

EARTH

A film by Deepa Mehta (1998)

Summarized from the website of the film: <http://www.zeitgeistfilms.com/current/earth/earth.html>

I. THE STORY

Lenny, is an eight-year-old Parsi (Note: a religious community that fled Muslim rule in Persia to India during the ninth century. Under colonial rule, they enjoyed a close relationship with the British and were not allied with any particular ethnic group during Partition) girl who is growing up rich in pre-partition Lahore in 1947, enjoying the warm, enveloping life that loving parents and a filial household staff of four brings. Lenny travels daily to the nearby Queens Gardens with her beautiful Ayah (nanny), Shanta, a young Hindu woman with the kind of curves and smile that ensures a constant supply of eager male suitors.

These men are a mixed bunch: Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs (Note: a strong religious presence in northern India, Sikhism combined elements of Hinduism and Islam. It was founded by the Sant, Guru Nanak, during the fifteenth century), and similarly the staff-members serving Lenny and her well-heeled family are a happy collection of the religious groups represented in India.

It is an entirely pleasing world peopled by her beloved Ayah, Imam Din, the genial cook, by Dil Navaz, the Ice Candy Man, a rogue, who is Lenny's hero, by Hasan, the Masseur, who invents oils made from pearl dust and fish eggs, and also by her precocious Cousin Adi.

When the film opens, the British are finally preparing to quit their empire in India and the searing process of splitting British India into Independent India and Pakistan is about to begin.

For Lenny the trouble first appears in her Lahore home when a quarrel erupts between Mr. Singh and Mr. Rogers, a British Inspector General of Police, who have come to dine with her parents.

Bitter words metamorphose into slogan shouting mobs and arson. Angry Hindus storm through Lahore one day, and angry Muslims the next. Still, it is all far enough away from Lenny's uneasy but untouched home where her mother, Bunty, teaches her to waltz and Ayah's crew of admirers continue to meet in the park as before.

Then the serious killing begins. Hindus and Sikhs attack Muslims; Muslims attack Hindus and Sikhs. The savagery is thrust into Lenny's idyllic world. Lenny is with Ayah and a group of Ayah's admirers outside the servant's quarters of her home when troubling reports of violence around Gurdaspur in India begin coming over the radio.

Whilst the group, gripped with fear, listens to the radio, Ice Candy Man waits for his sisters at the Lahore Railway Station. The train from Gurdaspur finally arrives with all the Muslim men and children killed and four gunny sacks filled with women's breasts. That massacre sets into motion events that turn Lenny's world upside down. From the rooftop of Ice Candy Man's tenement, Ayah and Lenny see Sikhs slaughtering Muslims, Hindus butchering Muslims and Muslims burning Hindus alive.

The once charming Ice Candy Man turns into a near madman, one of the many roaming the streets of Lahore with vengeance and murder on their minds. The Muslim Masseur, the only voice of reason amongst Ayah's admirers, implores the group of friends to "stand by each other." A love affair between him and Ayah blossoms amidst the carnage and Lenny is privy to this fragile relationship between a Muslim and a Hindu. Lenny's family is spared the slaughter because the neutral Parsees are not part of the politics and the bloodletting. But a Muslim mob arrives one day at their front gate. The family will not be touched, but the mob wants all the Hindu servants and that includes Ayah.

The destruction of innocence by desire and greed wearing the garb of religion and nationalism was the price of this sectarian war.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE PARTITION OF INDIA

Since May 1999, India and Pakistan have been fighting over border territory in Kargil, a city located in Kashmir, the predominantly Muslim state in northern India. The escalating war between Pakistani Muslim and Indian Hindu soldiers fighting among snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas has made headlines across the world. The origins of this latest conflict between two largely ethnic countries can be traced to 1947, when British India was partitioned into India and Pakistan.

In the multi-faceted history of the Indian subcontinent, many events have shaped relations between Hindus and Muslims. In the 15th and 16th centuries Mughal rule over the Indian subcontinent witnessed Hindus and Muslims living in relative harmony. The breakdown in this relationship began with harsh Muslim rule over Hindus towards the end of the 17th Century. Under the strict Mughal leader Aurangzeb, taxes were reimposed on Hindus after they had been abolished, Hindu temples were destroyed and Hindus were forced to

convert to Islam. By the beginning of the 18th Century, the Mughal Empire had dissolved and the Indian subcontinent was both vulnerable and fertile terrain for the British.

Yet, as the British gained full power over India during the 18th and 19th Centuries, Hindus and Muslims united in solidarity against them. A significant threat to British rule occurred during the 1857 Indian Mutiny, when Hindu and Muslim soldiers revolted against instructions by British officers to bite open rifle cartridges believed to have been greased with cow and hogfat, both taboo for Hindu and Muslim consumption. Resentment grew as Hindus and Muslims were denied jobs and high positions in the government and army. By the end of the 19th Century, the Indian National Congress (INC), comprised of Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs (but Hindu-dominated because of sheer strength of numbers) had been formed. Indians were making heavy demands for equal opportunity and freedom from colonial rule.

In order to counter the perceived threat of the Hindu educated class, the British sought to make the Muslims their allies. They instilled the notion that the Muslims were a separate political entity and by the beginning of the 1900s they gave the Muslims separate electorates in local government all over British India. Still, most Muslims supported the INC.

During the 1920s, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs bonded together in non-violent mass resistance led by INC head Mohandas K. Gandhi. As a concession to end the resistance, the British ceded more political power and fairer representation to the Hindu-dominated INC.

Muslim leaders led by M.A. Jinnah felt that the Hindus, by dominating the INC, were beginning to dictate decision-making in British India. In the 1930s, this triggered growing sentiment among Muslim leaders that in order to protect their Islamic heritage, the Muslims should have their own state.

In 1940, the All-India Muslim League under Jinnah, declared its desire for a separate state of 'Pakistan,' meaning "land of the pure." He was prepared to negotiate whether Pakistan should be entirely sovereign or exist as a confederation under an all India center with the majority Hindu state being 'Hindustan,' or "the land of Hindus." The All-India center would control communications, foreign affairs and defense. Gradually, as the popularity for a sovereign Pakistan increased among Muslims, Hindus began to feel uncomfortable about being a minority in a majority Muslim state. Hindus and the INC were not comfortable with the idea of having a Pakistan with non-Muslims. Relations between the two groups began to deteriorate. An undivided Pakistan under an All-India center no longer seemed like a possibility.

On August 16, 1946, in its demand for a separate Pakistan, the Muslim League called for "Direct Action" day which witnessed thousands of Muslims and Hindus fighting in mixed areas.

As growing inter-ethnic unrest permeated the country, the British were ready to leave India. On midnight, August 14, 1947, India's borders were demarcated, with the help of Lord Mountbatten, the last Viceroy of India, as Pakistan celebrated its independence. India celebrated its independence the next day, August 15. During this period of partition, nearly 12 million Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs crossed the newly established borders to join other Muslims in Pakistan and Hindus and Sikhs in India. As violence escalated, more than one million people were slaughtered and maimed in inter-ethnic violence. Since then, Pakistan and India have fought three wars. With both countries now nuclear powers the stakes today are much higher...but the roots undoubtedly lie in the 1947 conflict. EARTH returns us to that conflict.

III. HOW THE FILM EARTH CAME ABOUT. BY DEEPA MEHTA

The title CRACKING INDIA written in fine black print down the spine of a paperback, could very well have been emblazoned in neon. My attraction to it was immediate. This might be attributed to the fact that I'm an Indian, and have the pathological need to buy any book that even remotely hints of 'Indian content'.

The synopsis of CRACKING INDIA described it as a "semi-autobiography of novelist, Bapsi Sidhwa, set during the holocaust that followed Partition in 1947." I was hooked. The tumultuous period surrounding the British division of India into two separate countries, Independent India and a newly created Pakistan, had always held a sort of dark fascination for me.

India, after years of struggle, finally gained its Independence from the British Empire in August of 1947. However, for most Indians, that 'Independence' is synonymous with its 'Division' or 'Partition', as it is known in the sub-continent. The announcement made by Viceroy Mountbatten, declaring the boundaries which would divide India into two, began a sectarian strife that would wreak havoc for the next fifty years.

My father and his family were some of the eleven million people that were uprooted from their homes during Partition. I grew up hearing stories about this particular holocaust, the carnage, the rapes and the mindless acts of violence that people who had lived together in relative harmony for centuries, committed against each other - all in the name of religion and nationalism.

Bapsi's CRACKING INDIA was a highly personal account of the Partition as seen through the eyes of an eight-year-old girl living in Lahore during that crucial time. What made it totally fascinating for me, was

that Lenny, the protagonist, belonged to the minority sect of 'Parsees', a religious group that had remained neutral and non-aligned, while the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs single-mindedly massacred each other.

Lenny's was an entirely unique perspective. It came from within an impartial community, but was also the point of view of a child, who learnt about love, war, destruction and betrayal within a span of a few months.

I wanted desperately to make CRACKING INDIA into a film, a particular film, EARTH, which would be the second in my trilogy of the elements of Fire, Earth and Water.

Tracing Bapsi was no easy task but persevere we did and soon I was talking to Bapsi on the phone, hoping that the film rights to her book were still available. Two months later, thanks to David Hamilton's unwavering belief in the project, we owned the rights, had development funds, and I was sitting at my kitchen table, writing the screenplay of EARTH.

David and Anne Masson and I had worked together on FIRE and we re-assembled the team to begin the detailed planning of the production.

During this phase Bapsi became a friend and was exceedingly generous with information and old photographs. She would talk with me for hours about what it was like growing up in Lahore during those times. Lenny, after all, was based on Bapsi. In fact, Lenny was Bapsi.

The irony of our situation hasn't escaped Bapsi or myself. Bapsi is from Pakistan and now a US citizen. I'm from India and now living in Canada. If neither of us had moved from our respective homelands, the film just wouldn't have been possible. Pakistan and India, since the Partition of 1947, are sworn enemies. Not only have they fought three major wars against each other, but also, as I write this, both countries talk blithely about their nuclear capabilities and continue their militant aggression against each other across the still-disputed Kashmir border.

The film had become an obsession for all of us, regardless of our own religious leanings. Not only did it seem imperative to show what the Partition did to innocent people, but somehow, in doing so, we hoped to understand why war is waged and why friends turn enemies, and why battles are invariably fought on women's bodies.