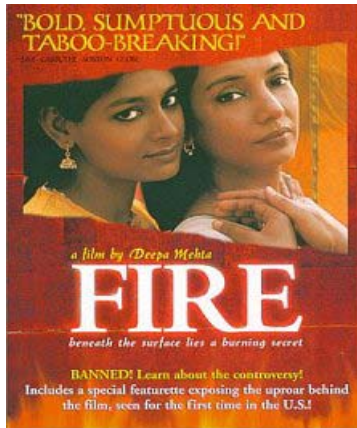


Glimpses of the fire: Documenting the debates around the film Fire



The site of [controversy](#) over the release of [Deepa Mehta's](#) ([external link](#)) film [Fire](#) in 1998 in India was a highly contested space with varied claims pertaining to a wide range of issues – from [lesbian rights](#) and [politics](#) to Hindu Nationalism ([The fiery periphery of the 'parivar'](#), [Furore over a film](#)), from [right to the freedom of expression](#) to the recent changes in Indian [culture and tradition](#), it invoked a range of questions and the central focus continuously shifted depending upon the set of concerns. The film was first released in 1996 [both in Europe and the US](#) and won several international awards, and Mehta's next project was already in the anvil. But the release of Fire in India provoked the [guardians of morality](#)– for the [lesbian theme](#) it sketched in the backdrop of a [traditional/patriarchal Hindu joint family](#) – who protested against its screening in different parts of the country. The [Shiv Sena](#) (for a short history and the party's relation with different riots click here- ([external link](#)), an extreme right wing Hindu organisation under the leadership of [Bal Thackeray](#) ([external link](#)) with roots in Mumbai (erstwhile Bombay), accused the film of being alien to [Indian culture](#) and tradition and of affronting its values. In December 1998, a small group of protesters halted the screening of *Fire* in two Mumbai theatres. The following day a similar group attacked a theatre in New Delhi where Fire was being viewed. In both cities, the protesters were primarily women affiliated with the Shiv Sena. They also held that the movie's storyline would [spoil Indian women](#) and would lead to the collapse of [marriage as an institution](#). The protesters laid

down demands to be fulfilled for uninterrupted screenings to be allowed; interestingly enough, among the conditions, one required that the protagonists' Hindu names be changed to [Muslim names](#), that is, from Radha and Sita to Shabana and Saira. A number of civil rights groups and women's groups and organisations gathered to support the film's screening and to counter the violent protests. The debate that followed foregrounded questions on the representation of woman ([statement on woman in Indian films](#)) and her [sexuality](#) in Indian films, cinema's role in articulating the nation's culture and tradition ([Lesbianism is part of Indian heritage](#)) etc.

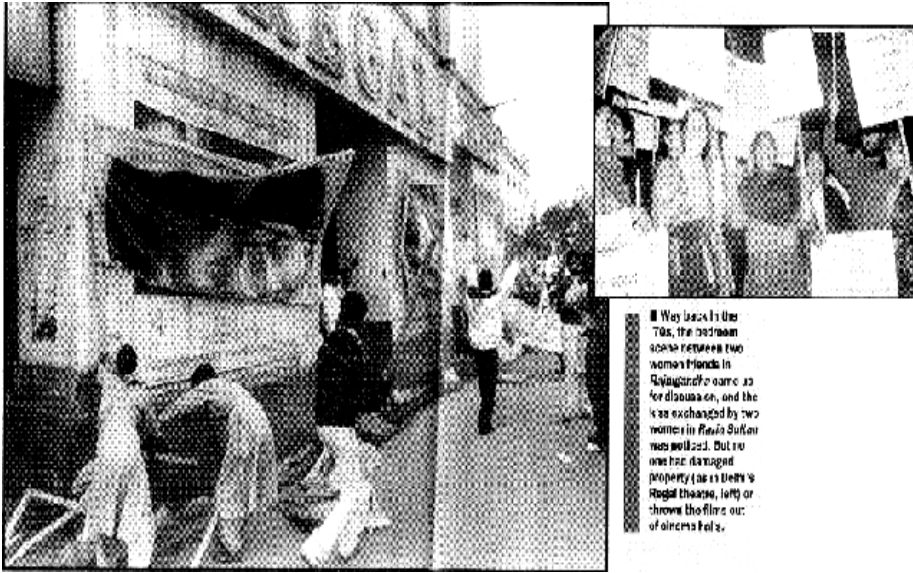
The controversy articulated diverse standpoints over these major concerns. From activist groups and [film makers'](#) associations to the Censor Board (CBFC) and the [central ministers](#) virtually everyone was pulled into this controversial site. The BJP, the leading party in the ruling alliance at the centre, was [criticised](#) heavily for its double standards on the issue. Whereas [some ministers](#) openly attacked the film on grounds of its cultural invasion, implicitly justifying the furious violent protests against its screening, [some others](#) took an indifferent stand although remaining silent on the issue of violence unleashed by the Shiv Sena and other Sang parivar affiliates. Both houses of the [parliament- Rajyasabha](#) and [Loksabha](#)- witnessed heated arguments over the issues that surrounded the screening of the film. Meanwhile the commotion against the screening of film and the vandalising gradually spread to other parts of the country as well (from Mumbai and [Delhi](#) to [Tamil Nadu](#), [Karnataka](#), [Guwahati](#) etc.) simultaneously attracting [protests against these protests](#) from all over the country ([posters in support of Fire collecting dust in a suburban office](#)). The picture got more complicated with the [women's wing](#) of the Shiv Sena assuming an active role in these violent protests, and certain other [religious organisations](#) considered to be more moderate than the right wing Hindu ideologues also joining in the campaign to stop screening of the film. The hysterical reaction of Shiv Sena activists was severely criticised and the justification for their action - that the film is against 'Indian tradition' because it depicts a lesbian relationship - was seen as a clear reflection of the Sangh parivar's definition of Indian 'culture' as essentially rooted in male control over female sexuality.



The film, cleared by the censor board ([What's the Censor Board got to do in an age of artistic adulthood?](#)) without, surprisingly, a single cut, was released on the 5<sup>th</sup> of

Way back in the 70s, the bedroom scene between two women friends in *Rajanigandha* came up for discussion, and the kiss exchanged by two women in *Razia Sultan* was noticed. But no one had damaged property (as in Delhi's Regal Theatre while protesting against *Fire*) or thrown the films out of cinema halls. **Indian Express, 13-12-1998**

November, 1998. Despite protests the film ran to [packed houses](#) for the controversy it was surrounded with and for the unconventional theme it handled. Meanwhile both those agitating against the film and [those who stood](#) for its uninterrupted and free exhibition in movie halls also sought legal means towards their ends ([Fire: Sena to move SC](#), [Fire hearing put off to Jan.25](#)). However, even the interventions made by the [Supreme Court](#) did not stop protestors from resorting to violent measures of agitating, and they eventually succeeded in [sending the film back](#) to the [censor board](#) for [reconsideration](#) of the clean chit it issued for the film amidst criticism from other [major political parties](#), [organisations](#) and [prominent cine artists](#). In any case, the board [cleared](#) *Fire* for a [second time](#). Interestingly the reincarnation of *Fire*, despite the clear nod from the censor board, saw [two clear changes](#) especially meant for the audiences in [Mumbai](#), which is the strong hold of the Shiv Sena. This time the names of the two principal female characters were [changed](#), although the changes were meant only for its spectators in Mumbai. But even these changes [did not lead](#) to a smooth screening of the film in Mumbai.



Considerable space was devoted by the media – especially the print media – to the controversy that surrounded the release of the film, and subsequently its screening in different-

Devendra Raj Ankur of the National School of Drama, who had staged *Lihaaf* (above) with second-year students, in a fine production that had Hibba Manra Shah, daughter of actor Naseeruddin Shah, in the lead: "The protest against *Fire* comes from a section which has nothing to do with literature or art". **Indian Express, 13-12-1998**

-parts of the country. The multivalent reception of *Fire* in India is most usefully seen as an arena wherein a number of discourses around femininity, sexuality and modern nationalism intersect and feed on each other. The various articles and commentaries presented radically polarized understandings of the function of cinema and of [Fire's representations of middle-class Indian women \(external link\)](#) as also the [emerging trends](#) in depicting masculine and feminine characters on screen in Indian cinema (see for instance Romit Dasgupta's review of Gayathri Gopinath's essay- [external link](#)). There were also attempts on the part of [some writers](#) who, evading the path of giving a historical definition for Hindu culture, instead identified the space of controversy as an opportunity to reflect upon the deployment of women's bodies and selves by such moral guardians as Shivsainiks against any scheme of liberation. The site of controversy also explained some of the limits and difficulties of [constitutional liberalism](#), and such liberal democratic concepts as [Freedom of expression](#), in the Indian context as the *Fire* debate was just one among a number of such debates around the question of [freedom](#) of art. For instance the Marathi language play on Nathuram Godse ("[Mee Nathuram Godse Boltoy](#)"), the

assassin of Mahathma Gandhi, released just before *Fire*, also became [controversial](#). Those agitated against *Fire* favoured the play whereas a number of organisations that supported *Fire* were in the “anti-Godse” camp [then](#). The *Fire* controversy forms part of a chain of similar instances during this period where the limits of creativity are often brought into question mainly on the grounds of religion. The controversy around [The Satanic Verses](#) written by [Salman Rushdie](#) ([external link](#)) ([Anti Rushdie campaigns](#)) and the [campaign](#) against artist [M F Hussain](#) ([external link](#)) for portraying [Hindu deities in nude](#) ([external link](#)) are just to mention a few and some of the most popular among them.

The location of controversy around *Fire* provided one with the sketch of a complicated terrain that made it nearly impossible to separate [the politics of protest](#), [sexual rights](#) and



[artistic expression](#) from the actual images of the film “[that is \(was\) supposedly about lesbianism](#)”, depending upon who is attacking or defending. An [overview](#) of the incidents that followed the initial screening of the film would enable one to get the nature and character of the controversy. The public spectacle that the controversy was, is also interesting for any objective observant for the contentions it hosted over various issues ranging from [lesbian politics in India](#) to [freedom of expression](#), from the question of [sexual preferences](#) ([external link](#)) to [nationalist ideologies](#) ([external link](#)) shaped during the period of [colonialism](#). Questions were invoked with regard to the [symbolic significance of women’s bodies](#) and chastity for Indian culture and tradition (for a somewhat detailed discussion on Women and Hindu nationalism [click here](#)), and the relevance of the (truthfulness of the film’s depiction of lesbian desire) film with respect to its proximity towards the [truth](#) behind the construction of lesbian desire. There was also a lot of debates around the [myth and reality](#) of lesbianism. The [support](#) extended by the gay/lesbian and other activist groups across the country against the violent measures adopted by the Shivsainik led opponents should also not be understood as unconditional and there were [different opinions](#) about the film plot’s proximity to lesbian realities in India ([insult to lesbians](#)). Hence, the support extended for the [right to screen a film](#) with an unconventional plot did not invariably turn out to be a sweeping celebration of the



film's theme as such, especially among [feminists scholars and activists](#). Certain other [arguments](#) emerging from the activist wings neatly fitted into the “[essentialist](#)” ([external link](#)) understandings of lesbianism/homosexuality, according to which homosexuality is understood as a unique disposition and not at all an outcome of certain unfavourable circumstances or uneasy relationships. According to the essentialist's argument homosexuals are born into their condition and their predilection is an inherited or an inborn characteristic. In other words, homosexual life is not chosen of a free will. Thus the film's theme that portrays a lesbian relationship as resulting from problems women confront within their marriage was placed under challenge since same sex sexual orientation is not an outcome of any particular social phenomenon and same sex sexual relations has an existence even beyond these social institutions. (The essentialist view is considerably challenged by [social constructionists](#) who hold that individual sexual orientation needs to be understood as deriving from cultural influences and rather than from essential features of an individual's biology or psychology. To see the debate between Essentialists and Social Constructionists in the study of human sexuality [click here](#)).

The [plot](#) of the film revolves around two women, housewives in a traditional Hindu family, Radha and Nita (played by [Shabana Azmi](#) and [Nandita Das](#)) who,



having been deserted by their husbands enter into a lesbian relationship with each other. Set within a middle-class Hindu family in Delhi, the film portrays both women as



oppressed in their respective marriages. They turn to each other and develop an emotional, sensuous and sexual relationship. They finally break out of the very patriarchal structures that threw them together to form independent lives. The



shifting of the sexual preferences of both Radha and Nita in the film is shown as a strong reaction to the patriarchal neglect of Indian men towards their wives (Gays and Lesbians in Indian Films- [external link](#)). The lesbian relationship that the two women enter into could be read as

a conscious and deliberate response against the misuse and abuse of female members by male power within the confinements of a traditional family. Thus lesbianism is invoked in the film in the context of power imbalances within the patriarchal society that could be potentially resisted through sexual intimacies without necessarily involving men. The film was also interpreted by many as exploring [women's dilemma in a modern world](#). While the film does not (only) deal with lesbianism (as [Deepa Mehta herself say](#)), in the strict sense of the term, and rather spills outside to deal with such nascent and [sensitive topics](#) as heterosexual relationships and even perversities between husband and wife, man and mistress, old woman and the onanist, lesbianism and patriarchy in Indian society, it could not absolve itself from the allegation of sketching female homoeroticism as caused by the denial of women's natural heterosexual desires- i.e. a sexually denied heterosexual female becomes a lesbian. That was also the curious message in the Urdu story, "[Lihaf](#) (The Quilt)," by [Ismat Chughtai](#), which has been much translated and uncritically anthologised as perhaps the first modern Indian story on this subject, and which was mentioned as the [film's source](#). Lesbianism therefore, unlike its Western reflection, takes on the connotations of an unequal power relationship, which the two women set out to

equalise through their sexual intimacy without men.

The moment of *Fire's* release coincided with the emerging trend in India that brought questions pertaining to sex, sexuality and gender to -



Deccan Herald, 13-12-1998

- the centre point of much heated exchanges at intellectual and activist levels. It also provided [space for organisations](#) on alternative sexualities to openly come out to defend their rights, associated with the freedom to express and be expressed through mediums with wider access to the public, to discuss more publicly issues that were so far confined

to the organisational spaces and spaces of courtrooms whenever (for instance) an issue of a [lesbian marriage](#) (*external link*) was brought before it. In fact discussions on alternate sexualities and rights of homosexual couples were getting on an active mood particularly after the marriage of two women police constables in Chandigarh hit the news paper pages in 1988. And yet the late twentieth century capitalism and the return to religious fundamentalism in India was quite intensely suppressing homoerotic impulses resulting in/reflecting upon the archaic moral structures, once again coming out from shadows and revisiting its socio-cultural spaces under the aegis of tradition. Such a backdrop and the relations articulated precisely to resist the label of deviance provides one with a [different ground](#) to look (in a more optimistic sense) at the release of *Fire* and its ‘pulling the crowd’ in different parts of the country. At this juncture it would be interesting to look at a short but different narrative on the crowd that *Fire* managed attract to Indian movie houses. [C M Naim](#) shares her experience of watching the film in an Indian cinema theatre and writes about the nature of the majority of the audiences particularly those (in her own words, “restricted to the 'lower', i.e. cheaper, sections) who filled the theatre with loud comments and noisy jeering or cheering at the unmanly husbands, the masturbating servant and of course the women in “action.” [Other accounts](#) on audience reactions to the film do not vary drastically and end with more or less similar conclusions. Although these accounts cannot be taken as representing the overall reaction of the public such accounts provide one with glimpses of the complicated reaction from the public towards the film and the near impossibility of having a one dimensional understanding of its theme and its reception, its screening in Indian movie houses and the immediate reactions - hostile or amicable -, the controversy surrounded it, the claims and counter claims that it witnessed etc.

In short, the site of controversy around *Fire* blends and juxtaposes diverging concerns over a range of issues; around the issues of Indian culture and tradition and the growing tendency on the part of Hindu fundamentalists to impose their own definitions through both violent and legal measures, freedom of [artistic expression](#), oppression of woman and her sexuality, the question of homosexuality in India etc. It provided the perfect space for these issues to be openly discussed. The spectacle of this controversy was [analysed](#) as a



space that could be effectively deployed by the women's movement in India by linking itself with questions of gay/lesbian's movement in order to tackle women's oppression. Such endeavours emerge from the fact that control over female sexuality constitutes the central concern of many of these issues although associating patriarchy as a measure to justify the film and its theme could effectively pitch in the presupposition that women's oppression is solely and directly related to the denial of choice in her sexuality. Other interesting accounts identified the film as a cultural product, the reception of which invites serious attention in understanding the transportation of meanings in a [global/local context](#) - with the film being viewed as anachronistic seventies style feminism in the West and as a Trojan horse for radical Western feminism in the Indian context; for the [normative arrangements](#) – sexual and cultural – depicted in the film against the backdrop of the ever present Hindu right. It was also deployed as a space to articulate the [potential caveat](#) against subscribing to the same biological reductionism that is fundamental to the patriarchal arrangements by drawing a direct link between sexual emancipation and freedom from oppression.



## Interviews

[The Fire Woman](#): Interview with Deepa Mehta

[Creativity should not be stifled](#): Interview with Veena Das

[Threat to Freedom](#)- Interview with Madhu Kishwar

[Dusky, daring Das](#) - Interview with Nandita Das

[“Larger Than Life”](#) – Interview with Shabana Asmi

[She loves to don challenging roles](#): Interview with Nandita Das

[Interview with Sanjay Mehta of Bobby Arts, Delhi distributor of Fire](#)

[Driven by instinct](#): Interview with Nandita Das

[Das Kapital of Films](#): Interview with Nandita Das

[Interview with Shabana Asmi](#)

## Additional links

[Protest in City against attacks on Fire](#)

[Not True to Life](#) - a lesbian critique of Fire

[Freedom and hurt sentiment](#)

[Newshounds or citizens?](#) (Shiv Sena invited media crew to capture their attack on Fire)

[Culture defined as communalism](#)

[Dilip Kumar campaigns](#)

[Making history](#): Drawing parallels between “Paraskthi” (Tamil) and “Fire”

[Nandita das- an element of talent](#)

[Fire: Thackeray justifies Sena demo](#)

[Bollywood's Best Films, Outlook, 12-05-2003](#)

[Shiv Sena MP apologises, takes back remarks against Dilip](#)

[Prosecuting Thackarey, by Rajeev Dhavan](#)

[Sena hardens stand on 'Fire' screening](#)

[Shabana surprised over Sena objection to 'Fire'](#)

[Lot of Smoke without Fire](#)

[Setting Water On Fire](#)

[Protest in front of Dilip Kumar's house justified, says Thackeray](#)

[Directives to police on 'Fire'](#)

[Shabana flays 'selective' ban on creative films](#)

[Protection to 'Fire' in Mumbai](#)

[Thackeray wants portion of Fire deleted](#)

[Fire: Sena wants names of Radha, Sita changed](#)

[Sena will not backtrack on Fire: Uddhav](#)

['Govt. decision on Fire, a knee-jerk reaction' - Deepa Mehta](#)

[Recertified Fire may be screened next week](#)

['Fire' row: Minister denies backing Sainiks](#)

[I have not seen Fire: Censor Board chief](#)

[M.S. Sathyu criticising attacks on Fire](#)

[Court orders protection for 'Fire' petitioners](#)

['Fire' generates heated debate at International film festival, Hyderabad](#)

[Shiv Sena warns against screening obscene movies](#)

[Distributors fear screening Fire without cuts](#)

[The Ulysses Of Indian Theatre: Bans, protests, censorship and creativity in India](#)

[Advani flays protest outside actor's house](#)

[Thackeray is communalising Fire issue: Shabana](#)

[Sena wants Fire withdrawn from Chennai hall](#)

[Sena asks Delhi cinema houses not to show Fire](#)

[No decision yet on Fire: censor board](#)

[Withdrawal blots freedom of expression: Deepa](#)

[Fire, burn](#)

[Freedom on Fire](#)

[Readers' responses](#)

[Naqvi \(central minister\) stabbing Censor Board in the back: Asha \(censor board chief\)](#)

[Now, Hindutva brigade spits fire over Malayalam song](#)

[Advani to make statement on Sena stirs, Dilip protection today](#)

[Sena seeks to spread its wings](#)

[Opposition walkout in Maharashtra Assembly](#)

[Shiv Sena member tenders apology in Rajya Sabha](#)

[Mahajan flays Sena for working as moral police](#)