



## Critical Intellectual Exchange in Turin

Soheb Niazi

Back in Delhi, during my master's programme at Jawaharlal Nehru University in the early 2000s, the writings of Antonio Gramsci served as a great source of inspiration. They captivated not only academic historians endeavoring to reframe Indian history from the perspectives of the subalterns (albeit with misinterpretations), but also resonated with left-leaning student activists. Gramsci's axiom – "*Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will*" – held particular appeal in addressing the escalating authoritarianism observed in university spaces, as well as in broader societal and political contexts.

When Laura Erber, the Fellowship Coordinator at IIAS, informed me about the possibility of a collaboration with faculty members from the Università di Torino, I was attracted to the idea of meeting and engaging with scholars based in the city of Turin. Often referred to as "the cradle of Italian liberty" and a hub of working-class and anti-fascist movements in the 20th century, Turin held a particular allure for me.

Undoubtedly, the research undertaken by scholars from the Università di Torino resonated closely with my academic pursuits, providing a compelling rationale for collaboration. Specifically, Professor Alessandra Consolaro's works on Hindi literature, particularly her focus on Dalit writings, closely aligned with my interests in advancing research on the literary realms of Pasmanda ("backward") Muslim castes. Additionally, the work of Marzia Casolari, Associate Professor of Asian History, proved invaluable. Her investigations into the relationship between Indian Hindutva Nationalists and the Italian fascists during the late colonial period of 20th-century

India, along with her examination of British strategic interests and roles in India's Partition, significantly informs my research focus on the politics of Muslim occupational classes in late colonial India. Furthermore, the research of historian Tommaso Bobbio, centered on historical heritage and collective memories of past events, serves as a compelling reminder of the significance of meticulous historical research for our contemporary times.

Prior to my fellowship at IIAS, having completed my PhD from the Freie Universität in Berlin, my experience was primarily grounded in the German academic system. While in Leiden, I have been able to some extent acquaint myself with the Dutch academic system. However, admittedly, my exposure to the works of Italian scholars in the field of Indian languages and history had been limited. The collaboration with Università di Torino presented a valuable opportunity to expand my understanding in this regard.

Together with the mentioned scholars, we designed a brief research sojourn in Torino which encompassed three lectures that I presented to students across different

levels within the Department of Humanities and the Department of Foreign Languages, Literatures and Modern Cultures at the Università di Torino.

My first lecture, titled, "An Introduction to Urdu Literary Culture," addressed a diverse class of Hindi language students in Turin, spanning various proficiency levels. This presentation offered an extensive overview of debates surrounding the origins of Urdu, discussions on the Hindi-Urdu controversy and delved into canonical works of Urdu literature, along with exploring various literary forms of Urdu poetry. The second lecture was tailored for slightly advanced political science and history students and focused on my primary research concerning caste hierarchy and social mobility among Muslim occupational classes in colonial North India. This lecture highlighted the multiple strategies deployed by Muslim occupational classes such as the *qassābs* (butchers and hide merchants) the *mīrāsīs* (genealogists and musicians) and the *julāhās* (weavers) to contest the stigmatisation of their social identities. The third lecture adopted a broader perspective, offering an overview of debates on caste and social stratification among Muslims in colonial and post-Colonial India. By contextualizing recent developments and debates on topics like reservation for Dalit Muslims or the implications of the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), the lecture provided a historical context by situating these debates within the broader historiography of Islam and Muslims in India.

Interacting with students at Università di Torino was a learning experience, reminiscent of the vibrant atmosphere in public universities in India, especially when contrasted with the relatively homogenous settings of elite German and Dutch academic institutions. The professors informed me that many students traveled from distant places, managing multiple jobs to pursue their intellectual pursuits. While initially reserved in expressing opinions during the lectures, the students displayed a genuine eagerness to explore subjects beyond their own cultural backgrounds. During one of the lectures, centered on contemporary events and the current situation of Muslims, the discussion extended beyond India, drawing comparisons with the conditions in Palestine and fostering broader reflections on authoritarianism, Islamophobia, and the assault on dissent in university spaces across the world.

While Gramsci's presence in Torino has almost faded away (a fate shared by many significant cities, where commercial developments have turned the home of the Italian Communist Party's founder into a sort of luxury hotel), my interaction with students and faculty provided a glimpse of South Asian studies beyond the obvious European academic networks. It also provided a flavour of the fiery and politically charged intellectual culture that has flourished in the city of Torino.

Soheb Niazi is a recipient of the Gerda Henkel Stiftung postdoctoral research grant and an affiliated fellow at IIAS. Email: [sohebrniazi@gmail.com](mailto:sohebrniazi@gmail.com)

## IIAS Fellowship Options



### Apply for an IIAS fellowship

The International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) in Leiden, the Netherlands, offers a 12-month fellowship to support individual projects in the social sciences and humanities. The institute especially invites early- and mid-career researchers to apply.



### Combine your IIAS Fellowship with a short term research experience at FMSH, in Paris

When applying for an IIAS Fellowship, you have the option of simultaneously submitting an application for an additional one to three months of research at the Fondation Maison des sciences de l'homme (FMSH), in Paris, France, immediately after your stay in Leiden.



### Apply for a Gonda fellowship

For promising young Indologists at the post-doctorate level it is possible to apply for funding with the J. Gonda Foundation of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) to spend three to six months doing research at IIAS.

Information and application: [www.iias.asia/fellowships](http://www.iias.asia/fellowships)

## Professorial Fellowship for the Chair of Taiwan Studies at Leiden University and IIAS

To facilitate the Taiwan Studies Programme at Leiden University, the Department of Cross-Strait Education of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of China (Taiwan), the Faculty of Humanities and the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) have jointly established a Chair of Taiwan Studies, based at the Faculty of Humanities.

The Chair of Taiwan Studies provides a Professorial Fellow position of five or ten months for a visiting scholar in Taiwan Studies to teach and conduct research at Leiden University and IIAS.

For further information and application procedure go to: <https://www.iias.asia/professorial-fellowship-chair-taiwan-studies-leiden-university-and-iias>

