



**Laetitia Zecchini (ARIAS/CNRS) Project in the EMOPOLIS Program:**

**Culture Under Siege? Hurt, Anxiety and Censorship in India**

*'In terms of censorship and the silencing of oppositional or awkward voices under casteist or communal pressure, the situation is intolerable ... It has become part of the air we breathe, the climate of fear we live in... Part of us falls silent in front of the hushing finger'* (poet and critic Adil Jussawalla, 'The Hushing Finger', 1991)

*'When we claim to have been injured by language, what kind of claim do we make? We ascribe an agency to language, a power to injure, and position ourselves as the objects of its injurious trajectory. ... We exercise the force of language even as we seek to counter its force, caught up in a bind that no act of censorship can undo'* (Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech*)

I am interested in analyzing what many artists, writers and intellectuals in India describe as a politics of 'ultra-sensitivity' and vulnerability, as well as a thriving 'marketplace of outrage', where 'hurt feelings' are cultivated, manufactured and staged to claim offence, *police* the territory of culture and mobilize politically. Artists, writers and intellectuals increasingly have to answer charges of obscenity, defamation, blasphemy and sedition, and cases are filed against them for hurting religious or communal sentiments, threatening public tranquility, inciting violence. As a righteous, 'natural' emotion par excellence, hurt doesn't seem to need justification, yet justifies in return what many writers/artists in India consider to be assaults on free speech: bans of books (works of fiction and non-fiction), films and performances, of exhibitions and paintings, articles, essays, cartoons, book chapters, 'objectionable' printed or oral comments (in festivals or conferences, on the internet, etc). Hurt and offence are claimed to target works of art that 'transgress' standardized or sanitized representations and narratives. Writers and artists talk of self-censorship, publishers refrain from commissioning or publishing certain books, academics write cautious forewords and prefaces. It is also this acute climate of anxiety which I am interested in exploring here - an anxiety which, like censorship that is predicated on the power or agency of art, language and literature, is not just about silencing and repressing, but may be productive as well (see Mazzarella 2009, Butler 1997). For it generates discourses (on what 'authentic' or 'legitimate' Indian culture and 'Indianness' are supposed to mean, on what works of art *do*, on what rights artists must reclaim in the public sphere, etc), collective mobilizations and interventions. Artists and intellectuals also stage their resistance to intimidation (see the recent 'flashreads' in major Indian cities, or the very vocal and creative platform of artists SAHMAT, founded in the emotional aftermath of the murder of playwright and actor Safdar Hashmi).