

*Sightings* 6/15/06

Clean Enough for Yuppies to Drink: Deepa Mehta Filters Ganges *Water*

-- William Alison

Long before its U.S. release this spring, *Water*, Deepa Mehta's movie about Hindu widows living in seclusion on the banks of the Ganges, had already become a *cause célèbre*. Mehta is based in Canada, and her films, which rely on international financing and talent, are exercises in a distinctly hybrid style of cinema, a fusion alluded to by the title of a 2002 feature, *Bollywood/Hollywood*. She had planned to complete the feminist trilogy that began with *Fire* (1998) and continued with *Earth* (1999) by shooting *Water* in 2000. The location she had chosen was also the film's designated setting: the North Indian holy city of Varanasi.

*Fire*, which deals with a lesbian relationship between sisters-in-law in contemporary Delhi, met with controversy upon its release, violent demonstrations having been mounted at theaters by militant groups that decried its love story as un-Indian and anti-Hindu. (God, nation, and a patriarchal model of the family are habitually collapsed onto each other among Indian no less than American right-wingers.) And in due course, advance word of *Water*'s theme -- coupled with the filmmaker's reputation as a feminist provocateur -- likewise fired elements of the Hindu chauvinist right. When a mob organized by the hardline Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or RSS, destroyed the sets that had been built in Varanasi, Mehta, who had also received death threats, withdrew to Canada and turned her attention to the more lighthearted *Bollywood/Hollywood*.

In 2004 she recast *Water* and quietly shot it on sets that had been fabricated in a North Indian architectural idiom on the banks of a river in Sri Lanka. The shift to an ersatz Varanasi has liberated her project not only from the opposition of Hindu militants but also from a host of visual and narrative challenges: The film's look relies on cool compositions of blues, greens, and grays, a controlled palette that would have been difficult to isolate on the crowded and vibrant Varanasi riverfront. The film's fictional city is called "Rawalpur," said to be located on the Ganges somewhere in Hindi-speaking North India.

The austere garbed widows who live out their vows of poverty by the holy river have long featured as a defining image of Varanasi, but Mehta's Rawalpur is conspicuously wanting in the other elements that have circulated over the centuries of Varanasi's fame as a center of religious pilgrimage (and thus of tourism): sacred bulls, holy men, boat traffic, the silk trade. What has been gained, along with compositional and narrative clarity, is a certain manicured prettiness, a glamorous sheen mediated through the transnational idiom of upscale tourist imagery. For all its archaic social injustice -- the film is set in the 1930's -- Rawalpur has the look of the kind of lush retreat where you can get a really soothing Ayurvedic massage. The packaging effect is underscored by the casting of the romantic leads: Lisa Ray and John Abraham are light-skinned model-actors strongly identified with advertising campaigns and both well known for their chests.

Throughout her elemental trilogy, Mehta has used her female protagonists as vehicles for critical perspectives on South Asian gender norms, examining varied but -- within the context of Indian feminist debates -- rather conventional topics: in *Fire*, the straitened sexuality of middle-class

housewives; in *Earth*, the erotics of the India-Pakistan Partition; in *Water*, the harsh code of conduct enjoined on widows by Hindu scriptures, which mandates modesty in the image of self-denial (in matters of clothing, diet, toilet, sexuality, and sociality) and of shame (at surviving the husband). Yet her films are not known for well-rendered character portraits. In the absence of psychological depth, Mehta's audiences (arthouse patrons in the West, primarily metropolitan elites in India) look to cues she deploys from conventional Bollywood cinema, such as established character types or impressionistic music-video-style numbers, to anchor the text in the kind of cultural rootedness that would endow its critique with authority.

Ultimately, as I have suggested, *Water's* claim to this kind of anthropological thick description does not deliver much more than the clichés of tourist brochures; at best, the picture is complicated by the self-exoticizing irony of images marketed to Indian yuppies, and the liberal impulse to romanticize poverty that animates the contemporary phenomenon of Western "poorism" in countries like India and especially sites like Varanasi's riverfront.

There is no question that the tactics of the mob that demolished *Water's* sets are reprehensible, and the program of its leaders both obscurantist and deeply cynical. Given the historical centrality of the campaign to reform widows' conditions to the formulation of both a modern Indian nationalism and a modern Hinduism in the colonial period, nothing in the film's narrative could reasonably be construed as an insult to heritage or creed. Indeed, according to Mehta, none of the rioters had even read the script. I'm sure she's correct, but I can't help noting that the very dismissal of the script suggests a different point: More concerned with visual than narrative representation, the Varanasi militants may well have been venting, in part, their rancor for the constant, postcolonial re-imaging of their lives and sacred spaces by tourists with cameras.

Perhaps no place in the world has been celebrated simultaneously as the locus of filth and transcendence as Varanasi has. The irony is that in denying their city -- in all its messy surplus of meaning -- a chance to expand Mehta's lens, its self-appointed guardians have done not only her and her audience, but also themselves a disservice.

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