

"The right of artists to express themselves is the most sacrosanct right of all"

A conversation with Indian filmmaker Ketan Mehta

Richard Phillips
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Indian film director, Ketan Mehta, recently spoke with the World Socialist Web Site during a short visit to Australia. A graduate of India's Film and Television Institute, the director, who is not related to Deepa Mehta, made Hindi-language television programs and documentaries before rising to prominence in India with a series of feature films in the 1980s.

Early work by Mehta has a strong social content: Bhavani Bhavai (1980), which was made in Gujarat state, won several national film awards for its dramatic exploration of the social conditions facing the untouchables. Holi (1984), his second feature, is about a rebellion by college students dissatisfied with their school's policies. Mirch Masala (1985), probably one of his better-known films outside India, tells the story of an uprising by a group of women against subedars or armed Indian tax collectors for the British colonial rulers. The subedars, who had their own private armies, kept a percentage of the collected taxes and terrorised towns and villages. The uprising develops after a local woman refuses to submit to the sexual advances of a subedar and takes refuge in a spice factory.

Maya Memsaab (1992), the only Mehta film publicly screened in Australia during his recent visit, is based on Gustave Flaubert's Madame Bovary. Maya, the film's central character, is disillusioned with her marriage and seeks fulfillment in a series of affairs. Recent work by Mehta includes Sardar, a historical drama, Captain Vyom, a science fiction television series, and Oh Darling! Yeh Hai India, a political satire.

Richard Phillips: When did you decide to become a filmmaker?

Ketan Mehta: I was always fascinated by theatre throughout school. During my college days I became interested in the film society movement, which was very strong at that time. Immediately after graduation I applied for and was accepted into the Film and Television Institute of India, where I did a course in film direction. Since then I haven't looked back. It was love at first sight with the medium and the love affair still continues.

RP: What filmmakers influenced you most?

KM: There were so many—from Sergei Eisenstein to Jean-Luc Godard, from Vittorio de Sica to Stanley Kubrick—it's difficult to name anyone in particular.

RP: Could you tell me something about your first feature film?

KM: My first feature, *Bhavani Bhavai*, was made 20 years ago in 1980 and it dealt with caste conflict in India. As you no doubt know, India has a pre-historic social structure of various castes and the

lowest of the castes were called the untouchables. Legend has it that these untouchables had to wear a special garb to identify themselves. They had to wear a broom like a tail to sweep their footsteps and they had to wear a spittoon around their necks so that they didn't sully the earth. The film, which tells the story of how this garb was removed, functioned on two levels: as a contemporary narrative about the untouchables and as a folktale about the legend.

When the film was completed and shown there were caste riots in Gujarat, where we made the film. It was a bold and controversial film for its time, and well received. It was dedicated simultaneously to Asait Thakore, a great Bhavai folkwriter, and Bertolt Brecht, because it derived a lot from his alienation theory of theatre. So it was an interesting mixture and I think a new form was created out of this.

RP: What came out of the political discussion provoked by the film?

KM: Well it is an ongoing debate in India—it's not as if one film can trigger debate and close it. It is still very volatile. India lives in various eras at the same time—some parts of India remain in the medieval ages, other areas are living in tomorrow—with the social attitudes of centuries past still lingering on. The film was my contribution to the debate, and was successful in that it generated a lot of discussion.

RP: What is the situation facing the untouchables today?

KM: The Indian constitution made provisions so that certain reservations were created for the untouchable caste and employment was made available. Over a period of time this section of society has become a little more empowered than it was 50 years ago and so they are much more vocal and play a more active role politically. Of course this situation has many sides and a certain amount of caste politics has crept in and now dictates electoral politics. To some extent this has become institutionalised with politics defined on a caste, rather than class, basis.

RP: *Mirch Masala*, your best-known film outside India, also deals with caste issues.

KM: Actually that film is about polarisation, about how events manage to polarise ideas and crystallise them. It is also about an individual against the social structure, in which he or she lives, and how they can be in conflict with each other. It is also about solidarity and submission. I suppose the crux of the film is that it is about freedom and the struggle for it.

RP: *Maya Memsaab*, the film screened today, is loosely based on Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, but set in India. Was it controversial to make a film about the infidelities of a middle class Indian woman?

KM: Yes, but there are hidden aspects to every human being that should be explored, whether in India or elsewhere. The film was definitely controversial but since its release in 1992 Indian women have become more expressive, in print and in the media in general. They are more vocal in demanding a life beyond what has been traditionally expected of them and it is now more socially acceptable that they pursue their own desires.

RP: Was there any political opposition by Hindu chauvinists or other elements?

KM: Not so much, but there was quite a reaction against one of my more recent films, *Oh Darling! Yeh Hai India*, which was political satire in a Hollywood format. The film is about a prostitute, who is very sad. One night she picks up an actor, who is out of work and very hungry. They strike a deal, and the deal is food for fun. She will give him food and he has to provide her with fun and entertainment during the night. So they take to the streets of Bombay looking for fun and are joined in this quest by various street people—beggars, lepers, prostitutes and pimps. In the process they discover a major conspiracy to sell off the nation.

There is supposed to be a meeting of multinational corporations and heads of states in India and a mobster has kidnapped the President of India and replaced him with a double that is trying to sell the nation. The duplicate president says that 150 years ago the East India Company ruled the country and everybody knew its profits. Those who have ruled India have always made a lot of money, he says, and declares it's time to sell-off the nation, with all its people and resources, to the highest bidder. So there is an auction of the nation.

Although the film is a kind of surreal satire, in the early 1990s India was up for grabs. The government was selling it off, bit by bit, so the film was a metaphor for what was really happening. But I got hate-mail like never before. There were threats to ban the film and fascist organisations said they were going to picket the cinema. My life was threatened and I was accused of being anti-national. I had to fight very hard to get the film released.

RP: And the sell-off continues today?

KM: Oh yes, it continues. Congress or the BJP, they have all been selling off the country.

RP: During the Q & A today someone suggested that ordinary people in India would not comprehend *Maya Memsaab* or that if they knew how the wealthy really lived it might be dangerous. Could you comment?

KM: I think this approach, which argues that any new information is taboo because it changes the social equation, is a kind of fascist attitude. I don't agree with censorship because it goes against the whole concept of a democratic society. How can you maintain censorship controls when we live in a world that is capable of providing free access to information to everyone?

My basic presumption is that the audience is intelligent. This is a given. I just don't believe the audience is stupid or naïve or has to be told what it should or shouldn't watch. And I believe that if filmmakers approach their work this way then the discourse will be much more interesting. You are not just trying to tickle or arouse, you are also talking to the mind of the audience. In my opinion, ideas are as important as emotions.

In India especially, however, it has been mainly emotions and feelings that have so far ruled the roost. Most stories are generally journeys of heroism, charged with emotions, and that is it. But the mind has to be taken into account. Unless a film can trigger my mind and be the basis for a thousand more ideas, then it hasn't served its

function.

Artists should not be involved in recycling ideas or existing categories, or restating already established categories. A real artist should understand and express life, without any preconceived notions or predetermined categories of perception. If they don't feel the desire to do that—to be alive and interact with life—then they should retire.

RP: Some of your more recent films have been science fiction works.

KM: I believe that science fiction in today's day and age gives the greatest scope and creative freedom. The only limit is your own creativity. It is time, however, to explore science fiction beyond the gadgetry and new ways of killing. Science fiction has a much greater scope, and that is the exploration of the human being. We have explored this planet and others but we have yet to seriously explore the mind. This is a whole new territory.

RP: How have conditions changed for artists and filmmakers in India with the rise of the Hindu fundamentalists?

KM: It is difficult, of course, but this has always been the case. I suppose as an artist I treat the difficulties as part of the package. Even in the most advanced societies there is no unhindered expression. If you do not follow the norms or the structures of business as they have been laid down or if you are not politically correct, it is tough. It comes with the territory.

RP: What is your response to the attack on Deepa Mehta, who I gather you are not related to, by the Hindu chauvinists?

KM: What happened to Deepa is totally despicable and should be resisted with all the energy and determination that can be mustered. It was obnoxious and brought out the ugly face of the reactionary forces today in India. The basic and inherent freedom of expression of all arts has to be held up at all times. If it isn't, then society cannot grow but will head towards disaster.

Deepa Mehta has to be firm about this and just go ahead and make this film, irrespective of the consequences. And thinking people all over the world have to realise that the right of artists to express themselves is the most sacrosanct right of all.

RP: Unfortunately there was not much broad resistance?

KM: No, there was opposition. Most of India's leading artists spoke out. It polarised people and many recognised it was a serious issue.

RP: With one or two exceptions, there were not many leading international directors who spoke out about this.

KM: This is because most of the western world regards India as a bit of a backwater. It is not regarded as important.



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