

‘Like racism, homophobia works in invisible ways’

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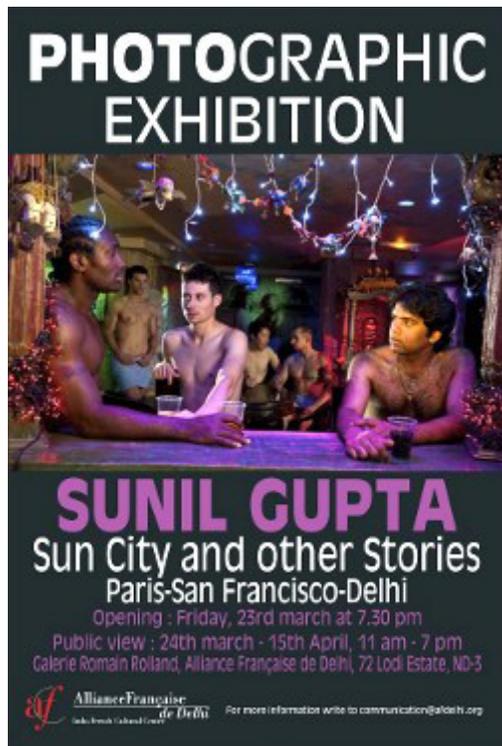
*An exhibition by photographer-artist **Sunil Gupta**, which got discontinued at the Alliance Française in New Delhi after an individual complained of being offended by it, Gupta talks to **Susmita Saha** about creative freedom and the multifarious ways in which it repeatedly get stifled in India and his sheer ‘perplexity’ about Alliance Française’s attitude over the incident.*



Don’t you think creative policing of this variety demands a strong retaliatory stand from an artist?

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Some of the photographs showcased in *Sun City and Other Stories* were also on display at Centre Pompidou in Paris as part of a Franco-Indian collaboration. In India, the exhibition was an entrant to Alliance Française de Delhi's Francophonie Week. Why have there been such fundamentally different reactions in two cities to the same content, despite the French connection?

What happened in Delhi did not happen in Paris. People here were confronted with a different situation. I would say that they were ill-prepared in a way. But even then, things could have been different. I am involved with Nigah, a queer collective in Delhi for four years. We host Queer Fest, an annual event featuring films, performing and visual arts. The visual arts exhibitions are hosted at the Max Mueller Bhavan and are discussed well in advance. We have not had a similar situation there, though visual art is something that sits for a long time, inviting people to respond and give their feedback. We live in a democratic society where people should be able to complain. However, there should be a process to it. In the case of Alliance Française, the process was absent.

You have invested this photographic project with tremendous energy and an aesthetic principle. Why are you so apathetic towards its predicament now?

I am not letting it go. I am speaking to you, I am speaking to various groups who are spearheading this discussion on appeasement and caving in to demands. I don't want this work to become a symbol of censorship. Rather, I want it to be looked at for its own sake. I can't imagine that the situation is going to be reversed if I retaliate. They are not going to put up the exhibition again. That trust is gone.

Do you feel that you are being persecuted for your gay status?

There is no concrete evidence that I can point to. But like racism, homophobia works in invisible ways. I believe there's a conservative lobby in the infrastructure of things and they have mounted pressure on the situation in some way. Had there been photographs of women or hetero-sexual scenes, I don't think there would be this kind of a reaction.

“They looked at some works and asked for 10 to be taken down”

Exhibition by photographer-artist Sunil Gupta gets called off after individual lodges complaint, Alliance Française keeps mum

Susmita Saha
New Delhi



Does this photograph offend you?

Artists and thinkers have expressed shock at the sudden cancellation of photographer and artist Sunil Gupta's solo exhibition titled *Sun City & Other Stories* in the Capital. The exhibition, originally a project commissioned by Centre Pompidou depicting a love affair, was shut down on Saturday, 24 March, just a day after its preview show at Galerie Romain Rolland at Alliance Française.

Photographer Ram Rahman, who was present at the preview, questioned the lack of clarity on the part of Alliance Française regarding an event of such momentous significance. "It's an issue concerning freedom of expression and the French institution has not elaborated on the grounds on which they have stopped the show," he said.

A statement issued by the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT) further pointed out that if well-regarded institutions like Alliance Française wilt under the pressure of a single individual and do not support creative expression, they are not in a position to enjoy the patronage of the art community. In the signed statement artist and activists, Ram Rahman, Geeta Kapur, Vivan Sundaram and Indira Chandrasekhar said they were “shocked to learn that the exhibition of photographs by Sunil Gupta was shut down shortly and they wanted Alliance Française to publicly clarify if they were ordered to shut down the exhibition”.

Even for political and social activist Aruna Roy, who delivered an inaugural speech at the preview, this form of bullying is completely unacceptable. “Moral policing of this variety is completely ridiculous. What is more astonishing is that the state apparatus, instead of putting its foot down, supports this kind of policing,” she said.

Gupta told TEHELKA that policemen arrived on the scene shortly after the inauguration after receiving a complaint from an individual present at the show. They did not interact with him directly but informed the organisers of the show about the complaint. “They went around, looked at some of the works and promptly asked 10 of them to be taken down,” said Gupta whose exhibition of 33 photographs is loosely based on *La Jetee*, a 1962 film by Chris Marker.

Through the evening, confusion reigned on the premises regarding the exhibition’s future. Gupta was informed on Saturday, 24 March, by Alliance Française that it was closing the exhibition for a day to figure out the next course of action. “By the end of the day, they called up again to communicate that the exhibition will be discontinued,” said Gupta, adding that no official communication offering reasons for cancellation has been made so far.

Mitushi Khurana, cultural coordinator at Alliance Française, however, maintained that it was mutually decided by Jean-Philippe Bottin, director of the French outfit in Delhi and Gupta to discontinue the event on 23 March, after the inauguration. It was originally supposed to go on till 15 April.

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http://www.tehelka.com/story_main52.asp?filename=Ws280312Art.asp