

# THE SHAPOORJI PALLONJI INSTITUTE OF ZOROASTRIAN STUDIES

SOAS University of London

Report prepared November 2023





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## Welcome from the Co-Chairs

As Co-Chairs of the Shapoorji Pallonji Institute of Zoroastrian Studies, we are pleased to share the end-of-year report for 2022-23 with you.

The highlight of the past year was the first lecture event in memory of Pallonji Shapoorji Mistry on Tuesday, 13 June 2023 in SOAS's Khalili Lecture Theatre. Justice Rohinton Nariman delivered a fascinating lecture on 'The Sassanian Empire: A Fire That Was Extinguished', speaking freely and without notes. The lecture was followed by a reception in the Foyer of the Khalili Lecture Theatre. We were delighted to welcome our donor and patron, Shapoor Mistry, both at the lecture and at the meeting of the SPIZS Advisory Board on 12 June 2023. In the evening of 12 June, SOAS's director Professor Adam Habib entertained Advisory Board members and other dignitaries, including Lord Karan Bilimoria, Ron Khalifa and Zerbanoo Gifford with a dinner at the National Liberal Club.

SPIZS Co-Chair, Dr Sarah Stewart, decided to retire at the end of this academic year. She has been instrumental in setting up the Institute and we are sorry to see her going. The SPIZS and the Department of History, Religions and Philosophies held a farewell party in her honour on 6 July 2023 to pay tribute to her as a valued colleague. Dr Mariano Errichiello, one of our former PhD students, has been appointed as the second Shapoorji Pallonji Lecturer. He started at SOAS on 1 September 2023.

Over the past academic year, the Institute has continued to flourish as a hub for teaching and research in Zoroastrianism. We have a vibrant and enthusiastic undergraduate, postgraduate and postdoctoral community

of about thirty students and young scholars. The Shapoorji Pallonji Institute provides a natural hub for them to meet and socialise with each other in person as well as through social media.

As you can see from the updates of the two talented recipients of scholarship awards, their progress through the Master's and PhD programmes has benefited greatly by the generous funding from Mr Shapoor Mistry, the Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe and the Kamran Djam scholarships, for which they are extremely grateful. This support makes a crucial difference to some of our most deserving students, who otherwise might not have had the opportunity to benefit from a SOAS education. Scholarships such as these enable us to attract the best global candidates who can thrive in the intellectually vigorous and inspiring environment offered by SOAS.

We were delighted to run our summer school again this year in collaboration with the Norwegian Institute in Rome and to teach such a lively and engaged group of students from all over the world.

Thank you once again on behalf of the Shapoorji Pallonji Institute of Zoroastrian Studies and the wider SOAS community for your continued support.



Dr Sarah Stewart



Professor Almut Hintze

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

The Senior Advisory Panel comprises nine members, including the donor, who can nominate up to four representatives. SOAS may nominate up to four members, one of whom will be the Director or a Pro-Director of SOAS who will act as Chair. The Senior Advisory Panel's remit is purely advisory. It is intended to offer guidance and support to the Institute. It is intended to advise the Co-Chairs and support the Institute start-up, collaborate to maximise opportunities for the Institute, advise the Co-Chairs on the management of risks associated with the activities of the Institute and consider the Institute's continued evolution and impact.

This year the panel welcomed two new members: Justice Rohinton Nariman, a retired Supreme Court of India Judge, and Professor Graeme Earl, Head of College of Humanities and Professor of Archaeology at SOAS.

The Senior Advisory Panel meets twice a year, and the Co-Chairs attend the meetings. The membership for the 2022-23 academic year is as follows:

**Professor Adam Habib** (Chair), Director 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**, Head of College of Humanities and Professor of Archaeology at SOAS.

# Teaching Zoroastrianism at SOAS

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

**Course Code: 15 800 0029**

This course is offered in the undergraduate degree programme, World Philosophies.

The purpose of the course is to introduce students to Zoroastrianism - its doctrines, rituals and observances within a historical framework. The teachings of the religion will be 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 will be 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 re-settlement of a diaspora community in India and from there up to the present day. Theological developments and issues of the contemporary communities will be treated within this historical context with particular reference to Zoroastrian literature. The modern history and adaptation of the religion in different cultural environments will be looked at mainly with reference to the Parsis in India, and the global Diaspora in such places as Britain, Canada and the USA.

## Zoroastrianism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives (PG)

**Course Code: 15 PSRC 052**

This course is offered in the degree programmes Religion in Global Politics, Iranian Studies, Near and Middle Eastern Studies, South Asia Area Studies. The course provides a survey of Zoroastrian teachings, rituals, observances 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 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 and lectures are shared. Postgraduate seminars are separate, and students spend more time studying Zoroastrian religious texts.

Five postgraduate students, registered in different MAs and including two auditors, attended this course, and two MA students, wrote their MA dissertations of 10,000 words relating to Zoroastrianism, Iranian and Central Asian Studies. The topics of the MA dissertations were:

- Shiruy Billimoria: On the Religious Foundation of Zoroastrian Business Ethics
- Hamta Mousavi: On the Contributions of Ebrahim Pur-e-Dawud (Pourdavoud, 1885-1968) to the Study of Zoroastrianism

## Avestan (UG/PG)

**Course codes: 158000182, 15PSRC033**

This course is an introduction to Avestan, the language of the earliest sacred texts of the Zoroastrians. It is designed to provide students with a clear understanding of the basic principles of the Avestan language in a way that enables them to translate simple Avestan texts and to analyse their grammar. Students who complete the course successfully will be able to handle simple primary sources of the Zoroastrian religion in the original Avestan and to critically assess translations made by various scholars.

## Teaching Zoroastrianism at SOAS

### Middle Persian (UG/PG)

**Course codes: 158000183 UG,  
15PSRC034 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 Ardashir, son of Bābag*, the *Kārnāmag ī Ardashir ī Bābagān*, and of a Zoroastrian religious text, the *Dādestān ī Mēnōg ī Xrad, The Judgment of the Spirit of Wisdom*, both of which will be read in the original Pahlavi script. In 2021–22, this course was attended by eight students, both on campus and online.

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

Sarah Stewart and Céline Redard have created an online short course (MOOC) entitled *Zoroastrianism: History, Religion and Belief*, for the FutureLearn platform. Its purpose is to introduce the subject of Zoroastrianism to an international audience and provide a 'taster' for the courses offered at SOAS. 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 3,500 people have enrolled since the course was launched in July 2021.

### Zoroastrian Summer School

The third Zoroastrian Summer School took place this year from 26 to 30 June 2023. A collaboration between SOAS and the University of Bergen, we welcomed 15 students to the Norwegian Institute in Rome for a week of lectures, seminars and workshops.

The course was taught by Dr Sarah Stewart (SOAS), Professor Michael Stausberg (University of Bergen) and Dr Jenny Rose (Claremont University). The lectures covered topics including Zoroastrianism and modern Iranian nationalism, the rediscovery of ancient Iran in the modern period and Zoroastrian themes in Persian literature. Students also delivered their own presentations to the group, each of them taking an interview from Sarah Stewart's *Voices from Zoroastrian Iran: Oral Texts and Testimony*, Volumes 1 and 2.

The course included an excursion to the Mithraeum, a temple dedicated to the Indo-Iranian god Mithras, deep below the Basilica San Clemente. Jenny Rose was our guide for the visit and gave a lecture on Mithraism at the site. Students and lecturers also enjoyed a traditional Persian meal at the Taberna Persiana. This year we had a truly international group of students from: UK, US, China, India, Russia, Chile and Switzerland. They included BA, MA and PhD students. We would like to thank all of them for the experiences, insights and enthusiasm that they brought to the course.

## Scholarships

Thanks to the generosity 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 will normally provide a contribution to fees of up to a maximum of £13,000 each year for the duration of the award. In addition, a stipend of up to £10,000 per annum (or pro rata for part-time students) may also be awarded.

The Shapoorji Pallonji Scholarships will provide a contribution to fees and living costs calibrated according to merit and availability of funds.

The SOAS Shapoorji Pallonji Institute of Zoroastrian Studies would like to spread the net widely and invites students who approach Zoroastrianism from different disciplinary backgrounds, for example, historical, linguistic, anthropological or from within the study of religions to apply.

### Eligible programmes and modules:

Undergraduate students take the full-year module (30 credits) in Zoroastrianism as part of the BA World Philosophies Programme. For postgraduate students, the module comes under the MA Religion in Global Politics.

A third half-year module (15 credits) will be launched this year for 2nd and 3rd year undergraduate students. The Zoroastrian Flame will be included in the World Philosophies programme as an open option.

Full-time MPhil PhD (new admissions only, starting in September 2023) students are enrolled in the following subject areas: Zoroastrianism, both ancient and modern, and Zoroastrianism with language study (Avestan, Pahlavi, Persian and Gujarati).

### 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 may also apply but will not be given preference.

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 apply but will not be given preference.

Applicants for the MPhil/PhD scholarships must have demonstrated 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, Sanskrit language.

Applicants for the MA scholarship must complete the compulsory 60 credit dissertation in Zoroastrianism and the 30-credit module: Zoroastrianism, Historical and Contemporary Perspectives. In addition to this, applicants may wish to take one further 30-credit language module (e.g. Avestan language module).

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

In 2022-23 we were able to offer an MA scholarship to Mr Shiruy Billimoria from Mumbai, India.

### Zoroastrian Summer School Scholarships

Scholarships were offered to five students at the Zoroastrian Summer School to help cover the costs of travel and accommodation. Students can apply for the scholarship when filling in their application for the summer school.

## ARISH DASTUR

MPhil/PhD Religions



As I approach the end of the third year of my PhD, I offer my most sincere gratitude to the Shapoorji Pallonji Scholarships for helping enable this wonderful journey. My PhD thesis *Imagination and Meaning in the Zoroastrian Yašts* is progressing very well. The third year of my PhD has been rich and productive, and a majority of the writing that shall be shaped into my final thesis has been completed. I shall use the fourth year of my PhD to finesse and finalise my thesis, and I am on schedule to submit it for examination on 15 July 2024.

During this third year I worked on some of the more challenging sections of the Yašts. For instance, under the valuable guidance of my PhD supervisor, I finished working on the analyses, translations and commentaries pertaining to a series of very difficult stanzas from Yašt 5. Yašt 5 is a beautiful and evocative hymn of worship dedicated to the Zoroastrian divinity of the waters, Anāhitā. The stanzas I was working on posed several grammatical, semantic and syntactic issues that have proven challenging for many other Avestan scholars as well. Three years ago, I would not have known how best to segment and analyse the various difficulties posed by this series of stanzas, or how best to critically evaluate the merits and shortfalls of the different solutions proposed by leading scholars. I would have most certainly shied

away from attempting to propose my own analysis or solutions to resolve some of these difficulties. But now, after an admittedly demanding joust with these difficulties, I was able to eventually work through the stanzas, and achieve a meaningful analysis and a translation accompanied with detailed commentaries on the issues.

Completing this task caused me to pause and reflect on the last three years, and on how grateful I am that due to the generous and reliable support of my scholarships, and the in-depth and engaging teachings of my PhD supervisor, Professor Almut Hintze, I have been able to make continued progress in the Avestan language, and thereby have also been able to much more deeply appreciate, understand and gaze into the ancient poetry of the Zoroastrian tradition.

On 24th April this year, my article *Contending for the Cosmos: A Zoroastrian Poet's Mysterious Rival* was published by Cambridge University Press, in the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society. In the acknowledgements section of this article, I have gratefully acknowledged my Shapoorji Pallonji Scholarship. This publication was a very meaningful milestone for me and I am currently finalising a second article that shall also be shortly submitted for publication. Once my second article has been submitted



## ARISH DASTUR

### MPhil/PhD Religions

for publication, I shall turn my full attention back onto the finalisation of my thesis, which I hope to finally submit for publication soon. After I complete my PhD on the Yašts, I shall aim to pursue post-doctoral work under the direction of Professor Almut Hintze.

This year, to continue reinforcing my language skills, I took classes in Sanskrit and Avestan. As mentioned in my previous annual updates, in my opinion, it continues to be of paramount benefit that the Shapoorji Pallonji Scholarships support and encourage the study of the Avestan language. This is an extremely pivotal and essential channel through which the Shapoorji Pallonji Scholarships keep the fire burning bright. A strong and critical foundation in language underpins any serious effort to study the rich and varied literature of the ancient religious tradition of Zoroastrianism. It is eventually

through this literature, when illuminated with a keen understanding of the language, that we may aspire to better contemplate aspects of Zoroastrian theology, cosmology, mythology and spirituality. It is because of my continued study of Avestan with Professor Almut Hintze, that I find myself able to confidently engage the primary materials, and more fully appreciate the ingenuity, nuances and scope of the rich diversity of literature produced by the Zoroastrian spiritual tradition.

As I continue along in my journey, I shall forever remain grateful to the Shapoorji Pallonji Scholarships, for enabling me to study under Professor Almut Hintze - first for my MA, and then for my PhD. This is the reason why I came to SOAS, and I shall always remember that the Shapoorji Pallonji Scholarships made this possible for me.

## SHIRUY BILLIMORIA

### MA Religion and Global Politics

I was grown up in Bombay (Mumbai), to a working-class Parsi Zoroastrian family where the tenets of our religion – Good Thoughts, Good Words and Good Deeds, were deeply embedded into my personality due to the rigorous efforts of my parents, and later on my teachers.

During a BA in History I touched upon the history of the Parsees in India. Since then I became obsessed with every little detail about our rich past in our adoptive homeland.

Through my degree and briefly studying the histories of the different major religions of the world such as Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Jainism and Islam, I gained a different perspective on our religion. This got me interested in pursuing cross-cultural and comparative religious studies. It enlightened me to seek out the mysteries of my religion and gain knowledge about it from a socio-cultural perspective. I chose the course as it provided me with the opportunity to procure a more comprehensive understanding and knowledge of the religion than had hitherto been possible.

I started my year at SOAS later than most people due to initial visa problems but once settled the programme and the modules that I took turned out to be some of the most enjoyable I have ever had the privilege of attending. I particularly enjoyed how each module challenged you differently. I enjoyed how the professors were very open and supportive of whatever point of view one would take in their assignments. They would often encourage us to be critical and take up a point of view that was unexplored. This freedom to explore, made the assignments not seem like a task. The classes and readings provided an intellectual stimulus for developing a unique mindset. Additionally, I

really enjoyed the camaraderie we built up with fellow students. Sharing points of view, opinions, or even countering them became fun. I really enjoyed the opportunity to meet people from different cultures. It has provided me with a well-rounded worldview, and has given me the ability to create my own unique perspective.

It is no exaggeration to state that I simply would not have been able to attend SOAS if it was not for the Shapoorji Pallonji Scholarship - without the scholarship there would be no MA for me. It gave me the opportunity that I had been working towards for a very long time to fully focus on my studies during the entirety of the year.

The ethnographic, theological, social, and cultural understanding of Zoroastrianism that I received enabled me to pursue my goal to conduct a study on the origins of the Zoroastrian value sets, governing business practices and their roots in theology. I studied the cross-culturalism between the Zoroastrian and Abrahamic peoples, and the theological similarities between Zoroastrianism and the Abrahamic and Vedic religions.

I have now started a PhD at SOAS with a project on Zoroastrian Business Ethos and its roots in Theology. I am passionate and fascinated with this research and understanding the religion and our past, with the effect it has on our practices and the future of the community.

I am inspired by what the Shapoorji Pallonji Scholarship did for me and intend to replicate this for someone else. This gave me the opportunity to pursue my passion. I appreciate it. I shall ever remain grateful.

## Research

### Gen Z and Beyond: A Survey for Every Generation

Our global survey project *Gen Z and Beyond: A Survey for Every Generation* ended in May 2023. Starting in July 2021, the aim of the project was to survey the global Zoroastrian population to inform thinking and discussions about the identity, aspirations and future challenges facing the community. The survey was designed to allow analysis and comparison of demographic, behavioural and attitudinal data across regions and age groups on a scale that has never been possible before. The project was led by Dr Sarah Stewart (PI) with Dr Nazneen Engineer (Project Manager) and Joe Turtle (Data Analyst and Project Administrator).

Previous studies had typically been conducted offline using a small sample group, yielding data of limited use to the wider community. The Gen Z and Beyond Survey was conducted using an in-depth, online questionnaire that allowed us to reach a large, multinational population quickly and easily. We received 5000 responses, an estimated 6% of the eligible global population.

We would like to thank all respondents who took the time to participate in the survey and contribute to this valuable resource. We are very grateful to our donors, ambassadors and volunteers without whom this project would not have been possible. We hope that the report, accompanying appendices and the raw data will be useful to students, academics and the Zoroastrian community worldwide.

The final report is available [here](#). The data collected during the survey is available from the UK Data Service upon request.

### The Multimedia Yasna (MUYA) Project

The European Research Council has extended the MUYA project, by a further six months to March 2023, so that the entire project has a running time of six and a half years (2016–2023). Two volumes of the project have so far appeared, and a third volume, by Benedikt Peschl, will appear before the end of 2022. On 12 July 2022 we launched the website of the MUYA project in the rooms of the SSPISZ. An online link enabled friends and colleagues around the globe to watch the presentation. The event was dedicated to the memory of Ervad Asphandiarji Dadachanji, whose beautiful Avesta recitation is immortalised in the film of the MUYA project. The interactive film can be watched [here](#):

### The Multimedia Yasna International Interoperability Framework (MUYA-IIIF) Project

The team of the MUYA-IIIF project, consisting of Almut Hintze (PI) and Iskandar Ding (Research Assistant) have developed the prototype of a platform for annotating Avestan manuscripts in collaboration with the company Digirati. Almut is currently exploring options for long-term hosting of the project's platform. The platform is designed to form the foundation of a manuscript image archive in the Zoroastrian Digital Collections of the SSPISZ.

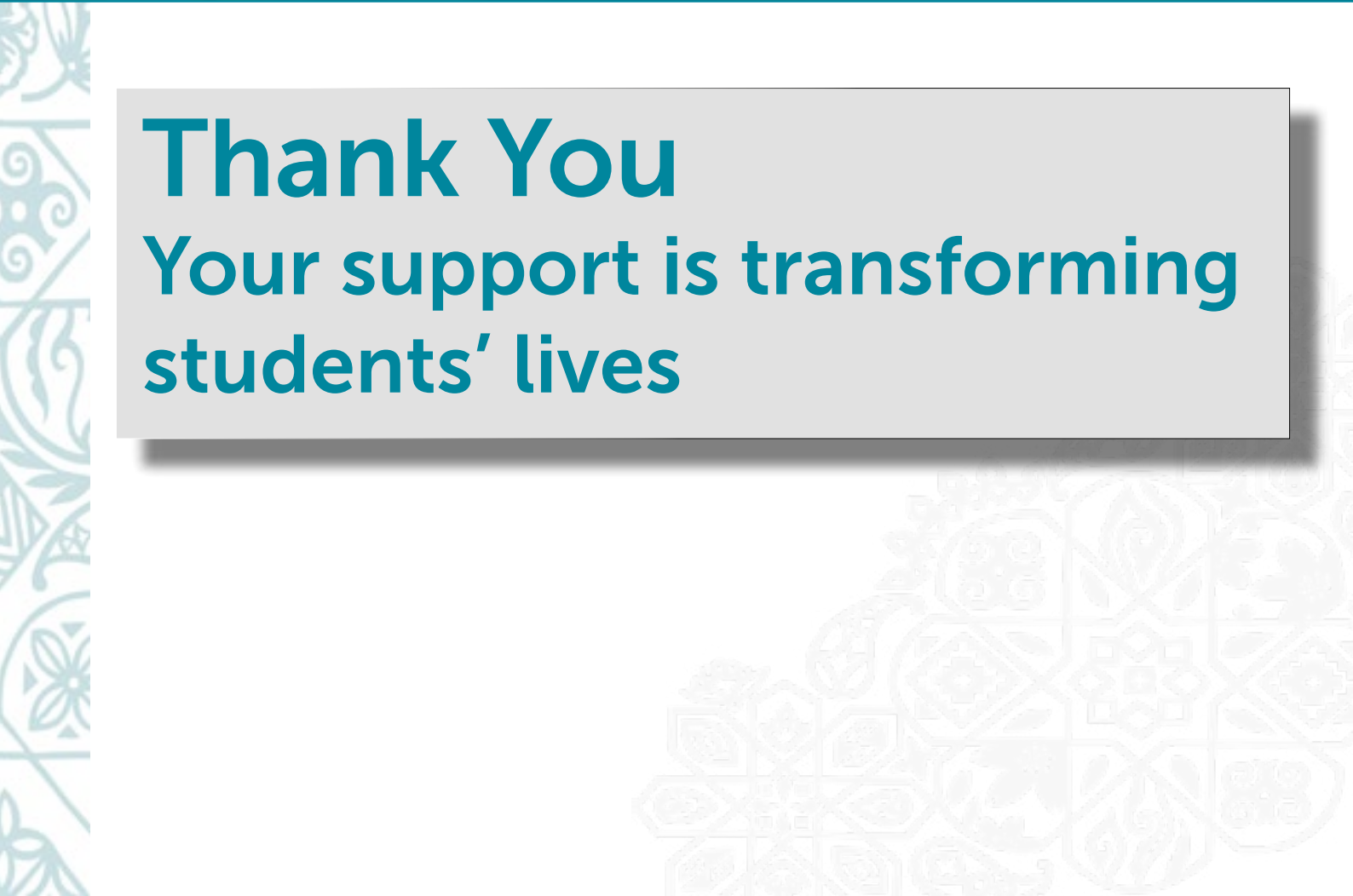
## Outreach

- This year, the annual Dastur Kutar Memorial Lecture was given by Dr Yousef Moradi on 23rd March. His lecture discussed the Zoroastrian Sanctuary of Ādur Gušnasp (Takht-e Soleyman) in the light of new archaeological excavations.
- Paulina Niechciał of Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland gave a lecture at SOAS on 27th April 2023, entitled 'Lived Zoroastrianism: Women's Religious Practices in the American Diaspora'.
- The inaugural Pallonji Shapoorji Mistry Memorial Lecture took place on 13th June 2023. The lecture by Justice Rohinton Nariman was entitled 'The Sassanian Empire: A Fire That Was Extinguished'.
- The night before the lecture we welcomed our advisory panel and guests to a dinner in honour of Mr Shapoor Mistry held by the SOAS Director, Professor Adam Habib, at the National Liberal Club, courtesy of Professor Eugenio Biagini. Following the lecture and reception, Lord Karan Bilimoria hosted a dinner at Madhu's of Mayfair restaurant at the Dilly Hotel.





**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](http://eepurl.com/gen7f5).

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