IN THE SHADOW OF EMPIRE

CALCUTTA'S VICTORIA MEMORIAL AND ITS CAST OF MOVING STATUARY

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4:00 pm
Eldersveld Room
(5670 Haven Hall)

With a focus on Calcutta's landmark monument – the most grandiose of the memorials to the Queen of all the ones built across the British imperial territories – this lecture addresses the theme of the end of empire through the persistence and proliferation of the genre of civic public statuary, its shifting cast of characters, and its movements across time and space. It is on the grounds of the Victoria Memorial – in the lingering shadows of a bygone empire – that a brood of imperial statues have found a safe haven, quietly living out their post-imperial lives of oblivion in a time and place where the empire is long gone but its hauntings remain.

In the recent past, we have seen how such hauntings of the past can suddenly return to a body of long-standing statues of American Confederate leaders, slave owners and imperialists, bringing on them the wrath of anti-white supremacist protests that began to rage across Western cities and universities during 2020. What the Black Lives Matter movement did was to return attention in India to the long-forgotten specimens of colonial statuary, mostly hidden away in remote locations of our cities - raising the issue again, after over 75 years of Independence, of their rights to remain in the spaces where they still stand. The afterlives of these relics of empire is a central theme of this lecture, as it explores various moments in the travels, dislocations and relocations of Calcutta's imperial statues, while charting a small parallel history of Indian statue-making over these transitional decades of the last years of British rule and the coming of Independence.

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