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Title: *Raja Krishnacandra: Hindu Kingship and Myth-Making in Early Modern Bengal*

I am requesting AIBS funding for a nine-month trip to India essential to transforming my dissertation on Raja Krishnacandra of Nadia (Columbia University, 2015) into a monograph. This book, tentatively titled *Raja Krishnacandra: Hindu Kingship and Myth-Making in Early Modern Bengal*, explores a transitional moment in the history, literature, and religious culture of the Indian subcontinent by tracking how this eighteenth-century raja passed into myth, becoming a symbol of an imagined 'classical' social order, the face of an orthodox Hindu renaissance centered on martial goddesses, and the hub of a conspiracy theory in which the Bengali aristocracy effectively engineered British colonialism in the region by helping Lord Clive in the 1757 Battle of Plassey. Where my dissertation research was relatively India-centric, two new chapters I am developing aim to shift the scope of the project to include more perspectives from East Bengal. One will help ground the book more decisively in popular culture common throughout the Bengali speaking world by focusing directly on Krishnacandra's legendary court jester Gopal Bhar, while the other will provide a firmer basis for appreciating what is distinctive about the evolution of Krishnacandra's mythos through comparison with two similarly storied zamindars from the East: Raja Pratapaditya of Jessore and Rani Bhavani of Rajshahi.

My research concerns the development of public memory around a brahmin aristocrat and magnate named Krishnacandra Ray (1710-1782). Although he was from one point of view a glorified landlord, Bengali literature and lore focus on Krishnacandra as the Maharaja of Nadia, a territory more than twice the size of Nadia district in the contemporary Indian state of West Bengal, and which also included parts of what is now Khulna division in Bangladesh. The project is not a 'life and times' biography but a diachronic look at how shifting representations of Raja Krishnacandra and his legacy evince different attitudes towards the past in response to various socio-political, religious, and linguistic changes in Bengal from the eighteenth century to the present.

Debates over the legacy of Raja Krishnacandra, who achieved international renown in the first few decades after his death (due in part to the efforts of British officials and missionaries) and reverted to a regional culture hero in about as long, provide a unique opportunity to explore the interplay of mythology, popular culture, *belles-lettres*, and public memory. The impact of colonial educational institutions, respectability politics among Kolkata's middle classes, and narratives of Hindu-Muslim sectarian conflict on these dynamics remains of relevance as well, especially given the often divergent historiographic treatments of the early modern landed gentry in contemporary India and Bangladesh.

My dissertation combined close readings of Sanskrit and Bengali texts produced at Krishnacandra's storied court in Nadia — including an epic poem, Bharatcandra Ray's *Annadāmaṅgal*, that many critics consider the last great work of Middle Bengali — with archival research into the raja's patronage patterns and East India Company records. Alongside discourse analysis of early colonial historiography I also surveyed a range of Bengali periodicals, biographies, local histories, and travelogues in addition to novels, children's books, films, and other visual media, filling in what gaps I could with my own ethnographic work at various temples and festivals.

The historicity of several traditions about Raja Krishnacandra has been debated in Bengali scholarship and, to a much lesser degree, in English as well. Nevertheless, my goal is not to demythologize Krishnacandra, but to explore how and why particular legends attached to him, at whose

hands and over whose objections, with an eye to what that process suggests about practices of mythmaking in the formation of sectarian and regional identities; the mutual imbrications of religious and political authority and the role of print culture in the consolidation of Bengali Hindu traditions; and the politics and poetics of representation in South Asia.

There are many smaller-scale revisions presently in progress of course, but the most substantial additions will be the inclusion of two new chapters for which I am hoping to collect materials if awarded this fellowship. The first will focus on Krishnacandra's famous jester Gopal Bhar. Stories of Gopal's wit and antics are ubiquitous throughout West Bengal and Bangladesh, primarily in the form of children's books, animated cartoons, and live-action sitcoms. Raja Krishnacandra appears as the 'straight-man' in many of these tales, which typically satirize political and religious elites as overly strict, serious, or intellectual. Since only the low-status character Gopal, shameless and cynically pragmatic, can resolve the troublesome situations whose solutions elude his patron, a chapter dedicated to this corpus offers a chance to explore sources critical of the raja from the point of view of the lower castes and classes while anchoring the book more firmly in popular culture and the recent past. I will be especially interested to find sources produced in Bangladesh, where Gopal Bhar stories are presumably *the* primary carrier of Krishnacandra's legacy.

I am also planning a new chapter comparing public memory of Raja Krishnacandra with that of his contemporary Rani Bhavani, the queen of Rajshahi (1716-1795), and with Raja Pratapaditya of Jessore (1561-1611), famed for his failed rebellion against the Mughal Empire. Although Pratapaditya and Krishnacandra were not contemporaries, there are tangible historical reasons for considering them together as the first two European-style histories written in an Indian vernacular were in fact biographies of these two rajas. A biography of Pratapaditya was the first Bengali-language history commissioned for use at the East India Company College at Fort William, but as the dialect of the text was deemed overly Persianate, a much more Sanskritic biography of Krishnacandra was introduced to replace it. Considering these figures together could make an excellent case study in how colonial curricula, the Baptist Serampore Mission, and religiously marked socio-linguistic ideals shaped the development of Indian historiographic traditions.

Incorporating Rani Bhavani as a comparative foil will also be useful since she, like Krishnacandra, was renowned as a patron of religion and the arts. The two were likewise enmeshed in many of the same political and economic conflicts, yet their reputations differ substantially, especially with regard to the so-called Plassey conspiracy. The impact of gendered notions of courage and patriotism on nationalist representations of the old aristocracy would be fascinating in its own right, and could help bring into focus how alternative currents of history and memory have shaped divergent understandings of the interests and actions of the major *zamindars* just before and during the transition to colonial rule. Taken together, the comparisons in this chapter will expand the dissertation into a more ambitious argument about the convergence of religious and political mythologies in and of early modern Bengal.

Although certain tasks will take me as far north as Plassey and Murshidabad (to see how the last nawabs of Bengal and the events of 1757 are represented at the Nizamat Kila), it would make the most sense to set up a base of operations in Kolkata for convenient rail travel throughout the region and access to resources and colleagues at the Asiatic Society, National Library of India, and Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta (CSSSC), with which I was affiliated during my dissertation research. In Kolkata, I can also find expert assistance in reading a manuscript of the *Tārā-bhakti-taraṅgiṇī* |

acquired from Dhaka. This 1737 text is one of just a few Sanskrit works we can say were definitively written explicitly under the raja's patronage and its esoteric Shakta subject matter makes it doubly valuable for my purposes. Alas, as the script is not entirely modern and the manuscript appears to have provided sustenance to quite a few insects, I will require some assistance working through it. I would hope to read, then, with Debabrata Sensharma at the Ramakrishna Mission or with Bibekananda Banerjee at the Asiatic Society.

It will also be essential to arrange a screening of the 1953 Sudhirbandhu Banerjee movie *Raja Krishnacandra*, which is preserved in the West Bengal Film Center archives, and there are, of course, a multitude of smaller "housekeeping" tasks I would covet the opportunity to wrap up both in the city and throughout Nadia district, where I have several new leads for updating ethnographic aspects of the project. Given an AIBS grant, I believe this could all be accomplished between August 2019 and April 2020. I am presently about a third of the way through editing my existing material, so I could begin immediately incorporating my findings with the goal of a complete book manuscript by the end of 2020. The end result, updated and revised with two new chapters expanding the scope further into East Bengal, should be of interest and use to anyone working on or curious about the religious, historical, and literary heritage of Bengal and the subcontinent more broadly.