

“Ajab Shahar Calcutta: The Outsider in the Bengal Renaissance”

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Nineteenth-century Calcutta was a cacophonous, cosmopolitan city, which witnessed a unique encounter between the ideas of the European enlightenment and a native elite that struggled with the social, political and agrarian changes brought about by the British empire. A new educational and print apparatus, facilitated by empire, saw a huge output in terms of literature. In this talk, I examine a couple of key figures (and one entirely elusive one) of the Bengal Renaissance who were precariously placed on the city’s social margins and yet occupied a central role in its intellectual life. These are Hensman Anthony *Firinghee* (1786(?)-1836), of Portuguese origins, a successful popular singer-songwriter, who defeated leading Bengali singers according to folklore; poet and teacher Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1823), also of Portuguese descent, who went on to inspire generations of Bengali students at Hindu College; and the trailblazing poet and playwright Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-1873) disinherited and outcast after his conversion to Christianity. By revisiting these poets, I explore three interrelated questions. How did these characters conceive their identity in their time? How did they bridge popular and elite cultures? Finally, who was an insider and who was an outsider to the Bengal Renaissance, and when was this historiography of empire and the city of Calcutta determined and by whom?

Bio: *Dr. Ahona Panda is assistant Professor of History at Claremont McKenna College and a historian of modern South Asia, specializing in nineteenth-and-twentieth-century Bengal. She is currently working on her first monograph Bengal Undivided: The Politics of Language and the Limits of Nationalism which provides a new account of the Hindu-Muslim relationship in South Asia through a renewed attention to the politics of language. Traditional accounts of this relationship frame it in terms of enmity and competing religious nationalisms culminating in the Partition of 1947. By focusing on Bengali as a shared language on which a shared sense of community could be forged, Dr. Panda uncovers a hidden history of friendship and collaboration that helped to generate new political possibilities across three nation-states (India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh) over the course of the twentieth century. She has also written on the Bengal Famine and World War II, and on the Mahabharata in nineteenth century-Bengal, and she enjoys translating literary writing from Bengali to English.*