

Nazmul Sultan

Project Title: Norms and Claims: Popular Sovereignty and the Rise of Democracy in the Colonial World

Abstract:

Focusing on a particularly crucial historical juncture in colonial Bengal, this pre-dissertation project explores how the emerging discourse of popular sovereignty shaped the course of anticolonial nationalism. To be specific, it traces how the transformation of the nation-as-civilization discourse into the nation-as-the-people discourse democratized anticolonial movements. The result of the democratization, however, was complex. On the one hand, I look at the works of C.R. Das (and the Swaraj Party documents) to explore how the popular sovereignty discourse enabled the politics of popular self-governance as a way of national unification. On the other hand, I will consult the Bengali Muslim political archive to explain how the separatist project emerged in that period. The contentious, and often riotous, mode of politics in the 1920s and 1930s register a crisis of legitimacy for the colonial state (and also for the dominant nationalist politics). I argue that Bengali Muslim separatist politics rather paradoxically drew from the discourse of popular sovereignty to substantiate the claim for a separate state. The broader significance of this project lies in offering a more nuanced genealogy of democracy in the colonial world. Taking colonial Bengal as the historical site of my research, I argue that the discourse of popular sovereignty fundamentally shaped the anticolonial nationalist projects in the colonial world (as opposed to the approaches that see democracy as an institutional imposition on the postcolonial societies).