

**Asian cinema**

**Deep trouble**

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**An Indian film stars at the world's biggest festival of Asian film**

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**Now she can laugh**

"WATER" is the third part of an elemental trilogy by Deepa Mehta, an Indian director with a reputation for liking hot potatoes. "Fire", one of her earlier films, tackled lesbianism, and "Earth", the still sensitive subject of India's partition.

In "Water", she turns to the plight of India's widows, who are often regarded as non-persons. Though *suttee* has been illegal for a long time, many widows still suffer under an extreme interpretation of a 2,000-year-old Hindu tradition whereby a wife is half of her husband and when he dies, she is in effect half-dead too, and should be consigned to an ashram or house of confinement.

After the script of "Water" was passed by India's official censor in 2000, shooting began in the holy city of Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh. However, Hindu fundamentalists were quick to protest, burning down the main set and seizing and destroying all prints and the original negative of the film. With no insurance cover, Ms Mehta had to abandon her project. But she remained undaunted, and spent the next few years raising the money to shoot the film again. A Canadian businessman came to the rescue and "Water" was remade in Sri Lanka, using a bogus working title as a precaution. It also required a new cast since one of the leading characters, a child, had grown into an adolescent in the interim.

Was it all worth it? Absolutely. "Water" combines a humanist message, political courage and visual poetry in a way not seen since the death of Satyajit Ray. It is the finest Indian film for a generation.

The story is told through the eyes of a six-year-old girl who is sent to an ashram after the husband she had barely known suddenly dies. Still a child, all she craves is her mother, but even this is denied her. The child's story is paralleled with that of another widow, who falls in love with and expects to marry a high-caste idealist but commits suicide when his father advises him not to rock the boat and to take her as a mistress instead.

The film is set in the 1930s against India's growing independence movement, and its conclusion is more upbeat than you might expect. Mahatma Gandhi, on a stop at the local station, makes an impassioned call for reform which inspires the child-bride and the now bereaved lover to flee the town together and accompany Gandhi to a brighter future.

Like "La Terra Trema" and "The Battleship Potemkin", "Water" uses great artistry to challenge orthodox views. It is in the grand humanist tradition of Ray, Ms Mehta's mentor, and Vittorio De Sica. The young girl who brings a wizened and dying widow a piece of fruit to see her safely into the next world is a tribute to Ray's first film "Pather Panchali". Ms Mehta was applauded last week at the tenth Pusan film festival. Ray would have been proud.