



CENTRE FOR ASIAN AND
TRANSCULTURAL STUDIES

SOUTH ASIA
INSTITUTE



UNIVERSITÄT
HEIDELBERG
ZUKUNFT
SEIT 1386

Lecture Series on Governance and Politics in South Asia

Department of Political Science

Special Lecture

on

The *Tawaifs* (Nautch Girls) and Indian Nationalism

by

Dr Pankaj Parashar

Aligarh Muslim University

While revolutionaries of the Indian freedom struggle are well recognized and amply researched, the role played by *Tawaifs* (nautch girls) has never received the deserved academic attention. These ladies, valued for their sophistication and etiquette, knowledge of arts and literature in the pre-British era, gradually lost their traditional social position of respect as social and economic changes swept the country after the consolidation of British rule in India. In the princely state of Awadh, the situation worsened to the extent that the word *randi* (prostitute) came into use, to their utter humiliation. Their households acquired ill-repute and were pushed to dilapidated urban margins, whereas once the nobles of Lucknow and Delhi used to send their sons to these bungalows to learn *adab* (etiquette), or how to talk to the king, reach influential people, the Urdu language, and court manners. These repositories of a distinct culture and tradition, especially Indian classical music and dance, suffered indescribable decline in status and financial conditions between 1857 and 1947. Dr Parashar argues that the *Tawaifs* and their role in the independence struggle demands further research, and demonstrates that they had participated enthusiastically with the leaders and revolutionaries of the *Tawaif Sangh*. Husna Bai of Banaras, Vidyadhari Bai, Badi Motibai, Tamibai and many other names have been discussed only sporadically, and their lives and times need further research. Celebrations of the 75th year of Indian independence will remain incomplete without highlighting the contribution and sacrifice of the *Tawaifs* in the Indian freedom struggle.



Dr Pankaj Parashar teaches Hindi literature at the Aligarh Muslim University, and is currently a visiting fellow at South Asia Institute, CATS, Heidelberg University. His research interests include literary criticism and theory, translation, subaltern literature, Indian classical music and south Asian politics. He has widely published original writing in the Hindi language, and has translated numerous eminent global works into the Hindi language. He has recently been awarded the Devi Shankar Awasthi Award for contribution to Hindi criticism for his book *Kavita Ke Prashna Aur Pratiman* (2016). He has been an Associate Fellow at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study (IIAS), Shimla (2014-2022), and a Member of the Advisory Board of Sahitya Academy, New Delhi (2018-2022).

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Time: 14:00 – 16:00, CET

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