

# "The only appropriate response is to make the film" An interview with filmmaker Deepa Mehta

David Walsh  
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Indian-born filmmaker Deepa Mehta, as readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* will know, has come under attack from right-wing forces in India for her efforts to make a new film, *Water*. Hindu fundamentalist elements, without of course having seen the script, pronounced Mehta's new work "anti-Hindu," and launched a physical attack on her film set last January and destroyed it. This was followed by a sustained smear campaign, in which Mehta was characterized as a "plagiarizer," an opponent of Gandhi, an opportunist making a career in the West by criticizing India, etc.

In the end, faced with the violent opposition of the fundamentalist forces, the hostility or cowardice of the media and the refusal of the political and cultural establishment in India to take any serious steps in her defense, Mehta was obliged to suspend shooting *Water* and return to Toronto, where she lives. Her plan has been to continue making the film in India later in the year.

This affair has considerable international significance. The immediate circumstances are distinctly Indian, but right-wing forces around the world feel increasingly emboldened to press ahead with attacks on democratic rights and the right of artists to express themselves freely on political, social and moral questions.

In the US, for example, Christian fundamentalists have conducted campaigns against libraries and bookstores and against freedom of expression on the Internet, in the name of combating child pornography and such. Publicly funded museums and the National Endowment for the Arts have come under attack by right-wing politicians, primarily Republican, for organizing or funding "controversial" exhibits and works. Police organizations and their allies in both the Democratic and Republican parties have attempted to muzzle any criticism of the Mumia Abu-Jamal frame-up in Philadelphia or the murder of Amadou Diallo in New York City.

The WSWWS launched a campaign in defense of Deepa Mehta because we felt the destruction of her film set was a particularly sinister and blatant effort, organized by chauvinist and fascistic forces with the connivance of governments at various levels, to silence an artist. To allow such attacks to go unanswered would encourage these right-wing elements and weaken the position of artists and intellectuals everywhere. The campaign received support from individuals and groups in India and Sri Lanka, Europe, Australia and North America. Filmmakers, including Ken Loach and Mohsen Makhmalbaf, film critics and film festival administrators have also responded.

The ascension to power of the Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) in India, as the head of a coalition government, has certainly strengthened the hand of Hindu fundamentalist forces. The demonization of Mehta and others, artists and historians, as "anti-Indian" and "anti-Hindu" is part of an effort to divert attention from the terrible social conditions, for which none of the bourgeois parties has any solution, and line up desperate layers of the

population behind some reactionary and fantastic project of a Greater India.

At the same time, the touchiness of the BJP and its ultra-right allies makes clear that they hardly have a firm grip on the situation. After all, Mehta has simply made two films—one depicting a relationship between two women and another exposing the horrors of communalism—and proposed to make a third, about the plight of Hindu widows in the 1930s. In discussing certain glaring social problems the filmmaker did not seek a head-on confrontation with the Indian establishment or important sections of it, yet she has faced one. That this critical voice provokes such a reaction indicates the fragility and volatility of the social situation on the entire subcontinent. If a socialist working class opposition to the BJP coalition were mounted this regime would quickly unravel.

But if there were such a mass progressive political alternative Deepa Mehta would not have found herself in her current predicament to begin with. After the January 30 attack, governments in Madhya Pradesh (Congress Party) and West Bengal (Communist Party of India [Marxist]) expressed interest in having *Water* made in their states. It seems likely that this interest was never more than passive or perfunctory. The media claim that the film's script was "anti-Gandhi" was aimed in part at cooling Congress's support for Mehta. Neither Congress nor the Stalinist parties are willing or able to combat Indian chauvinism in a principled fashion. Playing the nationalist card, after all, is one of their principal strategies. At the time of the Pakistani-organized incursion in Kashmir last year, for example, Congress and the Stalinists joined the BJP in an outburst of indignant patriotic fervor.

The response of the traditional party of the Indian bourgeoisie, as well as the "left" parties, and the general indifference—with honorable exceptions—within film and cultural circles to the attack on *Water* point to what is an international trend. At the time of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's crude attack on the "Sensation" show at the Brooklyn Museum last fall, we noted the extreme reluctance of the liberal-cultural elite in New York City to offer any serious resistance. This social layer—considerably enriched over the past two decades, self-satisfied, increasingly conservative—is barely capable of paying lip service to the right to free artistic self-expression. In India we see the same social tendency playing itself out: those in the cultural establishment who are not bullied by the extreme right lack a genuine commitment to democratic principles.

The increasing inability of the ruling elites in various parts of the world to tolerate criticism or even truthful reporting bears witness to powerful social currents that have only begun to make themselves felt in political life. It is once again becoming true that every official party and institution "fears superstitiously every new word" (Trotsky). There is no other way to explain the explosive reaction to what are as yet relatively mild criticisms. What will happen when artists mount a more all-sided and

global challenge?

For our part, we view the defense of art and the specifically artistic personality as no small matter. The goal of reaction is always to suppress or marginalize those human beings who act as the most significant outlets for the great subterranean currents that flow in and around all of us. Genuine art sensitizes, vitalizes, humanizes and always represents a danger to the existing state of things. One can establish it as a law of the modern era, as universally valid as any other, that no profound social change is *possible* unless artists have criticized, enriched and transformed the content of mental life.

Today we largely experience this phenomenon in the negative. An element in the ability of ruling elites in recent decades to carry out policies detrimental to wide layers of the population without arousing mass opposition has been the relative absence of that sort of critical, restless, textured, “thickened” consciousness serious and sustained artistic work inevitably helps create.

It is a form of self-indictment when a society assaults or refuses to defend the most sensitive and least protected part of its culture, its artists. The attack on Deepa Mehta was entirely unprovoked, unwarranted and cowardly. Her principal crime was honesty. We are proud to have defended Mehta's unconditional right to make her film in any manner she saw fit, and will continue to do so.

In mid-June we spoke to Deepa Mehta in Toronto. Also present for a portion of the conversation was David Hamilton, a producer on *Fire* (1996), *Earth* (1998) and now *Water*.

*David Walsh:* Your film has been accused of being anti-Hindu.... We had this incident in New York City. [Mayor Rudolph] Giuliani declared that a painting [in the “Sensation” show] was anti-Catholic. Well, it wasn't probably, but what if it had been? There's no law against being anti-Catholic or anti-religious.

*Deepa Mehta:* Yes, this has come up. It's not anti-Hindu, but what if it was? So what. But one of the best quotes was one that David got from the press. The press has a lot to do with this.

*David Hamilton:* Absolutely. When we were in India every day we'd come down in the elevator and there'd be a hundred press people there. One time I'd seen something that was particularly ridiculous and false, so I told them, “You are all disgusting. You know you're lying.” One of the senior members of the press corps replied, “This is a democracy, we have the right to lie.” I have it on video.

*DM:* Incredible.

*DW:* So what is the present situation?

*DM:* We're still trying to get it together to make the film. The question is where, this is what's difficult.

*DW:* You're still hoping to film in the fall.

*DM:* Yes, if we can.

*DW:* Is the problem finding a safe place in India to do it?

*DM:* There isn't one. [To David Hamilton] What do you think?

*DH:* There's the matter of the risk you're putting people under. It doesn't matter where you shoot in India, these people will show up. It's difficult to make a decision that would put everyone in that position.

*DW:* Had you shot anything?

*DM:* Two days' worth.

*DW:* What's the state of the legal case? The plagiarism case.

*DM:* There is no plagiarism.

*DW:* I know, but I mean your case.

*DM:* I don't know what will happen with it. It comes up in July. It's a joke. It could drag on for years.

*DW:* Could you go over the immediate background to the attack on the film set?

*DM:* It was in June, I think, that I finished the script of *Water* and we applied for official permission. You have to apply for permission to shoot in India, from the minister of information.

*DW:* Is there a censorship board?

*DM:* No. It started in the early 1970s when Louis Malle made a series of documentaries about India. You didn't have to get permission to shoot in India before that. The Indian government, when they saw the documentaries, were horrified. So they decided that any foreigner coming to shoot in India had to apply for permission.

*DW:* Oh, only foreigners.

*DM:* Yes, it doesn't apply to Indian filmmakers or citizens. You have to give your script in to the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, and it's processed. They look at it and examine it with a microscope. For example, *Midnight's Children*. They were doing a mini-series. When they sent this script to the ministry it was denied permission. They do deny permission. If they think it might be inappropriate.

*DW:* Do they suggest changes, or simply say yes or no?

*DM:* They can suggest changes. And you can say either that you will make them or you won't. Sometimes they simply say no.

*DW:* So you don't retain Indian citizenship.

*DM:* No.

*DW:* Because India doesn't recognize dual citizenship.

*DM:* No. So I had to apply for permission, as I had done with *Fire* and *Earth*. So it was no big deal. I applied for *Water*, and I received permission.

*DW:* They didn't say anything.

*DM:* No, no cuts, nothing. And I know they must have really scrutinized the script, after all the confusion about *Fire*. In fact, they all told me how much they really liked the script. That was that. We all arrived in India and pre-production began.

*DW:* When did you arrive?

*DM:* Six weeks before, in November. December. I was there a few weeks earlier. I was in Madras. Then I was on location in Varanasi. I'd been there in September too. We arrived there, set up office; hired people from all over the world and India. We all got there. Everything was fine. We did everything according to regulations. Once you get permission you just aren't allowed to go and make the film, because you might not make it according to the script you submitted. So the government sends a liaison officer, from the ministry, who is there the entire time you're shooting. He's got a copy of the script and he follows it. He knows if you're shooting what you said you were shooting. So it's not as though you can go and shoot anything you like.

This is a blanket permission issued for all India. But the state government ... you need to consider the state government, to talk to them. Because the central government has given permission, they aren't supposed to interfere, but it's good manners. So we were in touch with them. I had spoken to somebody from the state film commission. He came over to Varanasi and said how happy he was, how happy the local ministry was that we were shooting. That it was a big thing for Varanasi that we were shooting there. I met the minister of tourism as well, who had me over for lunch, and was very polite, very helpful.

It started with this guy, this film commission guy who came over. He started saying things like: “I have a friend and he should be in charge of getting all the extras. Why don't you give him a role in the film, and why don't you give him distribution rights for the province?” Basically we told him to buzz off. And he said—he was really angry—“We'll see how you'll make the film in Varanasi.” We didn't pay much attention to him.

*DW:* He made no political comments.

*DM:* No, none.

*DW:* You weren't actually on the spot January 30 when the set was destroyed

*DM:* No, it happened before shooting was supposed to begin.

*DW:* Was there security there?

*DM:* They all ran away. There were only a few of them.

*DH:* The television stations were warned about it, that's how they got

there.

*DM:* They informed the television stations that they were going to do this. And the press. And the police knew about it too.

*DW:* What was the nature of the set?

*DM:* It was the set of the house of widows.

*DW:* Interiors and exteriors?

*DM:* Interiors and exteriors. It was a period piece. We had done a lot of work.

*DW:* Where was this?

*DM:* Very close to Varanasi. It was something we built.

*DW:* How long did it take to build?

*DM:* We had been there for eight weeks, six weeks.

*DH:* The physical damage wasn't as great as was reported. It wasn't in the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

*DM:* No, our major loss was having to stop the shoot. That's what killed us. All that pre-production...

*DW:* How did you become aware of what was going on?

*DM:* The minute the mob started we got to know. Our location people.

*DW:* Did you go and observe the results?

*DM:* Yeah, it was awful.

*DW:* Do you know how the crowd operated when it got there?

*DM:* There were ten people who were really in charge of the whole thing. The rest were just along for... Because when they were asked, they didn't know what it was about.

*DW:* Do you know who those ten people were?

*DM:* They said who they were, members of the various right-wing parties.

*DW:* Can you tell me about the film script?

*DM:* The film is a period piece, set in the 1930s. It's about three widows in a house of widows in Varanasi. Varanasi is like the Hindu Jerusalem, because of its location on the Ganges River. Very important. Women in India traditionally, when their husbands died, went or were sent to spend the rest of their lives in Varanasi, in contemplation of God. Because according to our holy book, or the interpretation of our holy book, while a woman's husband is alive she is half his body, and when she dies he becomes half his corpse. Society makes it very difficult for women when they become widows. This is a proven fact, I haven't made this up. This is what happens. Women spend the rest of their lives like this. They have to go through rites of renunciation, they have to shave their heads, they're only allowed to wear one piece of cloth, and lead a very stark, difficult life. They're forced into renunciation.

There are homes all over Varanasi for widows. In the 1930s child marriage still existed. They still exist now, but they were far more prevalent then. *Water* is about a seven-year-old widow who arrives in a house of widows and how...

*DW:* She's seven years old?

*DM:* She's seven, because of child marriage. It still happens now, it was far more common then. And how when she arrives there she acts as a catalyst for two women, widows, one who is about fifty and has reconciled herself to this particular existence, and one, who is about twenty-one, who hasn't. The film looks at how they change their lives because of her. That's the story of *Water*.

*DW:* How widely was this practiced?

*DM:* It happened in great numbers. Not now. Or not so much. There are still houses of widows in Varanasi in the year 2000. The government is becoming far more aware of it, more than the government, social groups, especially women's groups, are trying to make sure that it's not so grim as it was.

*DW:* Are there particular castes that practiced this?

*DM:* No, simply Hindus.

*DW:* What was your impulse in writing this script?

*DM:* For me, it's a women's issue. Society has to look at this. The

hardships, especially for women.

*DW:* So how did this controversy arise?

*DM:* They hadn't read the script, of course.

*DW:* You say the fundamentalists added their interpretation. What was their interpretation?

*DM:* They said it was about an untouchable man and a Brahmin widow.

*DW:* Does that go on?

*DM:* I don't know if it goes on, it certainly doesn't go on in my script.

*DW:* That's what I meant. I hope it does go on.

*DM:* It might be healthy if it did. Of course it does. The main thing is that I had permission from the central government, if they wanted to stop it, they should have stopped it then. You can't give permission, have a whole crew there and then sit back and watch this circus unfold.

*DW:* What about your own background as a filmmaker?

*DM:* I love movies.

*DW:* I know you did some television.

*DM:* Very little.

*DW:* You made *Travelling Light* [1985].

*DM:* It was a film about a photojournalist, who happens to be my brother. That was very interesting. I grew up with movies, my father was a film distributor in India.

*DW:* Indian films?

*DM:* Mostly Indian. Also foreign films. Hitchcock.

*DW:* Which films influenced you, do you remember?

*DM:* Hindi films.

*DW:* Did you consider it a particular difficulty to be a female film director in that context?

*DM:* Not really. It's difficult for women everywhere, whether you're in North America or India, or anywhere? It was very much a boys club.

*DW:* *Sam and Me* [1991]?

*DM:* That was my first feature, set in Toronto. It's about four white-collar Indian immigrants living in a rooming house. And the relationship between one of them, a new immigrant ... the only job he can get is looking after an 80-year-old Jewish man who wants to go to Israel. The relationship between one who wants to stay here and one who wants to go.

*DW:* Did you enjoy it?

*DM:* Oh, I loved it. It had a lot to do with what I was going through myself. Identity, what did nationalism mean, can one belong to another country, issues that concerned me at that point.

*DW:* What about *Camilla* [1994]?

*DM:* *Sam and Me* was a small budget film, and this was much larger. It came perhaps too quickly. I didn't have the same freedom, I didn't have final cut. The difficulty of directing in the Hollywood system.

*DW:* I'm curious, have you heard from any of the people you worked with on these films?

*DM:* All the time...

*DW:* I mean, in support.

*DM:* Totally.

*DW:* Bridget Fonda.

*DM:* She sent a message through her agent, asking if I was all right. I got a message from Elias [Koteas]. Bridget is a lovely person.

*DH:* You heard from George.

*DW:* Which one?

*DM:* Lucas. They've been very supportive.

*DW:* You did an episode of *Young Indiana Jones*.

*DM:* I did two.

*DW:* How was that?

*DM:* Fabulous. I learned a lot. One I shot in Benares, ironically, and one in Greece.

*DW:* Was there a particular moment or event that prompted you to make a series of historical films? [*Fire, Earth and Water*]

*DM:* After *Camilla*, I felt that in the future, if I ever made another film, I

wanted to have control of the process. I wanted to make films that I believed in. Films that reflected something I was going through in my life. With *Fire* it was a lot about maturity. What you want to do with your career, your life. After Camilla, I knew I had to make *Fire*. So I wrote the script.

*DW*: When you wrote *Fire*, did you envision a trilogy?

*DM*: No, when we were finishing *Fire*.... It was a strange thing. We were shooting the last scene, and someone asked me, "What are you going to do next?" And I said, "I'm going to make *Earth* next." And I knew I wanted it to be about partition.

*DW*: How do you look back on the controversy over *Fire* now?

*DM*: Ridiculous.

*DW*: Who generated that?

*DM*: The Shiv Sena, which is a fundamentalist group.

*DW*: And what did that consist of? Demonstrations...

*DM*: Burning movie halls, terrorizing the people standing in line.

*DW*: Did the film close down?

*DM*: In Bombay and Delhi. It ran in Benares for thirty weeks. It ran for weeks without problems.

*DW*: This is the work of a small minority. If the population had been outraged over the showing of *Fire*, then they would have reacted.

*DM*: That's true.

*DW*: If there really were a concerted response, a principled response, by significant forces in India, these right-wing elements could be routed. They're not the masses.

*DM*: Absolutely not! This is not about the Indian people. This is what really upsets me.

*DW*: Speaking of *Earth*, it seems to me that there's a universal problem or challenge in historical films ... the relationship between artistic spontaneity and the need to fit characters into certain patterns, social types. The historical event is a known quantity. How do you treat history and maintain that spontaneity? So the individuals are not simply pat, spokesmen for social categories.

*DM*: These boring, cardboard figures...

*DW*: But there are films like that.

*DM*: Yeah, but I'm not interested in them. Film is a medium that fascinates me and this is an issue—partition, nationalism, religion, division, sectarian war—that fascinates me. You can have an historical film, but if you don't feel something for characters who reach you personally, and on an emotional level, I think it's useless. The films I like are ones in which I respond to the human characters, if I identify with the people I will go with them for the entire ride. For me everything starts with the characters. That's how I start. Who are these people, and what makes them the way they are?

*DW*: How closely did you stick to the book?

*DM*: The book carries on for another fifty pages after the place I ended my film. I felt that everything was an anti-climax after that. In the book you have a great many other characters. I felt that the spirit of the book and its characters is there.

*DW*: What was the experience of making that film like? It was a big, complicated film.

*DM*: I loved it. I enjoy being on the set. The pre-production is painful. I learned a great deal from George Lucas and Rick McCallum about the importance of pre-production. To do all the preparation so you are comfortable when it comes to the shooting. That's what's so awful about *Water*. The amount of energy, time, effort that had already been invested in pre-production.

*DW*: It's horrible.

*DM*: Horrible.

*DW*: How do you work with actors? Do you have any particular approach? Do you rehearse a great deal?

*DM*: Not too much. I don't want the actors to go over their lines

hundreds of times. I like to warm them up the first day. After that I use a combination of methods, including improvisation. To see what the chemistry is like. I want them to feel comfortable with each other. If the actors have any questions or any confusion that they might feel awkward with, that's the time to sort it out. It's really important. You don't want somebody to stop the shooting and ask, "What's my motivation?" Comfort, their comfort with me, with each other, their understanding of their roles, why they're doing what they're doing.

*DW*: Do the actors surprise you at times?

*DM*: Absolutely, as they should.

*DW*: Do you have a strong feeling about working from your own scripts? Do you enjoy the writing process?

*DM*: I love the writing process. It's the most individual and introspective part of the process. But I prefer directing.

*DW*: And when you get to the directing, do you change what you've written?

*DM*: Invariably. When you get to the location, there are always things you haven't foreseen or planned for.

*DW*: But have things emotionally or psychologically changed, in a radical manner?

*DM*: No.

*DW*: You've been dealing with a range of historical issues, central human problems. Is it possible to abstain from dealing with critical issues, problems, and make lasting, valuable art?

*DM*: It has to be valuable, to be meaningful, I don't think you have to address specific issues.

*DW*: No.

*DM*: It's not about that.

*DW*: There are an infinite number of ways in which you approach certain problems, but is there something meaningful, something substantial at the center of it?

*DM*: It should be. It's very subjective.

*DW*: What are the things that concern you the most?

*DM*: Not simply issues. I love comedies. Many things. An exploration of the world. The politics of sexuality, the politics of the family, the politics of nationalism—to start a dialogue with people. Issues of patriarchy and matriarchy. Things that I was going through myself. About choices you make. When I made *Fire* I was going through a very difficult divorce. Nationalism, boundaries, globalization, sectarian war.

*DW*: What I was trying to say before, not very successfully.... It seems to me that an artistic work is always an exploration of something that you don't understand and want to understand. How does that process work in relation to an event whose outcome is more or less known, and toward which you already have a definite attitude?

*DM*: You know that if you go north you're going to hit Queen Street. The way you get there is what's interesting. If you want to walk through the park and see what it's like, or do you want to go down south and see what the winos are like, and then get there, or do you want to go straight there. It's the way to get there, that's what makes it different all the time. It's what I choose to see on my way there.

*DW*: For example, in regard to *Water* you begin with a position of being opposed to their fate.

*DM*: "Opposed..."

*DW*: Well, whatever word you want to use. The situation is tragic. But it's what you make of that tragedy. One is opposed to the slaughter of Hindus by Moslems, and Moslems by Hindus, but then what do you make of that, what human stories come out of that which are surprising and different and illuminating.

*DM*: The important thing for me was to create something that moved people. That is what's it about. Sectarian war, the slaughter, it's all horrible. But can you feel for the Ayah [in *Earth*], can you feel for the little girl? Then maybe you will think about what happened.

DW: Or even feel for the guy [the Ice Candy Man] who becomes a monster.

DM: Exactly. Can you imagine that?

DW: No. Well, it happens, so I have to imagine it.

DM: It happens, and we all know it happens. But there has to be something about the character that strikes a chord in you emotionally. Then if people stop simply being intellectual about it is good. With *Water* there aren't any huge messages in the film, as such, if there's something about these three women that touches you, and you think "This isn't right." The seven-year-old girl asks the older woman, in the film, "Where is the house of men widows?" She's a kid. I was hoping, I still do, that when that kid is on the screen asking that, people will respond. It's not about a particular message.

DW: No, any genuine artistic work contains the element of protest only in the sense that it makes other realities, and you're obliged to think about your own. Dreams are a form of protest. As long as it's deeply felt and truthful...

DM: And honest. That's the most important thing. Is it honest?

DW: What do you think of the present state of Canadian, or Indian, or international filmmaking?

DM: I respond to what I see, more than get into the politics of filmmaking. Take *Ju Dou*, I find it a highly political film, or *Raise the Red Lantern*. The latest one, by Zhang Yimou [*Not One Less*], didn't move me at all. Kiarostami is brilliant. These little children in the Iranian films. You sit there and you say, "My god, this is what it's all about." I don't know how you feel about Terrence Malick, but I thought *The Thin Red Line* was brilliant.

DW: I wasn't that crazy about his films in the 1970s. So I didn't know what to expect. But I thought parts of the film were incredible. The scenes of the Japanese prisoners in particular.

DM: For me it was an incredible marriage between the narrative, the cinematography, the music, which is what all remarkable films are. Incredible performances. I don't read about filmmakers, but I go to see a lot of films. Some of them are unbearable. You think, "God...!"

DW: There are some unbearable ones. To return to your situation, one tries to be objective, but it must be painful to be the object of such an attack.

DM: I went through the whole gamut of emotions. I was really angry.... [Elisabeth] Kubler-Ross talks about it in her book on death. [laughter] I went through the anger, the pain, the disappointment, the sense of betrayal, the "why me?," feeling sorry for myself. Now I accept the situation for what it is. How am I going to get the film made, which is what I'm focused on. The only thing that is an appropriate response to what happened, the injustice of it, the waste of it, the tragedy of it, is to make the film.

DW: Can I ask about the support in India, or the lack of support, or the general response you felt or sensed?

DM: I found very little support from the Indian film industry.

DW: Did you speak to people, or...?

DM: I was too involved in trying to make the film.

DW: Was there any appeal issued for support?

DM: In Bombay there were a few people who actually did come forward. There were a few who were very supportive. Writers, artists. A few were very vocal in Delhi. The main support came from Bengal, where there were actors and directors who actively wrote to people and wrote things in their own newspapers, saying "This is terrible." I wouldn't say there was no support, there was. Unfortunately, there was another attitude: "This serves Deepa right, because she's trying to make a career by exploiting India and selling it to the West. And all this was generated by herself, as a publicity stunt." This view was reflected widely, only one newspaper reported the event fairly, the *Hindustan Times*. The rest...

DW: Frankly, whether or not any of that was true, and of course we

reject it, so what? That would be no excuse not to defend democratic rights, even if all that were true. Talk about shortsightedness. Let's say you were an opportunist and a careerist, and you were just there to make a buck, so what? Does that mean they're prepared to have the fascists break down *their* doors the next day?

DM: Well, it was an opportunity for certain people to take the moral high ground, "Why support someone who is exploiting India?" It's deeper than that, that's the surface. Beyond that, the climate is unpredictable. If they make the wrong move, they might find themselves in a position similar to mine.

DW: As Trotsky once said, force not only conquers, it convinces. Cowardice, fear, confusion, disorientation which is not very admirable. The same attacks will be carried out more widely. If they succeed with you, then they'll go after the others, one way or another.

We have gotten considerable support on the web site, letters of protest and so forth. Many artists and directors from Sri Lanka.

DM: Yes, I was surprised and gratified by those guys.

DW: Has there been any protest from filmmakers here in Canada or in Hollywood? Aside from general sympathy, actual statements.

DM: George Lucas said some good things.

DW: The trouble is today even when there is support, it tends to be passive. That reflects some of the political difficulties. People are sympathetic. I spoke to a lot of filmmakers in San Francisco, they were all sympathetic. But I can't say any of them exactly jumped out of their chairs and said, "We've got to do something about this." We have to create that atmosphere again, where people don't put up with so much.

DM: I don't know why this apathy exists, but it does. Whether it's filmmakers in Hollywood or elsewhere, there's not much concern with world affairs. I don't know how I myself would have reacted before. Now there's a conference on women in Afghanistan, and I feel I have to participate. But there's a tendency to sit back.

I was barraged by criticism, that I was hurting the sentiments of the Indian people. I remember I was sitting in my parents' house and I began to have self-doubts. Was there something subversive in the film that even I wasn't aware of? The force against you can become so large, so powerful, that you begin to doubt all the things that you took for granted. That's what scares me.

DW: There are very powerful forces at work. But there are also potentially powerful forces opposing all that.

DM: I hope to God that's true. Even four years ago I wouldn't have paid so much attention to these things, but because of what's happened to me.... It's not just an intellectual commitment, it has to be an emotional one. There are people who not concerned, who say, "It's not happening to me, it's not in my country."

DW: There is a layer of the population that's become extremely wealthy and narrow and selfish. And we see it in the film industry. I'm convinced there will more powerful forces opposing all that. The Christian fundamentalists and such are not going to rule the world.

DM: Oh, I hope not. I doubt it really. It's very short-lived. The people who are whipped up are very insecure, psychologically insecure.

DW: Economically insecure.

DM: For ten minutes they think they're important. They are called the protectors of Indian values. This sort of movement gives to these people, whose lives are so miserable, some measure of self-importance.

DW: Nobody else is offering them anything.

DM: No one is giving them anything. They feel important.

DW: Some genuine alternative has to be offered, some politically progressive alternative.

DM: That's right. There has to be something else.

DW: There are going to be masses of people increasingly desperately looking for solutions. And these right-wing forces have no social program, no solution for the poor and the desperate. But that has to be made clear.

What's the appeal? They feel the world is changing, things are getting worse, life is more and more insecure, "eternal values" are being attacked, look at these decadent, immoral filmmakers and God knows what, foreigners. But it can be counteracted. It's a period of great confusion.

*DM:* That's what I feel too. The technological revolution too is disrupting lives. Perhaps it weakens our ability to reflect. Reflection is so important. The ability to think about our lives.

*DW:* What about the media?

*DM:* These were daily papers. Some of them were outraged to begin with. A lot of them bought into it very quickly, very powerfully. The initial reaction was outrage, there's no question about that. For a lot of people, not all of them, it became not about freedom of expression, or the fact that we had permission, it shifted to something else.

*DW:* Did they not know the facts, or did they not want to?

*DM:* I don't know, I got tired of talking to people.

*DW:* "This is a democracy, we have the right to lie." They do the same here, they might not be as honest about admitting it.

*DM:* Suddenly I became anti-Indian, and nobody cared to look very deeply.

*DW:* What was the response of the actors and the crew?

*DM:* Total support, incredibly supportive. I'm determined to make the film, even if it has to be done in a studio in Toronto.

*DW:* You're not interested in being a martyr, you didn't incite all this. You did nothing to provoke this. If you were really out just to get publicity, you'd proceed in a different manner.

*DM:* What would I be doing?

*DW:* I don't know, but something else.

*DM:* I don't know what else to do, except to make the film.

*DW:* That's the job of a filmmaker, to make films. The complicated business is that film and art have all sorts of implications and ramifications that may go far beyond your own consciousness of them—as you've discovered.

*DM:* As I've discovered.

*DW:* You've touched a raw nerve. Which is to your credit.

I saw *Shadows in the Dark* [1999], by Pankaj Butalia. It's an honest and intelligent film about partition.

*DM:* I know his documentaries. He made a superb documentary about widows.

*DW:* The film also contained homosexuality, which he said was no longer so taboo in Indian filmmaking.

*DM:* I helped. [Laughter]

*DW:* How does it feel to be a trailblazer?

*DM:* I don't think about it.

*DW:* Is there some significance perhaps to the fact that you are outside the country, and therefore to say some of these things?

*DM:* I'm sure there is. I have a certain amount of freedom, a certain amount of protection, I suppose.

*DW:* There was no organized protest against *Earth*.

*DM:* Not that I know of. There was a lot of criticism outside the country. "How dare you show this picture of India?"

*DW:* I asked the question about being outside the country.... I meant also that there might be a certain amount of intimidation.

*DM:* I'm not intimidated.

*DW:* But those in India itself.

Have you thought past *Water*, what you would like to do?

*DM:* I would like to do a comedy.

*DW:* I don't blame you.

*DM:* A full-fledged comedy.

*DW:* A number of filmmakers have spoken out in your support. Mohsen Makhmalbaf made a statement.

*DM:* He was in India.

*DW:* He was going to make a film about India, I don't think he ever did.

*DM:* Someone else who has been very supportive is John Sayles.

*DW:* Really? Good.

*DM:* Yes, he's been very supportive. Very nice.

*DW:* Ken Loach...

*DM:* Ken Loach is brilliant, what a filmmaker!

*DW:* He made a statement at a showing of *Land and Freedom* in Sheffield, calling on everyone to sign a petition in your support, and saying that you needed support around the world.

*DM:* Oh, really.

*DW:* Anyway, we have garnered important support.

*DM:* I appreciate it, it's been great. Sometimes you feel so alone.

*DW:* That's what these forces are banking on, that they can intimidate the media, intimidate official cultural elite, shut everybody up, even those that know better, and then you will be isolated.

I think we're on the eve of a cultural and political revival.

*DM:* I hope so.

*DW:* If you tell the truth, it doesn't matter which aspect of reality you tell the truth about, it's always dangerous to somebody.

Is there anything you would like to add?

*DM:* I haven't really been giving interviews at all.

*DW:* Well, I appreciate it. If people told me they had the right to lie, I might shy away from the media too. Obviously it would be preferable to make the film in India, but if you can't, you can't. I just think it's a sad statement about the political situation, that there aren't the forces who would stand up to this.

*DM:* I'm sure there are. But when it came out that we were planning to film somewhere else, not in Varanasi, one of these fundamentalist groups threatened mass suicides. I don't want that on my conscience. Ten thousand suicides.

*DW:* I have my doubts. I heard about the guy who "attempted suicide" three times before the media paid any attention to him.

*DM:* And they came to me and said, "He's dying, he's on his death-bed, he's asking to see you. Before he dies, his last wish is that you don't make *Water*."

*DW:* What conclusions have you drawn from this experience?

*DM:* That politically I was naive.



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