

FIRE

A FILM BY DEEPA MEHTA

A ZEITGEIST FILMS RELEASE

FIRE

synopsis

The latest feature from veteran film director Deepa Mehta is an enthralling examination of a New Delhi family in the midst of transformation. Radha (the stunning Shabana Azmi) is unwavering in her devotion to her husband Ashok (Kulbushan Kharbanda), despite their barren and sexless arranged marriage. For 15 years Radha has been the consummate Indian wife while Ashok, under the guidance of a spiritual leader, is attempting to rid himself completely of any form of desire.

Meanwhile, Ashok's brother Jatin (Jaaved Jaaferi) has brought home his new wife Sita (Nandita Das), but is unwilling to give up his relationship with his Chinese girlfriend. Added to the mix are Biji (Kushal Rekhi), Ashok and Jatin's infirm mother, who keeps a watchful eye over the family, and Mundu (Ranjit Chowdhry), who works in the family's restaurant and video store under their small apartment.

Slowly, Sita's presence causes the threads that held the family together to unravel. Each member tries to hang on to a semblance of allegiance to the deeply rooted traditions of Indian family life, while at the same time seeking expression for their own personal needs and desires. Unable to woo her new husband, the young and feisty Sita is the first to question the order of things. Her doubts are contagious, and soon Radha's devotion begins to waver too. Deprived of their husbands' affections, the two women draw closer together in ways neither imagined.

Director-writer Deepa Mehta has captured the shifting landscape of the entire Indian subcontinent, where both men and women are caught in the immense tension between the continuity of the extended family and the desire for greater freedom and independence. Lusciously photographed and passionately told, FIRE ignites the senses as well as the emotions.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

FIRE came about in part because I had a real desire to de-mystify India. The India of the British Raj, of Maharajas and beautiful Princesses surrounded by abject poverty, just does not exist anymore. I wanted to make a film about contemporary, middle-class India, with all its vulnerabilities, foibles and the incredible, extremely dramatic battle that is waged daily between the forces of tradition and the desire for an independent, individual voice. More than 350 million Indians belong to the burgeoning middle-class and lead lives not unlike the Kapur family in FIRE. They might not experience exactly the same angst or choices as these particular characters, but the confusions they share are very similar — the ambiguity surrounding sexuality and its manifestation and the incredible weight of figures (especially female ones) from ancient scriptures which define Indian women as pious, dutiful, self-sacrificing, while Indian popular cinema, aka “Bollywood”, portrays women as sex objects (Mundu’s fantasy).

To capture all this on celluloid was, to a large part, the reason I wanted to do FIRE. Even though FIRE is very particular in its time and space and setting, I wanted its emotional content to be universal. The struggle between tradition and individual expression is one that takes place in every culture. FIRE deals with this specifically in the context of Indian society. What appealed to me was that the story had a resonance that transcended geographic and cultural boundaries.

My mother’s arranged marriage and her feelings of isolation moved me deeply as well. Most of my formative years were spent in New Delhi, surrounded by numerous aunts. We women, especially Indian women, constantly have to go through a metaphorical test of purity in order to be validated as human beings, not unlike Sita’s trial by fire. I’ve seen most of the women in my family go through this, in one form or another. Do we, as women, have choices? And if we make choices, what is the price we pay for them?

–Deepa Mehta

REACTION TO FIRE IN INDIA

“I’m going to shoot you, madam” is a line one doesn’t hear every day, especially when its delivered by an incensed gentleman on the verge of going ballistic. This threat, along with a few others, was received after the first screening of FIRE at the International Film Festival of India in Trivandrum this past January. I had never seen so many explosive males and so many jubilant women in one place, all ready to have a fist-fight in order to support their particular view of FIRE. Finally, the police appeared, tempers cooled, and I was escorted to the safety of my hotel. It was amazing that a film which explores choices, desires and the psyche of people who are victims of people who are victims of tradition, would cause such an uproar. But perhaps I was naive. “This (men would not even say the word “lesbian”), “is not in our Indian culture” was a refrain I heard often. When I would give examples from our literature, paintings and erotic sculptures all celebrating, in one form or the other, “this” particular relationship, I would be accused of fabrication. All very confusing! If we got into dialogue, it would invariably emerge that it was not the lesbian relationship that so offended middle aged Indian men, (surprisingly, younger and older men are ardent advocates of FIRE), it was the fear that FIRE might shift the status quo of husbands and women might just question their own insignificant role in marital relationships that lean very heavily in favor of husbands.

Indian women, by and large, have been nothing less than enthusiastic about FIRE. Yes, for “exposing” the hypocrisy in our society, but more meaningfully for them, for showing the secret lives we all lead.

On one hand, I’ve been thanked for opening a “dialogue” between men and women and, on the other, have been accused by men for destroying their happy, “safe,” and satisfied marriages.

WHY FIRE IS IN ENGLISH

I am a victim so to speak, of a post-colonized India. The medium of my education was English. In fact, not unlike many children of middle-class parents, English was my first language and Hindi, my second. I wrote the script of FIRE in English, a language I am totally at ease with. The difference is in the “kind” of English. In India, we do not speak “pukka” English. We’ve made the language our own. It’s totally colloquial and has many phrases that are distinctly Indian. We call this happy amalgamation “Hinglish.” I thought about translating FIRE into Hindi, but more for the Western audience rather than the Indian one. Western audiences find a “foreign” film easier to imbibe, easier to accept in its cultural context, if it is in its indigenous language. “A foreign film can only be a foreign film if it is in a foreign language.” And if it isn’t, then somehow it is judged (albeit subconsciously), as a Western film disguised as a foreign one. All very complex but true to a large extent. Well, how to explain to people in the West that most middle-class Indians speak Hinglish? Eventually, I decided to go for the authenticity of spirit of FIRE rather than peoples expectations of what a foreign film constitutes.

-Deepa Mehta

ABOUT THE CAST

SHABANA AZMI

Radha

SHABANA AZMI is the pre-eminent actress of India. Beginning with her very first film, ANKUR in 1974, she won the National Award for Best Actress and since that time has won every category of award for acting in the country; in many instances more than several times each. International audiences know of Ms. Azmi's work from such films as John Schlesinger's MADAME SOUSATZKA with Shirley Maclaine; Nicholas Klotz's THE BENGALI NIGHT co-starring John Hurt and Hugh Grant; Roland Joffe's CITY OF JOY and Ismail Merchant's IN CUSTODY.

NANDITA DAS

Sita

For a young actress, NANDITA DAS has an extensive list of credits. A native of New Delhi, India, she has been involved in street theatre, dance, puppetry, television series and film. She has worked with the well known theatre personalities Habib Tanveer, Barry John and Dadi Padumjee and has also acted in television series for acclaimed directors Amal Allana and A.K.Bir, Das is well known for her work in Muzaffar Ali's popular television series HUSNE JAANA. Das' previous film credits include PARINATI, (dir. Prakash Jha) and EK THI GOONJA (dir. Bappa Ray), both of which were screened at the International Film Festival of India. FIRE is Das' first English language feature film.

RANJIT CHOWDHRY

Mundu

RANJIT CHOWDHRY has appeared in all of Deepa Mehta's feature films. His first leading role was in SAM & ME for which he also wrote the screenplay. SAM & ME received a special mention in the Camera D'Or section of the 1991 Cannes Film Festival. Chowdhry was also in Mehta's CAMILLA. Chowdhry has performed in MISSISSIPPI MASALA, THE PEREZ FAMILY, THE NIGHT WE NEVER MET, Spike Lee's GIRL SIX, IT COULD HAPPEN TO YOU, LONELY IN AMERICA, and Gregory Hines' BLEEDING HEARTS. On stage he appeared in the Chicago-based Steppenwolf Theatre's 1994 production of THE MESMERIST. In addition to FIRE, Chowdhry has recently been seen in Mira Nair's KAMA SUTRA and Herb Gardener's I'M NOT RAPPAPORT.

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

DEEPA MEHTA **Writer/Director**

Deepa Mehta was born in Amritsar, India. She received a degree in philosophy from the University of New Delhi, and emigrated to Canada in 1973. She began her film career writing scripts for children's films, and has worked as an editor, producer and director. Her television work includes *Danger Bay*, *Inside Stories* and *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles*. In 1985, she directed TRAVELLING LIGHT: THE PHOTOJOURNALISM OF DILIP MEHTA, a one-hour television special on one of the top photojournalists in the world. The film was shot on location in Japan, France, England, the United States, India, and Canada. It received three Gemini nominations (Canada's Emmy Award equivalent) and a Finalist Award at the 1987 New York International Film and Television Festival.

In 1987, Mehta produced and co-directed the television film MARTHA, RUTH & EDIE, which screened at the Cannes International Film Festival in 1988 and later won the Best Feature Film Award at the 11th International Women's Film Festival in Florence, Italy. Mehta's 1988 television drama INSIDE STORIES received a Gemini nomination for Best Performance by a Lead Actress. Mehta's feature film debut SAM AND ME (1991) earned an Honorable Mention for the Golden Camera award at the Cannes Film Festival. In 1994, Mehta directed CAMILLA (1994), starring Jessica Tandy, Bridget Fonda and Hume Cronyn. FIRE, her third feature, was the opening night film of the Perspective Canada program at the Toronto International Film Festival. It had its U.S. premiere at last year's New York Film Festival where it received standing ovation.

GILES NUTTGENS **Director of Photography**

Giles Nuttgens left home at 17 to work in "theatre politique," doing jobs that no one else wanted to do. Years later, after ducking one too many empty whiskey bottles on Scottish football fields as a sports cameraman, Nuttgens began working in film. For six years, he worked as a focus puller on several award-winning British television productions. When he was 26, he worked as a cameraman on a feature-length documentary which was shot in the Amazon jungle. He shot his first feature film, ELECTRIC MOON, a Film Four project, three years later in India. Nuttgens also spent four years shooting around the world for George Lucas' internationally renowned *Young Indiana Jones Chronicles*. It was on that series that he met and worked with director Deepa Mehta. They shot two episodes together —one on location in Benares, India, the other on location in Greece and the Czech Republic. FIRE is the third collaboration between Nuttgens and Mehta.

ARADHANA SETH

Production Designer

Aradhana Seth received a Masters Degrees from the Mass Communications Research Center at the Jamia Millia Islamia University in New Delhi. She has worked on twelve documentary films and a combination of audio visuals, live news coverage, advertising films, radio features and photographs. Upon graduating in 1987, Seth began working in film as an assistant director. Her first film was IN WHICH ANNIE GIVES IT THOSE ONES. It was in 1992, while working on George Lucas' *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles* that she met director Deepa Mehta. In 1996, she worked on FIRE, and then as art director on Gary Sinyor's period film STIFF UPPER LIPS, which shot in India.

A. R. RAHMAN

Composer

A.R. Rahman is a living legend in India. He is the most important music composer in a country that produces 1,500 musical films each year. Influenced greatly by his father, a musical genius in his own right, Rahman started his career by composing jingles for advertisement films in Madras, in South India. Mani Ratnam's ROJA, a blockbuster hit film in India, was his first film. FIRE is his first international soundtrack.

BARRY FARRELL

Editor

Barry Farrell began his career as a dialogue editor and later became a picture editor, working for such clients as Pepsi Cola, Molson Breweries and the critically-acclaimed Leon's Furniture campaigns. Farrell has received numerous international awards for his work editing commercials and music videos. His film credits include the Russian epic THUNDERSTORM OVER RUSSIA (1991) and Deepa Mehta's CAMILLA (1994).

FIRE

written and directed by
DEEPA MEHTA

starring

SHABANA AZMI as RADHA

NANDITA DAS as SITA

KULBUSHAN KHARBANDA as ASHOK

JAAVED JAAFERI as JATIN

RANJIT CHOWDHRY as MUNDU

and introducing KUSHAL REKHI as BIJI

Cinematography.....GILES NUTTGENS

Editor.....BARRY FARRELL

Production Designer.....ARADHANA SETH

Music.....A.R. RAHMAN

Producers.....BOBBY BEDI, DEEPA MEHTA

Line Producer.....ANNE MASSON

Associate Producers.....KAREN LEE HALL, VARSHA BEDI

Executive Producers.....SURESH BHALLA, DAVID HAMILTON

1996 - Canada/India - 104 mins - In English

35mm - Color - 1:1.85 - Ultra Stereo

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