

## THE SHAPOORJI PALLONJI INSTITUTE OF ZOROASTRIAN STUDIES

**SOAS University of London** 

Report prepared October 2024





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#### Welcome from the Co-Chairs

As Co-Chairs of the Shapoorji Pallonji Institute of Zoroastrian Studies, we are pleased to present the annual report for the academic year 2023-2024. During this time, the Institute has continued to thrive as a centre for Zoroastrian scholarship and education.

With the support of prestigious grants from the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council, the European Research Council and Research England, the Institute has attracted a world-class team of scholars, strengthening its position as the world's leading centre for Zoroastrian studies.

The Institute has maintained a vibrant and diverse learning community comprising undergraduate, postgraduate and doctoral students. The generous support of Mr Shapoor Mistry, the Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe and the Kamran Djam Scholarships has been instrumental in enabling talented students to learn about Zoroastrianism and pursue their academic goals at SOAS. These scholarships provide crucial financial assistance to deserving individuals, allowing them to benefit from the world-class postgraduate education offered by SOAS.

The Institute successfully hosted numerous outreach activities, including the second Pallonji Shapoorji Mistry Memorial Lecture and the Kutar Memorial Lecture. The annual summer school, organised in collaboration with the University of Bergen, attracted a diverse group of students from around the world, providing a valuable opportunity for interdisciplinary engagement and learning.

On the occasion of the second Senior Advisory Panel's meeting, the Co-Chairs presented the 5-year plan 2024-2029 that included a refreshed vision and novel activities that will enable the sustainable growth of the Institute.





Dr Mariano Errichiello Professor Almut Hintze

We are grateful for the continued support of our benefactors, partners, students and the wider SOAS community. Together, we are committed to advancing the study of Zoroastrianism and fostering a vibrant intellectual community.

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## Governance of the SOAS Shapoorji Pallonji Institute of Zoroastrian Studies



The Senior Advisory Panel comprises nine members, including the donor, who nominates up to four or its representatives. SOAS also nominates up to four members. The SOAS Panel members include the Vice-Chancellor of SOAS, who acts as Panel Chair. The Co-Chairs of the Institute are in attendance of the meetings. The Senior Advisory Panel's remit is purely advisory. It is intended to offer guidance and support to the work and development of the Institute, to collaborate to maximise opportunities, to consider the Institute's continued evolution and impact and to support and advise the • Co-Chairs in their work for the Institute. in particular on the management of any risks associated with the activities of the Institute.

The Senior Advisory Panel meets twice a year, and the Co-Chairs attend the meetings. The membership for the 2023-24 academic year was as follows:

- **Professor Adam Habib** (Chair), Vice-Chancellor of SOAS.
- **Mr Shapoor Mistry**, Chairman and Managing Director of Shapoorji And Co Pvt Ltd.
- Mr Kekoo Colah, Executive Director of Shapoorji Pallonji And Co Pvt Ltd.
- Mr Farrokh K. Kavarana, Fellow of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England & Wales and a Member of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of India. In 2014 he retired as a Director of Tata Sons Limited and Tata Industries Limited.
- **Dr Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis,** Curator of Middle Eastern Coins at the British Museum, London.
- Mr Malcolm Deboo, President of Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe (ZTFE).
- **Ms Bapsy Dastur**, General Counsel at VFS Global.
- Justice Rohinton Nariman, retired Supreme Court of India Judge.
- **Professor Graeme Earl**, Dean of College of Humanities and Professor of Archaeology at SOAS.

#### Honorary appointments

On 24 April 2024, Professor Laura Hammond, Deputy Vice-Chancellor of SOAS, appointed Dr Sarah Stewart as Senior Fellow of the Shapoorji Pallonji Institute of Zoroastrian Studies for a period of three years. This appointment recognises the contribution of Dr Stewart to the establishment of the Institute, and we look forward to continuing our collaboration with her.

## **Teaching Zoroastrianism at SOAS**

## Zoroastrianism in the Ancient and Modern Worlds (UG)

This course is offered in the undergraduate degree programme 'World Philosophies'. The entitled course introduces students to Zoroastrianism - its doctrines, rituals and observances within a historical framework. The teachings of the religion are discussed on the basis of the Zoroastrian sacred text, the Avesta, in the context of the Indo-Iranian religious system to which it belonged. The history of Zoroastrianism is traced from its prehistoric roots in Indo-Iranian times through its development under the rule of three great Iranian empires, Achaemenian, Parthian and Sasanian, its gradual development into a minority religion after the Muslim conquest of Iran, the subsequent migration and resettlement of a diaspora community in India, and from there to the present day. Theological developments and issues of the contemporary communities are treated within this historical context with particular reference to Zoroastrian literature. The modern history and adaptation of the religion in different cultural environments are looked at mainly with reference to the Parsis in India, and the global Diaspora in such places as Britain, Canada and the USA.

#### The Zoroastrian Flame (UG)

This course is offered to third year undergraduate of the students 'World Philosophies' programme. It introduces students to the major aspects of the Zoroastrian philosophy through an overview of its religious features, the engagement with relevant texts and the study of its development from ancient to modern times. It engages with key questions,

debates and challenges that the field of Zoroastrian studies offers to the discipline of Philosophy by looking at critical aspects of epistemology, ethics, metaphysics and ontology emerging from the Zoroastrian esotericism, philanthropy, ritual performance and scholarship. This course proposes a community-engaged learning that entails the involvement of members of the Zoroastrians community in our seminars, allowing students for lively debates and interactions with individuals who, today, embody the Zoroastrian philosophy.



## Zoroastrianism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives (PG)

This course is offered to postgraduate students in the degree programmes 'Religion in Global Politics', 'Iranian Studies', 'Near and Middle Eastern Studies', and 'South Asia Area Studies'. The course provides a survey of Zoroastrian teachings, observances, rituals and contemporary issues with reference to Zoroastrian primary sources, including Avestan and Pahlavi texts in translation, and religious practices. It is taught within a historical framework beginning with the Indo-Iranian religious system and going on to trace the development of the religion in the Iranian empires and after the Islamisation of Iran, and its



### **Teaching Zoroastrianism at SOAS**

revival on the Indian subcontinent and the contemporary global diaspora. The course also covers modern Zoroastrian thought and the ritual and devotional practices of Zoroastrians today.

It is the counterpart to the undergraduate course 'Zoroastrianism in the Ancient and Modern Worlds', and lectures are shared. Postgraduate seminars are separate and students spend more time studying Zoroastrian religious texts.

#### Middle Persian (UG/PG)

This course is an introduction to Middle Persian, or Pahlavi, the language of the Iranian state and the Zoroastrian literature during the Sasanian period (224–651 CE). The course offers an introduction into the Pahlavi script and grammar. It is based on the reading of a short secular prose text, simple in style, 'The Book of the Deeds of Ardaxšīr, son of Bābag', the Kārnāmag ī Ardaxšīr ī Bābagān, and of a Zoroastrian religious text, the Dādestān ī Mēnōg ī Xrad, 'The Judgment of the Spirit of Wisdom', both of which are read in the original Pahlavi script.

# MOOC (Massive Online Open Course) – Zoroastrianism: History, Religion and Belief

Dr Sarah Stewart and Céline Redard have created MOOC, an online short entitled Zoroastrianism: course History, Religion and Belief, for the FutureLearn platform. It introduces Zoroastrianism to an international audience and provides a 'taster' for the SOAS courses. The course draws upon the rich repository of artefacts, paintings and texts displayed in the Everlasting Flame: Zoroastrianism in History and Imagination exhibition held in the Brunei Gallery (2013) and the National Museum, Delhi (2016). The course is free and replaces the Introduction to Zoroastrianism course that no longer runs following the withdrawal of the BA Religions of Asia and Africa. Over 3,000 people have enrolled since the course was launched in July 2021.





### **Teaching Zoroastrianism at SOAS**

#### Zoroastrianism Summer School (UG/PG)

The fourth Zoroastrianism Summer School took place this year from the 1-5 July in London. A collaboration between SOAS and the University of Bergen, this year's programme welcomed 19 students to the SOAS campus for a week of lectures, seminars and workshops. The course was jointly taught by Dr Mariano Errichiello (SOAS), Professor Michael Stausberg (University of Bergen), Dr Sarah Stewart (SOAS), and Dr Jenny Rose (Claremont University). The topics covered by the lectures included Zoroastrianism and modern Iranian nationalism, the rediscovery of ancient Iran in the modern period and Zoroastrian themes in Persian literature. Students also gave their own presentations to the group, each of them taking an interview from Dr Sarah Stewart's *Voices from Zoroastrian Iran: Oral Texts and Testimony*, Volumes 1 and 2. The course included an excursion to the British Museum led by Dr Yousef Moradi (AHRC postdoctoral fellow in the SSPIZ).

The students and lecturers also enjoyed a traditional Persian meal at the Persian restaurant, Naroon in London. The students included undergraduates, postgraduates and graduates from around the world. We would like to thank all of them for the experiences, insights and enthusiasm that they brought to the course.



## Scholarships

Thankstothegenerosity of the Shapoorji Pallonji endowment for scholarships in Zoroastrian studies at SOAS, there are a number of awards available for UK/ EU and overseas fee-paying students. These normally provide a contribution to fees for the duration of the award. In addition, a stipend may also be awarded. The awards are calibrated according to merit and funds available.

The SOAS Shapoorji Pallonji Institute of Zoroastrian Studies (SSPIZ) spreads the net widely and invites applications from students who approach Zoroastrianism from different disciplinary backgrounds, including history, linguistics, study of religions and anthropology.

## Eligible programmes and modules for 2024/25:

- 1-year full-time or 2-years part-time MA Iranian Studies.
- 1-year full-time or 2-years part-time MA Religion, Politics and Society.
- 1-year full-time or 2-years part-time MA South Asian Area Studies.
- 1-year full-time or 2-years part-time MA Middle Eastern Studies.
- Full-time MPhil PhD (new admissions only, starting in September 2024) in the following subject areas: i) Zoroastrianism, both ancient and modern ii) Zoroastrianism with Avestan, Pahlavi, Persian or Gujarati languages.

#### Candidate Criteria

Applicants for the MA scholarships must possess or expect to be awarded a First Class Honours Degree or equivalent.

Applicants with a non-UK MA degree must be in the top rank as evidenced by references and transcripts. Applicants with a 2:1 are also considered.

Applicants for the MPhil/PhD scholarships must possess or expect to be awarded an MA degree with a mark of Distinction from a UK university. Applicants with a non-UK MA degree must be in the top rank as evidenced by references and transcripts. Applicants with a mark of merit may also be considered.

Applicants for the MPhil/PhD scholarships must demonstrate in the research proposal of their application for admission that their research is in one of the following subject areas: Zoroastrianism, Avestan and/or Pahlavi languages, Persian language, Parsi Sanskrit and Parsi Gujarati languages.

Applicants for the MA scholarships must complete the compulsory 60credit dissertation on a topic relating to Zoroastrianism and the 30-credit module: Zoroastrianism. Historical and Contemporary Perspectives. In addition, applicants are encouraged to develop their linguistic skills by taking a 30-credit language module on one of the Zoroastrian languages, in particular Avestan, Pahlavi, New Persian or Sanskrit, all of which are offered at SOAS. We feel strongly that language competence enables students to engage with primary sources first-hand in their research.

The scholarship is open to UK/EU and overseas fee-paying full-time students.



### **Scholarships**



In 2023–24 we were able to offer one MPhil/PhD part-scholarship of £8,000 to Mr Shiruy Billimoria from Mumbai, India to contribute to his living costs. MPhil/PhD scholarships are given in each of three years of the duration of the MPhil/PhD course. Shiruy's SSPIZ scholarship is complemented by a scholarship from the Zartoshty Brothers Fund administered by the trustees of the Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe (ZTFE). These ZTFE scholarships are available to Zoroastrians studying Zoroastrianism at SOAS. Shiruy's ZTFE scholarship covers the tuition fees (ca. £22,000 in 2023-24) in each of the three years of the course. While MA scholarships are for one year only, MPhil/PhD entail a considerable commitment of funding as they are for three years.

Shiruy Billimoria's PhD is on the business ethics of Parsi entrepreneurs and businessmen and women. In particular, he is hoping to throw light on the question whether religion plays any role in the way they approach their business practices and how they use funds they have generated through their business activities.

#### Zoroastrianism Summer School Scholarship

The SSPIZ scholarships fund also provided five scholarships to students at the Zoroastrian Summer School to help towards the costs of travel and accommodation. Students can apply for the scholarship when filling in their application for the summer school.



### Shiruy Billimoria

#### MPhil/PhD Religions

BA History gave me a he different dynamic perspective on religion through brief histories Islam, Judaism. of Christianity, Hinduism and Jainism. I became interested in pursuing cross-cultural and comparative religious studies. It enlightened me to seek out the mysteries of my own religion and gain more knowledge about it from a socio-cultural perspective. In my Masters I started studying this history of the Parsees in India in detail.

The MA Religion in Global Politics gave me the opportunity to procure a more comprehensive knowledge of the religion. This deepened my understanding of the Zoroastrian religion. In my dissertation, Zoroastrian business ethos and their roots in theology, I argued the scope and extent of influence of Zoroastrianism on the evolution of the business practices of Zoroastrian entrepreneurs. My PhD research, Studies in Zoroastrian Business Ethics, studies the business practices of prominent Parsi business families historically and juxtaposing this alongside the business practices of contemporary Parsi entrepreneurs in India and in the diaspora.

The purpose of the thesis is to determine if the identifiable aggregate of business ethics and practices of Parsi business houses under British rule, which became a source of pride and prestige for the community, continues to be adhered to by contemporary Parsi entrepreneurs in the fast-changing economic pace of India today.



My research hypothesis is that Parsi Zoroastrian business ethics and its attitude towards doing business is informed by values that are embedded in the Parsi identity. These Zoroastrian values were used as tools to formulate a specific Parsi, Zoroastrian identity and approach, taking into consideration its time and space and its related socioeconomic influences. This was then leveraged and put into practice by Parsi business enterprises.

The Common Core module in my first year of MPhil/PhD, was intended to provide students with the research skills needed. I enjoyed how each lecture was designed to hone specific skills to carry out research. The professors were all very open and supportive of whatever point of view one would take in their assignments. The module provided an understanding of how to manage our research projects. I really enjoyed the camaraderie we built up and the opportunity to meet people doing a wide range of research.

I could have not done my first year of the MPhil/PhD without the Shapoorji Pallonji Scholarship as I would not have been able to focus on my research. The scholarship enabled me to dedicate my efforts to studying and research. The Shapoorji Pallonji Scholarship has had a profound impact on my studies

I would like to thank the donors for giving me this unique opportunity to pursue my passion. I shall forever remain grateful.



#### Religious Persianate in Africa: Trading Religions Meeting in the Global South

In the colonial period, African communities lived alongside Parsis, Zoroastrians who migrated from India. Parsis living in Africa during the second half of the 20th century moved to the UK after political unrest. By means of archival research and a workshop with first-generation Parsi migrants from Africa who still live in London, this project explored areas of exchange between Zoroastrians and African religious communities. It furthers our understanding of Zoroastrianism across Africa and the social and political use of religious categories such as 'magi' over time.

This international collaborative project, funded by the British Institute of Persian Studies with £3,000, was conducted in 2023-24 by Dr Mariano Errichiello and Dr Conerly Casey, Professor of Anthropology at Rochester Institute of Technology, in collaboration with the Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe. It explored the possible influences of Zoroastrianism and/or Parsis on the Maguzawa



(from the Arabic majus 'magi') community in pre-colonial and post-colonial Nigeria. Through archival research and the study of secondary sources we identified several beliefs and practices deemed 'anomalous' in the context of the customary Islamic milieu of the region (i.e. the use of dogs in rituals; worship of fire; the construction of walled sites of worship; oral narratives that placed Persia as the source of ancient wisdom). However, the insights gathered in a workshop conducted at the Zoroastrian Centre in London, on 2nd June 2024, led to the conclusion that it is unlikely that exchanges between Maguzawa and Parsis in the 19th and 20th centuries took place. Analysing these findings, we instead identified trade networks developing through the Arabian Peninsula as well as maritime routes as the potential sources of 'travelling' beliefs and practices associated with Zoroastrianism. Furthermore, we reflected on the contours of Zoroastrian/Magi as a label bestowed on Maguzawa by Muslim traders in contrast with the Parsis' self-identification as Zoroastrian.

This project also explored the possibility of extending the category 'Persianate world' to the study of experiences and mediations of Zoroastrianism, African religions and Islam among communities living in Africa. While the boundaries of this heuristic classification do not usually include Africa, the findings of the archival research brought to light evidence of constant contacts and exchanges between Persian and African territories since Sasanian times.



#### Avestan Ritual in India (AVINDIA), Jan 2024 - Dec 2028)

five-year project, funded by This an Advanced Investigator Grant of the European Research Council (€2,499,999) will film the performance of a Visperad ceremony in India. Using film and computational technologies, we will seek to detect, describe, visualise and analyse how the ritual is structured as systematically organised activity, and to reconstruct its genesis and historical trajectory. By analysing the ritual structure of the Visperad in the Indo-Iranian diachronic perspective, we are hoping to reveal change over long periods of time and across the boundaries of religious cultures.

In addition, the team will examine how the ritual is practised and understood in India. Building on editing tools and work already undertaken in Professor Hintze's Multimedia Yasna (MUYA) ERC project, we will edit, translate and analyse the Sanskrit version of the Avestan recitation text, the Gujarati preparatory ceremony (Paragna) and ritual directions, and Gujarati language treatises. This will create new insights into the historical trajectory of ritual change, as well as local variation of the performances in India.



The project will generate a large volume of research data in audio and visual digital formats, bringing with it responsibility for effective management both of data captured in field research subsequent and of processing. Technical infrastructure will be created to ensure that the data complies with recognised standards and can be made preservable in the long term. Early establishment of such infrastructure will significantly strengthen long-term preservation of raw data as well as discovery and accessibility of outcomes of AVINDIA, resulting in standardsbased and sustainable research and public data resources. Deliverables of AVINDIA, including movies, annotated collections and publications including books will be formed into corpus repositories designed for sustained use and further enrichment by the team and by the wider research community, and also to deliver publicly accessible presentations of key outputs.

Data management will be undertaken by AVINDIA team member Data Futures GmbH, a non-profit company and member of the international InvenioRDM consortium, which is led by CERN and the European Commission's OpenAIRE programme. While the infrastructure of the InvenioRDM platform is well established in the Sciences, AVINDIA will pioneer its use in the Humanities and Social Sciences, being the first large-scale Humanities project to adopt it from the outset.



#### Beyond Discovery: Religion, economics and administration in Sasanian Iran through new clay bullae from Taxt-e Solayman, June 2023 - May 2028. Co-Investigator: Dr Yousef Moradi.

the Iranian Centre for Archaeological enhance its public visibility through film, Research, the Urmia museum, and exhibitions, 3-D models and replicas. the Iranian Cultural Heritage Organisation, is funded by the UK The project will provide new insights Arts and Humanities Council. The team will analyse and the imagery, the production process publish newly discovered bullae and of bullae, sealing practices, the role of seal impression from one of the seals in Sasanian society, the economic most important fire temples Sasanian Iran. Located in province of Western Azerbaijan, the social and religious groups, including World Heritage Site Solayman ('Throne of Solomon') was disseminated in print as articles and as home of the 'fire of the warriors and a two-volume book to be published military chieftain', in Middle Persian: in the series Corpus Inscriptionum Adur Gushnasp, one of the three most Iranicarum, covering sealing practices, sacred Sasanian fires. There, between 2002 and 2008, during archaeological excavations under the auspices of An electronic dataset, published online the then Iranian Cultural Heritage with metadata, will provide photographs Organization, Yousef Moradi excavated and line drawings of all 824 bullae, and 824 Sasanian clay bullae, bearing almost 2,000 seal impressions. He thus will be made available at a workshop, recovered a new Iranian primary source and at exhibitions in the UK and at the for Sasanian history, which to date Urmia Museum, Iran, where the bullae largely relies on non-Iranian accounts. are stored. The outstanding feature of this find is not only that it comes from one of the most important Zoroastrian centres, but also that it has a secure provenance. For, in contrast to most other collections of Sasanian seals. this one comes from a controlled and fully documented excavation. Now housed in the Museum of Urmia, it is unpublished and inaccessible to the public. The purpose of our project is to analyse and publish it in a methodologically innovative

This project, in collaboration with way both in print and online, and to

Research into the reading of inscriptions and of activities of the Zoroastrian fire temple. the and its interaction with different of Taxt-e Jews and Christians. Results will be inscriptions, iconography, and providing a full descriptive catalogue with plates. 3D models. Replicas of selected bullae

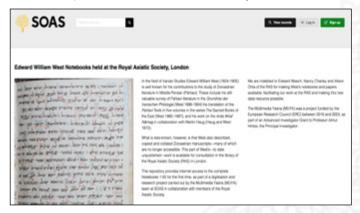




## Towards a scientific annotation service by subscription

This project was funded by Research England with an Impact and Knowledge Exchange grant (£20,000, February to June 2024) and was carried out in partnership between the SSPIZ, the German non-profit company Data Futures GmbH (DF) and the Royal Asiatic Society (RAS) in London. It laid the foundation for commercialising an annotation tool developed in Hintze's MUYA-IIIF Proof of Concept project, using the vehicle of a new digital repository for the unpublished notebooks of Edward William West held at the RAS, previously digitised via Hintze's ERC Advanced Grant MUYA (2016-2023).

The project created a new corpus repository and demonstrated the potential for a commercial annotation service. Compared with existing generations of digital infrastructure, our repository will gain unprecedented sustainability through open standards adoption. Starkly contrasting with existing short-lived website strategies, one of the ground-breaking features of the new repository is that it enables publicly accessible digital heritage resources to be continually enhanced over long periods for the first time, and for SOAS research data services to become prominent internationally.



## Enhancing Digital Research Culture for Early Career Researchers

Funded by Research England through a Research Culture Grant (£5,000, February to June 2024), this project trained three SSPIZ's PhD students to create and manage digital data in agreement with the FAIR principle (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable). Using existing manuscript images, the students learned about the principles of the International Image Interoperability Framework (IIIF) and how to use state-of-the-art annotation tools. They also learned how to use the tool for annotating manuscripts.

This project capacitated the students in a research area that is crucial yet underrepresented at SOAS. It enabled them to strengthen their research skills, develop their own research projects and lead them towards greater autonomy in exploring new research areas. It was particularly gratifying to see how a cohort of PhD students at the same career level but with different skill sets work together organically and collaboratively as a research team.

The aim of this project was to create and coordinate a cohort of early career researchers and equip them with skills that they can use in their own research and in future funding applications. The project widened the horizons of the students with regard to responsible

> data curation and data processing, and they learned about standards-based data formats. In addition, the PhD student who was training and mentoring the other two students developed research leadership skills through the teaching and mentoring experience.



### Outreach





This year's Kutar Memorial Lecture, entitled 'Understanding the Avesta: Zoroastrian scholastic activities in the 9th–11th centuries and the creation of Avestan-Pahlavi bilingual manuscripts', was given on 7 March 2024 by Dr Mehrbod Khanizadeh, AHRC Early Career Researcher at the SSPIZ. Based on his recent research, he drew a fascinating picture of Zoroastrian scholastic activities during the 9th–11th centuries and discussed the history of the creation of the first known exegetical Avestan-Pahlavi Yasna manuscript, and possible reasons for its creation.

The Idea of Iran symposium was sponsored by the Soudavar Memorial Foundation on 11 and 12 May 2024. Organised in collaboration with the SOAS Centre for Iranian Studies, the SOAS Middle East Institute and the Cambridge Shahnama Centre for Persian Studies, this 2-day symposium welcomed 15 world-class scholars to discuss the consolidation of the Qajar State and changed relations with the European powers in 19th century-Iran and Persianate world.



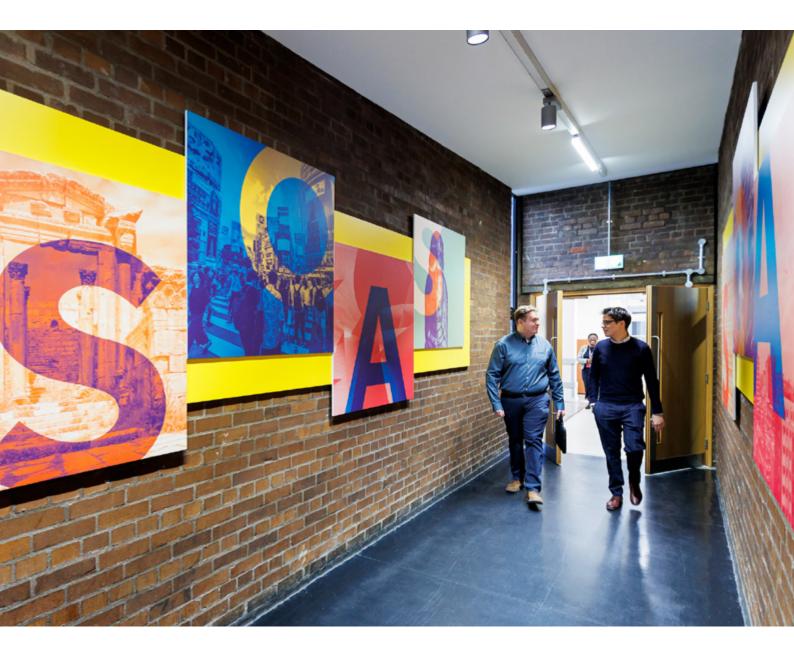


The second Pallonji Shapoorji Mistry Memorial Lecture, entitled 'To Hong Kong and Back Again: Parsi Charity and Building Bombay' was delivered by Dr Leilah Vevaina (University of Hong Kong) on 30 April 2024. Dr Vevaina explored how trade profits made by Parsis in the 19th century were invested in urban real estate in colonial Bombay, and how recent years have seen a resurgence of funds transferred from Parsi charitable trusts in Hong Kong back to Mumbai. She showed how the practice of charitable giving binds the two cities together.



# Thank You Your support is transforming students' lives





If you would like to receive updates on the work taking place at the Institute and information about upcoming events, please sign up to the SSPIZS mailing list. This can be found through our website or directly at eepurl.com/gen7f5.

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