

## Deepa wins in spite of Water losing out

Indian Oscar dreams were once again dashed as Deepa Mehta's controversy ridden film, 'Water', lost out on the Best Foreign Language Film award after making it to the final five. Although 'Water' was officially a Canadian entry to the Academy Awards, India had pinned her hopes on Deepa Mehta and her film given that 'Raang De Basanti', India's official entry, did not even make the final cut.

But for both, film and director, the journey to the Oscars has been a turbulent one to say the least. The film was originally supposed to have been shot in Varanasi but had to be shelved because of protests by right wing Hindu fundamentalists who even disrupted its sets while the shooting was on. The fundamentalists found the film to be offensive towards their religion as it depicted the plight of widows in 1930's India. This was way back in 1999 when Shabana Azmi was part of the original cast for the film. Mehta had to shut shop for a few years before again resuming shoot with a brand new cast that included Lisa Ray and Johan Abraham. By this time the shooting of the film had also been shifted to Sri Lanka for obvious security reasons. With the backing of the Canadian government, the film was finally nominated in the foreign language category at the Oscars.

Mehta, who is based in Canada, laments the fact that she could not shoot 'Water' in Varanasi as it would have given a totally different texture to the film but on hindsight doesn't regret having shot it in Sri Lanka as she could finally complete the film there. With the completion of 'Water' her trilogy of films including 'Fire' and 'Earth' stands completed. Each of the film focuses on a particular aspect of women's right in India. For her the completion of the films has been a great struggle, personally and professionally, and we are all proud of her determination and fortitude to make the films despite all odds.

And the very fact that she could rub shoulders with some of the best in the business by walking down the red carpet last Sunday is a great achievement in itself. Deepa Mehta has done India proud and we should all be grateful for that.

The fact that 'Water' eventually lost should not disappoint anyone. Not winning an Oscar after making it to the final five doesn't in any way make a film not as good as the one that actually won. There is a lot of lobbying that goes on in the Oscars and in the end your film not only has to be good but also needs to be associated with the right people with the right kind of backing. All the final five nominees are excellent films and it is almost an impossible task to choose one over the other. In the end it was Germany's Das Leben der Anderen (The Lives of Others) that finally bagged the Oscar.

But what should be a greater cause for celebration for the cast and crew is that 'Water' is finally being released in India on March 9th. Initially several distributors had refused to release the film given the violent reaction Mehta's previous films such as 'Fire' had had with protestors burning the film's posters and vandalizing theatres that were screening the film. But finally it was B.R Films that decided to take up the challenge. Its head, Ravi Chopra, who has produced several socially relevant films such as 'Bhagban' and 'Babul' said that his decision to be the Indian distributor for 'Water' had in fact nothing to do with the film being nominated. He said that it was a beautifully made socially relevant film that deserved to be screened in Indian theatres. He said that the film was initially going to be screened in theatres in the metros and then depending on the reaction would be screened in smaller cities and towns.

All in all Deepa Mehta has truly done India proud. 'Water' might have been a Canadian entry but it had the Indian stamp all over it. It is an Indian film about the plight of widows in pre-independence India and still has a lot of social relevance in India of today.

As far as hurting the sentiments of right wing Hindu fundamentalists is concerned I say let them cry about it as much as they want. If they think that they can get away with such mob activities then I think that it's high time we turn the tables on them and do what will hurt them the most; pay good money to watch films like 'Water'.

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