

Splendid colors and calligraphy: Advice books for Muslims (here in Urdu, the official language of Pakistan) are beautifully presented – and serve as important sources for research on emotions.



# Do Emotions Make History?

One might presume that feelings are universal. Scholars working with **Margrit Pernau** at Berlin's **Max Planck Institute for Human Development** would probably beg to differ. Taking India as an example, the group is exploring how the cultural environment has shaped emotions over the course of history.

TEXT **TINA HEIDBORN**

**T**he expert in difficult-to-decipher texts sits behind the first door. A brief glance at a manuscript that drives others to despair is often all he needs. "It's great to have someone on the team with a native command of Arabic, Persian and Urdu. Even handwritten texts pose no problem for him," says project leader Margrit Pernau. Her doctoral student Mohammad Sajjad smiles modestly when the subject of his language skills comes up.

When Sajjad told his friends at home that he was going to Germany on a scholarship to complete his Ph.D., they were more than a little surprised: an Indian doing a doctorate on an Indian subject in Germany, and working as part of an international research group – is that even possible? But India is a common topic at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development, where the country is the focus of research into the history of emotions.

In January 2008, historians working with Director Ute Frevert began investigating whether emotions actually make history. Their work traces emotions and how they change over the course of history, and explores the importance attached to them. "We all like to believe that our own emotions are universal," says Margrit Pernau. Yet she and her fellow researchers set out to question this very assumption. Their core hypothesis is that emotions are shaped by culture. It is through their environment that people learn which emotions they are supposed to or are allowed to have, and how they are permitted or, indeed, expected to express them.

The rules of emotions can thus change over the course of time, as can the ways in which feelings are expressed. Consequently, emotions are also embedded in a specific cultural setting. "We needed a region where the rules were different than those in

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Western Europe,” says Pernau. That is how India came to be part of the research scope.

On the one hand, the Indian subcontinent is far enough away from Europe to be really different. And unlike South America, which is also geographically distant from Europe, India has never been significantly shaped by European immigrants. On the other hand, India has historical connections with Europe, particularly as a result of British colonial rule. “Relations between India and Europe have been close for 300 years, and have been both mutual and reciprocal,” points out Margrit Pernau.

Consequently, from a European perspective, India is less different than China. For the scholars, the subcontinent was thus an ideal addition to the scope of their project aimed at exploring emotions over the course of time. At the same time, it provided a means of investigating the entanglement between South Asian and Western European cultures.

This modern publication on how to bring up girls warns against excessive consumerism (left). In contrast, prayer mats and hand mills are recommended (right).

But India also represents quite a challenging field of research, even just in terms of its languages. Historians of emotions take the same approach as all historians: they search for sources, then read and analyze them. Project leader Margrit Pernau has three shelves crammed full of books in her office. Elegantly shaped letters stretch across colorful bindings, graceful calligraphy, beautifully presented: Indian advice books, including “How to be a good wife,” “How to raise your daughter to be a good wife” and “A husband’s rights with respect to his parents-in-law.”

For Margrit Pernau, these are important sources that she can use to learn about the “emotional rules” in certain situations: How do I need to behave as a wife, a husband, a mother-in-law? Emotional norms, as outlined in literature such as these advice books, are one way for historians to access the world of feelings. Looking at these books, it didn’t take the scholars long to realize that different emotional rules are often underpinned by different social structures.

How do I become the perfect wife and daughter-in-law? Indian and German advice books each approach such subjects from the perspective of very different contextual backgrounds: “In large families where the sexes are segregated, as is the case in the Indian model, the hierarchies are completely different than in the European model of the nuclear family,” explains Pernau. For a long time, the core of an Indian family did not consist of father, mother and child. Instead, the sons stayed on at home with their parents and brought their wives to live with them.

**PEOPLE FELT DIFFERENT IN THE PAST**

In this situation, conflict quite often arose between the sisters-in-law, in other words the women who had married into the household. “The husbands, that is to say the brothers of the family, also would frequently play out their own conflicts with each other through the women,” explains Margrit Pernau. “That was a completely different framework for emotional management within the family,” she says.

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A Muslim family at the large camel and cattle market in Pushkar, India. Muslims make up just over 13 percent of the Indian population.

Hindi. He attended a madrasa (Muslim religious school) in Uttar Pradesh for six years – so he spent six years learning how to read not only printed texts, but also hand-written documents in three important languages: Urdu, Persian and Arabic.

Persian, long the language of the Mogul courts, is very important for historians concerned with India. Sajjad's talent did not go unnoticed at the madrasa, and they sent him to study at one of the universities in Delhi. There, he added another new language to his repertoire: English, the language of instruction at all Indian universities. It was at the university in Delhi that Sajjad heard from one of his professors about the call for applications by the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin.

Mohammad Sajjad's field of research fits seamlessly into the historiography of emotions: he is analyzing the relationship between teachers and students in Sufism, the most important mystical current in Islam. In Sufism, Sufi teachers show their students the path to Allah. A very detailed code of

However, advice books like these are not the only sources of information on the values and emotional standards of days gone by. Schoolbooks are also useful: what were women to learn, what were men to learn? What values do schoolbooks communicate? Schooling always involves emotional education, too. Then there are texts that deal explicitly with emotions, such as scientific works that explain the origin of emotions, or philosophical and theological treatises. Prohibitions, morals, ethical behavior – these were and continue to be burning issues throughout history.

The Max Planck scholars are tracing not only the rules that apply to feelings through different times and cultures, but also the ways in which emotions are expressed. Writers often express emotions: their own or the feelings of others. In addition to the literature written by men, India was another of the nations that saw increasing numbers of texts published by female authors from the 19th century onward, as women began to write novels, autobiographies and letters.

On the surface, emotions appear to be a rather unusual subject for historians to tackle. But on closer inspection, there are vast amounts of very differ-

ent sources out there. In the case of India, these sources come in many different languages: Hindi, Urdu, Persian, Arabic; English did not appear until much later. Margrit Pernau admits that this poses huge challenges. Her team currently includes four doctoral students: two Germans and two Indians. "I would never have given a purely Indian topic to someone who could read only sources in English. You need a command of at least one of the common languages," says Pernau. The two German doctoral students, both women, studied Indology, and one is currently completing her doctorate in advice literature in Hindi. She has just traveled to India to begin a two-month research residency.

### A TALENTED LINGUIST FROM DELHI JOINS THE PROJECT IN BERLIN

Mohammad Sajjad set out in the opposite direction in October 2008. A full-bearded man in his mid-thirties, Sajjad applied to join the Berlin-based project from his home in Delhi. Originally from Dinajpur, a district in the northwest of the state of West Bengal, his native language is a local dialect – a mixture of standard Bengali, Urdu and



Islam arrived in the 8th and 11th centuries, after India was conquered by Muslim forces from Afghanistan. Missionaries then made sure that the new faith spread.

conduct (*adab*) for this had already emerged in the 13th century – a code that specified what form the spiritual relationship between teacher and student should take.

It stipulated that a student must place himself completely in the hands of his teacher and reinforce his submission by swearing an oath of obedience (*bay'ah*). The code also spelled out how the student should feel about the master: he must feel *hayba* for his teacher – reverence, fear and respect. Over the years, the great Sufi masters and their schools established religious practices and traditions. The love of students for their Sufi masters did not even end at death, as students would often continue to worship the masters in rituals at their shrines.

In the 18th century, however, a time when India saw a great flourishing of Islam and its religious literature, criticism grew: “Muslim reformist legal scholars (*ulama*) sparked a debate about which were appropriate emotions to feel for a Sufi master and which were not,” says Sajjad. “They

even accused the Sufis of polytheism, the worst and most unforgivable of all sins in Islam.”

Sajjad’s research is examining significant players, individuals and emotional communities among Muslim reformists and Sufis in North India between 1750 and 1830, along with the theological disputes they initiated. The range of sources the scholar is drawing on in his research is diverse: speeches by masters that were written down by their students (*malfuzat*), as well as hagiographic descriptions of masters as penned by the students (*tazkirahs*). He is also studying hand-written documents, correspondence (*maktubat*) and mystical poetry. All of them testify to one thing: that very specific emotions were cultivated within this mystical religious practice.

#### **BOTH SIDES SHOULD LEARN FROM ONE ANOTHER**

Although the significance of emotions may be clear in the religious context, Mohammad Sajjad had not been aware that it was possible to study historiography explicitly from the perspective of emotional research until he joined the Berlin project. He had to systemat-

ically familiarize himself with the methods and schools of European historiography for his project work. “It is very helpful to be in such close proximity to fellow researchers here,” he says. “For instance, I have a colleague I always go to when I need help on discourse analysis.” His fellow scholars, for their part, come to Sajjad when they need his assistance with sources written in Urdu, Arabic or Persian. “It truly is a dialogue between us. And it’s definitely reciprocal,” says Mohammad Sajjad.

The way things work there on a small scale, between the scholars, is also how the project is meant to work on a broader scale: it should not be a one-way street between Germany and India, with information flowing in one direction only. Cooperation should be mutually enriching. That is why Margrit Pernau insisted that all European scholars working in the “History of Emotions” research center should actually learn about India, its culture and its language. “People were a little nervous at first, but that eventually gave way to a great deal of openness and willingness. And the realization that the Indian culture is really not all that alien to them. It worked wonderfully well.”

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Now everyone is pulling together in the same direction. This project, which looks at India and Europe at once, is, after all, a work of translation, both literally and substantively. “Trying to transfer European models to an Indian context one-to-one simply doesn’t work,” explains Sajjad. Just as it can often be impossible to translate expressions directly, one word in Urdu or Persian into one word in German or English. Words and phrases have to be paraphrased instead, the context explained, the implicit connotations pointed out.

Whenever Mohammad Sajjad wants to explain the work he does, he really has to go into detail. Take the concept of love: Sufism has many different types and levels of love on the path to Allah. Many different expressions, finely nuanced, are used to indicate the various states of love for God that the mystics have attained. It is simply not enough for Sajjad to translate these theological notions into English words. He has to explain to his fellow scholars the very different world that lies behind the terms.

Project leader Margrit Pernau is well aware of the difficulties of looking at different cultural worlds: people can be prone to measuring the other culture against their own standards. It is important that this does not happen to India in the context of researching the historiography of emotions. Instead, the scholars want to develop joint models that draw on approaches and research in both Europe and India. Their aim is to see more by adopting different perspectives.

**TRUST DEFINES ECONOMIC HISTORY**

“The concept of emotions is an easy one to work with as a historian. This is true not only for the history of civilization, which more or less goes without saying, but also for areas like economic history, too,” says Pernau. Trust, for example, is a central notion that can be used to describe economic history: “In the current economic crisis, we can see for ourselves how important an emotion like trust is for the economy’s ability to function.” This is no different today than it ever was.

The other Indian doctoral student in Pernau’s group is working in a similar vein: he is studying the concept of honor in the modern Hindu national movement, with specific reference to a certain commercial elite in Gujarat between 1858 and 1922. In the mercantile world of these entrepreneurs, honor, prestige, trust and creditworthiness were closely intertwined, so much so that they even used the same word for both “honor” and “creditworthiness”. The doctoral student is exploring how the traditional concepts of honor and creditworthiness and the feelings associated with them were transferred to the emerging Hindu nationalism, and how they were transformed in the process.

Margrit Pernau herself studied the significance of religion for the social status of a certain group of Muslim merchants in Delhi known as the Panjabi traders. At the turn of the 20th century, these traders were masters of

Homage: Excerpt from a commemorative publication to mark the silver jubilee of the Nizam of Hyderabad in 1937. The Muslim ruler (Nizam) presided over the Indian princely state of Hyderabad between 1724 and 1948.

Photos: Norbert Michalke (2)





left: Doctoral students Mohammad Sajjad and Monika Freier in a discussion with Salil Misra, Professor of History at Delhi University (from left).  
right: Studying sources: Monika Freier discusses the content of an advice book for Muslims with project head Margrit Pernau (right).

an extensive trade empire and they were some of the wealthiest Muslims in Delhi before the partition of India in 1947.

Being relatively new to wealth, these converts sought to elevate their social status, given that immigrants from Islamic countries were traditionally at the top of the social hierarchy. The latter were known as *ashraf* (from the adjective *sharif*, meaning noble) and held a higher social status than their converted fellow believers from among the local population, the *ajlaf*.

The Panjabi traders were *ajlaf*, as they had converted to Islam from various Hindu castes in the course of the 19th century. "Religion was what guaranteed internal cohesion within this group," says Pernau. But the significance of religion went even deeper: it paved the way for social advancement for the Panjabi. This was because the Panjabi had joined the Islamic reform movement, which had been centered in Delhi since the middle of the 18th century.

The reformers fiercely criticized the ruling Islamic elite and called for a re-

turn to religious sources: their ideal was based on personal devoutness and advocacy of Islam, for instance in the form of charity, rather than on genealogy. "As such, the values of reformist Islam were completely distinct from the behavioral norms of the traditional upper class," says Pernau.

The Panjabi subsequently built numerous mosques and schools and became very active in charitable causes. Thanks to their personal devoutness and tremendous dedication, the *ajlaf* had now attained social respect in addition to wealth. "Religion was the most important means of transcending social borders," explains the scholar, adding, "religion also guaranteed the Panjabi a right to a high social rank."

### HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT IS NOT FORGOTTEN

This has long been a central theme in Margrit Pernau's research: in her post-doctoral thesis, she investigated the emergence of a Muslim middle class in 19th century Delhi. Being a historian, developments in Germany were naturally in the back of her mind – along with how German and European historians had spent many years struggling to define the "bourgeoisie" for the Western European cultural zone.

Yet she did not force the traditional historical model of civil society to fit into the Indian context, but rather examined the historical development in Delhi in all of its individuality and diversity.

According to her analysis, "the role played by secularization – the withdrawal of religion from the public realm and the creation of political and civil-society structures – in the formation of a bourgeoisie in continental Europe was something that the religious reform movement took over to a certain extent in the Indian context." Pernau's method of research has been described as outstanding by the Association of German Historians, which awarded her its Habilitation Prize.

Margrit Pernau's own childhood experience is what motivated her to choose India as a research topic. Between the ages of five and eight, she lived in Delhi, one of many places her father worked in during his career. She later returned to Delhi as a scholar to spend a research residency of almost seven years there, subsequently going back every now and again to look for sources. Now based in Berlin, she studies the Indian cultural sphere from here in Europe. Her work on the historiography of emotions is, in fact, touching on a relatively new field

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within the science of history. “Emotions – this could become a basic category of historical research,” she feels. Perhaps the concept will enjoy a similar scientific career as the category “gender.” Pernau believes this is possible: “I am reminded of the discussions we had in the 1970s on the significance of gender for history as a branch of science. Historians began explicitly writing the historical narrative of women – in addition to the traditional historiography in which women had been marginalized.”

### BEING CIVILIZED MEANS BEING IN CONTROL OF YOUR EMOTIONS

In subsequent years, however, the historiography of women – a subject given a lot of specific, extra attention – increasingly grew into a more comprehensive gender history. The traditional historiography was frequently reexamined to ascertain whether and how the category of gender had been taken into account. A number of innovative methodological approaches emerged.

The gender viewpoint not only furnished the science of history with the new and specific sub-discipline of gender history, it also had a fundamental influence on the way historiography was studied thereafter. Margrit Pernau likens the idea to a house: “Emotions do not make up just one part of the vast house of history. Emotions are something that pervades every room,” she says.

And so scholars need to look for them in all rooms. Historians in search of the emotions of the past could use the feelings to describe the history of politics and power. This was demon-

strated by Pernau in a groundbreaking essay in which she investigated the “civilizing mission” of the British colonial powers in India from the middle of the 18th century to the middle of the 19th century. In doing so, she revealed how the concept of civilization can be linked to emotions: a person is civilized if they can control their (negative) emotions.

“With the Enlightenment, however, the attempt to civilize people’s emotions evolved from an individual task into a social task,” writes the Max Planck researcher. Specific individuals are no longer the only ones to be labeled as civilized or non-civilized and

barbaric – entire societies are now characterized as such. They are then assumed to be at a higher or lower stage of historical development accordingly. At the same time, the concept is increasingly proving to have universal validity – since the 19th century, people’s own civility is expressed more and more in the “attempt to civilize others.”

Evidently, emotions are richer in historiographical information than was previously thought. Should historians devote more attention to how emotions are perceived? The team at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin is working on it. ◀

### GLOSSARY

#### Indian Islam

In the 8th and 11th centuries, parts of India were conquered by Muslim forces from Afghanistan. Prior to this, Arabic merchants had already propagated Islam on the west coast of India. Muslim dynasties ruled on the Indian subcontinent for around 600 years, for instance in the Delhi Sultanate between 1211 and 1315 and the Mogul Empire from 1526. Missionaries representing the Sufi tradition also played an important role in the propagation of Islam.

#### Mogul

Dynasty of Mongolian descent (1526 to 1858). The Mogul Empire reached the height of its power in the 16th and 17th centuries. The start of British colonial rule in 1756 spelled the beginning of the end of this era. The British formally deposed the last of the great Mogul emperors in 1858. The language of the state and courts in the Mogul Empire was Persian.

#### Sufism

One of the main currents in Islam, often described as mystical. Sufism is a generic term under which many variants are subsumed. The followers of Sufism, Sufis, seek direct and personal religious experience: they aspire to have a spiritual union with God. To this end, they developed methods to place themselves in ecstatic trance states. They formed formal orders from the 12th century onward.

#### Gender history

Gender history originally emerged from the increased attention devoted to the subject of women in historical research from the 1960s onward. At the time, feminists in particular were critical of the fact that supposedly neutral historiography was often written from a purely male perspective. “Gender” has since become established as a separate category that not only incorporates biological gender, but is also regarded as a social and historical construct. Historians are exploring topics such as the relationship between genders and gender-based power relationships.