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Institute of Iranian Studies

JESHO International Workshop

The Colonial Present in South Asian Past



Oct 15–16, 2026

Austrian Academy of Sciences
4th floor, Seminar Room 6
Dominikanerbastei 16
1010 Vienna

The Colonial Present in South Asian Past

How do we read the colonial ‘past’ in our ‘present’? That the past is omnipresent in our everyday life is one common place; that colonialism weighs on the shoulders of our communities is another. But to what extent do our present concerns (both as scholars and occasional observers of things modern) inform our reading of the colonial past? What are such concerns? Can they potentially (mis-)lead us in our interpretation?

This workshop offers a theoretical and methodological meditation on how we assess materials generated during the period of European colonialism. Specifically, when we process such materials, we make claims about how their producers may have seen the world surrounding them. Over the past century, scholarly assessments in this vein can be seen as intertwined with the ‘present’ circumstances of the people who generated them. Early twentieth-century scholars saw the nineteenth century as a prelude to the age of high imperialism in which they themselves lived. Scholarship from the decolonising period sought signs of indigenous resistance. Postcolonial and subaltern studies worried over suppressed voices in line with the intellectual mood circa 1960-2000. On this principle, Professor Shahzad Bashir (The Aga Khan University, London) asks how explicit cognizance of current epistemological circumstances affects our readings of the early colonial past. How do issues like perspectivism, radical doubt regarding sources and methods, ‘fake truth’, a media sphere inundated with politically driven easy readings of the past, predetermine us to regard the early colonial period in certain ways? Conversely, how can materials from this past (that we read as a present of its time) teach us something about our own present? Professor Bashir will work through specific sources generated in early nineteenth-century India to discuss these questions.

Designed to reflect upon the multifarious experiences of history-writing across Asia, this workshop encourages scholars to reflect on the meaning of colonialism from the perspectives of their own periods, regions, and materials. The aim of this event is to highlight cutting-edge research on distinct fields of Asian studies and provide space for an academic conversation on what the past might signify for the political and cultural histories of individual regions and for the history of Asia as a whole.

Program

October 15, 2026

JESHO Lecture

18:00

Welcome and Introduction

Paolo Sartori, Austrian Academy of Sciences

18:10

Keynote

Shahzad Bashir, The Aga Khan University, London

The Colonial Present in South Asian Past

October 16, 2026

A Rountable Discussion on the Annual JESHO Lecture

10:00

Responses to Shahzad Bashir

Katherine Butler, King’s College London

Rahul Markovits, EHESS, Paris

Markus Daechsel, Royal Holloway University, London

12:00

Reception