

Project Title: Performing Britishness: The Social Club in Colonial India (1809-1947)

My project will examine the shared colonial past of the three countries of Pakistan, Bangladesh and India during colonial rule through a close study of the British gentlemanly club and its impact on South Asian and British history. By going beyond the post-colonial constructs of the modern nation state I will examine the collective experiences that people of these three regions shared in the past. My project will historicize the British gentlemanly club culture in colonial India to argue that it was a highly contested and politicized space where racial and class identities were constantly being negotiated. I will examine the colonial experiences of the time to understand how the nature of this peculiarly British institution, the gentlemanly club, changed when it was transported into colonial India. The club and its location, the performances practiced within its walls, was a symbolic capital used to create respectability and honorability in the eyes of the Indians and the English. This symbolic capital, I argue, was constantly used by the British elites to propagate a version of 'national' culture they had come to idealize: the manly independent individual. Based on extensive research of previously unused sources I suggest that this propagated British 'national' culture was fraught with insecurities. A simultaneous study of the many unnamed taverns and drinking houses set up for the white, vagrant community will reflect on how the practices in these two very different spaces throw the class divisions existing in British India's white society into stark relief. Similarly, the colonized other was not a homogeneous category either. Certain historical moments, I claim, changed who was part of this group and who wasn't. A careful study of the gentlemanly clubs and their members experience with the colonized other will complicate the simplistic binaries in which we understand colonial rule as just being about colonizer vs. colonized, English vs. Indian and contend that they were ever changing and fluid identities.