



EHESS, 190-198 avenue de France, Paris  
salle 640-641

**ceias** Conference **EMOPOLIS**  
Emotions and Political Mobilizations in the Indian Subcontinent

convened by  
Laetitia Zecchini

participants  
Véronique Bénéti, Debadya Bhattacharya, Peter D. Mc Donald,  
Sandhya Devesan Nambiar, Mira Hashmi, Lotte Hoek, William Mazzarella  
Rina Ramdev, Laetitia Zecchini

# WHEN BOOKS AND ART HURT

Censorship, emotions and cultural regulation  
in South Asia

An EMOPOLIS conference ▶  
convened by Laetitia Zecchini

'Is He an Artist or a Butcher?' is the title of a 1996 article published in a Hindi monthly magazine to protest against a sketch by the Indian iconic painter M. F. Husain depicting a nude Saraswati. It also signalled the start of a virulent campaign against the painter. This particular case shows how hurt is often claimed by different groups and publics when artists don't conform to a prescribed set of feelings or to appropriate representations of 'sacred' traditions, of the nation and national culture. This 'national culture' is often construed as a literal and intangible monolith that seems particularly vulnerable to corruption and *injury* by 'foreign' hands in different guises: the Muslim painter, in India, who is often said to be driven by the urge to disrespect Hindu sentiments, the Western scholar warned not to 'play with our national pride' (A. B. Vajpayee), the secular and modernist artist, etc.

This workshop aims at exploring issues of literary and artistic censorship in South Asia (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh) by focusing on the way anticipated 'hurt' often justifies the policing and regulation of the artistic sphere (cinema, visual arts, literature). Our point of departure is, in the words of Arjun Appadurai, the observation that culture is today the field 'where fantasies of purity, authenticity, borders and security can be enacted' and that the same censors patrol the boundaries of politics and aesthetics (Coetzee). In the subcontinent 'hurt feelings' are often reactivated or cultivated, staged and mass-mediated to claim recognition and legitimacy in the public sphere. The organizers of the Delhi conference in 2012 on 'The State of Hurt: Sentiment, Politics, and Censorship' talk of a 'ready state of hurtfulness', which particular organizations specialize in 'nurturing' to mobilize politically. Many artists, writers and intellectuals point to a politics of ultra-sensitivity and a thriving 'marketplace of outrage'. They are made to answer charges of obscenity, blasphemy, defamation or

sedition and cases are filed against them for hurting communal sentiments, threatening public tranquility, inciting violence.

Our objective in this workshop is to question the topicality and tangibility of 'hurt' in the public sphere on issues of literary and artistic regulation in South Asia, and to understand what it means to say that words or images *wound*. At the very least it suggests that an agency is ascribed to these offensive or provocative words and images. Censorship is obviously predicated on the power of language or art and must not only be considered as a 'punitive gesture', a means of suppressing and silencing. Censorship is productive as well, since it generates discourses and meanings, collective interventions, mobilizations and 'communities of sentiment'. Censorship must then be understood in the broad sense as a set of practices of cultural regulation which is neither the prerogative of the state or legislative action, but ranges from violent actions by the mob to operations of intimidation, practices of self-censorship, etc.

Bearing in mind that censors are also *sensors* engaged in the management of public affect (Mazzarella), what does it mean, in the South Asian context, to say that works of art and literature *hurt* feelings or offend sensibilities? That they mechanically stir into (violent) action and excitation? How is this feeling of vulnerability (i.e. etymologically '*woundability*') of excitable crowds, emotional publics and audiences, but also of artists, used and constructed, mediatized and sometimes ritualized? How can works of art disturb the 'distribution of the sensible' (Rancière) in the aesthetic-political regime and the 'differential allocation of grievability' (Butler) in the public sphere?

Wednesday, May 21<sup>st</sup> 2014

EHESS 190-198 avenue de France, PARIS

9:30 – 9:45 Welcome coffee

9:45 – 10:15 **Welcome address** by Amélie Blom (CEIAS) and **Introduction** by Laetitia Zecchini (CNRS-THALIM)

## First session 10:15-12:30

*Chair* Stéphanie Tawa Lama-Rewal (CNRS-CEIAS)

10:15 – 11:00 **The State of Hurt: The Contexts of the 2012 Conference and its Continuing Conversations Today** – Rina Ramdev (University of Delhi), Sandhya Devesan Nambiar (University of Delhi), Debadiya Bhattacharya (Central University of Bihar)

11:00 – 11:45 **"We, the artists' community of India, are deeply pained...": On Communities of Sentiment and Competing Vulnerabilities** – Laetitia Zecchini (CNRS-THALIM)

11:45 – 12:30 *Discussant*: Peter D. Mc Donald (University of Oxford)

## Second session 2:00-5:30

*Chair* Margrit Pernau (Max Planck Institute, Berlin)

2:00 – 2:45 **"This isn't a film": Aesthetic Sensibility and its Affronts at the Bangladesh Film Censor Board** – Lotte Hoek (University of Edinburgh)

2:45 – 3:30 **Unveiling The Visible: Circumventing Censorship in Pakistan** – Mira Hashmi (Lahore School of Economics)

3:30 – 3:45 Coffee break

3:45 – 4:30 **Incite-ful Speech: Censorship and the Politics of the Crowd in India** – William Mazzarella (University of Chicago)

4:30 – 5:15 *Discussant*: Véronique Bénéti (CNRS-LAIOS)