

Middle Bengali Retreat cum Workshop Event Highlights

Date: *August 3-13th, 2017*

Location of Event: *Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania – Miercurea Ciuc, Romania*

Actual or estimated # of participants: **22**

Actual or estimated # of attendees, if different: **15**

Funding Source (besides AIBS, if applicable): *Committee on Southern Asian Studies at the University of Chicago*

Notable Outputs & Outcomes: *All session leaders received valuable feedback both critical and encouraging on their works-in-progress; connections made between participants spurred new research projects and conference presentations/panels; everyone's sense of the Middle Bengali language and its literature improved.*

Links: <http://www.sapientia.ro/hu/hirek/middle-bengali-retreat-cum-workshop-in-transylvania-2017>

The 2nd Annual Middle Bangla Retreat-cum-Workshop brought together scholars and advanced students of Middle Bengali to read and discuss a variety of texts written in various forms of the Bangla language that were current before the standardization of modern Bangla during the time of British colonization.

Concepts of language and definitions, as well as the broad shape and organizational structure of the Middle Bangla discursive field laid the groundwork for discussion. Participants also read and discussed narrative and lyric poetry, regional myths and legends, Vaisnava theology, Muslim cosmogonies and local dynastic and political histories in the classroom and scenic outdoor settings.

The variety of texts, diverse methodologies, and skills of the workshop's participants made for lively debates and discussions during the ten-day retreat and workshop.



The 2nd Annual Middle Bangla Retreat-cum-Workshop brought together scholars and advanced students of Middle Bengali to read and discuss a variety of texts written in various forms of the Bangla language. Texts were explored and enjoyed by the individuals in a wilderness setting in beautiful Romania. AIBS is pleased to announce that it sponsored three US students and one Bangladeshi scholar to attend this successful workshop.

Jessica Bachman
Final Report
AIBS
Middle Bengali Retreat Cum Workshop
10/7/2017

For the second year in a row, the American Institute of Bangladesh Studies generously provided me with funding to attend the second annual Middle Bengali Retreat cum Workshop in Romania. The retreat lasted for 10 days. Each day we held three separate reading sessions, which were facilitated by different leaders who had been working through the selected texts in their own research.

This year the retreat organizers did an excellent job of recruiting a more diverse group of scholars to attend and lead sessions. We had many more female scholars (graduate students and professors) in attendance compared to last year as well as a larger presence of scholars from disciplines outside of philology, including more historians and anthropologists. This diversity meant that we were able to become familiar with a wider range of interpretative methodologies and strategies that can be used to understand Middle Bengali texts.

As a graduate student in South Asian history, I very much appreciated the opportunity to learn from the senior historian Indrani Chatterjee who facilitated our reading and discussion on day five. The reading was a late 18th century poetic chronicle about the kings of Tripura called Krishnamala. Dr. Chatterjee selected this particular text in order to direct our attention to a larger concern she has about the place of Buddhists within the historiography of Mughal India. According to Chatterjee, Buddhist inhabitants in the Bengal Sultanate, who were grouped under the “unfortunate category of tribals” during the colonial period, have largely been “written out of Mughal history.” But as we discovered by reading the text of Krishnamala, diverse Buddhist groups were living throughout the larger region of Bengal under Mughal rule: they were sharecroppers and tenants on Hindu and Muslim Zamindari lands as well as zamindars and rajas in their own right. Just like the Hindu zamindars of the region about whom much more has been written, Buddhists formed economic and social alliances with the Mughals. While we did not make it through the entire text, the sections we did read will certainly help me prepare for my comprehensive field exam on early modern South Asian this year.

My learning during the retreat this year was also greatly enhanced by the participation of Dr. Frank Korom who led a session on Ghanaraam Chakraborty’s Dharmamangal, a late 17th or early 18th century religious text about the Bengali deity of Dharma. As an anthropologist, Korom studies the living traditions associated with religious texts such as Dharmamangal. He shared with our group insight into the practices employed by priests who perform Dharmamangal in rural Bengal. Drawing on his extensive fieldwork on Dharmamangal pujas, he claims that the entire text was likely never intended to be recited in its entirety but that instead, different sections of the text are performed in different rural locals where Dharma remains an important deity. He also made us aware of the important role that lower-caste doms play in the puja; they take on temporary vows as Brahmins in a special ritual that allows them to oversee the puja as priests.

Finally, retreat organizer Professor Thibaut d'Hubert allocated more time this year to manuscript reading practice. I found this exercise particularly helpful and well organized. We broke into small groups to read and translate lines of the Kapilamangal, which Indian scholar Naba Gopal Roy prepared for his session. Manuscript reading is extremely challenging, but small group work made it less intimidating. This experience helped me gain confidence that I hope to apply in future scholarly endeavors.

The success of these retreats at promoting cultural and intellectual exchange fully depends on the participation of scholars and graduate students from South Asia, both as session leaders and general attendees. Unfortunately, however, this year many South Asian scholars based both in the U.S. and in Indian/Bangladeshi institutions were unsuccessful in obtaining visas to travel to Romania. I sincerely hope that the decision to hold next summer's retreat in Nepal will remedy this issue of visa inequity and enable AIBS to continue to facilitate and fund the participation of more Bangladeshi and Indian scholars and graduate students in this important cross-disciplinary and international scholarly endeavor.

With warm regards,

Jessica Bachman
PhD Student, Modern South Asian History
University of Washington

AIBS FINAL REPORT
MIDDLE BENGALI RETREAT/WORKSHOP

CHRISTOPHER L. DIAMOND

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

The 2nd Middle Bengali Retreat/Workshop in Miercurea Ciuc, Romania this past August was an incredibly rewarding, both academically and personally. As an advanced graduate student on the verge of my doctoral dissertation work, the collegial and collaborative atmosphere was invaluable.

While “Middle Bengali literature” might sound like a rather niche subject, it was surprising even to me the wide variety of scholars who attended the workshop. Historians, literary scholars, and anthropologists all brought their own disciplinary approaches to looking at a variety of texts. This kind of atmosphere led to unique collaborative discoveries and readings that would be impossible if any one of us were to approach a text on their own. I was lucky enough to be invited to lead a few sessions during the workshop. In preparation for my doctoral dissertation work as a Fulbright scholar this autumn, I presented a few lyric poems (*Padas*) from the 15th century Maithili poet Vidyāpati. His verses were popular during the medieval period in Bengal. As a scholar trained first in Hindi and the literatures of North India, I was pleased to be able to bring my research to a knowledgeable group of Bengali language scholars. I made several breakthrough discoveries in reading several difficult *padas*. This was not just the clarification of difficult points of grammar or vocabulary, but also the ability to place the literature in historical and literary contexts. Collaborative reading sessions are the only way to accurately and confidently translate and analyze pre-modern texts.

Besides my own readings/subject, I was thrilled to be exposed to a variety of other genres and texts that were presented by other scholars. From *Dharma-Maṅgala* to devotional hagiographies and early modern royal chronicles, my exposure to Middle Bengali doubled during the two weeks of the workshop. While traditional conference formats allow one to hear of the work of other scholars, a two-week intensive reading workshop allows one to delve deep into the actual work involved in research. On the social level, living side-by-side with an inter-generational and international group of scholars for an extended period allowed one to really connect and tune into the current state of global scholarship and to form friendships that will lead to future collaborative work. This less tangible outcome of events like this workshop should not be discounted.

Ishan Chakrabarti
Final Report
AIBS
Middle Bengali Retreat Cum Workshop

At the second Middle Bangla Retreat-cum-Workshop we read a wide variety of texts written in various forms of the Bangla language that were current before the standardization of modern Bangla during the time of British colonialism. This, roughly, is what we designated as “Middle Bangla” – an umbrella term for texts composed in Brajabuli, Maithili, Muslim do-bhāṣī, and an older form of what we now call Bangla.

Concepts of language and definitions thereof have been important to the study of South Asia in the West from the beginning. Debates about the status of written languages other than Sanskrit in pre-Colonial South Asia have been particularly lively in the last decade. The study of Bengal has much to contribute to this discussion and our workshop was productive in this regard.

Precisely defining and isolating these closely-related registers of writing as a language – or even as several languages – is complicated. No one writing these texts referred to their works as being written in something called Bangla, Maithili, or Brajabuli. The registers used in these texts never simply represented the vernacular spoken dialects. What’s more, some authors continued writing in these modes even after the standardization of modern Bangla. Yet, over the centuries, these texts and their languages have come to be seen as part of the Bangla tradition.

Along with the above considerations concerning the broad shape and organizational structure of the Middle Bangla discursive field, our participants were concerned with the contents of that field: narrative and lyric poetry, regional myths and legends, Vaiṣṇava theology, Muslim cosmogonies and local dynastic and political histories. Our reading sessions attempted to be both textually and historically grounded – a feat often difficult owing to the opacity of the texts themselves, but made easier thanks to the diverse methodologies and skills of the workshop’s participants.