Directed and written by Deepa Mehta
Dialogue by Anurag Kashyap
Produced by Mark Burton and David Hamilton
Original Music by Mychael Danna and A.R. Rahman
Cinematography by Giles Nuttgens
Film Editing by Colin Monie

Sarala...Chuyia
Buddhi Wickrama...Baba
Rinsly Weerarathne...Chuyia's Husband
Iranganie Serasinghe...Mother-in-Law
Hermantha Gamage...Barber
Ronica Sajnani...Kunti
Manorama...Madhumati
Rishma Malik...Snehalata
Meera Biswas...Gyanvati
Vidula Javalgekar...‘Auntie' Patiraji
Seema Biswas...Shakuntala
Lisa Ray...Kalyani
Sanoja Bibile...Woman Bather
Dolly Ahluwalia...Upset Woman
John Abraham...Narayan
Waheeda Rehman...Bhagavati, Narayan's Mother
Daya Alwis...Saduram
Raghuvir Yadav...Gulabi
Vinay Pathak...Rabindra
Kulbhushan Kharbana...Sadananda
Delon Weerasinghe...Priest
Mohan Jhangiani...Mahatma Gandhi
Zul Vilani...Mahatma Gandhi (voice)

Deepa Mehta (1 January 1950, Amritsar, India) has directed 11 films and segments of two TV series:


SARALA (1996 Sri Lanka) has appeared only in Water 2005.


(from IMDb) Deepa Mehta, LLD (born 1 January 1950 in Amritsar, Punjab, India)[2] is a Genie Award-winning and Academy Award-nominated Indian-born Canadian film director and screenwriter, most known for her Elements Trilogy, Fire (1996), Earth (1998), and Water (2005), which was nominated for Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. She also co-founded Hamilton-Mehta Productions, with her husband, producer David Hamilton in 1996.

Mehta was born in Amritsar in Punjab, India, though her family moved to New Delhi while she was still a child, and her father worked as a film distributor. Subsequently, Mehta attended Welham Girls High School, a boarding school for girls in Dehradun and graduated from the University of Delhi with a degree in philosophy.

After completing her graduation, Mehta started making short documentaries in India, and in time she met Canadian documentarian Paul Saltzman, who was in India making a film, whom she was to later marry and migrate with to Canada in 1973. Once in Canada, she embarked on her film career as a screenwriter for children's films, she also made a few documentaries including, At 99: A Portrait of Louise Tandy Murch (1975). In 1991 she made her feature-film directorial debut with Sam & Me (starring Om Puri), a story of the relationship between a young Indian boy and an elderly Jewish gentleman in the Toronto neighbourhood of Parkdale. It won Honorable Mention in the Camera d'Or category of the 1991 Cannes Film Festival. Mehta followed up with Camilla starring Bridget Fonda and Jessica Tandy in 1994. In 2002, she directed Bollywood/Hollywood, for which she won the Genie Award for Best Original Screenplay.

Mehta directed two episodes of George Lucas' television series “The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles.” The first episode, “Benares, January 1910,” aired in 1993. The second episode was aired in 1996 as part of a TV movie titled “Young Indiana Jones: Travels with Father.” Mehta also directed several English-language films set in Canada, including The Republic of Love (2003) and
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Heaven on Earth (2008) which deals with domestic violence and has Preity Zinta playing the female lead. The film premiered at the 2008 Toronto International Film Festival.

Mehta is best known for her Elements Trilogy…. Some notable actors that have worked in this trilogy are Aamir Khan, Seema Biswas, Shabana Azmi, Kulbhushan Kharbana, John Abraham, Rahul Khanna, Lisa Ray, and Nandita Das. These films are also notable for Mehta's collaborative work with author Bapsi Sidhwa. Sidhwa's novel Cracking India (1991, U.S.; 1992, India; originally published as Ice Candy Man, 1988, England), is the basis for Mehta's 1998 film, Earth. Mehta's film, Water, was later published by Sidhwa as the 2006 novel, Water: A Novel. All three films have soundtracks composed by A. R. Rahman.

Mehta is currently collaborating on the screenplay for Midnight's Children with the novel's author, Salman Rushdie. While casting is still in progress, Shriya Saran, Seema Biswas, Shabana Azmi, Nandita Das, Rahul Bose and Irrfan Khan are confirmed as participating in the film. [The film is currently in pre-production and is set for 2012 release.]


It was four in the morning as the Rajdhani Express sped eastward from New Delhi to Benares, the engine plowing through the darkened fields of Uttar Pradesh, the largest state in north India. …It was December 27, 1999, the verge of the new millennium….At the other end of my overnight train journey, my mother was sleeping peacefully in a small hotel room inn Benares—a peace that would be short-lived, although neither of us knew it at the time.

In four weeks my mother, international award-winning filmmaker Deepa Mehta, was going to begin shooting her fifth feature film, Water. She was born in India in 1950 and immigrated to Canada in 1973 after falling in love with my father, Paul Saltzman, a Canadian film producer and director. Together they started a small production company producing documentaries, television series and, eventually, feature films. She was thirty-eight when she directed her first movie.

I was their only child, a half-Hindu, half Jewish daughter, born during a snowstorm in Canada. They raised me between Canada and India, where we visited my maternal grandparents every year in their house in New Delhi. Dressed in small Indian lehengas and kurtas, I was fed food by my Nani, my grandmother, with her soft hands. My first words were in Hindi. But when I was eleven years old, soon after my mother directed her first film, my parents divorced. It happened at the Cannes Film Festival in the south of France.

My mother’s first film had been accepted into the Critics Week section of the festival. The whole family, including my maternal grandparents, went to Cannes to celebrate. The movie was about the unlikely relationship between two Canadian immigrants, an old Jewish man and his young Indian caregiver. It was received with praise and given a standing ovation, launching her career. But below the thin guise of celebrity and success that was beginning to envelop us, my parents’ marriage of eighteen years was crumbling.

It ended on a warm spring evening after a screening, in the small apartment we had rented overlooking the Riviera. I was trying to do math homework, but sat frozen at the oval dining room table as their last fight raged. My grandparents sat on the couch, dumbfounded. And then my parents asked me to choose whom I was going to live with….My choice haunted me every day afterward…As an eleven-year-old with a child’s instincts, it seemed only natural to choose him over my mother. I felt safe with him, while my mother’s pain and anger sometimes scared me….

When my mother invited me to make a film with her in India for three months, I accepted, despite the painful memories between us.

I hadn’t been to India for years, and the last time I had travelled there was with my father. We avoided New Delhi, where my grandparents lived, and when they tried to call me, my dad put down the receiver. In the pain after the divorce my father had wrapped me up in our own world in our home in Toronto, angrily pushing away any contact I may have had with my maternal grandparents. Since the divorce, my relationship with India had been slowly left to die, like a withered plant, untended and forgotten. Meanwhile, my mother’s relationship with India grew, and she soon returned to the land of her birth through the medium of film, turning her attention to the position of women in Indian society.

In 1996 my mother wrote and directed her third feature film, Fire. It told the story of two middle-class Delhi sisters-in-law who find love in each other and turn away from their oppressive arranged marriages. The film was explosive in India, a country that has no word for “lesbian.” It put my mother on the map as an international, and controversial, filmmaker. Movie theatres screening Fire in Bombay and Delhi were attacked by angry protesters who felt the film misrepresented Indian culture. They shouted that lesbianism didn’t exist in India, burned the film poster and broke down the theatre doors. She followed Fire with Earth, in 1998, based on the novel by Bapsi Sidhwa about the violent partition of Indian and Pakistan in 1947.

Water was the final film in what would come to be known as the Elements Trilogy. Set in the holy city of Benares in 1938, the film follows the lives of an almost invisible group of women in Indian society—Hindu widows. Women whose religion prescribed that they atone for their husbands’ death by living as ascetics, wearing only white, the colour of mourning, shaving their heads to renounce vanity, and living in ashrams or spiritual refuges. Hindu widows practised a different form of wifely devotion from the more widely known sati, in which a woman would throw herself on her husband’s funeral pyre, burning herself to death. The Manusmriti, one of the sacred Hindu texts, explains that in life a woman is half her husband and therefore, in the event of his death, she is half-dead. The practice of ascetic widowhood still exists today.

My mother had given me the script to read in Toronto. I read all of her work before anyone else, despite the difficulties between us. The script was beautiful, set against the backdrop of India’s struggle for independence from the British. It follows the lives of three Hindu widows living in an ashram: Shakuntala, a middle-aged woman hardened by her fate; Kalyani, a beautiful twenty-year-old, prostituted out to wealthy clients as one of the only means by which the ashram can earn an income; and Chuyia, a feisty widow-child of eight. Child marriage was a common practice
in India and still exists in parts of the country. A young girl would be betrothed to an older man, sometimes twenty or even thirty years her senior, and join him in his household upon reaching puberty. Daughters were a financial burden to their families, and quickly off-loaded through marriage. On Chuyia’s arrival at the ashram, Shakuntala and Kalyani are inspired to find freedom within the social constraints imposed upon them and to at last attain moksha—self-liberation.

David Hamilton, the producer of Water and my stepfather, stood waiting for us….David came into my life two years after the divorce, when I was thirteen….When I met him he was the CEO of a company based in Ottawa that provided high-tech services to corporations like Microsoft. Only after he met my mother did he begin applying his knowledge of finance toward film, transforming himself into a producer, like my father. David put together the financing for both Fire and Earth, piecing together money solely from independent investors.Over the next two weeks, an international cast and crew, including actresses Shabana Azmi and Nandita Das, who had played the lovers in Fire, would arrive in Benares to shoot Water. As I hugged David, I thought of my job. I was looking forward to working as the third assistant cameraperson in the cinematography department.

I would be working under my mother’s long-time cinematographer, Giles Nuttgens. They had met in Benares in 1993 while working together on an episode of George Lucas’s Young Indiana Jones television series. Giles was from northern England and had worked as a BBC cameraman for eleven years. We had met briefly on the second episode of Young Indy that Mom directed and Giles shot in Greece. He was due to arrive later in the evening from London, where he had been working on the most recent Star Wars.

My mother told me the idea for Water came to her while they were shooting in Benares in 1993. While she sat on the ghats (red sandstone steps lining the banks of the Ganges, descending into the river) on an early morning before shooting, she noticed an elderly woman dressed only in white, descending into the river for the river) on an early morning before shooting, she noticed an elderly woman dressed only in white, descending into the river for morning prayers. A production assistant explained to her that there was a Hindu widow, waiting to attain Kashi moksha—liberation from the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, which can instantly be gained by dying in the holy city of Benares. In all the years I had visited India I had never seen a Hindu widow, but I must have passed them on the streets, in the frenetic neighborhood markets, on overcrowded buses. There were over 30 million Hindu widows in a country of just over 1 billion. But I never knew. I never noticed.

We were going to a small tenement in central Benares where hijras, eunuchs, lived their lives dressed as women. It was part of our research for the character of Gulabi, a hijra who acts as Kalyani’s pimp.

Prostitution is an act Kalyani endures because of financial necessity. As a young beauty, she is sent out to support the other widows by selling her body. She has a pure spirit, which she believes remains untouched by her actions. I remembered a line from the script as Vikram and I got into the production car. It was Kalyani’s description of how she survived:

“Padma patramm evam bhasa.”
 “Like a lotus, untouched by the filthy water in which it grows.”

“It’s a Shiv lingam,” Vikram said.
“A what?”
“‘A symbol of the god Shiva. This is the city of Shiva.”
“I didn’t know.” I wanted him to tell me more.
Vikram stopped to look. He leaned closer to the lingam, resting his hand on the side of the chipped alcove.
“His my favorite god, Shiva. The creator and the destroyer. There are thousands of Shiv lingams like this scattered throughout the city. They say Benares is where he first touched the Earth, where creation began and where it will return in fire at the end of time. Shiv carries a drum for creation and a trident for destruction. Every image of him shows the Ganges flowing from his head.”
I looked closely at the smooth, black lingam. It smelled faintly of sandalwood paste.
“What does it symbolize?” I asked.
“It’s his phallus.”
“What!” I started laughing, embarrassed.
“No, really. It’s his phallus. And the low dish below has an opening, see? It’s a yoni, the birth canal and womb. It’s the union of male and female, a symbol of creation.”
I realized that every stone we were walking on in Benares was holy, each a small part of a constant cycle of creation and destruction. The energy of thousands of years of worship emanated throughout the city. They say Benares is where he first touched the Earth, where creation began and where it will return in fire at the end of time. Shiv carries a drum for creation and a trident for destruction. Every image of him shows the Ganges flowing from his head.

The newscaster’s authoritative voice announced a case of vandalism in Benares earlier today. The sets of Deepa Mehta’s Water had been burned and thrown into the Ganges by angry protesters, accusing her of defiling Hinduism, and polluting the holy river. Footage of our wooden sets were shown in flames on Assi Ghat and in the galis behind it.

No one would have known that day that the shutdown of Water was not about permission from the central government, re-permission, or democracy. In all likelihood, opponents of the film probably cared little about widows, if they were aware of them at all. It was about the blind pursuit of an idea of Indianess, an idea that required that anything that challenged it, threatened to fray its perfect borders, be cleansed and destroyed. In a country with so much exclusion, poverty, and difficulty, an idea was perhaps the only pure thing worth pursuing. And the preservation of that idea was as much about creating a self-serving image as creating one that would export well.
When Indian director Satyajit Ray made *Pather Panchali (Song of the Little Road)* in 1955, depicting life in a rural Bengali village, a famous Bollywood actress criticized him for glorifying India’s poverty. Why did he want to show the negative side of India? He could use his time to make films about India’s great industrial progress. Why not make a film about dams instead? It seemed to me that India under the BJP was in the midst of a similar purification campaign. Pavan K. Varma, a writer and member of the Indian Foreign Service, said “all nations indulge in a bit of myth-making to bind their people together.” *Water* was one of the casualties of maintaining that myth….

Sri Lanka was the perfect alternative location. The lush foliage and rivers could pass for rural India without the threat of the Hindu right. In the years after we had returned to Canada, Mom had searched for alternatives to India when she discovered Sri Lanka boasted a small, efficient infrastructure for film production.

The money had to be raised from scratch after the losses of Benares. David and Mom had to buy her script back from Ajay, who owned the rights as part of having financed the first attempt to make the film. In the end it was the Canadian government, through Telefilm Canada, a film funding body, that provided the largest investment in the project. Their decision to support *Water* was the beginning of a new way for Canada to support its artists. Telefilm’s mandate would only allow them to fund films in one of Canada’s two official languages, French or English. Recently the policy was extended to include Aboriginal languages. This narrow criterion ignored the reality of the country. Canada is a country of immigrants. Although they required that we shoot an English version of the film alongside the Hindi, they supported *Water*, a film set in India, beginning to embrace a new definition of what it meant to be Canadian. …

Our budget, $5.7 million Canadian, would allow for only forty-five days of filming, a short schedule in an industry where the Hollywood average was ninety days. Despite filming outside of India, a sliver of land away from the political fray, the crew would be required to sign a confidentiality clause, forbidding them to speak about the film to any media. Also, we would no longer be making *Water*. Language elicits memory, and there was no room for risk. Before leaving for Sri Lanka, David suggested that Mom change the name to *Full Moon*, an innocuous, almost silly-sounding title that hopefully nobody would question. …

“What are you doing?” I asked.
Mom was crossing out dialogue lines in the script.
“I’m simplifying, cutting out unnecessary dialogue.”

I watched as her black pen cut through the text….
“I want to tell this story visually.” My attention strayed back to Mom. She seemed to be speaking to herself. I could see her evolving as a director, through her desire to simplify, to take the time to do detailed shots of nature, which added ambience to the story. She had never done those things in earlier films.

Afterword by Deepa Mehta, January 2006.
“Sadly, we can’t rewrite our lives as we do film scripts. But with awareness and a bit of luck, we can sometimes nudge them in a different direction. The rebirth of *Water* coincided happily with the rebirth of my relationship with Devyani. As I read her book, I alternately smile and feel perturbed. Perturbed by her pain—because as parents we let her down. Smile because her honesty and courage made this redemption possible.”

Epilogue
On September 8, 2005, *Water* was chosen as the opening-night gala at the Toronto Film Festival. It was also the film’s world premiere….with us were the crew and main cast….We were all so excited that all I remember from the moment before we went onstage to introduce *Water* was the smile on my mother’s face and the glow from the white clothes we were all wearing. White—a small tribute to the widows whose lives we had tried to portray faithfully.

*Deepa Mehta’s ’Water’ Goes From Being Banned to Oscar Nomination, New America Media, Q&A, Sandip Roy, Posted: Jan 27, 2007*

Deepa Mehta’s film *Water* has been nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Film. It’s the third in a trilogy following *Fire and Earth*. It looks at a colony of widows set in a sacred city whose lives are upturned by a new widow, a child, in their midst. Mehta’s films have caused movie theatres to be burnt down in India by angry mobs and they have also won awards for the issues she addresses with the fiercest of passions. NAM editor and host of *UpFront* Sandip Roy spoke with Mehta when the film was first released and asked Mehta why she chose the subject.

Mehta: I made Water because its central theme is extremely relevant to me and - I think - in our world today. And that is the conflict between our conscience and our faith. To use the widows who I was exposed to in ashrams, seemed an appropriate vehicle to explore that theme.

**Do homes like the one you show in the film still exist?**
Yes they do. They’re pretty much the way it’s been depicted in the film. The houses are run by childhood trusts or temple trusts or by the Indian government. The good thing is that a lot of grassroots
work has been done with widows to alleviate their problems, which are socio-economic, by women activists. Widows have traditionally been cast off because their families don’t want to bear the financial burden of feeding her or share property. That’s true. Sadly, when you think of all oppression in the world it’s always economic reasons, and it’s the same thing with widows.

You started filming Water in 2000 in India but it was shut down. Tell us about that.

Before you make a film in India you have to give the government the script and they go through it with a fine-toothed comb to ensure there’s nothing detrimental or derogatory or offensive to India before they give you permission to film. The BJP government – a Hindu fundamentalist government of that day - gave us permission. So 6 weeks after pre-production when mobs started attacking our set in the name of Hinduism it was a real shock. The government which was another arm of the mobs that were attacking us had said it was fine. We were shut down after 2 days of filming.

How do argue with the mob?

You can’t argue with a mob. There’s not one person to have a dialogue with. There’s no room for reasoning. We tried but it was an impossibility.

Do you see us as a society getting more fundamentalist with less room for dialogue and tolerance? Instead of films provoking dialogue now we provoke riots with films, books, cartoons. Sadly it really reflects our times. All over the world different religions are being misinterpreted for personal benefit. It’s about power and economics and it isn’t really about the religion, whether its Hinduism, Christianity or Islamic.

So you ended up re-creating the sets for Water in Sri Lanka. Why?

We were invited to 4 other provinces in India but I was in such a state by what had happened – death threats on set, effigies being burnt, money lost for the producers - I was angry and to impose that anger on a script which doesn’t need it, would be doing a disservice to the film. It took 4 years for my anger to dissipate. It wasn’t about Water or about me, it was what was happening in the world.

People were flexing their muscles and trying to portray themselves as the protectors in the name of Hinduism.

When you shifted the production years later, you needed a new cast and the young girl in the film didn’t speak Hindi and you don’t speak Sinhalese. How did that work?

I love working with child actors because they’re so uncomplicated. I was warned that you make sure they really want to do it and they are intelligent. We had an interpreter and she learnt her script phonetically. It was marvelous. She’d never acted before, never even done theatre. She’s just fabulous. I had put posters up in schools and she told her mother she wanted to do it. And when I met her I knew immediately that she was the character. It worked out really well.

Water is the third of a trilogy, the others being Fire and Earth. How do these films set in different times of Indian history connect?

Fire is about the politics of sexuality and Earth is about the politics of war and Water is about the politics of religion and how they all affect women. That’s what connects them.

Which do you think is the most potent force?

Religion. That’s what I learnt in the four years and looking at the climate of the world today.

What does it mean that so many films about women, including your own, are about their sexuality?

That’s true but when you go a little deeper you see that sexuality is all about rules and who makes those rules.

The plight of the oppressed brown women as often been used to justify colonialism. Given that, how do you react when people say that films like Water make people in the West feel smug about their ‘superior’ practices?

I wrote Water as a brown woman who feels strongly for her sisters. Whenever Water has screened people have not said ‘what can we do about those poor Indian widows’ they say, ‘the way we treat our native Indians or our senior citizens or our Inuit is much worse’. It’s interesting that everyone started looking at their own backyard and not feeling smug.
COMING UP IN THE SPRING 2011 BUFFALO FILM SEMINAR

Jan 18 Fritz Lang, Metropolis 1927
Jan 25 Lloyd Bacon, 42nd Street 1933
Feb 1 Ernst Lubitsch, Ninotchka 1939
Feb 8 Luchino Visconti, Ossessione 1942
Feb 15 Robert Bresson, Journal d’un curé de campagne 1950
Feb 22 Martin Ritt, The Spy Who Came in from the Cold 1965
Mar 1 Nicholas Roeg, Walkabout 1971
Mar 8 John Mackenzie, The Long Good Friday 1980
Mar 22 Bernard Tavernier, Coup du torchon 1981
Mar 29 Werner Herzog, Fitzcarraldo 1982
Apr 5 Nagisa Ōshima, Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence 1983
Apr 19 Jafar Panahi, The Circle 2000
Apr 26 Ridley Scott, Blade Runner 1982

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What is cinema? The answer to this question is no easy matter. Long ago the Japanese novelist Shiga Noya presented an essay written by his grandchild as one of the most remarkable prose pieces of his time. He had it published in a literary magazine. It was entitled “My Dog” and ran as follows: “My dog resembles a bear; he also resembles a badger; he also resembles a fox…” It proceeded to enumerate the dog’s special characteristics, comparing each one to yet another animal, developing into a full list of the animal kingdom. However, the essay closed with, “But since he’s a dog, he most resembles a dog.” I remember bursting out laughing when I read this essay, but it makes a serious point. Cinema resembles so many other arts. If cinema has very literary characteristics, it also has theatrical qualities, a philosophical side, attributes of painting and sculpture and music elements. But cinema is, in the final analysis, cinema.

—Akira Kurosawa