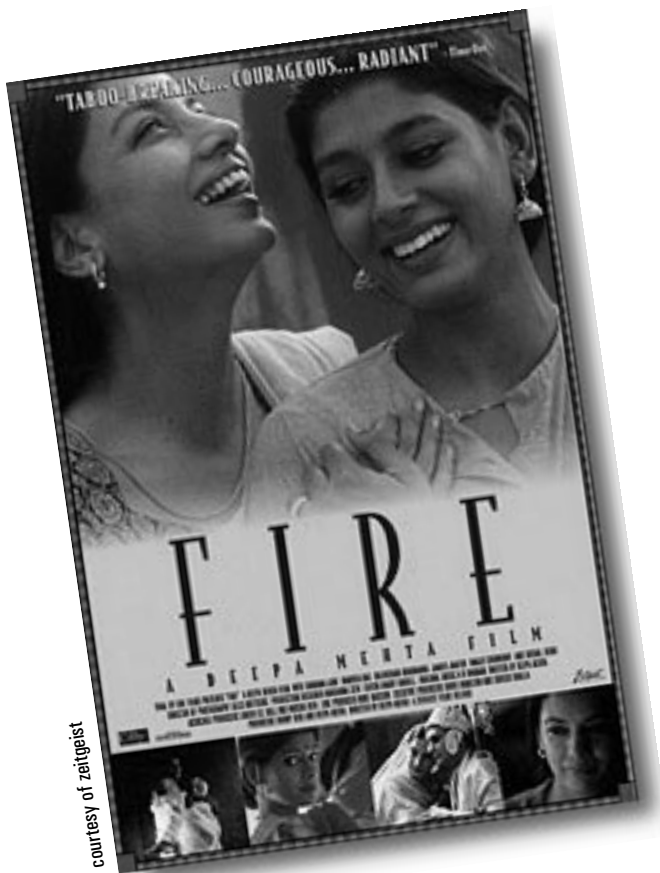


fire, sparks and smouldering ashes

by Gomathy and Bina



courtesy of zeitgeist

The film *Fire*¹ is about the relationship between two women, Sita and Radha, married to brothers. Set within the patriarchal framework of a middle-class Hindu family in Delhi, the film portrays both women as oppressed in their respective marriages. They turn to each other for tenderness and respect, moving into a sensuous and sexual relationship. They finally break out of the very patriarchal structures that threw them together, to form independent lives.

The film has four clear strands interwoven through it. One is that of the oppression that these two women face within the heteropatriarchal institution of marriage—the violence and the absence of love or tenderness. The second strand weaves around the nature of sexuality within Indian families and in particular, the repression of women’s sexuality and desire within it. Interwoven is the sexuality of “other” characters: the affair of the second brother with a Chinese sex worker, the hiring of pornographic films by young school boys, the live-in servant who watches a pornographic film and masturbates in front of the mother-in-law (old and paralysed, unable to communicate her distress except by the ringing of a bell). The third strand is the evolving love between the two women, the dilemmas that this poses, and the strength that it gives to break the patriarchal structures that bind and violate them.

The fourth strand locates this story within the Hindu cultural context. The film reiterates religious icons that reaffirm patriarchal control over women and their sexuality. Only, the icons are placed in new configurations so that the old symbolism and new are placed in juxtaposition. Thus fire that usually symbolises purity and sanctity, and is a witness to the marriage of women and men, is used to symbolise the passion between women. The names “Radha” and “Sita” represent popular mythological heroines/goddesses.¹ In Hindu mythology, Sita has to undergo trial by fire to prove her chastity—here the trial by fire is for Sita. In using these names, the film directly challenges the construction of female purity and symbols.

Fire was released in India in November of 1998, over a year after it was internationally released and won 14 awards. Within the country, reviews and various pieces had been appearing in the media well before the actual release of the film. Much to the surprise of everyone, the Censors Board of India passed the film without a single cut. It was screened for three weeks in the city and the country and ran to full houses. Special women’s shows were organised every week in Bombay.

Definitely the film has brought the issue of lesbianism into the public domain for discussion. For the first time, lesbianism moved from the grey areas of silence and half-murmurs, onto the “big” screen. It forced all kinds of people to make public their positions: people who may have never known about the issue; who may have heard about lesbians and have a healthy or morbid curiosity; who have taken a moral position about the sinful nature of such intercourse; who have denied their own sexuality and sexual experiences; and those women who have known that they loved women.

The film screening was disrupted three weeks after its release by the Mahila Aghadi—the women’s wing of the Shiv Sena (a Hindu fundamentalist party, currently part of the ruling coalition in Maharashtra). A handful of people broke the glass of New Empire, a local theater in Mumbai, tore the posters and disrupted the showing. They also threatened to prevent screening of the film completely all over the city and country, claiming that the film was perverted and was specially aimed to injure Hindu sentiments. Similar vandalism occurred at the New Delhi theatres screening the film.

After the initial period of shock, many groups in Bombay, Delhi, Pune and other parts of the country organised to counter this attack. In many ways, the film acted as a trigger for processes all over the country. The nature of the reactions and organising in Bombay and Delhi were very different. We understand from reports that in Delhi, the reactions were centered on the portrayal of lesbianism in the film. There was a strong wave of demand for visibility of lesbian rights, by lesbians, feminists and supporters of lesbian and gay rights. A candlelit protest was organised. Meetings were held, and regular protests were organised. This effort coalesced into a group now known as the Campaign for Lesbian Rights—formed by lesbians, supporters and feminists.

In Bombay, the home-turf of the Shiv Sena, the protests took on a different color. The focus of this action was freedom of expression, and an anticomunal protest. Even while the film was still being screened, there was a feeling of unrealism that the Shiv Sena had not moved to prevent the screening. We were looking over our shoulders even as we distributed pamphlets about Stree Sangam—our group for women who love women, at the women-only screenings. Then there was the attack on the theaters showing the film. Foremost was the feeling of shock, anger and helplessness. At the same time there was also a feeling of inevitability. Under the Shiv Sena’s influence, more and more of us have had the feeling of sitting on the sidelines, ineffectively watching in a world where fundamentalists forces are increasing to the point where no differences would be tolerated, where women would be pushed into corners.

The mass reaction to the Shiv Sena’s vandalism came as a relief. Concerted action from different parts of the city—not merely the activists and academicians—was initiated. In the past two years we have seen a series of “clamp-downs” on all art and events that offended the Shiv Sena dictates, and somewhere, the vandalism in this instance was the proverbial last straw. *Fire* literally sparked a concerted move to organise against the Shiv Sena dictate. A large number of women expressed publicly their displeasure about the film, and in doing so, reemphasised their right to select the kind of films that they wanted to see. Spontaneous protests erupted in the city. Four days after the film was removed from the screen, 32 organisations protested in front of

the theater. People were arrested and harassed by the police for disturbing the peace during this protest (the same police who were conspicuously absent when the theater was being vandalised). Then there was an effort to launch a massive poster campaign. The poster focused on freedom of expression and challenged the city's passive acceptance of each violation perpetrated by the Shiv that finally culminated in the banning of the film. About 25,000 posters were printed. Efforts to put up the posters in the city were stopped by the police repeatedly. Men who were paid to put up the posters backed out at the last minute, expressing fear of the police.



Nandita Das as Sita



Shabana Azmi as Radha

courtesy ur.zenigera.t

Finally, members of the Republican Party of India volunteered to put the posters up, but were arrested. Those posters that were put up were torn and a handful of the thousands put up survived. Then there was an easing on the part of the State. Small-size posters were put up in the trains, in the ladies compartment. Some of these survive to date.

This was followed by a public demonstration against the banning of the film. A long banner with the protest slogans in five languages—Hindi, Gujarati, Marathi, English and Urdu—was held with slogans. The English slogan on the banner was “Bombay a city of freedom, not anyone’s kingdom.” About 300 women gathered on a public beach in Mumbai, along one of the major crossroads in the city. The event was widely covered in the media.

The protests have coalesced into a loose

group of organisations—Committee for Action against Fascism—to continue protest action against the atrocities in Mumbai by the Shiv Sena, that is still active. The protests also initiated an active debate within the press and around the right to Freedom of Speech and Expression.

Dilip Kumar, Deepa Mehta and Mahesh Bhatt, well-known actors and directors, filed a court case against the act of vandalism by the Shiv Sena and demanded the continuation of the film screening. The film was referred back to the Censors Board and was passed once again with no cuts.

However, the producer Jhamu Sigandh—to ensure that the Shiv Sena does not disrupt the film screenings again—made some cuts, and removed the names “Sita and Radha.” Despite the confusion caused by this lack of names, even in its mutilated form the film continues to draw crowds and break even at the box office.

For those of us who identify as women who love women, that such a film should have been made at all and shown in India in mainstream theaters seems almost unbelievable. The experience of sitting in a theater full of women and watching the film with its scenes of love and caring between two women, and not a man and a woman, was moving in a way that prevented immediate analysis or critique. Foremost was a sense of exultation that in the barrage of constant heterosexist imagery was (one possible)

representation visibilising and validating the ways in which women can love women.

There have been several critiques about the film from film critics, feminists, and women who love women. The most obvious criticism points to the directorial cop-out in portraying both women as situated in unhappy marriages. Their choice to seek each other seems more to escape their marriages rather than as a positive choice. In the arena of possibilities, one would wish that at least one of the two women were not married or in an unhappy marriage: then the point of positive choice could have been more deliberate. But on the other hand, there are very few women who come from situations that are not oppressive, and it is made very evident in the film that both women clearly assert their lesbian choice over their marriage.

Other critiques center on the class-biased portrayal of the servant as a masturbating, comic figureⁱⁱ. In addition, there is the cliched portrayal of the “foreign bitch” (the Chinese woman) who seduces Indian men for the gratification of her sexual appetites. In both cases, the director has resorted to common Hindi film stereotypes.

Another bone of contention is the lack of clarity portrayed between the act of masturbation by the servant while watching porn videos where the mother-in-law is forced to watch, and the act of sex between the women. Both seem to come under the grey area of “wrong” sex for a confused Radha, who is shown as unable to make the distinction between consensual and forced/violative acts of sex.

There have been many more critiques, but those we will not go into, given that this is one film attempting to portray a single story. To make it mean everything for everyone is a load the film (any film, for that matter) cannot carry. Instead, for us the critiques imply the absence of other cinematic images of women who are strong, who explore their sexuality and make choices about their sexuality outside the “normal” paradigm.

What we would like to do, though, is examine the film in the context of lesbian existence and realities in Indiaⁱⁱⁱ—a complex issue, because women—only spaces and female friendships are woven into social practices and consciousness.

THE TROUBLE WITH MEN

by Sudip Mazumdar

When a woman loves a woman, suggests a bold new film,
her husband needs an attitude check.

Deepa Mehta, the Toronto-based filmmaker, was terrified of what the Indian censors would do to *Fire*, her latest feature film. Of course, she had achieved international acclaim for *Sam and Me*, an examination of the life of an immigrant in Canada, and for *Camilla*, starring Jessica Tandy and Bridget Fonda. But she didn't think that her name would protect her new movie. After all, *Fire* depicts the growing intimacy between two sisters-in-law trapped in loveless marriages, and shows the two women making love. When *Fire* was shown at a film festival last year in the southern city of

Trivandrum, Mehta received death threats from men who accused her of making a “dirty” movie.

So Mehta steeled herself for the worst from the board of censors, but it never came. One member told distributors that *Fire* was an “important film and every Indian woman should see it.”

So far, women—and men—are heeding the advice. Since the film opened to raves last week, theaters in New Delhi and Mumbai (Bombay) have had to put up FULL HOUSE signs for many showings. To social critics, those signs needed explaining. Could it be that India's gradual

Some feminists have contended that there are exclusively women's spaces existing within traditional Indian society, where women have had and continue to have the freedom to explore intimate and sexual relationships with other women. Such spaces would, the argument runs, be endangered if lesbianism was brought out as an open, politicised agenda. These—along with the existence of ancient erotic sculptures of women with women, and the existence of many women-centered traditions and rituals—create a belief that as a society we are tolerant of same-sex relationships. It is necessary to explore the many strands underlying this belief.

Almost all women in our society have experienced women-only spaces—for confidence sharing, healing, mutual comfort and support—at some point in their lives. Often deep bonds, intimacies and sensuousness—sometimes extending to the sexual—have characterised these spaces. At the interstices of a patriarchal society with the potential to maintain the structures that control women—or transform them, these spaces act as essential “breathing spaces” and sources of energy for women to share and recuperate from the misogynist

society that we live in. However, “women-only” spaces are “allowed” only if women in it are seen as sexually inactive within them. The possibility of women actively choosing women as sexual partners is thus denied.

These spaces can become autonomous—but only when women begin to challenge and transform the structures within which we operate. Sometimes both processes of maintaining and transforming happen simultaneously. Women have used these spaces to express choices, other than what is sanctioned by patriarchal structures of society. Often, these choices are a silent testimony of resistance. Lesbian women by expressing sexual desire for each other engage in acts of resistance that challenge the norm of female sexual passivity.

It is this shift from same-sex behavior to the articulation of a lesbian identity that has tested the limits of the supposed “tolerance” of same-sex relationships—and sometimes provoked negative, even hostile reactions. In *Fire*, although neither Radha or Sita identify as lesbian, it is not so much the several challenges to the heteropatriarchal, Great Indian Joint

opening to the outside world is loosening up attitudes toward sex?

It's probably not that simple. Mehta herself believes that her film has tapped into a deeper rethinking of the relations between men and women and how they are shaped by the Indian patriarchy. In particular, many of her fans come from the country's growing middle class. “I am absolutely thrilled by the reaction,” says Mehta. “My purpose in making the film would be fulfilled if it just makes people think.”

Fire, the first film in an ambitious trilogy, tells the story of Radha (played by Shabana Azmi). Radha is miserable in her marriage to Ashok, a businessman from south Delhi. Under the influence of a local guru, Ashok has taken a vow of celibacy in the belief that it will bring him spiritual salvation. To test his control over sexual desire, he often makes Radha lie next to him. Meanwhile, Ashok's younger brother, Jatin, accepts an arranged marriage to Sita, while continuing an affair with his Chinese mistress. The spurned wives meet on the sidelines and gradually fall in love, But the larger point, of course, is the inadequacy of their men. “It is one of the more irreverent films of the 1990s,” says movie critic Nikhat Kazmi of the *Times of*

India newspaper.

The film is trendsetting in another way: it is one of the few acclaimed commercial dramas to be released in Hindi. The Indian film industry produces hundreds of Hindi-language movies, but most are flimsy song-and-dance extravaganzas with cardboard characters. (*Fire* was shot in the mix of Hindi and English used in most middle-class homes, then dubbed into Hindi.)

Not everyone has loved the movie; a critic for the *New Delhi Statesman* called Mehta a “pretentious” filmmaker who made a “pornographic and distasteful” film. But Mehta—who has already finished her next film, a story of the Subcontinent's partition called *Earth*, and is working on the screenplay for the last of the trilogy, *Water*—says she has been heartened by the public reaction. Members of all-female audiences have begged her to organise shows for men. But perhaps the most encouraging reaction to her film came from a male colleague, who has started fetching his own drinks, instead of asking his wife. Now that's progress.

Source: *Newsweek*, 30 November 1998

Family set-up or even the fact that they make love that is perceived as threatening, but the final act of resistance in their walking out, together.

The point comes home when one takes a comparative look at the other well-known lesbian story—*Lihaaf*. *Lihaaf* (The Quilt) is a short story by the Urdu writer Ismat Chughtai published in 1941. The narration is through the eyes of a young girl who observes (though does not understand) a sexual relationship between two women (under the quilt). Obscenity charges were levied against the author by the moral brigade of those times. These charges were overturned in court by the judge who ruled that the story did not use any obscene language, and could only be understood by someone who already had some knowledge (and therefore could not be said to “corrupt” innocent minds). Here there is no hostile reaction—because there is no articulation of a lesbian identity.

The articulation of lesbian identity in India has been taken a step further when women have attempted to register their marriages—in any way possible. The marriage of Leela and Urmila, two women police constables, in 1988 marked the start of a decade that has seen media attention given to a series of several women-to-women marriages, or suicides by women who refused to be parted from each other (see Annex 1 for documentation of the other stories). In 1998 there were three instances: in April, two young women in Patna were reported to have filed an affidavit (witnessed by three persons) that they were married and living together. Later in the year, in two separate incidents, a young couple in Bombay, and another couple in Orissa committed suicide. These are all women who have mostly limited access to the resources necessary to enable them to live independently or even access the city-based lesbian and gay support group networks. They have been trapped in circumstances that have forced them to conform to compulsory heterosexuality, even if it means undergoing a sex change, or suicide. Despite this, some of them have had the courage to publicly assert their determination to love and live together.



Shabana Azmi (left) as Radha, the unhappy housewife who breaks taboos by falling in love with her younger sister-in-law, Sita, played by Nandita Das (right)

It is our contention that Speech, and Images—especially those created by us—are vital in the definition of lesbian existence in India. In the absence of this, the accounts of lesbian existence are arid newspaper reports recording the punishments, the denials, death, suicides, isolation and labelling of women who have acted on their sexual desire for other women. In so

many cases, their silent acts of protest are registered as statistical details of suicide. This invalidates the lived realities of these women. It sends a message to other lesbian women to be silent or simply cease to be.

In the absence of self-created images and speech, it is possible for the director Deepa Mehta to back out “under fire” with statements like “Lesbianism is just another aspect of the film. It is probably the last thing they resort to when they derive a certain confidence out of the relationship.” (*Indian Express* interview, 13 December 1998); and “I can’t have my film hijacked by any one organization [with reference to the protests by the Campaign for Lesbian Rights in Delhi]. It is not about lesbianism, it’s about loneliness, about choices.” (*India Today*, 21 December 1998, p.80).

Neither the Shiv Sena protest against *Fire* nor (by and large) the counter-protests are about conscious lesbian identity. Overtly, the Shiv Sena vandalism was justified by their claim that “lesbianism is against Indian culture.” The subtext, though, was the definition of “Indian tradition” as Hindu. The film—and therefore lesbianism—is O.K. as long as it is identified with the “other”—if the heroines’ names are changed to Shabana and Saira.

In retrospect, looking at our strategies of protest in Bombay, in reacting to the communal threat, and in protecting the right to freedom of expression, somewhere the lesbian lens on the picture got out of focus. There are two ways in which we feel this happened.

First, when some feminist critiques—in the media, and in the protest marches—questioned the hypocrisy of the Shiv Sena in protesting lesbianism and not protesting violence against women and obscenity in Hindi films as being

“not part of Indian culture.” This is dangerous territory since an implicit equation is being set up between negative sex acts (rape, incest, etc.) and lesbian sex. The Shiv Sena could very well (at least hypothetically) turn around and protest the former—along with the latter.

Second, when we defined the counter-protest terrain as “freedom of speech,” somewhere the unquestioned equation was to “freedom to love.” On closer examination, though, this equation doesn’t hold, as long as the “freedom to love” is criminalised through Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. And here’s the irony: Section 377 criminalises the act of sodomy. One cannot be convicting for “being” homosexual, or “saying” one is homosexual. One has to be “caught in the act.” Supposedly, too, since the Section refers to sodomy, lesbians have the “freedom to love.”

However, as long as there is a moral and social stigma attached to same-sex love, it can be criminalised under obscenity laws—whether or not there is a sodomy statute. Section 292 of the Indian Penal Code punishes obscenity and makes it a criminal offense. The definition of obscenity in the section can lead to its misuse against gay men and lesbians.

Given this context, what is the liberatory potential of “freedom of expression” for lesbians and gay men? Can the limits of the concept be stretched to include the right to pleasure and desire (and the expression of both)? Or is the maximum stretch only to the point of tolerance of sexual diversity? And so, in some sense have we not come back full circle? ↻

Annexe 1 : News Reports

- ♦ 7 May 1988, *Indian Express* (Bangalore edition) carried a brief story of Asaruna Gohil (31) and Sudha Amarsingh (29), employed in a panchayat school at Vadadhali village, Naswadi taluka (Gujarat)—who wanted to continue living together. The two women signed a statement at the district court in the presence of a notary and entered into a friendship contract called “Maitri Karar” in Gujarati.
- ♦ (Date unknown, 1988) *India Today*: Gita Darji and Kishori Shah (both 24) of Meghraj, Gujarat, two nurses in the local hospital ended their lives in the hospital quarters because they could not bear the separation which was to be enforced by Gita’s brother after her marriage.
- ♦ 18 April 1990, *India Today*: Tarulata in 1987 underwent a female to male sex change operation and married Lila Chavda in 1989. They had met five years previously, when Tarulata’s sister who was running for elections was campaigning in Dasade. Muljibhai Chavda, Lila’s father has gone to the Gujarat High Court saying that it is a lesbian relationship and that the marriage should be annulled. The petition contends that, “Tarunkumar possesses neither the male organ nor

any natural mechanism of cohabitation, sexual intercourse and procreation of children. Adoption of any unnatural mechanism does not create manhood and as such Tarunkumar is not a male.” Muljibhai has called for criminal action under Section 377.

- ♦ 21 March (year unknown): two young women—Vinodha Adkewar (18) and Rekha Choudry (21) approached the Registrar of Marriages in Chandrapur in order to get married. The two women were from the villages of Patri and Dadgaon and had met each other during a family gathering almost four years previously. Their relationship grew, despite the distance between their homes, ending in their resolve to marry. Initially, Khadse, the registrar told them that he would check and see if it was legally possible; however, later, when public attention was drawn to the case, he and the District Superintendent of Police dissuaded the women from even living together.

- ♦ Date unknown, *The Tribune*, Chandigarh in an article “Woman weds woman” reported the story of Neeru alias Dinesh Sharma and Meenu who married and were living together in Faridabad. They were married on 9 July, in a temple in the presence of friends of both the women. They had met at a jagrata and started meeting regularly. “I know society will not accept this marriage, but despite all odds, we have decided to live together” said Neeru, who is aware of the marriage of Leela and Urmila in Bhopal.

- ♦ 14 January 1995, *Matrubhoomi* (Daily newspaper in Malayalam): the girls, Gita (22) and Saija (16) decided to elope after Gita’s one-month-old marriage made separation seem inevitable. Saija was a good student, in her first year predegree course, and Gita had been her tuition teacher for the past five years. They disappeared on a Monday from Aleppy and were discovered in a critical state—having consumed poison—only on a Thursday. During those three days the duo seemed to have wandered a lot since they were spotted boarding a bus from Ernakulam to Alwaye, and finally ended up in Trichur. The police recovered love letters they had written to each other from the bags they had been carrying.

- ♦ 8 August 1995; *The Mumbai Times* (Times of India) reported “Another tutor, student ‘scandal’” in which two young women—Parul and Mehernaaz (names changed in report) ran away from their respective homes and spent 10 months roaming around the country (Madras, Calcutta, Siliguri) trying to live together. Finally they returned to Mumbai only to be put in custody, as a case of kidnapping had been filed against Mehernaaz by Parul’s father.”

The authors are members of Stree Sangam—a Bombay-based collective of lesbian and bisexual women.

¹ Sita in particular also represents purity, first virginal and then monogamous, who is saved by her husband from the “evil clutches” of another man. Then she passes through the test of “fire” to prove her chastity to be accepted back by her husband. Her word is not enough. Her chastity is proved by her stepping into fire. The god of fire does not harm her (incidentally a man) and returns her to husband.

ⁱ The film is directed by Deepa Mehta, and has Shabana Azmi and Nandita Das in the lead roles.

ⁱⁱ See Mary John & Tejaswini Niranjana, “Mirror Politics: ‘Fire’, Hindutva and Indian Culture” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 6-13 March 1999.

ⁱⁱⁱ The conceptualisation of these ideas about lesbian existence, was done with Maya Sharma and Shanti.