

An interview with Deepa Mehta, director of *Earth*

"If people want to separate they should understand what it would really mean"

Richard Phillips
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Indian-born director Deepa Mehta spoke with Richard Phillips last month following her attendance at the Melbourne International Film Festival. The festival, like its Sydney counterpart, screened *Earth*, Mehta's latest work. The film, based on the novel *Cracking India* by Bapsi Sidhwa, deals with the 1947 partition of India, as witnessed by a child. *Earth* will be released world-wide in mid-September with Australian screenings beginning in Melbourne on September 16 and Sydney showings sometime in October.

Deepa Mehta began her filmmaking career after she immigrated to Canada in 1973. She started writing scripts for children's films before moving into television work as an editor, producer and director. In 1985, she directed *Travelling Light*, a one-hour television documentary on Dilip Mehta, a world-renowned photographer, and in 1987 produced and co-directed the television film *Martha, Ruth & Edie*. In 1990 Mehta made her feature film debut with *Sam and Me*, a poignant story set in Canada about a friendship between an Indian immigrant and an elderly Jewish man. The widely-acclaimed film was followed in 1994 by *Camilla*, starring Jessica Tandy and Bridget Fonda.

Mehta's third feature, *Fire*, produced in 1996, tells the story of two lower middle class Indian women, both trapped in arranged marriages, who form a lesbian relationship. The movie, which is set in contemporary New Delhi, provoked hostile demonstrations by Hindu fundamentalists who attempted to force the government to ban the film. Screenings were stopped in several cities and the film was resubmitted to the Indian censorship board. The Indian censorship board eventually re-released the film uncut.

Mehta's latest feature, *Earth*, is a moving account of the British partition of India in August 1947 into a Muslim-controlled Pakistan and a Hindu-dominated India (see link to film review below). At least 11 million people—Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and others—were driven out of their homes. Some reports put the death toll from communalist pogroms and rioting at one million. The greatest numbers were killed in Punjab, which was split in two. Tens of thousands died in weeks of carnage. Partition was organised by the British Labour government with the support and collaboration of the Muslim League and the Indian Congress Party.

Richard Phillips: Before talking about *Earth*, can we discuss *Fire*? You said in one interview that nothing had prepared you for the response to this film in India. Can you elaborate?

Deepa Mehta: We all knew that *Fire* would perhaps be a contentious film in India and so when it went through the censor without one cut we were very heartened. Our censor boards are not like yours, or the North American censors. They just don't cut things here and there because of violence or sex; they are sort of moral guardians. So for them to have passed *Fire* without one cut was very heartening. We thought this is good, things are becoming very liberal.

When it opened in India, and it was opened at 40 cities I think, it did really well. The response was amazing and it was played for three weeks before the controversy started. So in the period between the censorship, as well as the fact that it was doing well at the box office, and the favourable reviews from the critics, I thought that everything was fine and I could move on to the next project.

Within two days of me saying this, the s--t hit the fan. There were demonstrations and protests, all sorts of things started happening. I suppose I was a little naive in thinking that because it had screened without any problems for three weeks everything would be all right. But I am not a politician, I am a filmmaker, and although you should be able to distance yourself from your own work and be objective about it, there is so much of your own personal emotions and involvement put into a film and so I was shocked.

There were protests against *Fire*, there were demonstrations for it and there were editorials, both for and against. There was a mobilisation of the women's movement and a great mobilisation of people for freedom of expression. And so although the fundamentalists started the protests, the whole thing took off and became more than the film. *Fire* became a much larger issue—a springboard for a dialogue about the fact that women in India don't have choices and how dare anybody tell them what they should watch and what they should not. Or what is morally right for them, and what is not. So it started a huge debate in India.

The government really didn't know what to do about the protests so they banned the film in Bombay and Delhi, the two major cities, and then sent it back to the censors to be reviewed with the possibility that they may make some cuts. Much to the censor board's credit they said no, they would not cut it and it played throughout India, including in Bombay and Delhi.

RP: What was the response of Shiv Sena and other Hindu fundamentalists to the censor's decision?

DM: They've just kept quiet and have effectively disappeared from the scene on this issue. It's like when a bully meets a strong opposition, they just cower. The opposition to these elements, and in support of *Fire*, was very widespread. It was not only the so-called intellectuals, but also housewives and students. All sorts of people spoke out.

RP: You've said that although *Fire* deals with the problems facing Indian women, every character in the film is a victim of society's rules and regulations. Could you explain?

DM: *Fire* is about particular individuals, but it is also a universal question, not unlike *Earth*. At the moment I am reading Luis Buñuel's autobiography; it's called *My Last Sigh*. Buñuel talks about the importance of characters being rooted to a place. He says that any character that is honest and rooted to a place immediately becomes universal because human emotions are universal. I think this is true.

Every society or traditional value, whether in the east or the west, has an incredible impact on human behaviour. So everybody in *Fire*—the women, the men—confront these problems. The younger man in *Fire* really wants to get married to a Chinese girl. She doesn't want to marry him. He doesn't want to be in a joint business, but this is the way things are dictated. And so the complex pressures of society impose on all the characters.

RP: Can you provide some background to *Earth*—why you made the film and why you think there have been so few films made by western filmmakers about the partition of India?

DM: The partition of India was like a Holocaust for us and I grew up hearing many stories about this terrible event. Naturally I was attracted to this subject.

I have my own theory about why there has been such a silence about this tragedy by western filmmakers, and it is just a theory. I think it is bound up with a number of attitudes that prevail in the western countries about India. Obviously I am not including everybody in this generalisation, there are many exceptions, but there are several conceptions that prevail in the west about India. There is firstly the spiritual India—a place where you go and find nirvana. Secondly, there is the conception that India is entirely poverty stricken, with a permanent kind of begging bowl attitude. There is the India of Maharajas, princes and queens, and the India that comes from nostalgia for the Raj. And there is always the prevailing pressure that people should feel superior to some other place: look how bad India is with all the beggars, aren't we lucky to be better off.

It is uncomfortable and difficult for some filmmakers to produce works that destroy these perceptions. India brings specifically fixed images in many western minds, and the minute you start de-exoticising that, you have you deal with Indians as real people, and there is a pressure not to do that.

Finally, there are many dark political questions about partition that the British establishment doesn't want brought to light. When you know the real history of partition and the responsibility that lands in the laps of the British, obviously you understand why it is a very uncomfortable subject for them. Generally the response there has been to romanticise Gandhi and Lord Mountbatten. This is done to such a degree that I find it quite nauseous.

RP: *Earth* is a direct statement against nationalism and separatism, not just in India, but everywhere. Could you comment?

DM: Oh yes, it certainly was. Of course *Earth* for me was a very particular film in that it deals with the partition into India and Pakistan by the British, but also it has that universal resonance. Whether you look at Kosovo, Ireland, in fact, whatever country has been colonised, wherever there has been some kind of separatism, division, or so-called ethnic cleansing, 50 years later there are still all the same problems. In fact the situation is always worse than before the division.

RP: Could you explain the situation that confronted your family during partition?

DM: My father and his brothers were brought up in Lahore and they faced tremendous difficulties. They had to leave their family home. They never saw their friends again and my father never saw his Muslim friends again. I grew up hearing about all the horror stories of partition, as did a lot of people who were from the Punjab, the area most affected. In fact, if you ask anybody from the Punjab today, and we are talking about third generation, what does 1947 mean to you, they will never say the independence of India. They all say the partition of India. Every family member has some horror story to tell. It was a Holocaust.

RP: At the question and answer session after the screening of *Earth* in Melbourne someone made a statement that Muslims and Hindus had their own homeland, why shouldn't the Sikhs? You rejected this. Could you comment?

DM: Either we decide that we want to be a part of a single united country or we divide up on the basis of religion. If the last course is taken,

the basis for division will become narrower, narrower and narrower. It might appease one's ego for the moment, but to follow such a course would be a disaster. All the same problems would remain and the divisions would never end. The Sikhs might want a homeland, tomorrow the people of South India will want one, and it will carry on and on. And we know that it doesn't work.

There are certain lessons that have to be learnt from history. When we don't learn those lessons then what is the point of recording history?

The issue of separation comes down to a socio-economic platform where religious fervour is used, or misused, by politicians for their own ends. Today it is basically the dollar that drives the demands for separation. The British first perfected it through the method of divide and rule. Today it is a similar kind of colonialism except the multinational corporations are doing it. And what is happening in the Balkans is a horrible example of it.

Film is a powerful medium and my hope is that *Earth* will produce a dialogue and force people to think more deeply about the cost of such divisions. If people want to separate they should understand what it would really mean. I know that there will be some dialogue or some debate. I hope that *Earth* will put this into perspective. I think I have made a film that shows the futility of sectarian war, a film that is anti-war.

RP: *Earth* personalises the partition. Could you explain the complexities of personalising the political?

DM: First of all I have to be engaged personally on an emotional level with all my characters. To make epic sweeps and have politicians representing the anguish that the ordinary people went through is not for me. I wanted to tell this really large story from the standpoint of an intimate group of friends from different ethnic groups and trace out the process of partition through them. The difficulty for me was to keep a balance between the intimate and the epic, and to do that you must always give your characters the power to represent a point of view and not be scared of doing that. You have to trust your characters.

RP: What were some of the more memorable moments in making *Earth*?

DM: There were so many. I was amazed at how much the film engaged me emotionally every day. This was a revelation. As you know we don't shoot linearly, we shoot according to the schedule. But whichever scene we shot, it affected me very deeply because I know that all this happened. Whether it was the love scene, the train scene, or little Lenny saying it is my birthday and everybody is too busy reading the newspapers or the little boy saying, "my mother was raped and do you want to play marbles?" All these scenes had a profound effect on me.

I couldn't divorce myself from the pain that Lenny, or Bapsi [author of *Cracking India*], or the ordinary people went through and then you would get up in the morning and read the newspapers about how nuclear-armed India and Pakistan were getting ready to fight again. Suddenly everything we were doing in the film was in context. It was very eerie.

Earth was also a period of self-exploration for me, if you like. I got to know a lot about myself and I also recognised that there is so much more to learn. It was not just a question of making an anti-war film, but a constant challenge.

RP: You have no formal training in filmmaking. Who are the directors that have most influenced you?

DM: There are a quite a number but there is one group of great masters. There is Satyajit Ray whose work has played an enormous part in my appreciation for the cinema. I regard him as one of the most lyrical and humanist filmmakers of the century. I also admire Mizoguchi, Ozu, Vittorio de Sica, as great masters.

There are three contemporary directors that immediately come to mind whom I enjoy and am inspired by. I think Emir Kusturica is brilliant, and one of my favourite films of all time is *Time of the Gypsies*. I like the fact that he doesn't flee from an emotion, he embraces it fully. He doesn't seem

to give a damn about how his films will be perceived. If he wants to be irreverent he will be. I like the use of music in his films, I love the heart of his films and they always carry a very strong political message. I also like Pedro Almadovar very much—I like his black humour—and I like Peter Weir, because he has managed to keep his integrity as a director while making his films very accessible. That I admire enormously. I am sure I could go on at length.

RP: Can you provide us with information about your next film, *Water*, the third movie in your trilogy?

DM: I am in pre-production right now and we start shooting on November 1 in Varanasi, which is our holy city, our Mecca or Jerusalem if you will. It is on the banks of the Ganges, about 2,000 years old, and it is a city of temples. The film is set in the 1930s and is about the politics of religion and its impact on ordinary people. So *Fire* was about the politics of sexuality, I guess. *Earth* is about the politics of nationalism and *Water* about the politics of religion.



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