

Interreligious Interactions in South Asia

Second Colloquium, April 3–12, 2024

Co-convened by Hina Khalid, Pranav Prakash and Ankur Barua

Abstract:

In attempting to understand the past, and the multiple inheritances of the past in the present, we seem to be caught in a conceptual double bind. On the one hand, present-day or presentist categories cannot be readily projected onto the past which remains something of a strange land in its temporal alterity. On the other hand, since we have to start from where we are already – namely, the present – we cannot dispense completely with the categories we have received. However, precisely this intuitive familiarity may blind us to the ways in which we have become accustomed to employing them in an unreflective manner. In this online series of table talks, we seek to bring together scholars from a wide spectrum of perspectives to inquire into the kinds of critical tools that are currently deployed to probe interreligious interactions in South Asia over the last eight hundred years or so. Through various historical processes—such as the interactions between Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic traditions, particularly after the spread of Islam in South Asia; the rise of paper as the primary mode of textual production; the emergence of Persian traditions; and so on—South Asian communities underwent deep-seated transformations, which ramify throughout various contemporary contexts. A wide variety of terminologies, such as “encounter”, “syncretism”, “third space”, “hybridity”, and “aporia”, have been employed in scholarly spaces to grapple with these patterns of plurality and processes of historical change. This forum will encourage critical interrogations of these idioms, whilst also cultivating an active attunement to, and immersive engagement with, a diversity of epistemic vantage-points, which are embedded in distinctive experiential terrains and perspectival horizons.

Convenors:

Hina Khalid (Ph.D. student, Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge)

Pranav Prakash (Junior Research Fellow, Christ Church, University of Oxford)

Ankur Barua (Senior Lecturer in Hindu Studies, University of Cambridge)



QR Code

Website: www.interfaith.cam.ac.uk/south-asia-24

Registration Link: <https://forms.office.com/e/Z4kN3ahfii>

Speakers	Day	Date	BST	EDT	IST
Afsar Mohammad	Wednesday	April 3	16:00–17:30	11:00–12:30	20:30–22:00
Purnima Dhavan	Thursday	April 4	17:00–18:30	12:00–13:30	21:30–23:00
Abdul Manan Bhat	Friday	April 5	16:00–17:30	11:00–12:30	20:30–22:00
Kashshaf Ghani	Monday	April 8	15:00–16:30	10:00–11:30	19:30–21:00

Tilak Parekh	Tuesday	April 9	16:00–17:30	11:00–12:30	20:30–22:00
Sumaira Nawaz	Wednesday	April 10	16:00–17:30	11:00–12:30	20:30–22:00
Supriya Gandhi	Friday	April 12	16:00–17:30	11:00–12:30	20:30–22:00

Abstracts and Bios of Speakers

Speaker: Afsar Mohammad

Title: Vernacular Sufi Texts and Hindu-Muslim Contexts

Abstract: Focusing on the early publications between 1900 and 1920, this presentation discusses how the early phase of print culture in Telugu produced a wide variety of Sufi texts- both original writings in Telugu and then the translations from various Islamic languages. Circulated widely as chapbooks and popular editions, these texts were successful in creating a dialogue between Muslims and Hindus as related to pluralism and religious diversity. Although a similar paradigm extends further into contemporary times after the advent of Hindu nationalism, I will show how such a history of interactions paved the way for a counter-narrative to the mainstream literary cultures in Telugu.

Bio: Afsar Mohammad is an internationally acclaimed South Asian scholar working on Hindu-Muslim interactions in the Telugu-Urdu speaking states of Telangana and Andhra in South India. Afsar is now teaching at the University of Pennsylvania and he recently published "Remaking History: 1948 Police Action and the Muslims of Hyderabad" with the Cambridge University Press. He previously published "The Festival of Pirs: Popular Islam and Shared Devotion in South India" with the Oxford University press in 2013.

Speaker: Purnima Dhavan

Title: Resisting Religious Labels in Early Modern Punjab: Why Place Matters

Abstract: South Asian scholars of religion have long been familiar with a diverse number of spiritual figures who actively resist framing their practice within already established faith traditions. A vast scholarship has emerged to explain this phenomenon, but broadly it still associates many of these figures within the broader sweep of Bhakti or Sufi trends. This paper examines what we lose when we confine ourselves to examining such figures and the communities they lead only through the confines of such analysis. In what ways does grounding our understanding in the specific regional ecology of the spaces from which the emerged-geographically, politically, culturally—help us to understand the ideas associated with such figures and also the communities associated with them with more specificity? Examining the life and works of two lesser-known figures in seventeenth-century Punjab, Bhagat Jallan and Shah Murad, I probe the ways in which the avoidance of sectarian labels in Punjab was also a process of intricate mapping which connected these men to deeply-rooted local traditions, ecologically significant shifts in their time, and self-location in oral cultures of their home districts. Rather than absorbing the legacy of both these figures into a generalized concept of Bhakti and Sufi traditions, I point to the micro-histories and geographies that matter in the emergence of these figures, and even more significantly in their lasting hold on public memory in the same places in which they lived, worked, and died.

Bio: Purnima Dhavan is an Associate Professor in the Department of History at the University of Washington, Seattle. Her publications include *When Sparrows Became Hawks: The Making of the Sikh Warrior Tradition, 1699-1799* (OUP 2011) and essays on Mughal and Sikh History. She is currently working on a new monograph exploring the ways in which literary networks created new identities and notions of public good in Mughal India, *The Lords of the Pen: Self-Fashioning and Literary Networks in Mughal India*.

Speaker: Abdul Manan Bhat

Title: Postures of Tradition: Corporeality and Islamic Ethics in Modern Urdu & Persian Poetry

Abstract: How does corporeality make religious ethics inhabitable? How do listening and recitation practices, entangled in a traffic of cosmologies, objects, bodies, and gestures, produce ethical postures? In this talk, I will explore the trifecta of corporeality, Islamic ethics, and poetry through the modern Urdu & Persian literary ecosystem, focusing on poetry gatherings, (*Mushā'iras*) from South Asia during and after colonial modernity. This talk will connect the corporeal turn in the study of religion to debates around interreligious interactions in modern South Asia.

Bio: Abdul Manan Bhat is a PhD candidate in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, where he specializes in Islamic literatures, embodiment, and religious ethics. Currently, he is a Penn Presidential PhD Fellow.

Speaker: Kashshaf Ghani

Title: Sufism and Religious Interactions from South Asia

Abstract: In the region of South Asia, Indo-Islamic traditions have a rich history of co-existence and interaction stretching back several centuries, that stimulated and resulted in a range of cultural production within the region. The aim is to explore the complex and unevenly charted domain of contact and exchange that involved practitioners of Sufism and Indic communities. These groups represented an elite approach to their individual traditions – Islam, Hinduism, bhakti, yoga, tantra etc. However, they were also successful in reaching down to the level of popular understanding, where they could tap a larger audience for their preaching and practice, as well a diverse readership for works that came to be produced through multiple linguistic mediums. In doing so, a long-standing tradition of cohabitation and cultural assimilation was stimulated at various levels of the society, leading to social and spiritual collaboration, and a thoughtful synthesis of ideas and religious positions. The presentation will begin with an overview on forms of interaction involving Sufi traditions and the impact they left on spiritual, esoteric, and textual practices. The discussion will conclude in early modern Bengal where Sufi interactions with local esoteric practices allow us to study flexible boundaries and meaningful interactions between spiritual traditions.

Bio: Kashshaf Ghani specializes on pre-modern South Asia covering the period 1000-1800, focusing on the history of Sufism, its practices, interactions, networks, and regional experiences. He is also interested in Indo-Persian histories, interreligious interactions, history and culture of the Persianate world, and Asian interconnections. He has held research positions as Sir Amir Ali Research Fellow in Islamic History and Culture at the Asiatic Society, Kolkata, Perso-Indica Visiting Fellow at the Sorbonne-Nouvelle, Paris, Visiting Fellow at the Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin, and Fellow at the Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata. Kashshaf was the U.S. State Department Academic Visitor at Temple University (2018), and received a U.S. State Department follow-on grant in 2020. He was carrying out research on Religious Pluralism in the U.S., with a focus on

modern-day Sufi networks in the U.S. Kashshaf has held teaching positions at Aliah University, Kolkata, and the University of Calcutta. Currently he teaches History at Nalanda University, India. His publications include *Exploring the Global South: Voices, Ideas, Histories* (2013) and *Imagining Asia(s): Networks, Actors, Sites* (2019). His recent monograph is titled *Sufi Rituals and Practices: Experiences from South Asia 1200-1450* (2024).

Speaker: Tilak Parekh

Title: Religious Leadership in Interfaith Interactions

Abstract: On 24 September 2002, the Swaminarayan Akshardham temple in Gandhinagar, Gujarat, was besieged by terrorists, killing thirty-one victims and wounding seventy others. It was one of the worst terrorist attacks on a religious place in modern India. This crisis in recent history was significant in light of its historical and religious context. Ongoing conflict between Hindus and Muslims, perpetuated by the catastrophic Godhra riots seven months' prior, led many to expect a violent backlash. In this study, drawing upon ethnographic testimonies, media documentation, and academic sources, I delve into the response initiated by Pramukh Swami Maharaj, the creator of Akshardham. Termed the "Akshardham Response," his leadership during this crisis offers valuable insights into strategies for conflict resolution, peace-building, and religious leadership. By examining the socio-political dynamics and cultural nuances surrounding this event, this analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in navigating interfaith tensions.

Bio: Tilak Parekh is a PhD student in the Faculty of Divinity. His doctoral thesis focuses on the purpose, creation and impact of the Neasden Temple in northwest London—the first traditional Hindu temple built in the western world. Tilak's research interests span sacred space, religious leadership, youth religiosity, and digital religion. He has a degree in Theology and Religion from Oxford, followed by an MPhil at Cambridge and an MSc in Social and Cultural Anthropology at UCL. Through his study of theology and anthropology, he engages in initiatives for inter-faith research.

Speaker: Sumaira Nawaz

Title: Reform Unbound: Afghanistan's *Sirāj-ul Aḥbār* (1911-19) and its Global Publics

Abstract: My paper explores the "global" outlook of Afghanistan's foremost Persian-language newspaper, *Sirāj-ul Aḥbār*, as it negotiated new political futures for the region. Launched by Mahmud Tarzi, an emigre activist with firm networks within Ottoman and Indian reformist milieu, *Sirāj* was an attempt to project Afghanistan as a "Muslim utopia" (Green 2011) to readers spread across Persianate geographies. In doing so, it ran regular columns on "correcting public opinion" [*tashīḥ-ye afkār-e 'umūmiye*] that countered English press' allegations against Afghanistan being an un-learned, politically-oppressed society governed by an iron-fisted monarch. Tarzi put forth (real and imagined) non-Muslim voices in *Sirāj*, especially Sikhs and Hindus with strong ties to colonial India, to underscore Afghan state's cordial treatment of minorities. *Sirāj* at its very inception imagined Afghan print culture as a transregional "collage" (Hofmeyr 2019), imbricated within broader channels of exchange both in terms of circulation and content. Scholars have viewed these developments under broad categories of "pan-Islam," erasing *Sirāj*'s ambivalent and often contradictory articulations of modernity, evident in its representation of constitutional politics raging in Ottoman and Iranian contexts. In his attempts to enact institutional reforms in Kabul, Tarzi welcomed collaborations with

Ottoman technocrats from the Committee of Union and Progress who were committed to constitutionalism (O’Sullivan 2016). At the same time, *Sirā’*’s columns regularly invoked violent images of civil war that had engulfed Qajar Iran following the Constitutional Revolution—leaving the state vulnerable to foreign intervention. This paper will investigate *Sirā’-ul Akhbār*’s encounters with multiple worlds—Muslim, Persianate, Colonial—while it tried to set-up Afghanistan as a “significant geography” (Orsini 2016) for its readers.

Bio: Sumaira Nawaz is a doctoral candidate at McGill University’s Institute of Islamic Studies. Her project focuses on Transregional Persian-language periodicals published across Istanbul, London, Calcutta, and Cairo. She is especially interested in “global” circulation of concepts like *haq*, *azadi*, and *musawat*, contrasted with every-day experience of constitutional thought in print.

Speaker: Supriya Gandhi

Title: Persianate Hinduism in Colonial India: Revisiting Rammohun Roy’s *Tuhfat al-muwahhidin*

Abstract: Rammohun Roy (d. 1833) is a pivotal figure in the global history of Unitarianism, liberalism, and modern religious reform. Although his early years remain shrouded in obscurity, he eventually soared to fame during his lifetime and gained the status of a legend after his death. By the twentieth century, the epithet “Father of modern India” was routinely appended to his name. Rammohun embarked on his reformist project with a concise treatise, written circa 1803. Entitled *Tuhfat al-muwahhidin*, or “Gift to the Unity-affirmers;” this work was composed in Persian and accompanied by a short preface in Arabic. This talk re-evaluates certain common assumptions regarding Rammohun’s early life and the context of the *Tuhfat*’s composition. I read the *Tuhfat* against a broader context of colonial modernity that incorporated—but also abandoned—prevailing cultures of Persianate scholarship and patronage.

Bio: Supriya Gandhi is a historian of South Asian religions who teaches in the Department of Religious Studies at Yale University. She is the author of *The Emperor Who Never Was: Dara Shukoh in Mughal India* (Harvard University Press, 2020). She has also written articles and essays on a variety of topics, including Persian renditions of the Ramayana; Persian writings on dharmaśāstra, and Vedanta; imperial approaches to comparative religion; discourses of racialization and caste in Mughal India; the rise of scriptural Hinduism in the nineteenth century, and Hindu nationalism. Her current book project draws on a corpus of neglected Persian and Urdu works to explore histories of religious universalism and secularism in modern India. Gandhi grew up in India and studied there as well as in the United Kingdom, Iran, and Syria before earning her doctorate at Harvard University. Her research has been supported by grants from the Fulbright and ACLS/Mellon foundations.