bosses had suspended them.

Likewise, most of those who saw *Fire* expressed no shock or horror at the open portrayal of a lesbian relationship. A small handful of Shiv Sainiks in Bombay and an even smaller number in Delhi disrupted the screening of the film at a couple of theatres. This disruption instantly became big national and international news. The vast majority of viewers in India, including influential public figures, resolutely defended the film's right to be screened, including those like me who had disliked the film. Yet that defence did not get as much

### Ismat Chughtai on *Lihaf*

"In spite of all this criticism, my stories were very popular and widely read. They were hardly ever rejected for publication. In 1935, Premchand founded the Progressive Writers' Association in Lucknow. I joined it, but no association could dictate to me what I should or should not write.

In 1941, three months before my marriage, I wrote a story called *Lihaf*. In 1944, I was charged with obscenity by the Lahore government. A summons arrived: "George the Sixth versus Ismat Chughtai." I had a good laugh at the idea that the king had read my story. So we went to Lahore to fight the case. Lots of my supporters who knew me through my writing came to meet me. We had a nice time, buying the famous Lahore shoes. When anyone asked how the case went, I would calmly say: "I bought lots of shoes."

The obscenity law prohibited the use of four letter words. *Lihaf* does not contain any such words. In those days the word "lesbianism" was not in use. I did not know exactly what it was. The story is a child's description of something which she cannot fully understand. I knew no more at that time than the child knew. My lawyer argued that the story could be understood only by those who already had some knowledge. I won the case."

**For a detailed interview with Ismat Chughtai, see MANUSHI No. 19, 1983**

notice as the antics of a few thugs. Why? Because liberal, tolerant behaviour doesn't conform to the studiously cultivated stereotype about India held not only by many westerners but also by westernised Indians like Deepa Mehta.

### Tradition vs Modernity?

The two opening cameos of *Fire* introduce the two heroines of the film. Radha is a depressed, over-worked and exploited middle aged housewife, and Sita as a bouncy, lively new bride with a sour faced and disinterested husband. Sita's husband neglects her cruelly even during their honeymoon. It is fairly obvious from the outset that the younger woman is to be the agent for promoting rebellion in this supposedly conservative tradition-bound middle class society. Mehta introduces her campaign for "liberating" Indian women within moments of Sita's entry into her new marital home. Annoyed at her husband's callous neglect of her, she takes off her saree, wears her husband's oversized pants, pulls out a cigarette from his table-drawer, bares her shoulder, and takes a few mimed puffs from his cigarette, all in the style of a clothes model, and breaks into a disco dance to the tune of a silly, noisy Indi-pop number.

Most thinking women in the West have already rejected the fantasy that women can achieve equality or freedom by emulating men not just by learning to wear pants, but also by copying their self-destructive habits such as smoking. But in this film, such a style of juvenile rebellion is supposed to act as a catalyst for a revolution against moribund, tradition bound Indian society. Just as in the field of science and education, we tend to import outmoded, even discarded technologies and obsolete intellectual fashions from the West, so with ideologies and feminist role models.

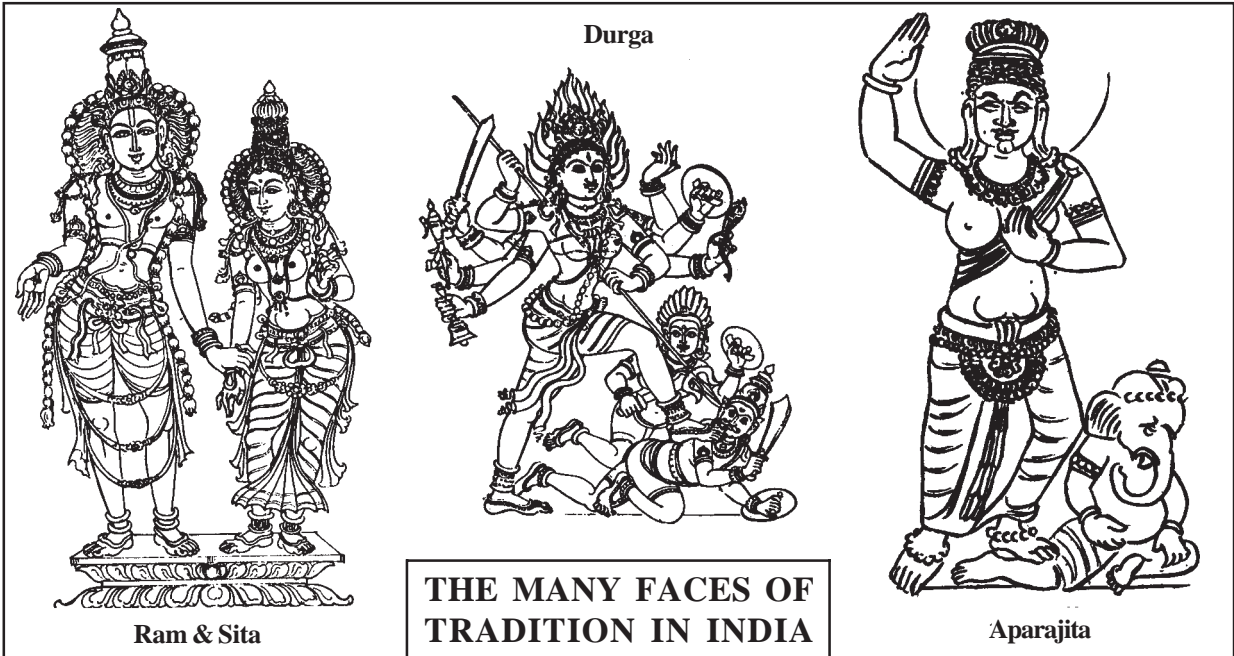


Mehta's Sita in her cross-dressing role-play establishes her persona as a modern (meaning westernised) woman. However, Radha needs to be coaxed and seduced into liberating herself from her traditional mould. Sita proves herself worthy of the male pants she had donned in an earlier scene by taking the lead in awakening suppressed sexual desire in Radha in the most unconvincing manner. Thereafter, the road is clear. Once sexually awakened, Radha acquires the courage to say "No" to her husband's demands. She refuses to be his drudge and slave, and refuses to participate in his attempts to attain *moksha* by extinguishing sexual desire—and what is more she learns to enjoy her rebellion. Sita has been able to convince her that "the concept of duty is highly overrated," that it makes women into mindless slaves like the Sita of the *Ramayan*. Ms Mehta's disdain for Indians except those who are supposedly sabotaging "tradition" by seeking sexual fulfilment in defiance of social norms (like Mundu's obsessive masturbation before an old, crippled woman) oozes out of virtually every dialogue in the film. For example when Radha declares : "We are so bound

by customs and rituals, that someone has just to press the button called 'tradition' and I start responding like a trained monkey." All Indians are thus reduced to nothing better than servile, mindless apes.

### Poor Indian Culture!

Thus, for Mehta, liberation can only come by overthrowing the stranglehold of Indian tradition. For example, Sita declares, after a love making session with her sister-in law Radha, "There is no word in our language to say what we are to each other." In other words, because Ms Mehta couldn't find the verbal counterparts to the English word "lesbian" in any of the Indian languages, it is proof that the Indian languages are supposedly incapable of expressing modern sensibilities and desires. Indian culture is incapable of coping with something so supposedly "new" and "radical" such as two women caressing, fondling and obtaining sexual satisfaction from each other. Hence the need and compulsion to write this "script of rebellion" in English. Mehta says in her various interviews that she attempted to get Hindi translations of the script but was satisfied with



Ram & Sita

Durga

Aparajita

**THE MANY FACES OF TRADITION IN INDIA**

none. She cites two sentences as examples of the profundities in the script that were untranslatable—“The concept of duty is over rated,” and “The Swamiji’s testicles have grown too big for his loin cloth.”

(*Trikone*, October 1997)

By this time the viewer is puzzled into asking what is Mehta’s version of Indian tradition? Is it true that Sita’s unfair banishment and *agnipariksha* is the most dominant aspect of Indian gender traditions? Are not Shiv and Parvati in Indian tradition the most popular archetypes of happy, blissful conjugality, including euphoric joy in sexual union, the most celebrated couple of Indian mythology? After all, the supposedly traditional Indian woman keep fasts on Monday to pray to be blessed with a Shiv-like husband—not for an incarnation of Ram. I have rarely, if ever, heard a woman wish for a Ram-like husband.

Similarly, if voluntary celibacy has been glorified as an aid to spiritual quest in one part of Indian tradition, there is a parallel tradition of spiritual quest via sexual union at a level of sophistication rare in most other

cultures. Not too long ago the West saw such Indian expressions of sexuality as evidence of decadence and immorality. Today, the western—educated elite want to liberate “sexually repressed” Indians by importing for us their recently discovered fashionable western versions of sexual freedom.

**Stereotyping of India**

According to Deepa Mehta’s worldview, women in the Indian tradition are allowed only one role, that of long suffering Sita’s. What about Indian women and goddesses who appear as Durga, Chandi, Kali and in a host of other fierce and benevolent forms? When they are indignant they make the most powerful men tremble with fear. They vanquish their enemies with their earth shaking ferocity. Such women and goddesses are not only an integral part of village lore but a living role model for women of all ages throughout India. Remember how many in India saw and responded to Indira Gandhi as Durga incarnate. Even ordinary women, like our first woman cop, Kiran Bedi, are often referred to as Durga and held up as role models for young girls not only

in TV serials but also by ordinary Indian parents. However, what sells in the international media market is the unidimensional stereotype of India as solely a land of beggars and oppressors, a country where brides are commonly burnt to death for money and consumer goods.

Apart from the unremitting attack on the *Ramayan*, the Indian family system is also condemned as stifling human happiness because we are still foolish enough to believe that our old parents should be taken care of by their own children rather than consigned to old age homes or left to fend for themselves. Jatin’s Chinese girlfriend, who wants to live in Hong Kong, refuses to marry him because she would feel suffocated in a “joint-family”. Deepa Mehta, an innovative radical, introduces this Chinese girlfriend as a symbol of a free life in a worldwide modern urban society. She asserts her choices and individuality by refusing to be a baby-making machine in an Indian joint family. He ends up spurned by her, not because she does not enjoy having sex with him but because he is an ethnic Indian. The Chinese girlfriend’s father seems to give vent to deep

hatred for Indians which sounds more like Ms Mehta's own disdain for fellow Indians. He endorses his daughter's rejection of Jatin by launching a whole diatribe of insults against Indians.

He feels sorry for himself that while most forward—looking Chinese went away to Australia and Canada after the cultural revolution in China, his own working class parents chose miserable India for migration. Among the things he can't stand about "stupid, bloody Indians" is that "they shit sitting on a hole in the ground." He declares with imperial arrogance: "When I want to shit, I want to shit comfortably, reading Kowloon news."

Ms Mehta invents an ingenious reason for his hatred and contempt for India. His son is teasingly called "Chinki" by his schoolmates. That is reason enough for him to conclude that "there is no place for minorities here" since "these bloody Indians have fooled themselves into believing that they can transform themselves from a developing country to a developed one."

And what is the "rebellious" Jatin's response to these insults? A sheepish: "You are right sir, we Indians are a very complex people."

True enough, Ms Mehta. Some of us even enjoy pouring shit on the heads of our fellow Indians because it has become a lucrative proposition in the western market.

### Revolt against Tradition

Jatin's revolt against tradition is peculiar indeed. While aspiring to assert his independence from the mumbo-jumbo of India, he is willing to quietly accept the worst of racist abuse hurled at him by the man whose daughter he wishes to wed! Is this Mehta's idea of modernity? His romance with a Chinese hairdresser made up to resemble a call-girl is presented in so crude and unrealistic a manner that only someone unable to control her hatred for India would use

it as a device to portray a quest for individual freedom from the tyranny of Indian values. This is Ms Mehta's way of assuring us that even men are victims of the horrible Indian way of life and value system. The stifling of his rebellion and yearning for modernity take him to literally licking the feet and legs of a westernised Chinese girlfriend dying to migrate to Hong Kong, hook some rich American there so she can escape living in India.

If Deepa knew the basics of Indian family life, she would know that Indian men grow up expecting to be pampered and honoured like little gods by their prospective in-laws. Their inverted racism may manifest itself in accepting insults from a western woman but they certainly don't take such shit from an ethnic Chinese woman or father-in-law. Mehta's lack of understanding and mean spirited caricature of middle class family life among urban Hindus is amazing considering Deepa Mehta claims to belong to such a family and says Radha could be her own mother or aunt. An unrealistic element in her depiction is that the *Fire* family seems to live in complete isolation. This *Fire* family strangely enough never gets a visitor, even at the ritually important moment when the young couple

returns from their honeymoon. The post-marriage period is usually filled with guests and neighbours in Indian families. In this case, the couple is merely greeted by a depressed looking Radha who welcomes them with an *arti*. The total isolation of this family is not only unrealistic but also claustrophobic. The air of depression is all pervasive—there is no laughter, no enjoyment. As a long-time resident of Lajpat Nagar, where the film was supposed to have been shot, I can say with confidence that such a family as this is not likely to exist among the community she portrays. One of the key hallmarks of Indian family life, especially in a Punjabi neighbourhood like Lajpat Nagar, is that there is constant interaction with neighbours and relatives. But Deepa Mehta has cooked up a new variety of Indian family to conform to her schematic picture of all round oppression. To quote her: "...in the Indian context, nobody sits down and has family chats. That is such a western concept. Nobody says: 'we can talk it out... Women talk during weddings, when they are hanging around. Men talk at weddings, get-togethers... or when someone's died. They get together around rituals and then there's gossip... But nobody as a whole, as a



A typical post-marriage gathering of a middle class family in Lajpat Nagar

family unit, sits and chats.' (*Trikone*, October 1997). As a result, she claims that "the incredible loneliness of being [is] often the lot of women of India." (*Outlook*, November 30, 1998)

I have heard of artistic license, but this is a curious case of sociological license! The West has not only the onerous task of teaching us how to be liberated from our culture, but also how to learn to talk and chat with our own families.

No less unrealistic is the portrayal of Radha and Sita as cooks in the family owned take-away. Not even mildly traditional, middle-class men in such a neighbourhood would be comfortable with their wives working as *bawarchis*, along with low-paid male servants, in their self-owned restaurant. The really hard core traditional middle class male would consider such an arrangement a matter of great shame. For a woman of such a middle class traditional family to perform menial tasks in a public restaurant would be highly unlikely, even though she might take on a managerial role—a fairly common arrangement among this class. However, in the interest of making them the stereotypical victims of exploitation at the hands of males, Ms Mehta shows the two men merely acting as managers and cash collectors, while the two women sweat it out all day in the kitchen with the servant.

It is noteworthy that all the scenes associated with Hindu spaces and symbols are sites of oppression. Their one and only happy outing as a family is also in a garden built around a Muslim monument. The major moment of freedom and liberation from Hindu middle-class tyranny comes during the first happy outing of Radha and Sita at Nizamuddin *dargah*. It is also the place of their final union when Radha asks Sita to leave home and wait for her there at a pre-arranged spot. They don't choose a hotel as would any sane couple who needed a

place to stay the night, or a *gurudwara* which provides both *langar* and shelter to anyone in need. They choose this *dargah* as their symbol of freedom.

Ms Mehta has mesmerised herself into believing that by making these two women walk out of bad marriages she is doing something altogether alien and path-breaking, as though so far such a 'radical' option had never been exercised by Indian women to quote her: "When you look at it, what are they going to do? I have no idea. It's going to be tough, but will they deserve to ... But I know that they will not end up as prostitutes on the street, and in that way their relationship has liberated them from the stamp, which is what women who have left their houses usually end up being in Hira Mandi in Lahore or G.B. Road in Delhi or in the cages in Bombay." (*Trikone*, October 1997)

In other words Ms Mehta wants to convince us that before she showed the way, any Indian woman daring to walk out of a bad marriage, would end up as a prostitute. Amazing arrogance combined with gross ignorance of the society she wishes to reform.

### Boring and Grim Sex

The film is obsessive in its focus on grim depictions of sexual desires. All

the male characters are brought in as stereotypes of some or the other sexual kink. Ashok is experimenting with celibacy, subjecting his wife to the indignity of having to play the role of a rejected, mistrusted object of lust, a lure he has chosen to conquer. Mundu, the obsequious live-in-servant, specialises in masturbating while watching blue films in full view of the paralysed mute old mother of the two brothers while he is supposedly caring for her. His fantasies of a sexual union with the elder daughter-in-law of the house find open outlet in his teasing her with the lewd singing of film lyric *Bol Radha Bol Sangam Hoga ki Nahin* (Speak Radha, whether we will be united or not?). Jatin gets sexually high only when a woman treats him with contempt and disdain. As long as his wife is nice and affectionate to him, he neglects her, treats her crudely and prefers to be at the feet of his Chinese girlfriend who not only spurns his marriage offers with casual contempt but also allows her father to insult him. However, as soon as his wife turns disdainful towards him and starts to repel his sexual advances, he begins to find her attractive and declares with new found interest: "I like my women to be fiery and

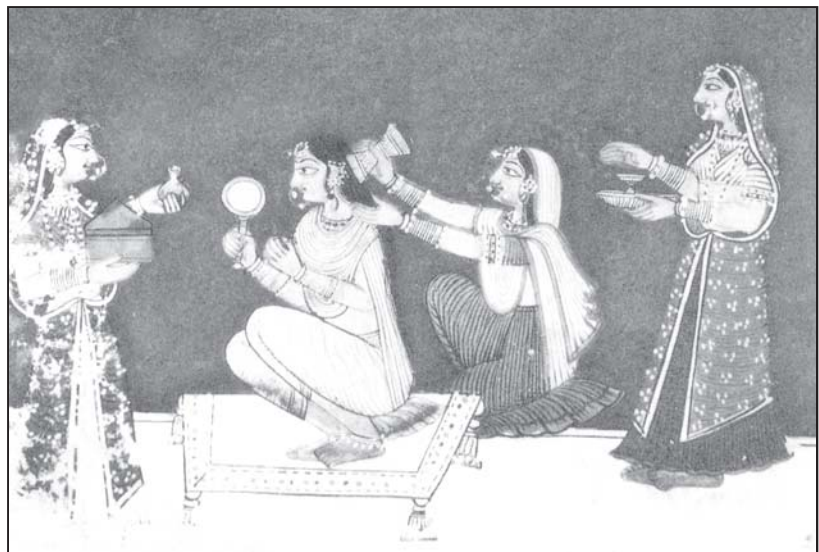


Photo : National Museum

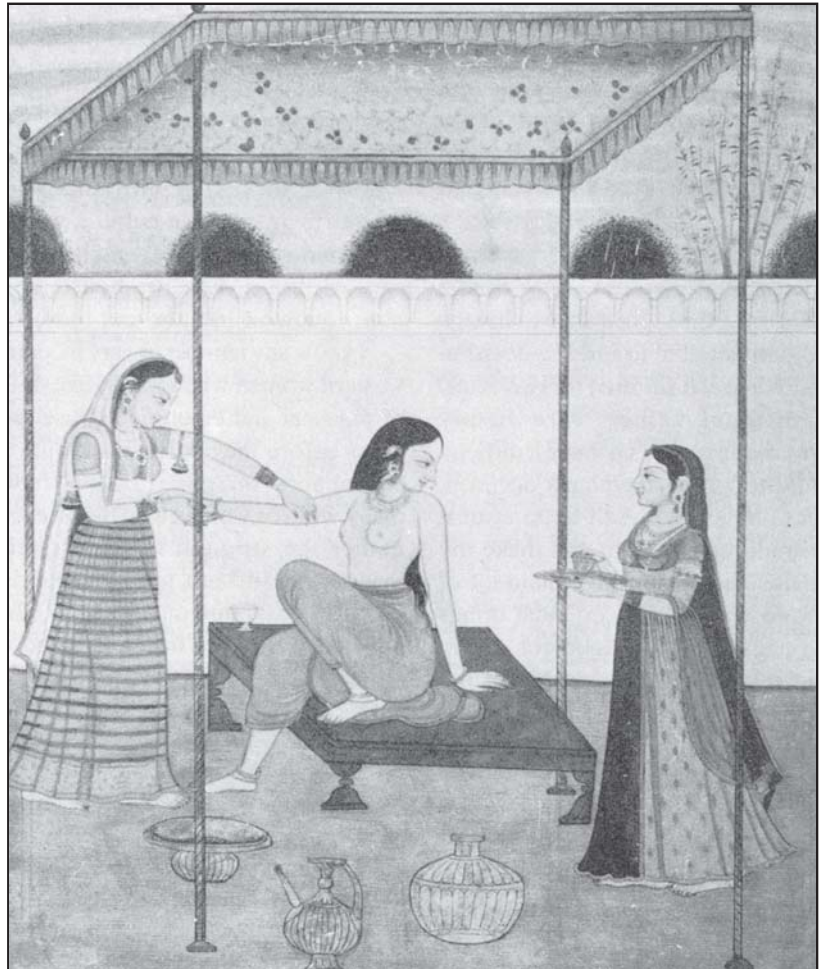


spirited.” Even little school boys are introduced in one scene to asking Jatin for the most titillating blue film at the family-owned video parlour. They are given nothing less than a hard core pornographic film which makes *Basic Instinct* seem like, child’s play. Sex enters into in Mehta’s reference to Ashok’s guru, who is described as needing expensive surgery because his “testicles have become too big for his loin-cloth”.

Deepa Mehta wants to be celebrated for taking on a bold theme depicting the growth of lesbian love between two women. I found its portrayal rather callow. To begin with, the film suggests that same—sex relationships among women are most likely to arise only when they are treated badly by men. Secondly, the sexual part of the relationship is too laboured and lacking in subtlety. Even something as common between women as a hair-massage is melodramatically portrayed as foreplay.

From the start, the film’s marketing has insisted that the lesbian affair is a liberating break away from bad heterosexual relationships. However, close emotional bonding accompanied by displays of a good deal of physical affection are commonplace household occurrences among women in many Indian families. Deepa admits in some of her interviews that her own mother experienced a very nurturing relation with her sister-in-law in the early years of her marriage.

The truth is that in most Indian families, even when sexual overtones develop in the relationship of two women situated as are Radha and Sita, no one generally gets upset about it provided people don't go around flaunting their sexual engagement with each other. I have known of any number of such relations in very ordinary, traditional families. Given that in a gender—segregated society like ours, women spend a lot more time with each other than they do with men,



such close bonding is fairly routine. Indians, by and large, are not horrified at witnessing physical affection between two people of the same gender. Two women friends or female relatives sleeping together in the same bed, hugging, massaging each other's hair or bodies is seen as a normal occurrence and even encouraged in preference to similar signs of physical affection between men and women. Such physical affection between women is not ordinarily interpreted as a sure sign or proof of lesbian love.

### An Agit-Prop Film

By crudely pushing the Radha-Sita relationship into the lesbian mould, Ms Mehta has done a big disservice to the cause of women. She could have portrayed their relationship to

be as ambiguous as was her own mother’s relationship to her sisters-in-law who apparently were the main source of emotional sustenance in the early years of her mother’s marriage. (*Outlook*, October 2, 1996)

But an agit-prop film cannot afford to leave anything to the audience’s imagination. I suspect that the net result of this political tract of a film, determined to create programmed individuals, will be to make many women in India far more self-conscious than earlier in their relationships with other women. There is a danger that many of those exposed to this controversy will learn to view all such signs of affection through the prism of homosexuality. As a consequence many will feel inhibited in expressing physical fondness for

other women for fear of being permanently branded as lesbians.

Ms Mehta provides us with yet another insight into what went into the making of this film. Many of her interviews bring in her personal experiences of a bad marriage to explain the inspiration for *Fire*: “Every film of mine has an autobiographical element. That time I was going through a bad marriage and was not able to make a decision for divorce and suffered for two years. Traditional values were firmly ingrained in me which made it difficult for me to go ahead with my decision, I was preparing myself to go against the traditional system and make my choice. This phase gave me a lot of time to contemplate on such things and it gave me the food for a film like *Fire*.” (*The Asian Age*, November 29, 1998)

“*Fire* is a result of bitter personal experience of a bad marriage for 11 years and it took me two years to get out of it. The reason I could not get out of it was my subconscious upbringing that said marriages should last forever... The hold of traditional values set me thinking of what tradition means and how tenuous it can be... that is how *Fire* started, between doing something for your personal desires and the pull of tradition.”

(*Hindustan Times*, Aug 9, 1997)

### Macaulay’s Children

Strange words indeed! Here is a woman who has all along received western education, even while living in India. She tells us she even thinks in English (*Trikone*, October 1997). Very early in life, she migrates to England and then to Canada, becomes a Canadian citizen, marries a Canadian man of her choice and this non-traditional, very modern marriage turns sour. She takes two years to make up her mind about whether or not to walk out of that marriage—and

the product of that uncertainty is a film about India demeaning to Indian culture and its people.

Macaulay who claimed that through English education, he hoped to create a class of Indians English in tastes and morals, though brown in skin colour, would be proud of his achievement if he saw Mehta’s *Fire* or heard her pontificate on Indians and India.

I know any number of very modern western women who took a great deal of physical and emotional abuse for years before they dared walk out of an unhappy marriage. I also know many western women who didn’t ever gather the strength to leave such marriages. Instead their husbands usually walk out on them. When directors in the West make films about unhappy marriages, they don’t feel obliged to caricature the Bible and use it as a peg on which to hang all women’s troubles. This is true even though the Biblical commandments often make it difficult for men and women in strongly Christian communities to walk out of bad marriages. In any case, the pervasiveness of divorce is not an obvious symbol of women’s freedom and modernity. In fact, the tendency of a certain variety of western—educated women to see divorce as a statement of self-assertion by women, a move towards greater freedom, often makes the life of both women and children more, not less, vulnerable. Lesbianism may well be a lifestyle option for some women but cannot be viewed as a universal antidote to bad marriage, as this film would have us believe.

### Marketing ‘Poor Hindu Women’

If Ms Mehta had described this film as one more domestic melodrama dealing with marital incompatibility due to the insensitivity of some husbands, I would have confined this review to assessing how well the film

deals with this well-worn theme. Anywhere else in the world, a film about unhappy marriages would be treated as just that. But when a film about domestic relations is made with Indian characters, it becomes a film about Indian family life—a peculiarly Hindu phenomenon, a product of Indian tradition. It is only because she labours hard to call the marriages of Radha and Sita “Hindu marriages” and attributes their failures and crudities to the Hindu worldview that one begins to view Deepa as one more among a growing tribe of Indian women who have understood that there is a lot of money to be made by portraying the real and imagined miseries of much—pitied Indian women in the western market.

Hitherto, the most common way to do that was to float an NGO to do research on the status of Indian women, to write tracts and make tear jerking documentaries proposing half baked, amateurish solutions to alleviate the sufferings of this hapless species by “empowering” her with slogans approved by donor agencies. But now the Hindu/Indian woman has become a marketable commodity in the global entertainment world as well.

### Smashing Myths?

It is not a coincidence that this film about Hindus was originally made in English and was first released in the West. It was made primarily for a western audience, something Mehta herself acknowledges: “The international audience is exposed to a very stereotyped picture about India. I want to break this myth about our society.” (*Femina* Feb 1, 1997)

And what is the myth she wants to smash before the international audience? Who are the myth-makers she disapproves of? Mehta cites Satyajit Ray as an example of someone who fed westerners with an unrealistic picture of India. One can understand her discomfort with Ray

because he portrayed both the rich and the poor, the educated, the illiterate, Indians endowed with a unique dignity even in difficult circumstances. He projected their dilemmas and conflicts with insightful empathy. Mehta considers such cinema as having misled western audiences. To quote from yet another of her interviews from Toronto: "It's amazing how ignorant people are about India over here (meaning north America). The audience here is fed on a diet of Satyajit Ray on the one hand and the Raj on the other." Ms Mehta instead decided to focus on the "throbbing middle class of India" that was supposedly not portrayed by Ray and others, and of whose existence the West is not even supposedly aware. This middle class was chosen because it "carries the burden of tradition more than anyone else." She, therefore, wanted to show up the hypocrisy and cruelty inherent in their connection with Indian tradition and "how the Radhas of this world catch fire." (*The Asian Age*, Feb 9, 1997)

### Neo—Colonial Reformers

This device of professing sympathy for the "oppressed" Indian women in order to condemn the traditions and culture of all Indians has a more than two century-long history. After the establishment of pax-Britannica in India, and the emergence of a new class of natives who began to challenge the legitimacy of the British Raj, oppressed Indian women became a favourite prop of our colonial rulers and missionaries. Customs like purdah, child-marriage, and the ban on widow remarriage prevalent among certain castes and communities became the universal symbols of the uncivilised nature of Indian society.

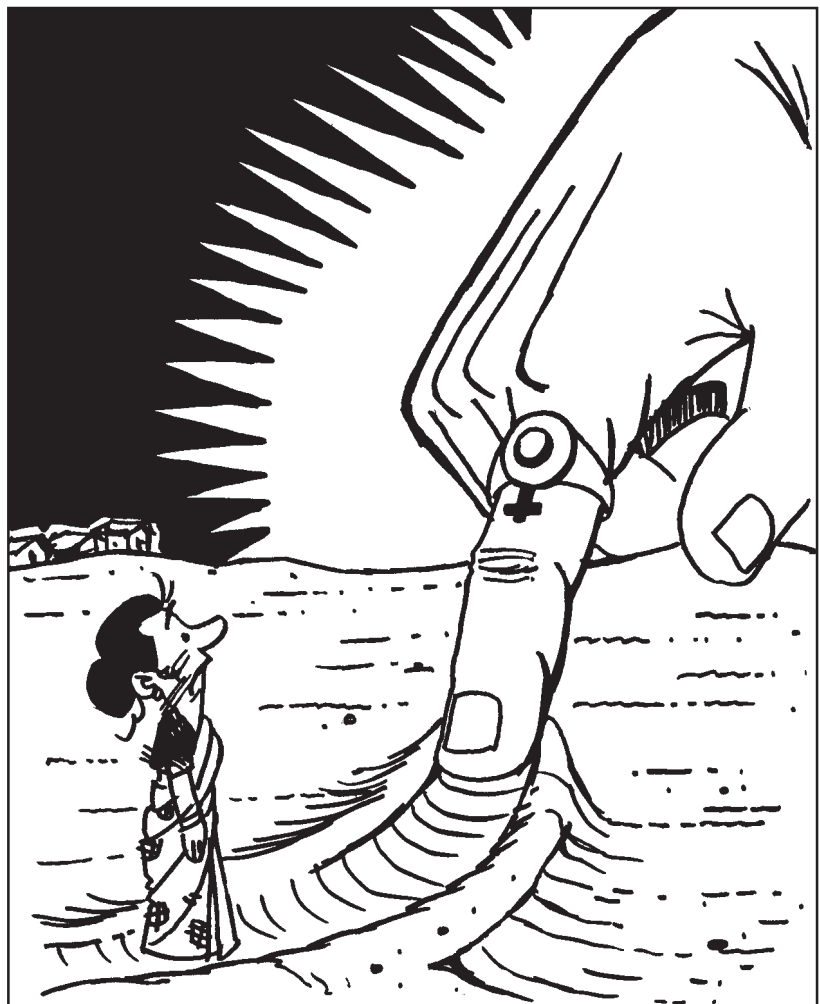
In their reforming zeal, the British conveniently forgot that some of these customs were confined to a segment of upper caste Hindus in certain regions of India. For example, even their own census had recorded

that the custom of child marriage and the ban on widow remarriage affected no more than 10 per cent of British India's castes and communities. The rest had uncomplicated, traditional ways divorce and easy acceptance of remarriage for women. Nothing the Indians did escaped condemnation. If they kept women in seclusion, they were considered backward. If they allowed sexual freedom and choices, they were condemned as being immoral. Either way, Indians needed to be re-formed that is, learn to adopt and copy whatever sexual mores the British considered 'moral' at that point of British history.

For example, the British delighted in expressing their outrage at north Indian Brahmins and certain upper

castes because of their oppressive sexual norms for women. At the same time, they were outraged for directly opposite reasons with some other communities which followed much freer sexual norms than their own. The women of matrilineal communities of the south were condemned as immoral and promiscuous because they exercised the right to change spouses at their discretion, without much ceremony or any permission from any religious authority.

Among many of the animist communities of India (derogatorily termed tribals by the British), the fact that most women wore blouseless sarees, had a different concept of illegitimacy and enjoyed a great deal more sexual freedom than was



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common in England caused them to become targets of attack and reform. Christian missionaries worked zealously to introduce European concepts of sexual chastity and monogamy among such communities. The British mesmerised themselves and many educated Indians into believing that the British were here on a civilising mission to reform Indians and make them fit for the modern world. Nothing was spared. We were declared uncivilised because we worshipped false gods and exercised the freedom to invent new gods. We were condemned for seeing divinity in rivers, trees, air, water, sun, moon and even stones, rocks and mountains, monkeys and snakes.

### Rediscovering Tradition?

Deepa Mehta inherits this tradition of using outrage over the plight of Indian women as a means to attack not only contemporary Indian culture but also as a way to demean and caricature Hindu family life. Even more disappointing than her film was the way Ms Mehta reacted when attacked by a small bunch of Shiv Sainiks. It is understandable that she wanted to play martyr to Hindu zealots because that would go down well with western liberals and radicals. While her early posture was that of a first-time radical introducing subversive ideas like lesbian love in the tradition—bound Indian society, when Shiv Sainiks took her bait and expressed outrage at her self-confessed attack on Hindu culture, she suddenly discovered that lesbianism was indeed a part of Indian heritage (*Pioneer*, Dec 8, 1998). Her supporters too began emphasising the versatile celebration of myriad forms of sexuality in the temple sculptures of Khajuraho, as well as the open depiction of homosexual love in a whole array of Indian paintings and other art forms. Her new discoveries were meant to

bolster her case that she had done nothing outrageous, nor had she injected western ideas into traditional Indian minds.

Worst of all, she quietly changed the name of her rebellious heroine from Sita to Nita for the Indian version of the film and began pretending there never was a Sita in her film. I would have respected her much more had she shown the courage to say her Sita could indeed be lesbian. In India, we have a well-respected tradition that any individual or group can interpret or rewrite any scripture or sacred text in whichever way they like. Not just Tulsidas, but a host of literary writers have used the Balmiki *Ramayan* as a take-off point for their own versions of the epic.

There are *Ramayans* which portray Ravan as the real hero, just as in some other versions Sita actually falls in love with Ravan. There are folk versions in which Sita kills Ravan, while Ram swoons with fear. In the Jain *Ramayan*, Sita is portrayed as Ravan's daughter. In many, Ram is subjected to very harsh critical scrutiny rather than portrayed as *maryada purushottam*. If ordinary village women in India have felt free to exercise the right to rewrite the Ram-Sita script in many radical ways in their folk versions, I fail to understand why Deepa Mehta chickened out so easily and dared not proclaim with pride that *her* Sita is indeed a westernised lesbian!

All this only goes to show that those who wish to engage in creative reform of our traditions must be

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people who understand our traditions, who are deeply involved in and concerned about the well-being of the society they wish to reform rather than those who descend on us as attacking outsiders. Such efforts can only aggravate the sense of inferiority among our people who have had to bear centuries of brutal attack by foreign invaders. We need to heal those wounds, not inflict new ones that hold up our own people to undeserved caricature and ridicule.

When people are constantly subject to humiliation and unmerited attack, they lose their sense of self-respect and often even start transforming their behaviour into that of the stereotyped image projected of them. This may be what happened to some Blacks in America. The behaviour of our Shiv Sainiks, Bajrang Dalis, and other members of the Sangh Parivar shows that a similar loss of self-respect is coming to inflict a large number of Indians as well. We would do well to remember, a people without self-respect do become dangerous—both to themselves and to others. In that sense, the likes of Deepa Mehta are indeed playing with fire, in a way not very different from the Shiv Sena's fireworks. The politics of both is based on encashing on or stoking the sense of inferiority among the Hindus.

I wish we could learn to ignore their antics. However, the way this film was marketed to gain attention by becoming the focus of a major national controversy, with virtually every newspaper, magazine, and TV channel giving it prominent headline space for weeks on end, shows how easily we are manipulated into engaging in empty debates around phoney issues that tend to waste so much time and energy and take attention away from more important and meaningful public issues. □