

RSM023

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We from **Sakhi (Delhi)**, **Sangini (Delhi)** and **Stree Sangam (Mumbai)**, lesbian groups in India strongly oppose and condemn the actions and statements of Shiv Sena goondas as regards the screening of the film FIRE. We need to break the silence around the fact that the violent enforced closure of the film constitutes yet another violence against lesbians in particular and women in general.

FIRE is the first film in India to explicitly acknowledge the existence of lesbianism. Furthermore, it also brings into focus the critical issue of forced marriages and forced heterosexuality - practices that deny women choice in our lives. The Shiv Sena has argued that this film is "a threat to marriage." We would argue that an institution which conceals so much brutal exploitation of women through domestic violence - an issue the Shiv Sena has never touched - could benefit from self-questioning. We congratulate Deepa Mehta for her film.

On the other hand, the Chief Minister of Maharashtra has lauded the actions of the Shiv Sena, saying that FIRE is "alien to our culture." We would like to take this opportunity to inform the press and the public that lesbians exist in India. We are here today, and we have always been a part of Indian society - witness the extensive yogini temple sites and lesboerotic sculpture all over India - and women will continue to love women for centuries to come. Lesbianism is not specific to any one culture, religion, society, class, language group, or geography. Lesbianism exists everywhere that women exist - all over the world.

If we claim that India is a free and democratic country that upholds the rights of all its citizens then clearly FIRE must be put back on the screens of the country. What the withdrawal of the film illustrates is that a few thugs are dictating what we can see and do, in clear defiance of the Censor Board and the voice of the public which has seen, enjoyed and peacefully discussed the film over the past three weeks.

Perhaps if the Shiv Sena had raised a protest against the current culture of Indian cinema, which alienates *all* women with its crudity, vulgarity and celebration of physical violence, there might have been room for dialogue.

As it stands, this completely irrational and inexcusable act underlines the fact that on one can take the safety of life and voice for granted. The Sangh Parivar has targeted various minorities - Dalits, Christians, Muslims, gays and lesbians, etc... They are also against the basic plurality which is inherent in Hinduism. This is an important moment for all of us to affirm our right to live as free citizens with all the democratic rights of other Indians. As lesbians, we deserve the right to live free from fear and violence, the right to a job, the right to affordable housing and government services, the right to free speech and association, and the right to cultural expression.

We demand that:

- * All cinemas should resume screenings of FIRE with the necessary protection from the police and the Ministry for Information and Broadcasting.
- * FIRE should not be sent back to the Censor Board as they have already approved FIRE for public screenings. Furthermore, the public has clearly demonstrated (witness the sold out shows) that they support the film.
- * Shiv Sena thugs and leadership should be tried for breaking the law - for inciting and condoning violence, for damage to property, for loss of revenue, and for spreading hatred against a minority group - lesbians.