Asia and African Studies, British Library is pleased to announce a great line-up for the June-October in the ‘South Asia Series’; a series of free public talks based around the ‘Two Centuries of Indian Print’ project and the BL South Asia collection. We have academics and researchers from the UK and abroad sharing original and cutting-edge research, with discussions chaired by curators and specialists in the field. Pencil the dates in your diary and come along!

Location: Knowledge Centre (Brontë Room), British Library
Time: 6:15-7.30pm

Monday 10th June 2019:
Cultivating Value in the South Asian Countryside
Meghna Chaudhuri (New York University)

Monday 17th June 2019:
A History of Swamps, or How We Built Sinking Cities?
Debjani Bhattacharyya (Drexel University)

Monday 15th July 2019:
The Political Potency of Wartime Experiences of Workers at the Calcutta Port
Prerna Agarwal (London School of Economics)

Monday 29th July 2019:
Ganga and the Pulse of Indian History
Sudipta Sen (University of California Davis)

Monday 5th August 2019
Witnessing History, Writing Nostalgia: the Progressive Women
Farha Noor (University of Freiburg/University of Heidelberg)
Monday 12\textsuperscript{th} August 2019

\textit{Jagadish Chandra Bose and the Politics of Science in Colonised India}
Christine Hoene (University of Kent)

Monday 23\textsuperscript{rd} September 2019

\textit{World War II Letters and Photographs: Recovering Indian Experiences}
Diya Gupta (King’s College, London)

Monday 21\textsuperscript{st} October 2019

Screenwriting Practices during the First Indian Talkies
Rakesh Sengupta (SOAS)

Monday 28\textsuperscript{th} October 2019

Hungry Stomach, Heated Body: Exploring Early Modern Masculine Sexual Health
Sonia Wigh (University of Exeter)

\textit{For further info, please contact Dr. Priyanka Basu at Priyanka.Basu@bl.uk. No booking or payment required. Please come along!}
This talk tracks how the 1870s through to 1905 represents a key moment of transfiguration where credit relationships in the countryside became the prism through which the state tried to organize the relationship of the peasant with the wider world. In parsing the ways in which liberal protectionism sparred with free trade logic in shaping a specific vision of development, I highlight how the developmentalist project came to articulate the contradictions of a universalist, comparativist framework with a conservative, historicist drive towards protectionism. Values such as foresight and thrift were the pedagogical imperative behind experimental financial intervention, helping transform the idea of labour into an embodiment of value generating potential. I argue that the idea of labouring to improve productive capacities of land transformed through this focus on credit relations, into self-improvement through the cultivation of social values. The talk shows how the colonial construction of the irrational peasant extends to the image of the “traditional” peasant which continues in contemporary development discourse. It reveals the significance of experimental financial interventionism in India from the 1870s to the global emergence of a discourse on incomplete integration of agrarian hinterlands to the global economy.

Meghna Chaudhuri is a doctoral candidate in the Department of History at New York University. Her dissertation reconstructs the relationship between life insurance and forms of agrarian finance in colonial India. The project argues that this relationship reveals a longer history of the developmentalist state in South Asia, and its role in the global emergence of a discourse on agrarian hinterlands as spaces of absence in the global south. Her research reflects her interest in political economy, subjectivity, and the history of science. Meghna completed an MA and an MPhil in Modern South Asian History at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.
Water is overwhelming life in coastal and riverine cities across many parts of the world. We are responding in multiple ways: by fortifying the coasts, draining and pushing water out of lands, and sometimes making room for river in our constant struggle to remain dry. Each of these responses are situated in deep colonial history. Taking the example of the growth and settlement of Calcutta in the swamps of Bengal, this talk will explore how we came to inhabit land-making and land-reclamation as urbanization through the nineteenth-century. Decentering debates around epidemiological urbanization, I explore how property operated as a technology of drying. Using a couple of case studies beginning from 1770s I argue that property and its many instantiations in law and economy became a tool for transforming the landscape and ecology of the delta in creating Calcutta. I will follow the journey of the swamps and marshes as they move from the colonial courtroom in the late 18th-century, through the nineteenth-century engineer’s desk and finally the land speculator’s grasp in the twentieth and twenty-first century. I conclude by showing how the fluid landscape of the tidal delta shaped urban law, infrastructure and the land market in colonial Calcutta.

Debjani Bhattacharyya is an assistant professor of history at Drexel University, Philadelphia and the author of ‘Empire and Ecology in the Bengal Delta: The Making of Calcutta’ (Cambridge 2018). Currently she is working on her second book manuscript tentatively titled “Monsoon Landscapes: Law and Climate Science in the Indian Ocean World,” which explores how East India Company’s marine insurance cases shaped the 18th and 19th century climate science.
The fall of imperial port cities of Singapore, in February 1942, and then Rangoon, March 1942, signalled the vulnerability of the British Empire, albeit in multiple ways, across Eastern India and beyond. In such a context, the Quit India Movement reverberated at the Port of Calcutta despite the reluctance of the labour leaders. Such empire-shaking events combined with the impact of daylight Japanese bombings of the port itself, seriously put into question the legitimacy as well as the capability of the employers - so closely associated with the British state - to rule in the eyes of the workers. As the chaos of the empire unfolded in front of the eyes of the workers, the war exacerbated exploitation despite all the concessions that the Port workers as 'essential' workers wrested from their employers. With the opening of China-Burma-India theatre of the World War II in the summer of 1942, Calcutta Port became one of the key ports for the Allies. The port of Calcutta was being radically transformed to serve as a military port in a context when the end of the raj was already visible, a monumental effort that strained the labour relations to their extreme. This paper in focussing on the Port labour during the war reflects on the everyday and momentous experiences of the labouring section of the population as they shaped labour politics in the crucial years before Indian independence. It will underline the deeply politicizing nature of the war-time experiences of the workers at the Port.

Prerna Agarwal is a postdoctoral fellow at the Economic History Department, London School of Economics (LSE). She received her PhD in History and Contemporary India at the India Institute, King's College London. Her doctoral thesis focused on ‘Planting the Red Flag: early communists and the politics of labour at the port of Calcutta, 1920s-1940s’. Her research interests are labour history, history of infrastructure and industrial spaces, history of decolonisation.
Originating in the Himalayas and flowing into the Bay of Bengal, the Ganges is India’s most important and sacred river. In this unprecedented work, historian Sudipta Sen unravels the story of the Ganges, from the communities that arose on its banks to merchants that navigated its waters, and how it came to occupy a center-stage in the history and culture of the subcontinent. Sen begins his chronicle in prehistoric and ancient India, tracing the river’s first settlers, its myths of origin in the Hindu tradition, and its significance during the ascendancy of popular Buddhism. Through subsequent centuries, Indian empires, Central Asian regimes, European merchants, the British Empire, and the Indian nation-state, all have shaped the identity and ecology of the river. Weaving together geography, environmental politics, and religious history, Sen’s lavishly illustrated volume—Ganges: the Many Pasts of an Indian River—is a remarkable portrait of one of the world’s largest and most densely populated river basins.

Sudipta Sen, is Professor of History and Director of the Middle East/South Asia Studies Program, University of California, Davis. Sen has taught at Beloit College, University of California, Berkeley, and Syracuse University. He is the author of Empire of Free Trade: The English East India Company and the Making of the Colonial Marketplace (1998) and Distant Sovereignty: National Imperialism and the Origins of British India (2002). A former Fulbright-Hays Faculty Research Fellow and Senior Fellow at the National Endowment for the Humanities, he won the Daniel Patrick Moynihan Award for research and teaching at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University.
The Progressive Movement in North India saw a definite shift in the status of women as contributors to society. It brought fresh perspectives to the heated debates regarding the value of women’s engagements with the ‘literary’. As literary revolutionaries like Rashid Jahan and Ismat Chughtai broke new ground, many women within the Progressive milieu began to write. They wrote mostly of themselves, their lives and times, giving rise to a growing surge in the genre of life-writing or autobiographical writing in Urdu. These stories are recognised as individual works only in retrospect and often as complimentary or secondary pieces to a mainstream narrative. Much of this recognition is based on their reading as witnesses to history and nostalgic recollections. Reading these texts against the grain, this talk aims to investigate the entanglements of genre and gender while rethinking Nostalgia and its relationship with forms of life-writing. Furthermore, editorial intervention like processes of selection, collection and translation will be considered to probe into the concept of Witness and tease out the politics of text as performance. Some of the works to be considered are *Yaad ki Rehguzar* by Shaukat Kaifi, *Hum Sath The* by Hamida Salim and *Humsafar* by Hameeda Akhtar.

Farha Noor is currently writing her doctoral dissertation on Concepts of Leisure in Modern Bangla and Urdu Fiction at the South Asia Institute in Heidelberg, in association with the Collaborative Research Centre 1015 ‘Otium’ at the University of Freiburg. She attained her M. Phil. and M. A. degrees from the Centre for English Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi. For her M. Phil. dissertation, she studied politics of Genre and Gender, reading the collected letters of Alys Faiz. Noor is interested in literary translations and has translated from both Bangla and Urdu in various South Asian publications.
Jagadish Chandra Bose and the Politics of Science in India
Christin Hoene (University of Kent)

Jagadish Chandra Bose (1858–1937) was an Indian scientist and polymath, who first gained international reputation for his work as a physicist in the 1890s. His research on millimetre waves, for example, was instrumental for the invention of the radio – although it was Guglielmo Marconi who got all the credit for that, including the Nobel Prize in 1909. Yet, throughout his scientific career, which span four decades, Bose had to fight prejudices amongst his colleagues in the west concerning his skills and credibility as a scientist. As he recalled in a speech at the University of Punjab in 1924, the prevailing prejudice in the west was that “no great contribution to exact knowledge could be made in India, since the Indian temperament was merely speculative and dominated by exuberant imagination”. Moreover, western scientists were suspicious in regards to Bose’s interdisciplinary approach to science. Bose attacked these prejudices repeatedly in his writings, and particularly in his numerous public speeches. He argued that imagination and science are not mutually exclusive, and he criticised the strict disciplinary boundaries of western science and instead promoted a holistic philosophy of science. Thus, Bose created a philosophy of Indian science that was resolutely independent.

Christin Hoene is the Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in the School of English at the University of Kent. She is also a Researcher in Residence at the British Library. She is the author of ‘Music and Identity in Postcolonial British South-Asian Literature’ (Routledge, 2015). Her current work focuses on depictions of sound and sound technology in colonial literature and on the history of the radio in the context of the British Empire. Her research interests include: word and music studies, sound studies, postcolonial aesthetics, and the legacies of anti-LGBT legislation in former British colonies.
“Letters mean half meetings and they are a great consolation to us,” writes an Indian soldier from the Middle East, serving in the British Indian Army during the Second World War. His ardent desire to hear from home reaches us today through military censorship reports archived at the British Library. Soldiers’ letters were written in Hindi, Gurmukhi, Urdu, Bengali, Malayalam and Tamil, and often dictated to scribes by Indian non-literate sepoys. They were then translated for the censor, who compiled quotations from the letters into a report testifying to the Indian soldiers’ ‘morale’. This talk will examine the relationship between censorship and the text, particularly as the latter shifts from the verbal to the transcribed, Indian vernaculars to the English language. It will explore how we receive insights into the emotional lives of colonial soldiers through the censored word. How is the text itself affected by the letters’ reception by family and friends in India and the military colonial gaze? Do such letters become textual connectors between remote villages spread across India and theatres of war thousands of miles away? And what can we gain by interpreting such letters alongside colonial photographs from the Second World War?

Diya Gupta is interested in the intersections between life-writing, visual culture and literature, particularly in response to war. She holds BA and MA degrees in English from Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India, and Second BA and MPhil degrees in English from the University of Cambridge. Diya’s doctoral research at the Department of English, King’s College London, provides the first literary and cultural examination of Indian soldiers’ experiences in the Second World War. Drawing upon her bilingual skills, she considers writing in both English and Bengali languages to untangle the troubled yet transformative emotional legacy of this war in the Indian subcontinent.

- Monday 21st October, 2019
How does one write screenwriting history without early film scripts? This presentation will engage with the unfortunate archival absence of film scripts from the early years as a heuristic rather than a handicap, employing ‘intermediality’ both as an archaeological and a conceptual tool in reconstituting screenwriting as a converged media practice. The widespread circulation of screenwriting manuals for amateurs constituted a pedagogical infrastructure separate from, but parallel to, the other infrastructural flow of ideas and professionals from the Parsi theatre into the film industry. The autobiographical accounts of some of the first playwright-turned-screenwriters bear testimony to the spaces they negotiated for themselves in the talkies after a successful stint with the Parsi stage. These memoirs form an interesting counterpoint to the testimonies of another group of ‘amateur’ screenwriters from the Indian Cinematograph Committee evidences (1927–28) wherein they express great apathy towards the practice in Indian studios and declare their freelancing associations with Hollywood studios that solicited story ideas from viewers worldwide. The talk shall explore the practice and discourse of screenwriting during the first Indian talkies through a study of the margins of print, theatre and film history.

Rakesh Sengupta is a doctoral student in the Department of South Asia in SOAS. His research on screenwriting in early Indian cinema (1930s-50s) draws on multiple methodologies from film history, print culture, media archaeology and postcolonial studies. Rakesh’s work has been published in BioScope and is forthcoming in Literature/Film Quarterly and Journal of Screenwriting.

- Monday 28th October, 2019
This talk will discuss Persian textual sources produced between c.1650-1750, to argue that impotence or lack of/waning desire, was one of the major anxieties embedded in early modern constructions of South Asian masculinities. In the medical texts the ability to have an erection is inextricably linked to the unimpeded flow of seed, and the presence of both indicated that the man was fertile, that is, that he was capable of producing offspring. A virile male, then, was the pinnacle of masculinity and the inability to produce a child brought the discussions of digestion, sex, and the flow of seminal fluids (inzāl) to the forefront in political, erotological, and medical texts. Early modern medical texts created specific notions about curing this sexually ailing body. While most cures for sexual problems involved correcting humors through food or dietary regimen, the imbalance of seminal fluid could also be corrected through psychological solutions, especially in the ṭ ībbīya texts. This talk will demonstrate how individual sexual medical health was intrinsically linked not only with Indo-Persian humoral theories but with the desire to increase sexual power and vigour (quwwat-i bāh). The talk will also comment on the gradience in the production and consumption of sexual medical knowledge in the eighteenth century.

Sonia Wigh is a doctoral candidate at the Department of History, University of Exeter. She has been awarded the College of Humanities International studentship for pursuing her project titled, ‘The Body of Words: A Social history of Sex and the Body in Early Modern India’. She has published on the issues of politics and knowledge production around sex in the works of the Braj poet Bhairalal. Her current interest include trying very hard to decipher texts written on sexual medicine, especially those with obscure magical symbols.