



CENSORSHIP IN SOUTH ASIA
CULTURAL REGULATION FROM SEDITION TO SEDUCTION

EDITED BY
Raminder Kaur
William Mazzarella

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INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS
Bloomington and Indianapolis

This book is a publication of

INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS
601 North Morton Street
Bloomington, IN 47404-3797 USA

<http://iupress.indiana.edu>

Telephone orders: 800-842-6796
Fax orders: 812-855-7931
Orders by e-mail: iuporder@indiana.edu

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Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Censorship in South Asia : cultural regulation from sedition to seduction / edited by Raminder Kaur and William Mazzarella.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-253-35335-1 (alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-253-22093-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Censorship—India. 2. Censorship—South Asia.

I. Kaur, Raminder. II. Mazzarella, William, date—

Z658.I4C46 2009

363.310954—dc22

2008052447

1 2 3 4 5 14 13 12 11 10 09

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Acknowledgments

The origins of this volume are shrouded in the mists of the distant past—November 2002, to be precise, when some of the contributors to the present volume assembled at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in New Orleans to participate in a panel on censorship in South Asia. That so much time has passed between those initial conversations and the publication of this book makes the editors all the more grateful for the work, patience, and trust that the contributors and the splendid people at Indiana University Press—especially Rebecca Tolen—have put into the project. Acknowledgment is also overdue to Nayanika Mookherjee and Monika Mehta for their input during earlier stages of this project. Raminder Kaur would like to thank the British Academy for its Small Research Grant (SG-35512) to begin research on public perceptions and representations of nuclear issues in 2003, and the Economic and Social Research Council for its grant (RES-000-23-1312) to develop the work and bring it to fruition. William Mazzarella is indebted to the Law and Society Program of the National Science Foundation, whose generous support allowed him to begin investigating issues of censorship.

CENSORSHIP IN SOUTH ASIA

Between Sedition and Seduction Thinking Censorship in South Asia

William Mazzarella and Raminder Kaur

Censorship has been getting a lot of publicity in South Asia recently. The mid-1990s alone saw a veritable carnival of controversies over the line between the acceptable and the unacceptable in public culture. By way of example, one might point to the uproar in 1994 over the alleged obscenity of Madhuri Dixit's song-and-dance sequence "Choli ke peeche kya hai?" (What lies behind the blouse?) in Subhash Ghai's film *Khalnayak* (The Villain); to Shekhar Kapur's *Bandit Queen* (1994), which ran afoul of caste sentiment, the film censor board, and its real-life protagonist, outlaw-turned-parliamentarian Phoolan Devi; to Mani Ratnam's feature *Bombay*, whose dramatization of the Bombay riots of 1992–93 managed to offend Hindu groups, Muslim groups, and secular intellectuals alike; to the extraordinary intensity of protest (including one self-immolation) and policing that surrounded the Miss World 1996 pageant in Bangalore; to the Bombay ban on Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995), which, in the wake of the national ban on *The Satanic Verses* (1989), desecrated Indian political idols old and new by featuring a dog named Jawaharlal Nehru and an unflattering, thinly veiled portrait of Maharashtrian strongman Bal Thackeray; to Mira Nair's feature adaptation of the *Kamasutra*, whose Hindi version was in 1997 subjected to more stringent cuts than its English-language equivalent; to the public burning of a scholarly article, printed by the *Illustrated Weekly of India* in 1994, that dared to call into question elements of the mythical narratives surrounding both the seventeenth-century Maratha ruler Shivaji and the nineteenth-century proto-nationalist heroine the Rani of Jhansi, and to the cinema smashing, legal challenges, and extra-legal harassment that greeted Deepa Mehta's *Fire* in 1998, not to mention the direct physical violence that ended the first attempt at filming its successor, *Water*, in Banaras in 2000, before it had even properly begun.¹

And that is just India. In November 2007, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf declared a state of emergency and suspended the country's 1973 constitution for a third time. Independent news stations were forced off the air, hundreds of protesting journalists and lawyers were arrested, and the Supreme

Court was stacked with clients of the regime. But this relatively dramatic move—in some ways reminiscent of the much more extended Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi in India in 1975–77—was not Musharraf’s first experiment with censorship. Sporadic official interference with the media, as well as “disappearances,” had marked his rule since its beginnings in a “bloodless” coup in 1999. As in other parts of the world, the Internet presents wholly new challenges to official regulation in Pakistan. “Cyber-cops” working for the Pakistan Internet Exchange assiduously filter pornography, blasphemy, and “anti-Islamic” content from online networks. More generally, as Asad Ahmed’s contribution to this volume shows, Islamic orthodoxy is regularly asserted in the form of blasphemy accusations. Popular culture is by no means immune: Islamist parties have been involved in incidents such as the 2003 provincial banning of music by the pop band Junoon. And in the wake of the murder of three journalists in October of that year, the press has censored itself more stringently.

Bangladesh emerged onto the international map of censorship when Taslima Nasreen’s novel *Lajja* was banned in 1993. Like that of Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, the banning of *Lajja* only heightened the adulation with which it was greeted in the “liberal” West. Nasreen’s more recent books, *Ka* and *Dwik-handita*, personal memoirs that identify the author’s sexual partners in both Bangladesh and West Bengal, have provoked lawsuits and bans in both cross-border regions. In Nepal, two major incidents since 1990 stand out (prior to that year, under the Panchayat regime, press censorship was strictly enforced). First, there was the deafening silence consequent upon the Narayanhiti massacre of 2001, when the editor in chief, general manager, and publisher of *Kantipur* were arrested for publishing an editorial by Baburam Bhattarai, the second in command of the Maoists, alleging that the king’s brother Gyanendra was implicated in the deaths (see Genevieve Lakier, this volume). Second, there was the more dispersed regime of press censorship imposed along with the state of emergency from November 2001 until August 2002. While not as brutal as other emergencies in the region, it involved comparable restrictions on the press: all pro-Maoist publications were raided and shut down the day before the emergency was declared. As for Sri Lanka, censorship in that country has generally been a function of the ongoing battle between the state and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. While some aspects of President Chandrika Kumaratunga’s media censorship have now been revoked, it is still illegal to report on any proposed operations or military activity by the security forces, or on the acquisition of arms, ammunition, or other equipment by the armed forces or the police.

The incidents we have listed here are only some of the best known, most publicized controversies of recent years. By no means a comprehensive list, they nevertheless give some indication of the terrain with which we are concerned in this book. Our intention in bringing them together under the rubric “South Asia” is to explore the commonalities that result from their shared history of colonial subjugation, to account for their different locations in distinct national

politics, and finally to examine the more recent connections and contestations brought about by regional liberalization in the 1990s and beyond. Even though the primary emphasis of this volume is on Indian materials, our underlying ambition is comparative.

The very fact that these and other similar controversies were taken up and circulated by the cosmopolitan media establishment in South Asia (and often beyond) is itself an important social fact. Superficially, part of what made them compelling as public dramas was the way that they seemed to stage the contradictions of South Asian public culture in an age of globalization, a period that combined effervescent consumerism with surging religious nationalism. From the mid-1980s, and especially after 1991, the deregulation of consumer goods markets joined hands with an explosion in new commercial media. In the 1980s, India saw the spread of color television (already established in the rest of South Asia) and the coming of video and cable; in the 1990s, South Asians began being influenced by transnational satellite broadcasting and the Internet.

In this context, the relationship between the public interest and the interests of publicity inevitably became more complicated. Marketers, politicians, cultural producers, and social movements all sought to establish a presence and a profile, to realize the value-creating possibilities of these new affect-intensive fields of public identification, as well as to proclaim their dangers (Brosius and Butcher 1999; Kaur 2003; Mankekar 1999; Mazzarella 2003; Rajagopal 2001). Structurally, the lure of what one might call “profitable provocation” meant that the boundaries of public civility and decorum were constantly being challenged. Key areas included the public representation of sex, the supposed irrationality of religious appeals in an ostensibly secular democracy, and the line between legal and illegal forms of political action—this last paradigmatically represented by the popular rise of hypermasculinized, often violent political organizations like Bombay’s Shiv Sena (Eckert 2003; D. Gupta 1982; T. Hansen 2001; Katzenstein 1979).

With so much publicity, many of these controversies actually became less rather than more intelligible. The media reportage quickly imposed a kind of discursive hardening, a sort of dramaturgical standardization. It was the prescribed urban drama of cultural globalization, the overdetermined clash between the cosmopolitans and the localists, between modernity and tradition, iconically fungible and ready-made for nightly summary on CNN. At the same time, it would certainly be a mistake to suggest that we might reach the “truth” of these events by stripping away the “distortions” and “biases” imposed upon them by the media. These were struggles that, in a very fundamental way, lived and breathed in the media, found their distinctive forms and their conditions of possibility in the space provided by a particular configuration of media and publics.

On the one hand, then, the essays in this book represent a collective attempt to step back from the clamor, the relentless repetition of assertions and counter-assertions. On the other hand, we recognize, and indeed theorize, the inseparability

of medium and message. In part, this means placing the contemporary moment in historical and regional context. To what extent do the contemporary discourses, practices, and conditions of censorship echo or reconfigure those of the colonial period? The essays by William Mazzarella on the 1920s and Tejaswini Ganti on the 1990s, for instance, suggest striking continuities in the social dynamics of film censorship. Meanwhile, Asad Ahmed describes the present-day adaptation in Pakistan of colonial legal precedents regarding the management of blasphemy. Historical and comparative contextualizations also require us, in turn, to rethink the very category of censorship. To what extent is it an adequate or relevant descriptor for the kinds of public cultural controversies that we invoked above? In what ways might we retheorize censorship to gain a fuller understanding of the cultural politics of publicity in South Asia?

From Censorship to Cultural Regulation

As with many social phenomena, the harder one looks at censorship, the stranger it becomes. At the most elementary level, it quickly becomes clear that the common understanding of censorship as the repressive action of states and state-sanctioned institutions will not get us very far. One might even say that there seems to be something of a correlation between the regulation of cultural production and the proliferation of provocative forms.

Repression first: by considering censorship only as a matter of silencing and of denial, we risk missing what several scholars have identified as its productive aspects. On one level, we are referring here to the relatively obvious point that any kind of utterance or discourse, indeed the very possibility of language, depends upon a kind of constitutive foreclosure (Bourdieu 1991; Butler 1997, 1998). This foreclosure is, as Judith Butler argues, “a kind of unofficial censorship or primary restriction in speech that constitutes the possibility of agency in speech” (Butler 1997, 41). In this sense, censorship does not act upon a sovereign subject from “outside”; rather, it is one of the very preconditions of subjectivity itself.

In practice, the relation between explicit and implicit forms of censorship is often ambiguous. Genevieve Lakier’s contribution to this volume demonstrates this through an analysis of the self-censorship at work in the (lack of) representations of the massacre of Nepal’s royal family in the indigenous media. And Tejaswini Ganti shows how, in the world of Mumbai film production, self-censorship is inextricable from personal dispositions toward controversial themes. An open question—both empirically and theoretically—is the extent to which the positive meanings allowed or encouraged by a certain linguistic or semiotic configuration are “haunted” by the possibilities that they must disavow, but which remain crucial to their intelligibility. By attending to the particular politics of disavowal that structure particular events or sites we may well understand something important about the dialectic of fascination and loathing that seems to characterize so much in the realm of censorship.

On another level, some have theorized censorship as productive according to a Foucauldian schema. Classically, we imagine the censor, as Dominic Boyer (2003) reminds us, as the very embodiment of the anti-intellectual. The endangered word (lively, inventive, poetic) confronts the complacent philistinism of the censor (sluggish, pedantic, literal-minded). But censorship may also be understood as a generative technology of truth. Far from only silencing, censorship can be read as a relentless proliferation of discourses on normative modes of desiring, of acting, of being in the world. Censorship, then, would be not so much a desperate rearguard action as a productive part of the apparatus of modern governmentality (Foucault 1977, 1981, 1985; Burchell, Gordon, and Miller 1991). We find, for example, that the discourses on Indian women's sexuality that emerge out of censorship practices are internally contradictory in interesting ways (Mehta 2001a, 2001b). Moreover, as many recent public controversies over obscenity in the media have demonstrated, these discourses are routinely brought up against equally normalizing but quite different narratives of Indian sexuality—the compulsory invocation, by “cosmopolitan” critics of censorship, of Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra* and the erotic temple carvings at Khajuraho and Konarak as an integral part of the South Asian civilizational heritage is a case in point (Mazzarella 2003).

Then there is the issue of censorship as the action of states or state-sanctioned institutions. This raises two questions. The first is one of location: where is censorship? What are its sites? Where should we look for its logic and its motivation? Should we be examining the utterances and ideologies of those individuals authorized by states to intervene in the public field? To what extent does it make sense to say that the person who enacts censorship is better placed to comment on it than the person who is subjected to it? The Foucauldian commandment would of course encourage us, at the very least, to situate the deliberate utterances of practitioners within a wider institutional field. But what is the best way to discern the play of censorship in the textual traces left by its operation? How should we read the relationship between the carapace of case law and the relatively ephemeral rhythms of public debate?

The second question is: what counts as censorship? Are we stretching the term too far if we force it to accommodate not only the operations of official regulatory authorities (the courts, the police, censor boards), but also various “extra-legal” or “extra-constitutional” initiatives and interventions? Some, for example, speak of the “silent censorship” that market forces (or, better, the social relations that are reified as such) exert on the contents of the media (Jansen 1988). Does violent action against the screening of a film count as censorship? Or indeed any of the many “nonviolent” tactics by which activists in South Asia often seek to prevent particular events from unfolding—*bandh*, *hartal*, *dharna*, *gherao*, *morcha*, and so forth?

What about the connections between legal and extra-legal forms of censorship? Does it matter if violent or nonviolent “extra-legal” protests are linked, by either alliance or overt sympathy, to those who in fact do control the official

machinery of regulation? Such, for instance, was the case at the time of the Shiv Sena's agitations against Deepa Mehta's *Fire* in Bombay and Delhi in 1998. Only recently ousted from political power in the state of Maharashtra, the Shiv Sena smashed theaters and intimidated actors, and its actions were greeted ambiguously by the national government. National political leaders deplored the "lawlessness" of the violence, but regionally affiliated allies at the center expressed solidarity with the Shiv Sena and approval of its actions. And the Minister for Information and Broadcasting was in fact, to the dismay of many, persuaded to return the film to the Censor Board for recertification (a practice that the Indian Supreme Court declared illegal in December 2000).

On occasion, conversely, the Indian Supreme Court has effectively acknowledged the social force of an unofficial ban. In mid-2006, after Aamir Khan, the lead actor in the feature film *Fanaa*, publicized his support for the rehabilitation of people displaced by the Narmada dam project in Gujarat, cinemas were subjected to violent, government-supported protests in that state (see Ganti, this volume). Constitutionally guaranteed freedom of expression was thus pitted against the repressive practices of a state government claiming to be acting in the interests of the people. The deadlock was only partly resolved when public interest litigation filed in the Supreme Court yielded the verdict that while nothing could be done against the unofficial ban, individual theaters would receive protection if they decided to screen the film. In this way, in the language of the ruling, "any untoward incident" might be avoided. Certainly, "extra-legal" or "extra-constitutional" forms of censorship, particularly when backed by local leaders, often seem to carry more social force than official decrees.

Censorship is not just *in* but also *of* the public sphere. The censor's work is generally figured as semiclandestine, shy of—indeed perhaps structurally opposed to—publicity. We might imagine a nondescript functionary, seated at an anonymous desk in some minor alleyway of the corridors of power, wielding his pen and scissors with smug pedantry (and, yes, it does seem to us that the censor, despite all evidence to the contrary, is generically imagined as a man). But censorship, as we have suggested, often actually courts the full glare of publicity. And its agents are by no means always impersonal bureaucrats. Moreover, the censor's work is, it turns out, curiously dependent upon that which it would silence. Not just structurally—a society without obscenity would no longer require censors—but also sensuously: no one pays the provocative word or image as much careful, detailed, even loving attention as the censor.

We are all familiar with this compulsive dependency from the drama of legal process, in which the forbidden word must be spoken again and again precisely to establish its unspeakability. And we recognize it in marketing strategies that court bans in order to heighten the desirability of a product by marking it as controversial. Official censors will themselves often dismiss the indignant objections of their "victims" as nothing but publicity stunts. Shekhar Kapur in the field of commercial cinema (*Bandit Queen*; *Elizabeth*) and Anand

Patwardhan in that of political documentary (*Father, Son and Holy War; War and Peace*) have both been accused of this in recent years.²

In this age of liberalization and proliferating media, the singular centralized authority of government film censorship is increasingly coming to be supplemented by self-regulatory councils and professional advisory bodies, such as the Advertising Standards Council of India (see Angad Chowdhry's chapter in this volume) and the Press Council. Such independent organizations respond to and act upon public complaints against already circulating images and texts. But when it comes to the cinema, there has long been a sense that pre-censorship is necessary. The Government of India's Central Board of Film Certification retains the tradition established in 1920 when the first regional film censor boards were founded: moving images are censored before they reach the viewing public.

Richard Burt (1994) points out that censorship sometimes even becomes quite flamboyant, as keen and as media-savvy a participant in the great game of publicity as its ostensible quarry. In this mode, censorship competes vigorously for the conviction and attention of its publics. "Censorship not only legitimates discourses by allowing them to circulate, but is itself part of a performance, a simulation in which censorship can function as a trope to be put on show." Book burning, then, is not simply about getting rid of the books, but equally about "staging an opposition between corrupting and purifying forces and agencies" (xviii). This publicity-seeking side of censorship is evident across the spectrum of regulatory action. Few cultural protests, whether on the left or the right, whether peaceful or incendiary, commence these days before newspaper and television reporters are in place and press releases have been distributed. But the official organs of censorship are equally conscious of the need to perform their efficacy and their relevance. When film actor Anupam Kher took over as chairman of the Central Board of Film Certification in India in the autumn of 2003, the board was quick to promote a new clampdown on indecency in song remixes from Hindi films and in film trailers on television.

All this points to the fact that any claim to authority or power via regulatory action in the field of public culture necessarily involves some kind of active participation in the poetics and politics of publicity. Calculated interventions into the play of publicity—in the name of protecting the sentiments or cultural integrity of a particular constituency—are a standard feature of contemporary South Asian politics. Such forms of "censorship"—calling for the withdrawal of this or that film, book, or newspaper article—are obviously not just silencing tactics; rather they rely, for their political efficacy, on harnessing and mobilizing the public energy of the very artifacts that they appear to be trying to suppress. That such wagers on mass attention should be a matter of some ambivalence is not surprising. The ideal of communicative rationality in public debate frowns upon the affective, spectacular tactics of publicity—the performance of this distinction becomes particularly evident

during elections, when candidates' speeches are closely monitored for potential boundary breachings. Publicity is by definition an affect-intensive game. It touches upon the embodied and the intimate; its mode of persuasion is one of resonance rather than reason. It often seems dangerously close to disorder and chaos, to the nightmare transformation of the enlightened democratic public into the rampaging crowd. But this ambivalent aesthetics is, we are suggesting, the condition of any effective appeal to identification and authority. Public culture may be seen, then, as a field of contest between competing experiments, often improvised and volatile, with the profitable and productive harnessing of this volatile substance. That such experiments, sometimes extraordinarily compelling to their constituencies, are always inconclusive, provisional, and even dangerous goes without saying.

Many of the analyses in this volume deal with the affective intensity of images, that unstable corporeal energy that is captured in Jean-Francois Lyotard's (2004) notion of the "figural." But in other chapters, the censored objects are speech acts or texts, closer, perhaps, to Lyotard's "discourse." Our aim in these pages is not to prejudge the relation between image and text in the work of censorship, but rather to offer a provocative juxtaposition of situations that, taken together, might open up new ways of thinking about the libidinal economies of South Asian public cultures.

From one perspective, censorship seems designed to moderate the excessive force or perceived violence that such experiments in public cultural action may involve, as in the case of "hate speech," "obscenity," or—and this is an important one in India—incitement to communal violence (Butler 1997; Gates 1997; Heumann, Church, and Redlawsk 1997; Strum 1999; Walker 1994). But from another perspective, censorship also seems to routinize transgression. Michael Taussig, developing Elias Canetti's aphorism about the secret at the heart of power (Canetti 1984, 290), argues that social orders are based on "public secrets": that is, forms of knowledge or representation that are generally, even obsessively, known insofar as they must not be overtly acknowledged (Taussig 1999). Everyday social dynamics, then, depend upon the institutionalization or management of transgression, the normalization of a system of taboos and their breaking. In India, this dynamic has recently become particularly evident around the phenomenon of the screen kiss. For the first fifty years of Indian independence, Indian commercial filmmakers rigorously observed an unwritten (but nevertheless incessantly discussed) "ban" on hero-heroine kissing. The prohibition began to be breached with some regularity in the 1990s, but always with a *frisson* that effectively reinstated the power of the prohibition. One film, *Kwahish* (2003), was marketed primarily on the premise that it contained seventeen kissing scenes; meanwhile, critics complained that Indians looked "unnatural" and "awkward" kissing in films, and actresses keen to be seen as respectable made much of their visceral dislike of screen kissing.³

Madhava Prasad (1998) has developed an interesting argument that the prohibition on the screen kiss is an index of the impossibility of a bourgeois space of conjugal privacy and intimacy in the context of a social order that continues in large measure to idealize a patriarchal-feudal model of the family and, by extension, of social relations in general. We do think that the question of the intimate and its possible relations to public culture is crucial. But we are also interested in exploring the ways in which the compulsive assertion and foregrounding of a prohibition serves to routinize a pattern of incitement, a relation of desire and transgression. Here, too, censorship is not only or even primarily a mechanism of denial and repression; rather it serves to articulate a language of the hidden and the sacred in which everything is “out in the open” even if it is not “shown.” We are, of course, well aware of this dynamic when it comes to marketing or to show business: the strategic deployment of the tease, of provocation as a means of focusing attention, realizing profits, and attracting audiences. However, mainstream politics is no less performative, no less dependent upon a volatile calculus of provocation and respectability, defiance and dignity (T. Hansen 2001, 2004; Kaur 2003).

What we are proposing, then, is to resituate the concept of censorship as a particular (perhaps in some ways privileged) variant of a more general set of practices which we are calling “cultural regulation” (cf. Post 1998; Thompson 1997). Cultural regulation comprises a spectrum of public cultural interventions that would, according to conventional taxonomies, be considered quite distinct and, at the extremes, diametrically opposed—as in the case of “publicity” and “censorship.”⁴ By placing these practices on an analytic continuum, we hope to make visible the ways in which both rely on specific (more or less conscious) attempts to generate value (commercial or symbolic) out of a delicate balancing of incitement and containment. So whereas the term “censorship” to a greater or lesser extent alludes to the institutionalized frames of a legalistic discourse, the concept of “cultural regulation” points to the performative, the productive, and the affective aspects of public culture.

On one level, then, we are interested in calling into question the too-quick equation of state censorship with cultural regulation *per se*. At the same time, we believe that it is crucial to recognize the reasons and social effects of this equation. If we began with the figure of formal censorship, we did so because state-sanctioned censorship has become the most consciously and conspicuously formalized institution of cultural regulation. It brings the burden and force of state power to bear on its public cultural interventions, even as it claims, often rather complacently, to be acting in the public interest. No wonder it is reviled; no wonder we are tempted to understand the field of public culture as a relentless struggle between the valor of free expression and the cynicism of repressive power.

The fact that state censorship has become such a paradigmatic figure of regulation enables the complementary institutionalization of the discourse of