“TWO WIDOWS IN THE COLONIAL COURTROOM:
A MICROHISTORY OF STATE AND COMMUNITY IN LATE
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY NORTHERN INDIA"

A seminar by
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Abstract

During the late eighteenth century in northern India, the colonial state reorganized social relationships to create a stable and extractive agrarian regime. Colonial demands of revenue incentivized old and upstart landlords to enter into debts with bankers in order to avoid government auctions of defaulting estates. Disputes over unpaid debts animated the newly established East India Company civil courts. In this paper, I will focus on a specific moment in this history when contestations between two feisty elderly widows, one hailing from a landed family, and another from a banking family engulfed the colonial courts in scandal. A protracted dispute, it threatened to unravel colonial discourses on the efficacy of its judicial regimes while exposing the networks of patronage, exchange and bribery that sustained colonial administration from the imperial to the most local levels. Illuminating the different ways in which the widows drew attention to their “helpless” and “frail” bodies even as they actively participated in the changing political economy, and challenged and bribed court authorities to their advantage, I suggest that this history is indicative of women’s continued political relevance in a tumultuous early colonial society, even after the colonial state aggressively sought to compromise their status.

About the Speaker

Rochisha Narayan is a historian of Early Modern and Modern India with specific research interests in histories of gender, family, caste and the political economy of the eighteenth century in India. She completed her dissertation titled, 'Caste, Family and Politics in Northern India from the Eighteenth to the Nineteenth centuries' from Rutgers University-New Brunswick in October 2011. She was a postdoctoral scholar at the South Asia Studies Council at Yale University from 2011-2012. She is Assistant Professor in the Department of History at William Paterson University where she teaches courses on South Asia and World History. Presently, she is working on her book-manuscript.