Inter-Asia Cultural Studies, Volume 1, Number 2, 2000

The controversy over '*Fire*': a select dossier (Part I)

Introduction

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When the film Fire *by the Canada-based filmmaker Deepa Mehta first came to India after its release in the West and elsewhere, its entry was an unobtrusive one. There were mixed reviews in the press (the international awards notwithstanding), with a sprinkling of screenings at film festivals, as well as private video shows by women's groups. In 1998, the film was cleared by the state-controlled Censor Board for general distribution without any cuts being imposed. This came as a pleasant surprise for many, given the Censor Board's mandate (often controversially interpreted) of curbing so-called 'objectionable visuals' under categories such as violence and vulgarity. Indeed, 'censorship' took the unusual but significant turn of demanding solely the changing of one name – 'Sita', the younger sister-in-law, was renamed 'Nita' in the Hindi version dubbed from the original English film, before being released in major cinema halls across the country. (The Censor Board was obviously concerned that the name Sita may prove controversial because it is also the name of Rama's virtuous wife in the Hindu epic, the Ramayana.)*

A few weeks after its opening, the film hit the headlines with accounts of attacks by groups of Shiv Sena activists, and its women's wing, the Mahila Aghadi, who targeted the cinema halls in Mumbai and Delhi where 'Fire' was being screened. They demanded a ban on the film. (The Shiv Sena under its leader Bal Thackeray, is a right-wing political organization, which, until a few years ago, was an exclusively regional party with its largest following in Mumbai. At the time of the protests, it was allied with the party leading the coalition in power at the national level, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Although the Shiv Sena and the BJP seem to share broadly similar right-wing Hindu-chauvinist ideologies, the alliance has been an uneasy one.) The reasons cited by the protestors ranged from the film's 'vulgarity' and 'lesbianism', to the 'five minute-long abuse of an Indian national by a Chinese'. In the controversy that ensued, Bal Thackeray publicly announced that he would have no objections to the film being re-released on condition that the names of both the female protagonists Radha and Sita/Nita be switched to Shabana and Saira. (These Muslim names were obvious references to Shabana Azmi – one of the stars of the film, known for her left-wing politics – and Saira Banu, actress and wife of film actor Dilip Kumar, who publicly supported the film's screening.)

As the result of the attacks in New Delhi and Mumbai, the film was 'voluntarily' withdrawn by commercial film distributors in these cities. The Union minister of state for Information and Broadcasting, on his part, directed that the film be reviewed yet again by the Censor Board. In the rest of the country, however, and this includes northern BJP-ruled states as well as the south, the controversy over the film had the opposite effect, stoking interest in the film so that it ran to packed houses in more than the usual number of venues and shows. In many cities, tickets were only available at a substantial premium on the 'black' market. Public protests, press statements and writ petitions in the Supreme Court condemning the Shiv Sena action and the withdrawal of the film were organized. These were publicly supported by leading representatives from the cinema and the arts, as well as feminist, gay and lesbian groups. Numerous articles and even editorials were written on the subject, mostly defending the film and strongly critical of the attempts to have the film banned. The opinions and responses of the director Deepa Mehta were especially sought after, in the print media and on television.

From the time when 'Fire' was first attacked in early December 1998, to its subsequent rescreening in Delhi (after being cleared once

ISSN 1464-9373 Print/ISSN 1469-8447 Online/00/020371–11

again by the Censor Board), a great deal was written about the film and the controversy that surrounded it. Rather than attempt to provide an exhaustive account of all the positions and issues that were involved, we have presented extracts from some of the articles that appeared during this period.

Readers will discover for themselves how the figure of the modern Indian woman both within and beyond the film became a resource – in remarkably different and contrasting ways – for everyone who participated in the controversy. On the one hand, the stitching together of this 'woman' with 'Indian culture' is a well-worn theme, going back to the 19th century, but with resonance right up to the present day. On the other hand, as a number of the commentaries attest, the introduction of 'lesbianism' clearly fractured this legacy of Indian womanhood, and, indeed, of Indian feminism. Arguments over evaluating the film inevitably incited differences over how to interpret the current political conjuncture in India, including the question of 'India' and her relationship not only to the 'West', but also her 'past'. Questions of culture were reopened not just from the relatively new perspectives of sexuality, but equally pertinently from the less obvious configurations of class, caste and religious community. Moreover, the sharpest and most interesting debates, it seems to us, were not so much in opposition to the Hindu right and its attempts to appropriate Indian culture and womanhood, but amongst different sections of the women's movement itself. We hope that the pieces reproduced below will help provide readers of this journal with a sense of the varied strands of the debate as it unfolded.

The first excerpt, by Carol Upadhya (a sociologist at the SNDT women's university in Mumbai), entitled 'Set this house on Fire', appeared in the journal Economic and Political Weekly *in the wake of the attacks on 'Fire' in Mumbai during the first week of December 1998. The next article, written by Mary E. John (Senior Fellow at the Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi) and Tejaswini Niranjana (Senior Fellow, Centre for the Study of Culture and Society, Bangalore), came out in the same journal a few months later, by which time film theatres in Delhi had resumed screening the film. A response to this piece was then written by Ratna Kapur (co-director, Centre for Feminist Legal Research, New Delhi) soon afterwards. The Campaign for Lesbian Rights (Caleri) which emerged out of the controversy over 'Fire' brought out a dossier of their own on the film. The next contribution, 'A Lesbian Critique of 'Fire'' by V.S. comes from that collection. The next essay is by Madhu Kishwar, co-founder of* Manushi, *a well-known women's journal where it appeared in early 1999. The final piece, 'Fire! Fire! It's the Lesbians' by S.L. is also from the Caleri dossier mentioned above.*

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Set this house on Fire, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 18 December 1998

Carol UPADHYA

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The hysterical reaction of some Shiv Sena activists, who effectively stopped the screening of the film in Delhi and Mumbai and caused it to be referred back to the censor board, is extremely revealing. The justification for their action – that the film is against Indian tradition because it depicts a lesbian relationship – demonstrates that Indian culture for the Sangh parivar[1] is defined essentially in terms of male control over female sexuality. *Fire* directly challenges this construction of Indianness in its portrayal of two women who opt for another kind of relationship and thereby reject this kind of patriarchal control. (It also appears to threaten the male ego, which presumes itself to be the only object of female desire. This episode reminds me of the reaction to the *Hite Report* in the US in the 1970s: the book, a harbinger of the sexual revolution, was widely welcomed by women because it described their sexuality realistically for the first time, but it outraged most men by suggesting that they are not essential for the satisfaction of female desire.)

The discourse of Indian tradition currently being touted by the Sangh parivar has not been invented single-handedly by them: it is derived from a wider discourse about Indian

culture that is prevalent among the educated middle classes, which is in turn derived from certain brahmanical practices and values which were reified and institutionalised under colonialism. This discourse, which is built upon such tropes as Indian values, the Indian family system and Indian culture, has become central to the construction of Indian identity among the urban middle classes. It is also found in the reconstruction and reification of Indian culture by the wealthy NRI [Non-Resident Indian] set, as reflected in films depicting ideal family life such as *Hum Apke Hain Kaun*, [a Hindi blockbuster film, which broke all records at the time of its release]. In this discourse, Indian society and its values are always counterpoised to the decadent west. However, when pressed, people are rarely able to specify any values other than those related to control over female sexuality: virginity at marriage, marriage with partners approved by the family and community, and female chastity and devotion to the husband within marriage (the behaviour of males of course is another story). These values are presumed to contribute to the solidarity and stability of the family, both of which distinguish Indian society from the social fragmentation and sexual permissiveness (and perversity) of western societies. As a foreigner living in India for years, I have been subjected to this kind of comparative discourse about Indian values by strangers on trains enough times to be convinced that sexuality is at the centre of what it means to be Indian, at least for large sections of the middle class. This image of Indian culture is promoted especially by NRIs, who embrace every advantage of life in the west but jealously guard their daughters from straying and scour India for virginal brides for their sons, and in so doing claim that they are upholding Indian tradition – whatever else they may be doing in other spheres of life.

This conceptualisation of Indianness, which is being imposed in an increasingly rigid form on society by the Sangh parivar, needs to be challenged head-on by women's groups and other progressive forces. By remaining silent there is a danger that the right will succeed in defining the terrain of Indian culture in such a way that it cannot be contested except on their own terms. Rather than simply waiting for each act of provocation to react, the hindutva discourse on Indian culture must be attacked right at its base – by bringing the issues involved much more directly into public view and exposing the irrational assumptions and illiberal ideology that underpin that discourse.

In broad outline, this counter-attack could point out that India is a diverse society and that brahmanical notions of sexuality and female purity, now reflected in the Sangh parivar discourse, historically have been held by only a small section of society. It is well known that norms of sexual behaviour, like other aspects of culture, are highly variable. Brahmanical practices, such as kanya-dan marriage accompanied by dowry, were not widely observed in the past but began to spread to non-brahmin castes and non-Hindu communities only in the 19th century. Central to such Sanskritisation processes is the tightening of control over women and curtailment of their autonomy, for example, by withdrawing women from work outside the house or forbidding remarriage of widows. Yet the Sangh parivar, probably because of the social make-up of its constituency, has seized upon the values connected with brahmanical forms of marriage and the patriarchal joint family (also primarily a high caste institution) and combined them with a kind of Victorian prudishness to construct its model of Indian culture. Therefore, one can argue that women's struggles for greater personal freedom are not necessarily anti-Indian or western-oriented, but are an attempt to recover a different, non-brahmanical value system as a basis for building a more egalitarian society – one which accords greater autonomy and respect for women.

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Perhaps feminists can seize the moment offered by Fire to put the issue of female sexuality at the centre of debates on women's rights and human rights in general. Both feminist and anthropological theory argue that control over female sexuality is a fundamental component of patriarchal power and hence of women's oppression in all kinds of societies.

The women's movement in the west struck at the heart of that power by linking up with the so-called sexual revolution, which called for greater sexual freedom for both men and women. The outcome of this revolution, whatever other negative consequences it may have had, is that today most people (barring the powerful Christian right) accept the idea that everyone has a right to define and control his or her sexuality and to choose their own relationships, and that such relationships ideally should be based on equality and mutuality rather than domination. The women's movement has indeed led to the restructuring of the family (which it is often accused of destroying) by rejecting the power equations on which it was founded and rebuilding it as a much more democratic institution – one based on relations of consent rather than convention, within which the rights not only of women but also, of children are recognised. In the west, the struggle for gender equality thus was closely linked to the movement for sexual freedom – which includes the right not to have sex forced on one in any form, through rape, sexual abuse or harassment – as well as the right to express one's sexuality with a partner of one's choice.

In India, however, women's groups have remained largely silent on this issue, at least in public, understandably so since they are all too often accused of aping western fashions and because they have been preoccupied with other issues that seemed more pressing. Yet control over female sexuality is at the centre of many of those issues: domestic violence (how many incidents are reported of husbands beating or murdering their wives because they suspected their fidelity?), rape, sexual harassment on the streets and in the workplace. Even the question of women's property rights is connected to sexuality, for the structure of the patrilineal kinship system which grants inheritance rights only to males and dispossesses daughters also dictates that control over female sexuality and procreative powers should pass from father to husband. Moreover, the maintenance of female purity through patriarchal control is still strongly linked to the reproduction of the caste system, as shown by the increasing number of incidents of young couples murdered by their own families for daring to marry outside their communities. Fire has been so violently opposed precisely because it appears to challenge male control over female sexuality, which is at the base of these power structures – of family, caste and class – which the Hindu right seeks to preserve.

Note

1. Literally the Sangh family, this refers to a group of apparently independent Hindu chauvinist organisations owning allegiance to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh or RSS (National Volunteers Organisation).

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Mirror politics: *Fire*, Hindutva and Indian culture, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 6–13 March 1999.

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It is worth underscoring the significance of the overwhelming support for the film and the broad-based public outcry against the attacks on it. As feminists who participated in the opposition against the film's unwarranted withdrawal, both of us were called upon to discuss the film, amidst the widespread acclaim that surrounded it. Women's organisations and especially gay and lesbian groups, who played a leading role in these counter-protests, raised key issues relating to questions of obscenity, on the one hand, and gay/lesbian rights, on the other. On the whole, however, these issues tended to get deflected if not lost in the dominant focus on the Shiv Sena attacks. Moreover, critiques of the film itself were muffled in an overall atmosphere that sought to protect the fundamental right of freedom of expression, and maintain as great a distance as possible from the agendas of the Hindu right.
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