

## Interreligious Interactions in South Asia

Convened by Ankur Barua, Hina Khalid and Pranav Prakash

### 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 Sanskrit and non-Sanskrit 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 College, University of Oxford)

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

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### Schedule of Presentations

Speakers	Day	Date	GMT	EST	IST
Samia Khatun	Monday	<b>April 3</b>	15:00–16:30	10:00–11:30	20:30–22:00
Sohini Sarah Pillai	Tuesday	<b>April 4</b>	15:00–16:30	10:00–11:30	20:30–22:00
Kashshaf Ghani	Wednesday	<b>April 5</b>	15:00–16:30	10:00–11:30	20:30–22:00
SherAli Tareen	Thursday	<b>April 6</b>	15:00–16:30	10:00–11:30	20:30–22:00
Jyoti Gulati Balachandran	Friday	<b>April 7</b>	15:00–16:30	10:00–11:30	20:30–22:00
Shankar Ayillath Nair	Wednesday	<b>April 12</b>	15:00–16:30	10:00–11:30	20:30–22:00

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### Zoom Details

**Zoom link:** <https://zoom.us/j/94189387595?pwd=QohvNDZvYjhDUVZOTHkxSWxNVGIyQT09>

**Meeting ID:** 941 8938 7595

**Passcode:** 181402

**iCalendar** (.ics) link for adding the schedule to your calendar system:

[https://zoom.us/meeting/tJAsf-CrpjwvE9HpEh1OafcXkinXZyhnH\\_fq/ics?icsToken=98tyKuCs rzMjGdyStRCCRowlBYqgXenxiGZYj\\_pjDrtUggyZADOPbNMCOhmGNb4](https://zoom.us/meeting/tJAsf-CrpjwvE9HpEh1OafcXkinXZyhnH_fq/ics?icsToken=98tyKuCs rzMjGdyStRCCRowlBYqgXenxiGZYj_pjDrtUggyZADOPbNMCOhmGNb4)

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### Speakers and their Abstracts

**Speaker:** Samia Khatun (SOAS, University of London)

**Title:** Nur, Darshan & Enlightenment: Three Approaches to Connecting Texts and Textiles in 18th century Bengal

Nur, Darshan and Enlightenment comprise distinct yet overlapping paradigms of light that profoundly shaped 18th century histories of Bengal and economies of cotton production. With cotton often described as the 'fabric that made the modern world', a focus on cotton runs through key works of various strands of modern history. These are often accounts powerfully shaped by the question: What is Enlightenment? In examining Nur, Darshan and Enlightenment as contemporaneous modes of illumination that were operating in the late 18th century, this paper considers the economic colonisation of cotton industries alongside the subjugation of intellectual histories of the Bengal delta. Focussing in upon East Bengal and the production of cottons at the Dhaka factory operated by the British East India company, the discussion will examine the possibilities of seeing the 'Others' of modernity through systems of thought eradicated and relegated to the past under the gaze of colonial Enlightenment. Beginning with a discussion of the interreligious politics of seeing South Asian pasts through the historical lenses bequeathed to us today by Enlightenment thought, this paper raises the questions: Is it possible not just to describe how Nur was understood in 18th century Bengal, but use Nur today to undertake research and writing about 18th century textiles? From the vantage point of today, can we see the past through the lens of Darshan? What new/old grammars of difference for encountering 'Others' become available through sustained engagement with Nur and Darshan? These questions will be examined through a consideration of texts produced in some of the most lucrative regions of textiles cultivation and production in Bengal.

**Samia Khatun** is a feminist historian of race, difference and empire in the History Department at SOAS, University of London. Her work focusses on the life worlds and intellectual/cultural histories of colonised peoples across the British Empire, tackling a racist assumption that profoundly shapes contemporary scholarship about Asia, Africa, the Middle East and their diasporas: The claim that the knowledge traditions of Enlightened man have superseded the epistemologies of peoples colonised by European empires. Her first monograph, *Australianama: The South Asian Odyssey in Australia* (2019), won the Scholarly Non-Fiction Book of the Year in the Educational Publishing Awards Australia and was shortlisted for the Douglas Stewart Prize for Non-Fiction, the Multicultural NSW Prize and the Ernest Scott Prize for History. Receiving a Leverhulme Research Fellowship to undertake the research for her second monograph, she is currently working on a project connecting the histories of texts and textiles in 18th century Bengal. Before joining SOAS, Samia was Associate Professor at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB), where she was teaching undergraduate history.

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**Speaker:** Sohini Sarah Pillai (Kalamazoo College)

**Title:** A *Bhakti* Mahabharata for Aurangzeb? Sabalsingh Chauhan's Bhasha Retelling of the Epic

Between the late sixteenth century and the early eighteenth century, several South Asian poets composed Persian retellings of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana epic narratives that were either commissioned by or dedicated to one of the rulers of the Mughal Empire. These retellings include the *Razmnamah*, Fayzi's *Naldaman*, the *Akbari Ramayan*, Masih Panipati's *Masnavi-yi Ram va Sita*, Giridhardas's *Ramnamah*, Candraman Bedil's *Nargisistan*, and Amar Singh's *Amar Prakash*. Yet in this ocean of Ramayanas and Mahabharatas, only one is composed in Bhasha (Old Hindi): Sabalsingh Chauhan's seventeenth-century *Mahabharat*. Chauhan's composition is an overtly Hindu *bhakti* or "devotional" poem that reframes the Mahabharata as the deeds of the popular Hindu deity Krishna.

Eleven of the eighteen books of this poem begin with prologues and these prologues have caught the interest of multiple Hindi scholars. Eight of the prologues contain dates ranging between 1661 and 1724 CE. Four of these dated prologues praise the sixth Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, one praises a king by the name of Mitrasen, and another praises both Aurangzeb and Mitrasen. Given that seven out of the eight dates in the prologues are within the dates accepted as Aurangzeb's reign (1658–1707), many prominent Hindi literary historians have asserted that the prologues document Aurangzeb and Mitrasen's patronage of Chauhan.

The fact that this Hindu devotional Mahabharata is filled with verses in praise of Aurangzeb might come as a surprise since in India today Aurangzeb is frequently remembered as a devout but fanatical Muslim ruler who persecuted non-Muslims. In this table talk, I will provide close readings of the different prologues of Chauhan's *Mahabharat* and demonstrate how religious concerns and political concerns are deeply intertwined in this poem.

**Sohini Sarah Pillai** is Assistant Professor of Religion and Director of Film and Media Studies at Kalamazoo College. She is a comparatist of South Asian religious literature and her area of specialization is the Mahabharata and Ramayana epic narrative traditions with a focus on retellings created in Hindi and Tamil. Her current book project, *Krishna's Mahabharatas: Devotional Retellings of an Epic Narrative*, demonstrates how regional religious traditions in premodern South Asia transformed the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*, an epic about a catastrophic war, into a narrative of *bhakti* (devotion) focused on the popular Hindu deity Krishna. She is also the co-editor of *Many Mahabharatas* (State University of New York Press, 2021), a member of the Steering Committee for the Hinduism Unit at the American Academy of Religion, a member of the editorial board for *Reading Religion*, and the academic advisor for Aangan: South Asian Center for Art & Thought. She received her PhD in South and Southeast Asian Studies from the University of California, Berkeley, her MA in Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies from Columbia University, and her BA in South Asia Studies and Theatre Studies from Wellesley College.

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**Speaker:** Kashhaf Ghani (Nalanda University)

**Title:** Seeking Allah and Krishna: Sufism and Religious Interactions from South Asia

In the region of South Asia, Indo-Islamic traditions have a rich history of co-existence and interaction stretching back to several centuries. This stimulated and resulted in a range of cultural achievements that survives in the form of tangible and intangible heritage of the region. This paper will undertake a study of the unevenly charted domain of spiritual contact and exchange that took place between Sufis and Indic communities. Both 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 from 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 mediums – classical and vernacular.

In doing so, a long-standing tradition of cohabitation and cultural assimilation was stimulated at various levels of the society, leading to social, spiritual collaboration, and a thoughtful synthesis of ideas and religious positions. On many occasions, this transcended social divisions within the worlds of Islam and non-Islamic religions in South Asia.

With the aim to capture the above, the paper will follow a chronological order beginning from the early 13th century when Sufi groups arriving into South Asia found opportunities to engage in dialogue with yogic and bhakti practitioners, who were drawn into the practice of seeking the Divine through the intense emotions of love and ascetic pursuits. These holy men, from multiple backgrounds, came to stress, at times, on the common aim of the unity of all sacred traditions, manifested through the singularity of the Divine. Their most important ground for confluence was transcendentalism through an open rejection of ritualism embedded in religious rituals. This tradition gained momentum throughout the next few centuries, leading to a unique cultural environment that will be discussed in course of the paper.

**Kashshaf Ghani** teaches in the School of Historical Studies, Nalanda University, Bihar. He specializes on pre-modern South Asia between 1000-1800 with a focus on the history of Sufism, its practices, interactions, networks, and regional experiences. He is also interested in Indo-Persianate history, cosmopolitan cultures, and Asian interconnections. Kashshaf has held research positions at The Asiatic Society, Kolkata, Universite Sorbonne Nouvelle – Paris, Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin, and the Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, Kolkata. In 2018, he served as the U.S. State Dept. Academic Visitor for a program on *Religious Pluralism in the U.S.* at Temple University, Philadelphia, and again had a U.S. State Dept. follow-on grant in 2020. His research explored Sufism in the U.S. through a little-known Sufi master in Philadelphia, Bawa Muhaiyadeen, published in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*. Kashshaf studied History at Presidency College, Kolkata and University of Calcutta. He has previously taught in Aliah University, Kolkata, and the University of Calcutta. He writes in English and Bengali. His publications include *Exploring the Global South: Voices, Ideas, Histories* (2013), and *Imagining Asia(s): Networks, Actors, Sites* (2019). His forthcoming book from Oxford University Press is titled *Sufi Rituals and Practices: Experiences from South Asia 1200-1450*.

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**Speaker:** SherAli Tareen

**Title:** Contests over the Boundaries of Hindu-Muslim Friendship

Drawing from my forthcoming book *Perilous Intimacies: Debating Hindu-Muslim Friendship after Empire* (Columbia University Press, 2023), I hope to discuss some critical conceptual problems and questions connected to the study of interreligious encounters in early modern and modern South Asia. Primarily, I will be interested in the following question: what conceptual dividends might we gain by shifting the camera of analysis from the colonial transformation and reconfiguration of religion in South Asia to traditions of intra-Muslim contest over the boundaries of Hindu-Muslim friendship.

**SherAli Tareen** is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Franklin and Marshall College. His research focuses on Muslim intellectual traditions and debates in early modern and modern South Asia. His book *Defending Muhammad in Modernity* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2020) received the American Institute of Pakistan Studies 2020 Book Prize and was selected as a finalist for the 2021 American Academy of Religion Book Award. His second book is called *Perilous Intimacies: Debating Hindu-Muslim Friendship after Empire* (Columbia University Press, 2023).

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**Speaker:** Jyoti Gulati Balachandran (Penn State University)

**Title:** Socio-Political Dimensions of Spiritual Practice in Gujarat: Notes from Two 15th century Sufi *silsilahs*

Taking the diversity of Islamic spiritual practice in fifteenth-century Gujarat as its vantage point, this presentation seeks to extend the conversation on inter-religious interactions in South Asia to include intra-religious interactions as well. A greater engagement with the multiplicity of beliefs and practice within Islam has significant implications for how we set the terms for understanding interactions between two or more religious traditions in South Asia. For one, it compels us to be more attentive to the specific ways in which historical figures identified themselves and others in their texts, an aspect that often gets obscured in our usage of broader religious categories. Furthermore, identifying aspects of 'conflict', 'competition', and 'accommodation' among varied Sufistic communities reminds us that religious engagements had very concrete material underpinnings, embedded as they were within the larger socio-economic and political contexts. Instead of focusing on purely theological and philosophical aspects of interreligious interactions, this presentation hopes to encourage conversations on the social and political dimensions of religious practice in South Asia.

**Jyoti Gulati Balachandran** is Edward J. and Eleanor Black Nichols University Endowed Fellow in History and Associate Professor of History at Pennsylvania State University. Her research focuses on social and cultural histories of Muslim communities in Gujarat and the western Indian Ocean in the medieval and early modern period. She is the author of *Narrative Pasts: The Making of a Muslim Community in Gujarat, c. 1400-1650* (OUP, 2020), a finalist for the British Association for South Asian Studies Book Prize 2022 and the Karwaan Book Award 2022. She serves on the editorial board of the *Indian Economic and Social History Review*.

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**Speaker:** Shankar Ayillath Nair

**Title:** Rāma and Sītā as Adam and Eve: The *Rāmāyaṇa* through the Prism of the Persian Romance

Although the *Rāmāyaṇa*'s vibrant life beyond Hindu communities has been oft-observed (e.g., in Buddhist and Jain contexts; see Clines 2022, Richman 1991), Muslim retellings of this enduring Indic tale have received scant attention (see Keshavmurthy 2018, Gandhi 2014). In this vein, this talk examines one episode from the *Rāmāyaṇa* epic – the mutilation of the villainous “ogress” Śūrpaṅkhā – in the Muslim poet Masīḥ Pānīpatī's Persian rendition of the tale, *Masnavī-yi Rām o Sītā* (1624). In Pānīpatī's Persian iteration, the protagonists' familiar exploits are refracted through the prism of Persia's own corresponding “national epic,” the *Shāhnāmāh*; Pānīpatī furthermore recasts Rāma and Sītā's love within the genre of the Persian narrative romance (*masnavī*), alongside a robust set of other Persian literary topoi.

Pānīpatī's preface provides us with further interpretive clues: there, Pānīpatī critiques his narrow-minded denouncers – who deride Pānīpatī's engagement of a non-Islamic tale – labelling them as “Sufi in appearance but Satanic in inner nature.” This theme of the mismatch between outward appearance versus inner reality again comes to the fore in Pānīpatī's depiction of Śūrpaṅkhā: the ogress is ostensibly a villain, but surprisingly described as an ideal Persian “lover” (*‘āshiq*). As Śūrpaṅkhā gradually succumbs to her carnal desire for Rāma, however, Pānīpatī's vocabulary shifts towards more pejorative terms for problematic, selfish craving, approximating the technical Sufi terminology for the *nafs* or “lower soul.” For Pānīpatī, I argue, the ogress hence comes to embody the full range of possibilities of the human condition – both sublime and ruinous – while Rāma and Sītā, in contrast, stand in for the prophetic exemplars of Adam and Eve.

In making this case, I aim to move beyond a consideration of only the “content” of the rendition and the doctrinal tenets deployed therein, seeking additionally to explore analytical avenues for appreciating the *aesthetics* of the translation process.

**Shankar Ayillath Nair**'s general field of interest is the religious and intellectual history of the Indian subcontinent, particularly as it relates to broader traditions of Sufism and Islamic philosophy, Qur'anic exegesis, and Hindu philosophy and theology (especially Advaita Vedānta and other forms of Hindu non-dualism). His research to date has centered upon Muslim-Hindu interactions and the encounter between Arabic, Sanskrit, and Persian intellectual cultures in early modern (Mughal) South Asia. Broadly speaking, he is interested in how Muslim and Hindu philosophers, theologians, and mystics interacted with one another, and the ways in which these figures conceptualized and responded to the fact of religious diversity in the world around them. He is especially interested in the phenomenon of translation, as we find numerous Sanskrit texts being translated into Persian and Arabic in this time period, often the result of teams of Muslim and Hindu scholars working in tandem. In his future research, he aims to trace the continuing history of such interactions into the colonial and modern periods. A few of his other teaching and research interests include Sufi poetry and didactic literature, Sanskrit aesthetics and literary theory, Indian vernacular literatures, and classical Islamic ethics.

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**Bios of Conveners**

**Ankur Barua** is Senior Lecturer in Hindu Studies at the Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge. His primary research interests are Vedantic Hindu philosophical theology and Indo-Islamic styles of sociality. He researches the conceptual constellations and the social structures of the Hindu traditions, both in premodern contexts in South Asia and in colonial milieus where multiple ideas of Hindu identity were configured along transnational circuits between India, Britain, Europe, and America.

**Hina Khalid** is a PhD student at the Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge. She is working on a comparative study of the theology and poetry of Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) and Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). She is particularly interested in the possibilities of comparative theology across Islamic and Indic traditions, and in the ways that shared devotional idioms have formed in and across the Indian subcontinent.

**Pranav Prakash** is a Junior Research Fellow and Associate Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Languages at Christ Church, University of Oxford. He is also a Senior Fellow of the Andrew Mellon Society of Fellows in Critical Bibliography, Rare Book School, University of Virginia, US. He specializes in the comparative study of religious traditions, literary cultures and book arts in South Asian and Persian societies.