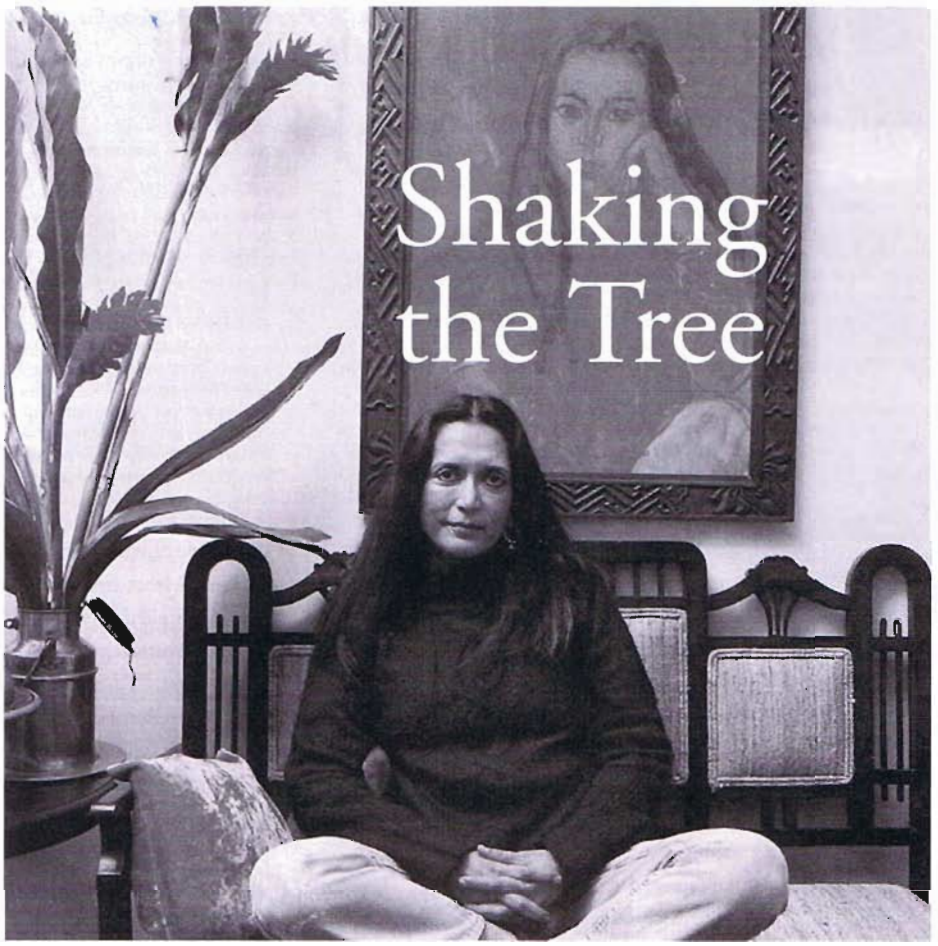


Cool and collected: Mehta calmly handled the controversy surrounding her films.

When it comes to modern mores, Deepa Mehta refuses to stop asking why

By Sarah Coleman

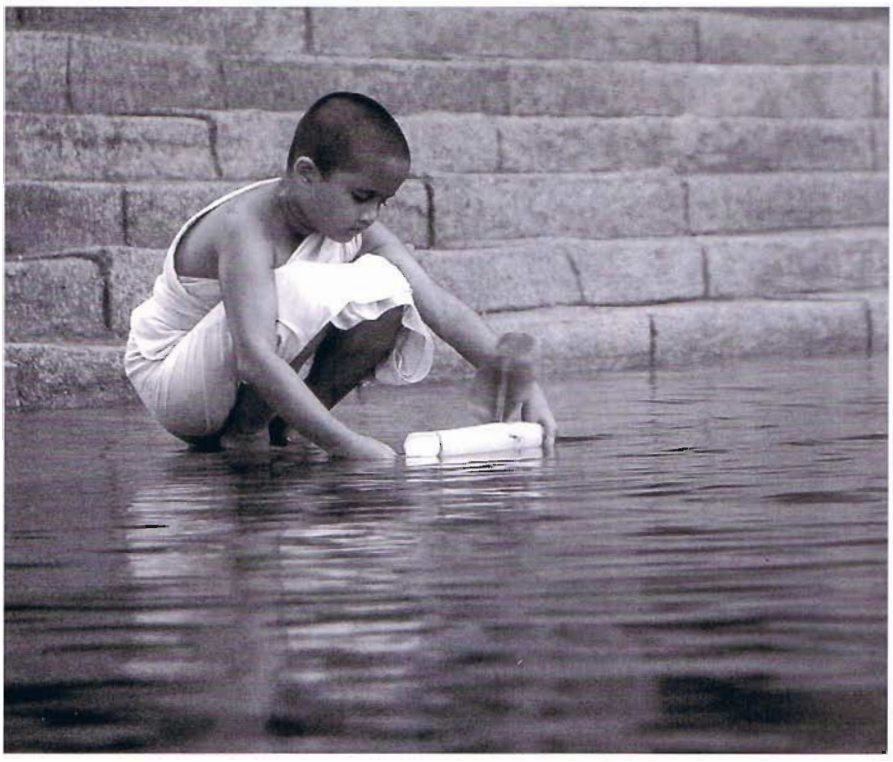
Five years ago, when Deepa Mehta was about to start making her film *Water* in the holy city of Varanasi, India, 11 people stood outside the set and threatened to light themselves on fire. Weeks before, protesters had stormed the film's set on the banks of the river Ganges and destroyed it, causing hundreds of thousands of dollars in damage. In one climactic moment, a man rowed himself out to the middle of the river, tied a rock around his waist, and jumped in, yelling that Mehta's film was responsible for his suicide. It didn't matter that the man, who survived, was exposed as a paid professional suicide attempter; by that time, frenzy had hijacked common sense, and the local government shut down the film's production.

Watching this delicate, lyrical film, which was made four years later in Sri Lanka, and will be released in the U.S. next month, it's hard to imagine what could have inspired such anger. The film follows a group of marginalized widows living in a run-down building on the banks of the Ganges. It's the 1930s, and the widows' struggle for freedom is set against the backdrop of Mahatma Gandhi's rise to power and the country's larger struggles for independence.

It sounds like a gentle, life-affirming period drama, but in India, where millions of widows are shunned by their families and forced into a life of begging or prostitution, the film hit a nerve. According to Hindu scripture, a widow has three choices: marry her husband's younger brother, burn on her husband's funeral pyre, or live a life of isolation and self-denial. By daring to suggest that widows are worthy of basic human rights, Mehta temporarily made herself public enemy number one for Hindu extremists.

"These people were the self-appointed caretakers of Hinduism, and I was in their way," recalls the filmmaker, reached by phone at her second home in Delhi. "I was a soft target, and an easy one."

It wasn't the first time Mehta found herself at the center of a swirling controversy. Her 1996 film *Fire*, the story of two middle-class Indian sisters-in-law who become lovers, touched off violent protests in India. A movie theater showing the film was ransacked, and



Sarala was discovered in a small Sri Lankan village and cast as Chuyia in *Water*.

the film was withdrawn from distribution. When Mehta appeared to talk about the film at the International Film Festival of India, a man in the audience stood up and announced, "I am going to shoot you, madam!"

One expects, then, that the voice on the other end of the phone might be strident, defensive, perhaps a little bitter. But Mehta is never less than warm and down-to-earth; her laugh is an infectious deep, throaty chuckle. After the aborted Indian production, it took four years for her to film *Water*, she says, because she didn't want the film to come from a place of anger. "Literally, one day I woke up and said, 'Oh my god, I'm not angry any more,'" she says. "If *Water* had happened out of anger it would have been a different film—and frankly, not one I'd be interested in."

One of several talented female Indian directors working today (the group includes Mira Nair, Gurinder Chadha, and Aparna Sen), Mehta is undoubtedly the most taboo-breaking of the group. Yet despite their controversial themes, her films don't trade on sensationalism. *Fire*, she says, is less a movie about lesbianism than about how traditional, patriarchal Indian society fails women. "[Patriarchy] is a way of life that, like any other, should be questioned," she says. "I think questioning is natural—I've never really deemed that I'm doing something controversial or cheeky."

Listening to Mehta talk about her films, it's hard to imagine she ever wanted to do anything else. Although she grew up steeped in Bollywood culture (her father was a movie distributor and theater owner), she wasn't immediately sold on filmmaking. "On the whole, I thought the [Bollywood] movies were a bit silly," she says. But one film, Asit Sen's 1966 *Mamta*, caught her attention. "It was the first film I'd seen that felt so much more real, emotionally, as opposed to over-the-top melodrama. It moved me greatly, and I realized that there was a kind of cinema that didn't have to be all cheap and shiny."

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Still, she resisted—until a friend persuaded her to work for a while in the Cinema Workshop, a government-funded documentary house in Delhi. "It had nothing that was even remotely glamorous, so that felt safe for me," she says, adding, "I didn't realize I'd get hooked."

Typically enough, her first film, *Vimla*, focused on the hard realities of women's lives. A documentary, it was made for India's Ministry of Family Planning and featured a 13-year-old girl who worked as a house cleaner. "I remember feeling passionately about her as we made the movie, and I was so upset to find out that she died two years later in childbirth," Mehta recalls.

While filming in Delhi, she met a Canadian producer named Paul Saltzman; the two married and Mehta moved in 1973 to Toronto, where a new raft of filmmaking possibilities awaited. Her first two feature films, *Sam and Me* (1991) and *Camilla* (1994)—pleasant, character-driven dramas—are set in Toronto. In between those two films, Mehta got a call from an unlikely source. "Was I interested in meeting George Lucas and possibly directing an episode of *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles*?" She laughs. "Yeah, right. George Lucas. I thought it was a joke."

She went on to direct two episodes of the series, one of which was set in Varanasi, which is where Mehta first came across the widows' houses: broken-down buildings filled with destitute women with shaved heads and thin white robes. "I'd seen a lot of widows while growing up, but I'd never seen the institutionalization of widows as an adult," she says. "That was my first exposure, and I said, 'My god, one day I'd really like to do a film about this whole phenomenon.'"

Water and *Fire* are two parts of an ambitious trilogy in which politics intersect with the personal aspects of women's lives. The third film, *Earth*, is set in 1947 in Lahore during the time when India was literally splitting in two. Based on a novel by Pakistani writer Bapsi Sidhwa, the film follows the fortunes of a beautiful Hindu nanny as the British pull out of India and a violent sectarian war erupts.

When she started working on *Earth*, Mehta says, the film seemed especially relevant because the genocide in Rwanda was

Deepa Mehta on the set of *Water*.

only a year or two old. "Bapsi said something intriguing to me, which was that all wars are fought on women's bodies," she says. "I think that's especially true of sectarian war, which is so devastating."

Though each part of the trilogy takes place in a different era, the three films clearly have common themes. Each is about the struggle of a woman—or women—to escape male oppression, but that doesn't mean that all the women in them are angelic. Along with their complex heroines, many of Mehta's films feature powerful matriarchs bent on thwarting the heroine's wishes. "The only people these matriarchs can exercise power over is other women, so they abuse them," says Mehta. "I find that fascinating."

In between *Earth* and *Water*, when she was recovering from the aborted production in Varanasi, Mehta took some time out to make a completely different kind of film. *Bollywood/Hollywood*, which came out in 2002, is a romantic comedy full of snappy dialogue, quirky characters, and joyous song-and-dance numbers. After what had happened in Varanasi, Mehta says, "I felt like doing something irreverent. I think I wrote *Bollywood/Hollywood* in about a month. It was very liberating."

Even at her most frivolous, though, Mehta has a knack for creating intriguing, believable characters. From Rocky, the house servant in *Bollywood/Hollywood* who has a secret double life as a transvestite nightclub singer, to Shakuntala, the middle-aged widow in *Water* whose Hindu faith conflicts with her earthly desires, Mehta's characters have rich, fascinating inner lives. Thanks to her ability to write such full characters, Mehta has been able to attract leading Indian actresses like Seema Biswas and Shabana Azmi to the roles.

These days, Mehta divides her time between Toronto and Delhi, spending approximately half the year in each city. Not being fully immersed in either culture "has given me an ability not to look at them through rose-colored glasses," she says. That clear perspective on both countries will come in handy when she films her next project, *Kamagata Maru*, a story of how Canada, fearing a "brown invasion," refused to accept a ship full of Indian immigrants in 1914.

With any luck, the project will be free from controversy—but don't bank on it. Mehta tends to pick subjects that get under people's skins, and *Kamagata Maru* is bound to raise some thorny questions about race and immigration. If it's anything like Mehta's other films, it will be a powerful piece of filmmaking that, because it encourages out-of-the-box thinking, also ruffles some feathers. "It all starts from curiosity," Mehta says. "Why can't two women make a choice to be together or a widow get married? Why do we have racism and exclusion? That's what it's about—why, why, why?" ★

Photograph by Dawoni Salzman