INDIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES
Bengaluru

# 37th MID-YEAR MEETING

## PUBLIC LECTURE



### Prof. Seema Alavi

Ashoka University, Sonipat

Professor Seema Alavi is a distinguished historian specializing in early modern and modern South Asian history, with particular emphasis on the transition from the Indo-Persian world to British colonial rule. She is currently a Professor of History at Ashoka University, Sonipat, having previously served at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Jamia Millia Islamia, and the University of Delhi. A PhD from the University of Cambridge, she has held several prestigious international fellowships, including the Fulbright Fellowship (twice), the Smuts Visiting Fellowship at Cambridge, the Harvard-Yenching Institute Visiting Scholarship, and the William Bentinck-Smith Fellowship at the Harvard Radcliffe Institute.

Her research spans the military, medical, maritime, and religious histories of South Asia. Among her acclaimed works are '*Muslim Cosmopolitanism in the Age of Empire*', recipient of the Albert Hourani Book Award and the Monsoon Book Award (2025), and '*Sovereigns of the Sea: Omani Ambition in the Age of Empire*' (2023). She also serves on the Editorial Boards of several leading international journals.

**3 July 2026 (Friday), 5:30–6:30 PM**

**@ Faculty Hall**
**IISc, Bengaluru**

# Entangled Histories: Unani Medicine, Religion and Politics in British India

The talk puts the spotlight on the entangled histories of medicine, religion, and politics in the long 19th century – the period of British rule in India. It analyses the engagement between Unani – a Greco Arab system of family-controlled medical knowledge – and English doctors.

Professor Seema Alavi argues that Unani flourished as an aristocratic medical tradition in the Mughal Empire. And during the period of imperial decline (18th century), it shifted its focus from health as an aristocratic virtue to an emphasis on medical wisdom and science. This facilitated its intellectual dialogue with English doctors during India's colonial encounter.

Colonial rule triggered fresh changes in the Unani healing as it tried to accommodate itself with English medical thinking. Individuals outside the established families of healers reached out to Sufi and Prophet healing practices. They used the freshly arrived print and access to the vernaculars to incorporate them into their medical writings. The old literate elite families viewed this religious outreach as a grave threat to Unani. They responded by setting up institutions of learning to professionalize and modernize Unani knowledge by restoring its Greco-Arab text-based core. These institutions helped them maintain full control over medical knowledge.

The talk focuses on these developments to show how ideas of 'medical modernity' and professionalization are not necessarily singular and Eurocentric but context-based. The 'modern' Unani, bereft of religious practice, found an easy entry into the medical projects of contemporary India's Health Ministry.

**Chairperson**

**Prof. Raghavan Varadarajan**
President
Indian Academy of Sciences

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https://youtube.com/live/0rJOeo8podY?feature=share

**All are Welcome**