

Humko Fire Mangta Hai

The constitution guarantees everyone a right to expression. Forceful shutdown of the film by a handful of Shiv Sainiks is a blot on the freedom of expression

Fire director Deepa Mehta

The controversy over Deepa Mehta's award-winning, internationally acclaimed lesbian-theme movie *Fire* raged through the month of December 1998, escorting India into the last year of the 20th century. Today, in the fourth week of January 1999, it continues to be debated in forums across the country. The Sangini Helpline and Support Group brings you an overview of the events as they happened in December, and some statements made by public figures relating to the controversy. If you are interested in knowing more about *Fire*, please visit the Sangini table and leave your name and phone number. We will provide you a free pamphlet containing many more details about the *Fire* controversy. Confidentiality assured. *Note: All information sourced from English print dailies, specifically the Times of India, the Pioneer, the Indian Express, the Hindustan Times and the Asian Age*

13 November Censor Board of Film Certification-approved all-India release of *Fire*

25 November Jain Vahini Samiti in Mumbai threatens to disrupt screening of *Fire* if film is not officially banned

2 December

- 200 Shiv Sainiks storm New Empire and Cinemax theatres in Mumbai, forcibly stop screening of *Fire*. Display glass smashed, ticket counter damaged at New Empire. Posters burnt at both venues, managers compelled to refund ticket money. Maharashtra Chief Minister Manohar Joshi praises Shiv Sainik's actions

3 December

- Cinema hall managers take *Fire* off theatres in Mumbai. In Pune, threats from the Patil Pawan Sanghatana ensure that the film is taken off theatres there as well
- Group of Shiv Sainiks attack Regal cinema in New Delhi where *Fire* was being screened
- Rajya Sabha MPs denounce the Shiv Sena's undemocratic and violent protests against the screening of *Fire* in Mumbai
- Three other theatres in Delhi stop screening the movie

We don't believe in violence. When we don't get what we want, we have to get violent, like in the Mahabharata

Shiv Sena Delhi unit chief Jai Bhagwan Goel

4 December

- Delhi Shiv Sena unit chief Jai Bhagwan Goel and joint secretary Dhruv Chand Pathak held for attack on Regal, released on bail later in the day against personal bond and surety by the court of the metropolitan magistrate
- Ministry for Information and Broadcasting (I&B) headed by union minister Pramod Mahajan and Mukhtar Naqvi, minister of state, refer *Fire* back to the Censor Board. In an official release, the ministry said *Fire* had caused public resentment leading to violent demonstrations and opposition across the country
- Dilip Kumar, Mahesh Bhatt, Javed Akhtar, Yash Chopra, Atul Setalvad, Hosbet Suresh and Toesta Setalvad in a petition urge Supreme Court (SC) Chief Justice A.S. Anand to seek an explanation from the Maharashtra government of its failure to provide protection to the screening of a film. Petition also requests India's apex court to ensure smooth future screening of *Fire*

5 December

- The Centre's decision to refer *Fire* back to Censor Board strengthens resolve of film personalities to petition SC
- Police, people successfully repel West Bengal Hindu Mahasabha and Shiv Sena demonstration outside Chaplin theatre in Calcutta where *Fire* was being screened. West Bengal Youth Congress president Paresh Pal condemns Hindu Mahasabha for attempting to disrupt the screening

6 December

- *Fire* director Deepa Mehta declares her intention to file a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in the SC on *Fire*

7 December

- 32 organisations including lesbian, artistes' and women's groups together with concerned citizens stage a peaceful protest against the Shiv Sena's vandalism and review of *Fire* by censors outside Regal cinema in Connaught Place
- Dilip Kumar, Mahesh Bhatt and six others file a petition in the SC seeking smooth screening of *Fire*

Ye aag ab nahi bujegi. We are Indians. Lesbianism is our heritage

Slogans, banners at the peaceful protest outside Delhi's Regal cinema

- Union minister for I&B Pramod Mahajan asserts that *Fire* has not been officially banned and will continue to be screened

8 December

- Cinema veterans Dilip Kumar, Mahesh Bhatt and Javed Akhtar at a press conference flay the government for succumbing to pressure from fundamentalists by sending *Fire* back to the Censor Board
- The National Commission for Women condemns the 'violence and vandalism' of the Shiv Sena against *Fire*, demands that government take punitive action
- SC hears PIL of cine personalities seeking uninterrupted screening of *Fire*, and a suitable direction to Shiv Sena leaders Bal Thackeray and Manohar Joshi and other centre and state authorities to ensure security to all concerned with the exhibition of *Fire*
- After raising resources to print posters protesting against the Shiv Sena 'thought police', albeit illegally as printers refused to state their name on the posters as required by law, civil rights and women's groups alongwith the Republican Party of India, in Mumbai, find themselves saddled with 20,000 posters that the police will not allow them to put up. Activists determined to continue putting up the posters

Freedom of expression, the bedrock of our nation, is being taken away from us by organised violence and vandalism
Dilin Kumar

They have ruined cricket pitches, burned paintings, choked music concerts and stopped a film from being screened. Mumbai just sits back and watches?

Poster issued by activists in Mumbai

9 December

- SC declines to issue notice on a limited plea for providing security to producers of *Fire*
- SC fixes date to hear plea by Jankapuri Residents Welfare Council, seeking an apology from the filmmakers for hurting Hindu sentiments by portraying lesbianism in *Fire*
- SC gives film personalities a dressing down for discussing with the press a matter that is *sub judice*, or pending before the court
- Congress clarifies stand on *Fire*. Spokesman Ajit Jogi says Congress is 'not against the film', and urges people to go to courts to protest and not indulge in violence

10 December

- 30 demonstrators staging a protest against Shiv Sena vandalism of *Fire* outside New Empire theatre in Mumbai rounded up, arrested and pushed into police vans

12 December

- Shiv Sainiks strip down to their underwear at a 'chaddi morcha' outside actor Dilip Kumar's residence in Mumbai, in protest against his approaching the SC for continued screening of *Fire*. Police arrest them for defying ban orders on illegal assembly. All were released the same day on personal bonds
- Janata Dal, CPI and CPI(M) politburo publicly condemn Shiv Sena assault on Dilip Kumar's residence
- Nearly a 100 artistes, lesbians, intellectuals and politicians (including the Janata Dal and the Left parties) stage candle-light protest organised by the Sahmat Trust outside Union minister for Home L.K. Advani's house, to protest against the Shiv Sena's assault on Dilip Kumar

We went in our underwear because that's the language he'll understand.
Shiv Sena MLA Shrikanth Surmalkar

13 December

- Bal Thackeray justifies Sena attack on Dilip Kumar. Objects to use of Hindu names Sita and Radha for protagonists in *Fire*. Demands that the same be changed to Shabana and Saira. Asks why film was set on backdrop of Hindu family

After a perceptive colleague relayed to me the whole story of the movie Fire, it seems obvious that the Shiv Sainiks have not seen the movie. Otherwise they would not have missed the subtle anti-Hindu tone of Fire, which appears to be a subtle take-off on the Ramayana.

Journalist Coomi Kapoor

- Mumbai units of CPI and Congress condemn Shiv Sena attack on Dilip Kumar

14 December

- Pandemonium in Rajya Sabha as Shiv Sena MP Sanjay Nirupam asserts that Dilip Kumar is a Pakistani. Representatives of Congress, Left parties and Rashtriya Loktantrik Morcha storm into the well of the house to demand an apology. Amidst ensuing ruckus, chairman Krishan Kant forced to adjourn the House without transacting any business
- Bal Thackeray alleges that *Fire* was cleared 'in a day' because of the close ties between the then minister for I&B Sushma Swaraj and Shabana Azmi
- SC orders the Union and Maharashtra governments to provide security to Deepa Mehta, Dilip Kumar, Mahesh Bhatt and others who had moved the court for screening of *Fire*
- The entire Opposition in the Maharashtra Vidhan Sabha stage a walkout to protest the Sena's 'violence' while protesting against *Fire* and for the chaddi morcha outside Dilip Kumar's residence

Today, I am extremely sad to call myself an Indian... I am told Mr. Dilip Kumar has been called a Pakistani in Parliament... How can these things happen in... a secular nation?

Filmmaker Vidhu Vinod Chopra

15 December

- SC issues notices to Union and Maharashtra governments seeking a police investigation into violent protests over screening of *Fire*. The court clarifies that it has nothing to do with either Censor Board or content of *Fire*, but will examine the larger issue of settling grievances by resorting to violence
- For the second day running, proceedings in both houses of Parliament dominated by *Fire* controversy and assault on Dilip Kumar by Shiv Sena
- Deepa Mehta provided protection by Delhi's South District police
- Union minister for Home L.K. Advani orders increased security for Dilip Kumar
- All India Democratic Women's Association demands that Parliament take action against Shiv Sena for challenging the citizenship of Dilip Kumar
- Shiv Sena MP Sanjay Nirupam compelled by Rajya Sabha chairman to apologise for his remarks against Dilip Kumar
- Sushma Swaraj and Shabana Azmi deny Bal Thackeray's allegations that they influenced the Censor Board to clear *Fire* in a day

You can portray the most delicate of issues, rape or lesbianism, without titillating

BJP leader Sushma Swaraj

16 December

- Bal Thackeray retracts charge of vested interest in clearing *Fire* in a day against Sushma Swaraj

18 December

- Screening of *Fire* which was to resume at Mumbai's Cinemax theatre called off due to review of movie by censors
- Minister of state for I&B Mukhtar Naqvi says that he is awaiting the Censor Boards decision on *Fire*

There can be no argument that lesbianism is unnatural
Minister of state for I&B Mukhtar Naqvi

23 December

- Censor Board's Asha Parekh says she has not seen *Fire*, and that the Board is still reviewing the movie

28 December

- Citizens of Mumbai continue to defy the law and put up posters criticising the Shiv Sena

29 December

- The Nagrik Adhikar Sangharsh Samiti organises screening of *Fire* amidst tight security at the Shieela cinema in Delhi

We are a free people in danger of losing our liberties because we don't appreciate them and we don't know how to defend them

Journalist Karan Thapar

Selected statements made by public figures relating to the Fire controversy

The Mahabharat and Ramayana don't have it (lesbianism). If it's in the Sutras, why do you have to bring them into society?

Jai Bhagwan Goel

When you are heir to the breathtakingly permissive Kautilya Sutra, why confine yourself to the missionary position on sexuality?... Homosexuality didn't need a visa to enter India, it was already here

Journalist Bachi Karkaria

Do we have lesbian culture in our families? Surely, this film has put all of us in a shameful light. *Hunko chulla bhari pani me doob marna chahiye*

Shiv Sena leader Madhukar Sarpatdar

Thanks to this film, even those who didn't know anything about lesbianism are now being introduced to it.

Shiv Sena MLA Shrikanth Sarmalkar

The film's theme is alien to our culture

Maharashtra CM Manuhas Joshi

Here is a country where not much is known about lesbianism. That being the case, what kind of public awareness are Shahana, Javed and their ilk trying to bring about by propogating lesbianism?

Shiv Sena supremo Bal Thackeray

We did not expect to meet the Home Minister and do not have any expectations from him or any of these leaders as they are all in the same league. But the only place where we can register the protest in Delhi is outside the residence of the Home Minister, so we gathered here.

Sahmat's Shahnam Hashmi

I have not called any member of the House of Pakistan. But Dilip Kumar has received Nishan-e-Pakistan, the highest award of that country, and he is a Pakistani

Shiv Sena MP Satyajit Nirupam

The target audiences for Fire were film festival delegates and foreign viewers who ever since Katherine Mayo's Mother India crave for depictions of India which the natives will find offensive.

Journalist Coomi Kapoor

After having subverted the autonomy of the process of film certification, the Shiv Sena and its political allies have now assaulted an individual's right to seek judicial redress

Rajya Sabha MP and lead actress in Fire Shahana Azmi

Ek aurat is doing intercourse with the other. On camera. What message are we sending to the public? We object to this.

Jai Bhagwan Goel

What do you gain by showing lesbianism? As it is, the institution of marriage is breaking down. This will make it worse.

Jai Bhagwan Goel

We are prepared to support the film if the film's protagonists withdraw the abuses they have heaped upon us

Bal Thackeray

The Shiv Sena was intolerant of dissent and wanted to curb the freedom of expression

Madhukarrao Pichad, leader of opposition in Maharashtra Vidhan Sabha

This will not fire, but backfire.

BJP MP Shatrughan Sinha

Peaceful demonstrations are part of democracy which can be understood. However there is no place for violence or exhibition of human parts in it

L.K. Advani

We didn't beat up anyone in the audience. We stopped the film, not the audience. We believe, don't kill the thief, kill his mother (Ha! Ha! Ha!)
Not all men can be like me.

Jai Bhagwan Goel

Jai Bhagwan Goel

Me & Di
Pranada
Anuja

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