

# Ranjit Hoskote

## Documenta

### Resignation Letter

*Ranjit Hoskote, well-known Mumbai-based author and curator, announces his resignation from the Finding Committee for the upcoming sixteenth edition of Documenta in Kassel, Germany. His resignation follows published in Germany's daily Süddeutsche Zeitung on November 9, 2023. It accused Hoskote of BDS sympathies and "anti-Semitism," based on his signing of a 2019 BDS petition against a far-right event on "Zionism and Hindutva," cohosted by the Consulate General of Israel in Mumbai. The culture minister of Germany's Green Party, Claudia Roth, was quick to as "clearly anti-Semitic" the statement's depiction of Zionism as a "racist ideology" and Israel as a "settler-colonial apartheid state." Roth threatened to withdraw state funding for the renowned exhibition, whose last edition was already engulfed in a scandal around its alleged proximity to BDS and a dispute over anti-Semitic iconography.*

*In a sign of what is to come for German cultural institutions, Documenta was to ensure that the members of the new Finding Committee, and particularly the next artistic director(s), held no BDS sympathies. Before the members of the current Finding Committee—Gong Yan, Bracha Ettinger, Simon Njami, Kathrin Rhomberg, and María Inés Rodríguez—were announced, several well-known international curators who had already officially signed up for the Committee were suddenly removed, due to fears of BDS sympathies based solely on their ethnicity, or to their having expressed concern over the stifling consequences of the wholesale conflation of opposition to Israeli politics with anti-Semitism.*

*Earlier this week, another member of the new Finding Committee resigned—the Israeli painter Bracha Ettinger, for reasons that she stated were not connected to the accusations levelled against Hoskote but because Israel was enduring "dark times." Hoskote's resignation is the latest in a string of escalating scandals that have followed an anti-BDS resolution passed by the German parliament in 2019, with artists and curators, especially from non-European backgrounds, increasingly finding themselves targeted by weaponized accusations of anti-Semitism.*

\*\*\*

Mumbai, November 12, 2023

Dear Professor Dr. Andreas Hoffmann (managing director, Documenta und Museum Fridericianum gGmbH),

These last few days have been among the most deeply distressing days of my life. The monstrous charge of anti-Semitism has been brought against my name in

Germany, a country I have regarded with love and admiration, and to whose cultural institutions and intellectual life I have contributed for several decades, as a writer, curator, and cultural theorist. Members of the German commentariat who have no acquaintance with my life and work have judged, denounced, and stigmatized me on the basis of a single signature on a petition, taken out of its context and not approached in the spirit of reason. I have been written about with harshness and condescension, and none of my detractors has thought it important to ask me for my point of view. I feel, strongly, that I have been subjected to the proceedings of a kangaroo court.

It is clear to me that there is no room, in this toxic atmosphere, for a nuanced discussion of the issues at stake. And now—in what strikes me as a doomed attempt to save a situation that is beyond saving—I am being asked to accept a sweeping and untenable definition of anti-Semitism that conflates the Jewish people with the Israeli state; and that, correspondingly, misrepresents any expression of sympathy with the Palestinian people as support for Hamas.

My conscience does not permit me to accept this sweeping definition and these strictures on human empathy. Such a definition and such strictures have been opposed by prominent Jewish thinkers such as the philosopher Omri Boehm, the historian Moshe Zimmermann, the columnist Gideon Levy, the philosopher Michael Marder, and many, many others, who reject the equation of anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism. A system that insists on such a definition and such strictures—and which chooses to ignore both criticality and compassion—is a system that has lost its moral compass. I say this with the greatest sadness.

It pains me to say that such circumstances negate Documenta's historic openness to a diversity of positions and its capacity for sustaining the life of the imagination in a supportive environment. I greatly fear that these circumstances will compromise the generosity of spirit and the willingness to engage in dialogue that have long been sterling features of Germany's contribution to global cultural politics.

As such, I find myself unable to perform my duties towards Documenta, an institution for which I have had great affection and which I have known well for more than twenty years, ever since Okwui Enwezor invited me to chair a panel at the Delhi platform of Documenta 11 in May 2001. It has been an honor to serve on the Finding Committee for Documenta 16, and it has been a pleasure to get to know you and work with you. With much regret, I must offer you my resignation and step down from the Finding Committee.

\*\*\*

As I leave, you will agree that it is only fair that I should be permitted to state my side of this case, for the record. I would like to do this as follows:

1. I wish to restate that I have the highest regard for the Jewish people, and have always had the deepest empathy with their historic sufferings and admiration for their glorious cultural achievements. This is evident in my essays, my lectures, and my books. I am appalled by the accusation that I am anti-Semitic, and the suggestion that I am in need of instruction on this sensitive subject. Simple biographical factors render this accusation absurd. I was brought up in a pluralist family, which took pride in the diversity of India, including the presence, among us, of three distinct Jewish communities—the Bene Israel, the Cochin Jews, and the Baghdadi Jews—for centuries. My first mentor and dear friend, the great Indian poet and art critic Nissim Ezekiel, was a member of the Bene Israel community. Indeed, one of my great-aunts, Kitty Shiva Rao, was born Kitty Verständig in a Viennese Jewish family; she made her home in a newly independent India, applying her knowledge of the Holocaust to healing a young country that had been born amidst the horrors of the Partition. The Shoah is not external to me; it is one of the strands in my own family history.

2. Putting aside biographical factors, I wish to place on record also that I have publicly opposed the intellectual and cultural boycott of Israel—on the grounds that this will further weaken and isolate our liberal, progressive, critical, and inclusive colleagues within Israel. I do not share the BDS position, and disagree with it. My heart goes out both to the Jewish people and the Palestinian people, who have suffered an unremitting condition of strife for more than seven decades in West Asia.

I condemn unequivocally the terror unleashed by Hamas against Israel on October 7, 2023, and the horrendous massacre by Hamas militants of Israeli men, women, and children as well as Palestinian, Thai, Filipino, Nepali, and other individuals. I mourn the deaths of these innocent people. At the same time, I cannot ignore the brutal program of annihilation that the government of Israel has launched against the Palestinian civilian population, in retaliation. I cannot look away from this humanitarian catastrophe, its cost exacted in the lives of innocent men, women, and children. Now, more than ever, there is a compelling need to bring the communities of Israel and Palestine together, to renounce the exceptionalism of suffering on both sides, and to craft a solidarity of grief, a communion of shared vulnerability, and a process of healing and renewal.

3. Let us now consider the so-called evidence that has been presented against me: my signature on a petition circulated by the Indian Cultural Forum and dated August 26, 2019, protesting a discussion hosted by the Consulate General of Israel in Mumbai, on "Leaders' Idea of Nations: Zionism and Hindutva." The invitation for this event

presented a portrait of Theodor Herzl, the founding figure of Zionism, alongside a portrait of V. D. Savarkar, a founding figure of Hindutva.<sup>1</sup>

My reason for signing this petition was because the event clearly posited an equivalence between Herzl and Savarkar, and was intended to develop intellectual respectability for an alliance between Zionism and Hindutva. I found this highly ironic, since Savarkar was known to be an admirer of Hitler and openly expressed his admiration for Nazi ideology and methods, which he proposed as a model for a Hindu-majoritarian India to follow, especially with regard to the treatment of the religious minorities.<sup>2</sup> No member of the German commentariat who denounced me has asked herself or himself why the Israeli Consulate General thought it appropriate to equate Zionism with Hindutva in the first place.<sup>3</sup>

I have dedicated my life to opposing authoritarian forces and discriminatory ideologies, and my signature carried with it the weight of my commitment to dialogue, inclusiveness, mutuality, and the ceaseless quest for common ground. This commitment remains with me, as the cornerstone of my life.

With warm good wishes,

Ranjit

**X**

**Ranjit Hoskote** is an Indian poet, art critic, cultural theorist, and independent curator

1

Hindutva is an authoritarian-populist ideology that emerged in the 1920s, based on the belief that the multireligious Indian subcontinent could only fulfill its historic destiny as a Hindu-majoritarian nation-state in which religious minorities would live on sufferance, as second-class citizens. Hindutva views Indian Muslims in particular as an internal enemies who must be marginalized and diminished. The founders of Hindutva drew inspiration from Nazi and fascist doctrines and methods. Since 2014, with the rise to power of the Hindutva-based Bharatiya Janata Party, freedom of expression has been curtailed, political opposition parties subjected to persecution, the media turned largely into an official mouthpiece, and minorities targeted through attacks on their places of worship, their means of livelihood, and their access to opportunities and amenities.

2

Addressing a crowd of twenty thousand people in Poona in 1938, Savarkar said: "Germany has every right to resort to Nazism and Italy to fascism, and events have justified that those -isms and forms of government were imperative and beneficial to them under the conditions that obtained there." In 1939, Savarkar declared that Indian Muslims were "potential traitors, like the Jews in Germany."

3

I did not author the petition, nor do I agree with every detail of the wording of the petition. But, as anyone who has ever signed a petition knows, even sharp differences of stance are temporarily set aside in the cause of establishing a coalition to address an urgency. In this case, as the list of signatories shows, the coalition consisted of some of India's best-known artists, intellectuals, curators, and academics. As it happens, the artist who sent me the petition, asking if I would sign it, was Vivan Sundaram, whose grandmother, Marie Antoinette Gottesmann-Baktay, belonged to a Hungarian Jewish family.