



## NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

### DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

#### **Narrative Section of a Successful Application**

The attached document contains the grant narrative of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and applicants are urged to prepare a proposal that reflects their unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs application guidelines at <https://www.neh.gov/grants/research/collaborative-research-grants> for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Research Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

The attachment only contains the grant narrative, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

**The application format has been changed since this application was submitted.** You must follow the guidelines in the currently posted Notice of Funding Opportunity (see the Notice posted on the Collaborative Research program page linked above).

Project Title: Taj of the Raj? Decolonizing the Imperial Collections, Architecture, and Gardens of the Victoria Memorial Hall, Kolkata

Institution: Syracuse University

Project Director: Romita Ray

Grant Program: Collaborative Research

## Significance and Impact

As the call to decolonize art and architectural history, museums, and environmental history urges us to reassess the writing of imperial histories, as well as the continued impact of those histories on today's globalized, multi-racial world, this Planning International Collaboration project focuses on the [Victoria Memorial Hall](#) (VMH) in Calcutta (Kolkata), one of the grandest of imperial monuments whose Indian legacy has long been overlooked. Set amidst 64 acres of ornamental gardens, the VMH was the brainchild of Lord Curzon, viceroy of India (1899-1905), and was dedicated to queen Victoria whose death in 1901 concluded an important chapter of British imperial rule. While much has been written about Curzon and his museum in the erstwhile capital of the British Raj, curiously, very little has been written about the Indian contributions to the VMH's architecture, collections, and gardens, entangled though they were with Curzon's imperial legacy. Still less has been analyzed about their links with North America.

Our project, therefore, refocuses attention on the Indian legacy of the VMH and how it was interwoven with local, national, and transnational histories. Indian engineers, art-collectors, and gardeners were deeply involved with the making of the sprawling complex of the Victoria Memorial Hall from its very inception. At the same time, Indian architectural elements permeated the museum's neoclassical architecture whose striking resemblance to the Taj Mahal would earn it the moniker of "Taj of the Raj." Indian and foreign plants defined the museum's ornamental gardens as sites of imperial botany and horticulture. Teasing apart this multi-faceted Indian legacy, therefore, necessitates examining the diverse Indian components that helped shape the contours of British imperial art, architecture, and garden-design at the VMH. It also means investigating the ways in which they were linked to Britain and North America, first through Mary Curzon, Curzon's American wife, and next, through British and American collectors from whom the museum's Indian patrons acquired European art. How then might such mediations allow us to analyze the Indian networks of knowledge and exchange at the VMH, as locally rooted, yet globally oriented? And what does this tell us about the hybridity of imperial relations, and of imperial sites like the VMH? With these questions in mind, our project brings together an interdisciplinary team of art and architectural historians, literary scholars, cultural historians, garden historians, anthropologists, and historians of environmental studies, in a pioneering study of the entangled visual cultures of India, Britain, and America that made up the Indian legacy of the VMH.

Our project consists of an onsite exploratory workshop at the Victoria Memorial Hall that will be followed by a virtual symposium. With NEH support, we aim to bring scholars from the USA and UK to join Indian researchers for the workshop in Kolkata, so that we may study first-hand, the collections, gardens, and architecture of the VMH. Investigating the Indian agency in the production of an acclaimed imperial museum constitutes an important step in understanding the complex set of negotiations and challenges that underscored the use of art and architecture to promote British imperial rule. Furthermore, we aim to contextualize the Indian contributions to the Victoria Memorial Hall within the broader networks of knowledge and exchange that connect the VMH to other archives and collections in Kolkata, London, New York, and New Haven. In order to situate the Indian contributors to, and interlocutors of, the VMH, within these local and global flows of art, artifacts, architectural design, and plant-exchanges, the project's leadership team has identified four research questions that will form the foundation of this project. Workshop participants will engage with these questions and create research blogposts and research papers that they will subsequently present at a virtual symposium. The goal is to publish these papers in an edited anthology of scholarly essays (2024/25). In 2021, the Victoria Memorial Hall will celebrate the centenary of its official opening to the public. Given this historic milestone, we expect a robust scholarly focus on—and public interest in—the Indian chapter of the VMH's imperial legacy. We, therefore, undertake this project with the aim to rewrite the histories of the Victoria Memorial Hall in a multi-pronged, thoughtful way that invites open dialogue between a diverse group of stake-holders in academia and the museum world. Only through such dialogue can we grapple with the Indian legacy and transnational links of an imperial site that has crystallized into India's most visited museum in the post-colonial era.

## Substance and Context

Within days of queen Victoria's demise, Lord Curzon, viceroy of India (1899-1905), convened a meeting in Calcutta (Kolkata) on February 6, 1901, to propose a memorial to the queen empress, "a building, stately, spacious, monumental, and grand, to which every newcomer in Calcutta will turn, to which all the resident population, European and Native, will flock, where all classes will learn the lessons of history, and see revived before their eyes the marvels of the past."<sup>1</sup> Five years later, in 1906, the Prince of Wales—the future king George V—laid the foundation stone for the memorial during his official tour of India. The final outcome was a monumental museum and memorial set amidst 64 acres of spectacular gardens that opened to the public in December 1921. In 2021, the Victoria Memorial Hall (VMH)—India's most visited museum—will celebrate the centenary of its public opening.

Designed by the architect William Emerson, president of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), the Victoria Memorial Hall was built out of white marble in the neoclassical style. Strikingly, its European features were infused with Indian architectural elements, rendering the building an imperial version of the Taj Mahal, a monument much admired by both Curzon and Emerson. Constructed by the Indo-British engineering firm Martin and Company founded by Sir Rajendra Nath Mookerjea, the well-known Bengali engineer and entrepreneur, and Sir Thomas Martin, the Birmingham-born industrialist, the museum's Indo-European style would be complemented by the hybrid aesthetic of its ornamental gardens whose native plants and foreign transplants were interspersed with manmade lakes and public sculpture. Guiding these horticultural choices was the renowned botanist Sir David Prain who had served as director of Calcutta's Indian Botanic Garden and the Botanical Survey of India in 1898. Prain would go onto direct the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (1905) and the Linnean Society in London (1916-1919). Eminent Indian as well as British art collectors, including the maharajas of Jaipur and Burdwan and Calcutta's Tagore family, would help shape the VMH collections of art and artifacts. While a handful of scholars have studied the VMH as an imperial museum, curiously, little research has been undertaken on these and other Indian contributors to, and interlocutors of, the VMH, crucial though they were to forging the imperial legacy of an acclaimed imperial museum, and of Victoria and Curzon themselves.

Our collaborative project, *Taj of the Raj? Decolonizing the Imperial Collections, Architecture, and Gardens of the Victoria Memorial Hall, Kolkata* refocuses attention on this very Indian legacy to ask: whose "marvels of the past," are represented at, and by, the Victoria Memorial Hall? What might this "past" tell us about the spaces of intellectual inquiry, art connoisseurship, and social and cultural exchange forged by Indian art-collectors, engineers, and gardeners at the VMH? And what might we learn about the complex inter-related mechanisms of place-making, identity-formation, and imperial spectacle? Such questions are further complicated by the timing of Curzon's proposal for an imperial museum, which coincided with the Partition of Bengal, the creation of a new capital city in Delhi, and the thickening pulse of the Indian Independence Movement. Shrewd enough to understand the significance of building an imperial landmark in such troubled times, Curzon ensured that the VMH represented an imperial aesthetic that was neither strictly British, nor Indian, but a blend of both. Weaving their way through this Indo-British visual legacy were American collectors like the wealthy New Haven businessman Edward Malley from whom the maharaja of Jaipur purchased the Russian artist Vasily Vereshchagin's monumental painting depicting the Prince of Wales' visit to Jaipur. The maharaja presented the painting to the VMH in 1905. Such transnational linkages in the Victoria Memorial Hall's history are yet to be studied, and as such, they urge us to reassess the VMH's Indian legacy as locally rooted, yet globally oriented in its collecting practices, design ideas, and engineering technology. More broadly, these linkages situate British and American historical perspectives—upon which the writing of

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<sup>1</sup> Sir Thomas Raleigh (ed.), *Lord Curzon in India* (London, 1906), 521. In this application, I use the name "Calcutta" when referring to the colonial city. The city's name was changed officially to "Kolkata" in 2001.

imperial histories has long relied—in dialogue with Indian historic perspectives with which they were also enmeshed.

A word now about the VMH's collections. Among its holdings are the “finest group of oil paintings in the world by European artists” who lived and worked in India between 1780 and 1830;<sup>2</sup> rare archival documentation of the memorial's construction; paintings by Indian artists commissioned by East India Company officers (Company paintings); colonial sculpture; nineteenth-century photographs; drawings, watercolors, aquatints made by colonial artists; Persian manuscripts; Mughal paintings; Rajput paintings; paintings from the Bengal School; and musical instruments (including one of queen Victoria's pianos). To date, no comprehensive scholarly examination has been undertaken of this extraordinary collection of art, artifacts, and archival records. Certainly, no scholarly investigation has brought to light the Indian contributions to these collections, even though the fields of South Asian and British art history, and the interwoven histories of art and empire have undergone methodological transformations. Philippa Vaughan's edited volume, *The Victoria Memorial Hall Calcutta: Conception, Collections, Conservation* (1997), the last scholarly study to take a step in this direction, focused mainly on Curzon's ambitious plans for an imperial repository and memorial to Victoria. Much fundamental research, therefore, still needs to be done to tell the integrated story of the VMH's collections, gardens, and architecture. In this moment of intensive global conversations about decolonizing imperial histories, it is more imperative than ever that we rise to the challenge of telling that story.

It is with this challenge in mind that we propose an exploratory workshop at the VMH with a team of international scholars who work on imperial art, architecture, literature, and garden and environmental histories. Together, they can draw Curzon's museum back into the orbit of scholarly inquiry, while also widening the focus of that inquiry to investigate the global connectivity of the VMH's Indian legacy. The workshop will result in research blogposts and will pave the way for a virtual symposium. Because of the scarcity of scholarly research on the VMH, our first step will be to study first-hand a selection of art, artifacts, and archival records in the VMH collections, to analyze four key research questions: (1) how did a museum in India curate an imperial legacy with queen Victoria as its focal point? (2) how was such a legacy created, bolstered, and at times, challenged, by Indian art collectors, engineers, and gardeners? (3) how did objects and plants in the VMH collections and gardens constitute imperial networks of knowledge and collecting shaped by Indians, Britons, and Americans? (4) how did the architecture and gardens of the Victoria Memorial Hall produce new spaces of imperial identity in Calcutta for its Indian citizens? Of special interest is the public sculpture at the VMH whose politics of display resonate with the recent protests in the USA and Britain over statues of Confederate heroes, Christopher Columbus, and slave owners. In 1969, Curzon's statue at the main entrance to the Victoria Memorial Hall was replaced by a statue of the Indian freedom fighter Sri Aurobindo. Such displacements and replacements urge us to think about how and why imperial legacies continue to be reframed in the post-colonial era within the context of social justice movements across the world.

The scholars who will participate in this project have been selected in part because of their deep knowledge of collections that link back to those of the Victoria Memorial Hall. Indeed, the VMH's collections form a significant part of a large constellation of archives in India, the UK, and the USA, including private collections in Kolkata and the Kolkata-based collections of the Indian Museum; the Asiatic Society; and Government House; the Mumbai-based Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (formerly Prince of Wales Museum); the UK-based India Office collections (British Library); RIBA; Victoria and Albert Museum; British Museum; Historic Royal Palaces; and Royal Collections; and the US-based Metropolitan Museum of Art and Yale Center for British Art. Rarely, if ever, have the links between the VMH and these collections been explored. Likewise, no substantial work

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<sup>2</sup> Philippa Vaughan, “Introduction,” in *The Victoria Memorial Hall Calcutta: Conception, Collections, Conservation*, ed. Philippa Vaughan (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 1997), 2.

has been done on the VMH architecture and gardens, which open up exciting opportunities to delve into the archives of RIBA; the Kolkata Municipal Corporation; the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew; the Linnean Society in London; and the Indian Botanic Garden in Kolkata.

One of the strengths of this project is its interdisciplinary range of scholars from three different countries: the US, UK, and India. By bringing together art and architectural historians, curators, anthropologists, cultural historians, garden historians, literary scholars, and environmental historians, we aim to examine, reassess, and rewrite the histories of the collections, gardens, and architecture of the Victoria Memorial Hall in a multi-pronged, thoughtful way. Only by inviting an open dialogue between a diverse group of stake-holders in academia and the museum world can we grapple with the complex imperial histories of the VMH, and reveal the extent of Indian agency in the production of one of the grandest of all British imperial monuments from its very inception. If we are successful in procuring NEH funding, *Taj of the Raj* will be a pioneering research endeavor of its kind. Not only will it extend decolonizing efforts to India where no museum has embarked on such a reassessment of its imperial heritage, it will do so with a team of international scholars who are uniquely positioned to unpack the Indian, British, and American overlaps and intersections bound up with that imperial legacy. This, in turn, will sharpen our broader understanding of what it means to decolonize imperial histories in former colonies like India where postcolonial legacies of imperialism continue to impact political, cultural, and educational sectors.

Additionally, the virtual symposium will help us vet research papers for a scholarly publication along the lines of *Victorian Jamaica*, edited by Tim Barringer and Wayne Modest (Duke University Press, 2018) and *The East India Company at Home* edited by Margot Finn and Kate Smith (UCL Press, 2018). In particular, Finn and Smith's Leverhulme Trust-funded research project and publication, *The East India Company at Home*, provides a useful model for *Taj of the Raj*, because it involved hands-on engagements with private collections in the UK that uncovered the imperial legacies of objects imported from India into Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As importantly, *The East India Company at Home* explored how such legacies continue to shape ongoing debates about how empire impacted Britain. Similarly, our project, while focused on analyzing a monumental imperial site in India, offers the opportunity to participate in such ongoing global efforts to rewrite imperial histories by examining long overlooked indigenous legacies of art collecting, engineering, and gardening. And it does so by involving a broad swathe of humanities scholars who will bring their individual disciplinary strengths to such an endeavor.

### Methods and Execution

While designing *Taj of the Raj*, the project director chose a three-pronged approach to studying the Indian legacy of the Victoria Memorial Hall: collections, gardens, and architecture. Such a division synchronizes with the layout of the VMH. It also provides a comparative context for our analyses, and will help frame and tighten our investigation of the four main research questions outlined in the *Substance and Context* section of this project narrative. Our investigation will begin with an exploratory workshop at the VMH, and will be continued in a virtual symposium that will take place on Zoom. The workshop and symposium will be organized by the project director Romita Ray (associate professor, Syracuse University) in close consultation with Jayanta Sengupta (secretary, chief curator, and director, Victoria Memorial Hall) and Tim Barringer (Paul Mellon Professor of the History of Art, Yale University), and with feedback from the project collaborators. Ray, Sengupta, and Barringer constitute the leadership team for this project. Project collaborators are from the USA, UK, and India, the three countries whose historical links shaped the Indian legacy of the VMH. As such, we are confident that our different international perspectives and wide array of research expertise will enrich and sharpen our research investigations.

The paucity of scholarly literature on the Victoria Memorial Hall and its collections, necessitates that we hold this workshop onsite at the VMH itself. While the museum has been digitizing its collections, this

project is far from complete and most of the museum's archival records and art collections remain in storage. We, therefore, do not have a clear picture about the contents of the VMH collections, nor of their depth and scope. Furthermore, the architectural layout of the VMH is yet to be studied in detail, and the gardens have not been examined at all. With scholars like Swati Chattopadhyay (architectural history), Vinita Damodaran (natural history and environmental history), Romita Ray (landscape studies and natural history), and Annu Jalais (environmental anthropologist) onboard, we hope to develop some innovative ways to address these significant lacunae.

Each workshop session at the VMH will be organized like a mini-seminar for which the four main research questions, along with readings and images for each session, will be circulated in advance of arriving in Kolkata. To that end, members of the leadership team for this project have arranged similar research workshops at Syracuse University and the Yale Center for British Art where they have experienced first-hand, the value of engaging directly with art, artifacts, and archival documents to explore and frame research questions, and generate ideas for scholarly publications. Such collaborative hands-on engagements are also anticipated for the VMH workshop, with the goal to foster interdisciplinary exchange. Often, it is through such onsite encounters that the most thoughtful observations, analyses, and knowledge-sharing take place during collaborative research projects.

The scholars selected for this project have deep knowledge of international and Kolkata-based museums and archives noted earlier in the *Substance and Context* section. As such, they are expected to bring their knowledge of those collections to our workshop, so that we might link our findings at the VMH with archival records, art and objects in those related collections. Furthermore, we anticipate such linkages to stimulate new avenues of scholarship and research, and new research partnerships. Our onsite investigations at the VMH will be augmented by field trips to private collections in Kolkata, as well as to Government House (where Curzon resided), the Indian Botanic Garden, and the Indian Museum—all part of Kolkata's imperial legacy. This will help us map the links between the VMH and other imperial collections in Kolkata. In doing so, we aim to contextualize the Victoria Memorial Hall within the complex networks of imperial collecting and knowledge-formation in colonial Calcutta, while remaining mindful of the global extensions of those networks. For instance, the Indian contributions to the VMH are yet to be studied in relation to the Burdwan collection in Kolkata. Visiting the Burdwan collection will foster insights into the elite Indian practice of collecting European art, and how such practices helped create an imperial museum in Calcutta.

Rarely, if ever, do American, British, and Indian scholars come together onsite in India to unpack a monumental imperial complex like the Victoria Memorial Hall. As unique is the interdisciplinary range of interests that these collaborators bring to the project: art and architectural history, environmental anthropology, human geography, cultural history, literary studies, material culture, natural history, music history, and garden history. Our three-pronged study of the VMH necessitates such a transnational and cross-disciplinary examination so that we can think across, and beyond, our disciplines and historical frameworks, to probe into broader questions of cultural and intellectual agency in the shaping of imperial landmarks. Furthermore, our interdisciplinary exchange will help us analyze how imperial power was inscribed by the strategic confluence of architecture, art and artefacts, plants and gardens, and not just by these individual areas alone. Finally, we aim to include the *malis* or gardeners at the VMH who have lived knowledge of the plant histories of the garden, but who are rarely invited into scholarly discussions. By drawing their voices into our workshop, we hope to be as inclusive as possible in our goal to forge new research questions, partnerships, and projects.

Our exploratory, interactive workshop will be convened at the VMH in January 2022, and will be spread across six days with three additional days for travel and jet lag recovery. It will be divided between immersions in (1) the art collections (2 days), (2) gardens (1 day), (3) architecture (1 day), (4) local art and botanical collections (1 ½ days), and (5) a round-table discussion of research themes and future

research projects (½ day). Each session will allow us, first and foremost, to gauge the research potential of the VMH collections, gardens and architecture. Next, each session will enable us to examine our four main research questions, individually as well as collectively. Since they are interwoven with one another, these questions are meant to shape a prismatic approach to studying the Victoria Memorial Hall. For instance, the architecture session might urge us to compare and contrast our findings from the gardens-related session to study the political ramifications of building the VMH complex next to Fort William and the *maidan*, two other colonial strongholds in the city. Similarly, the art and archival collections might shed light on how the gardens were envisioned as a botanical repository, or how the museum's Indian art patrons represented the cosmopolitan cultures of imperial India. Such a multi-faceted approach will enable us to stay within our disciplines, while encouraging us to go beyond them, take risks and learn from each other, and consider research methods with which we may not have engaged before.

*October–December 2021: Planning:* Between October 1, 2021, and the beginning of the workshop in January 2022, the project director and leadership team will keep in close contact with each other and with the project collaborators, to *compile a list* of objects, works of art, and archival documents (provenance records, photographs of the VMH construction, memos, correspondence, and newspaper records) in the Victoria Memorial Hall that the collaborators will examine during the workshop. They will circulate the project's *four main research questions*, and compile and circulate *bibliography*; titles of digitized *rare books* about the VMH in archive.org, Google Books, and HathiTrust Digital Library; and *images* related to the VMH collections, gardens, and architecture, so that participants can start preparing for the Kolkata workshop. The project director and leadership team will also *plan field trips* for the workshop participants to Fort William, Government House, and the Indian Museum, as well as to private collections like the Burdwan collection. While the Indian Museum and Burdwan palace are open to the public, because of the Indian government's rules and regulations, permissions to access Fort William and Government House can be procured only if and when NEH funding is secured for this project. The Victoria Memorial Hall, the principal site of our workshop, will help us obtain these necessary permissions (the VMH is overseen by the government of India's ministry of culture). It is also worth noting that the current maharaja of Burdwan has long served on the VMH's board of trustees

*January 2022: Onsite Workshop, Victoria Memorial Hall:* During the VMH workshop, the leadership team will keep track of the *research insights and themes* that will evolve over the course of our daily research sessions. They will do so by inviting each participant to submit one compelling research insight or take-away theme at the end of each daily session. These insights and themes will shape the break-out discussion sessions for the final *round-table discussion* that will take place on the last day of our workshop. For this final meeting, participants will be assigned to break-out groups, and will be expected to brainstorm with each other to (a) discuss overlaps between each other's research findings (b) frame new research questions and consolidate existing ones and (c) discuss possible ways to take their insights and questions forward, be it through publications, research collaborations, websites, or podcasts.

*March 2022: Research Report/Blogpost:* Each of the workshop participants will be asked to choose an object, work of art, or plant from their research findings during our workshop, or to select any aspect of the VMH's visual, material, architectural, and garden histories that they will examine in a *1000-word research report*, which will be submitted to the project director by mid-March. Depending on government of India regulations, each of these reports will be linked to the VMH website as *research blogposts*.

*August 2022: Research Papers and Publications Advisory Committee:* The above reports/blogposts will be expanded into longer *research papers* that participants will be expected to research and write between mid-March and mid-August. These research papers will be submitted to the project director who will circulate them among members of the leadership team. The papers will also be shared with the other project collaborators in advance of a three-day virtual symposium in which they will participate in September 2022. In the interdisciplinary spirit of this project, participants will be paired up with each

other to exchange feedback about their papers. Lastly, a *publications advisory committee* will be formed from among senior researchers to chart a plan for publishing the research papers in a scholarly anthology.

*September 2022: Virtual Symposium:* By organizing the virtual symposium over three days, we hope to accommodate scholars in different time zones in the USA, UK, and India. Workshop participants will be asked to recommend additional researchers who can participate in the symposium, and who will also be expected to write and share their research papers in advance. Our goal is to widen the scope of our scholarly exchange and create a dynamic forum for exploring the research questions that will have emerged during our Kolkata workshop. The virtual symposium will involve 10-minute presentations, a format used very effectively by the Huntington Library for their [\*Early Modern Global Caribbean\*](#) virtual conference held recently in September 2020. By focusing on short presentations, the Huntington conference organizers alleviated Zoom fatigue and produced thought-provoking question-and-answer sessions in between different panel presentations. Our symposium will close out the project period.

### **History of the Project and Productivity**

*Taj of the Raj* was first conceived in Kolkata in 2018 when the project director Romita Ray met with Tapati Guha-Thakurta, the acclaimed Kolkata-based historian of Indian art (Centre for Studies in Social Sciences Calcutta), and Jayanta Sengupta (VMH), to discuss how we might re-assess the VMH in the light of its centenary celebrations in 2021. A three-pronged approach to studying the VMH collections, gardens, and architecture was proposed. Guha-Thakurta further suggested that we examine the Victoria Memorial Hall's long-neglected Indian legacy. From this initial set of conversations grew the idea of framing the entire project within an investigation of the Indian contributions to the VMH. A workshop was immediately envisioned as an initial step towards such an investigation.

With this in mind, the project continued to evolve over a series of meetings in New Haven, New York City, and London where Ray met, at different points, with Guha-Thakurta, Tim Barringer, Edward Cooke (Yale University) and Margot Finn (University College London), to discuss the possibility of collaborating on this project. Barringer and Cooke's contributions to research on British imperial art and Anglo-American art, and Finn's *The East India Company at Home* project, made them ideally suited to joining the project as research collaborators.

It was decided that Ray, Barringer, and Sengupta would constitute the leadership team, with Ray as the project director. Like their collaborators, all three have international reputations for their work on different aspects of the British empire (see attached curriculum vitae for details). Ray and Barringer have already started consolidating material related to the VMH, in the collections of the Yale Center for British Art, with Ray making a field trip to Yale to examine these materials (drawings, photographs, and album) in 2019. Furthermore, a digital copy of the VMH's foundation exhibition catalogue published in 1925, was circulated among members of the leadership team.

In 2019, Ray learned about the ongoing UK-based Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) Networking Grant-funded research project, [\*Victoria's Self-Fashioning: Curating the Royal Image for Dynasty, Nation and Empire\*](#), directed by Joanna Marschner (Historic Royal Palaces) and Michael Hatt (University of Warwick). Because *Taj of the Raj* offers the unique opportunity to collaborate between and across both projects, Ray invited Marschner and Hatt to join our project so that we might together reexamine how the Victoria Memorial Hall played a crucial role in curating Victoria's image as queen empress on a monumental scale in India. Moreover, synchronizing our projects enables us to study how Indian interlocutors played their part in either cementing Victoria's image, or resisting it by claiming their own histories within the VMH.

With these key scholars onboard, in 2020, Ray invited Swati Chattopadhyay (University of Santa Barbara), an authority on the architectural history of Kolkata; Vinita Damodaran (University of Sussex),

noted scholar of environmental history and imperial India; and Rina Banerjee, the critically acclaimed Kolkata-born, New York City-based artist whose thought-provoking installations interrogate the diaspora of imperial objects and South Asian identities, to bring their expertise to our workshop. Ray also invited Holly Shaffer (Brown University), a rising star among scholars of imperial art and architecture; Annu Jalais (Dakshin Foundation India and National University Singapore), an outstanding environmental anthropologist; Rimli Bhattacharya (University of Delhi), a literary scholar who has written extensively about colonial Calcutta and is currently working on natural history in colonial children's literature in India; and Anshuman Dasgupta (Visva Bharati University), who has worked on Calcutta's architecture, to participate in *Taj of the Raj*.

In choosing this interdisciplinary team of researchers, the leadership team paid close attention to their research expertise and current research partnerships with the hope that they might expand upon those partnerships as well as create new research collaborations through the VMH project. They also took into account their ranks and nationalities. Our scholarly exchange could only be enriched, it was decided, by bringing together junior and senior scholars: while junior researchers might open up new methodologies in established scholarly fields, senior scholars will be able to mentor their junior colleagues; chart new research collaborations with them; and bring their deep knowledge to bear upon the VMH collections while forging institutional connections for those projects and collaborations. Drawn from the USA, UK, and India, the scholars bring different national perspectives and language skills to the workshop, thereby making it possible to communicate with the VMH gardeners; read archival documents in English, Bengali and Hindi; and interpret imperial histories through different—and at times—conflicting lenses.

While selecting the project collaborators, the synchronicity between their research interests and existing research projects became increasingly clear (please see *Collaboration* section). To that end, a virtual symposium was envisioned as the most effective way to explore the overlaps and intersections between their research interests with the VMH as the focal point. The symposium will also enable us to firm up the research themes and questions that will have emerged from the Kolkata workshop. Workshop participants will have the opportunity to further expand upon these themes and questions in research papers that they will present at the symposium. Additionally, the symposium will allow the leadership team to vet research papers for a scholarly edited volume that they aim to publish with an academic press in 2024/2025.

### **Collaboration**

The collaborators comprise of 15 researchers: 3 leadership personnel (including the project director), and 12 project collaborators. 6 researchers are from the USA, 4 from the UK, and 5 from India.

### **Leadership Team**

The project director Romita Ray works on the art and architecture of the British empire in India. The author of numerous publications including *Under the Banyan Tree: Relocating the Picturesque in British India* (Yale University Press, 2013), Ray was a guest-curator for the exhibition *Between Worlds Voyagers to Britain 1700-1850* at the National Portrait Gallery in London (2007). Tim Barringer is an international authority on British art with numerous publications on the art of the British empire including the edited volumes *Victorian Jamaica* (Duke University Press, 2018), *Art and the British Empire* (Manchester University Press, 2007), and *Colonialism and the Object: Empire, Material Culture, and the Museum* (Routledge, 1998). Jayanta Sengupta (VMH) is a noted historian of South Asia and author of *These Noble Edifices: The Raj Bhavans of Bengal* (Victoria Memorial Hall, 2019) and *At the Margins: Discourses of Development, Democracy, and Regionalism in Orissa* (Oxford University Press, 2015). Ray will work on *Taj of the Raj* throughout its duration. She has already been deeply involved in the planning stages preceding this grant application. Similarly, Barringer and Sengupta will continue to liaise with Ray, and with each other, throughout the grant cycle, to bring the project to fruition.

## Collaborators

*Art History and Material Culture*: In addition to Ray, Barringer, and Sengupta, Tapati Guha-Thakurta—who has been integral to conceiving this project—will participate in the workshop and symposium. Her pioneering publications include *The Making of a New “Indian” Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850-1920* (Cambridge University Press, 1992) and *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Post-Colonial India* (Columbia University Press, 2004). Guha-Thakurta’s expertise on the Indian history of imperial art will be complemented by Edward Cooke’s research on Anglo-American histories of imperial art. Cooke (Charles F. Montgomery professor of the history of art, Yale University) is the author of *Inventing Boston: Design, Production, and Consumption, 1680-1720* (Yale University Press, 2019), and is a leading expert on American art with a growing, secondary field of interest in South Asian craft and design. Cooke will address American contributions to the Indian legacy of the Victoria Memorial Hall, and will bring the expertise of a material culture expert to the workshop and symposium.

Joanna Marschner (senior curator, Historic Royal Palaces) and Michael Hatt (professor of art history, University of Warwick), both experts on British art, have organized numerous exhibitions and publications, including *Sculpture Victorious: Art in an Age of Invention, 1837-1901* (2014) and *Enlightened Princesses: Caroline, Augusta, Charlotte, and the Shaping of the Modern World* (2017). The research generated by their project *Victoria’s Self-Fashioning* will be placed in dialogue with our research findings. Additionally, Marschner’s deep knowledge of British royal palaces together with Hatt’s expertise on British sculpture will foster rich insights into objects donated by the British royal family to the VMH, as well as into the museum’s elaborate imperial sculpture program. Indeed, Hatt’s research will be complemented by Guha-Thakurta’s work on Victorian and Edwardian portraits of Indians made by Indian sculptors, such as Sir Rajendra Nath Mookerjea’s portrait statue in the VMH gardens.

Holly Shaffer (assistant professor, Brown University), will join the workshop and symposium to explore the potential of research projects on natural history drawings in the VMH collections. Her research interests are complemented by Ray’s work on natural history collections and landscape studies. Moreover, Anshuman Dasgupta (art historian and curator, Visva Bharati University), who has deep knowledge of the Tagore family, is ideally positioned to explore Sir Pradyut Kumar Tagore’s 1934 donation of over two hundred natural history drawings by Indian artists commissioned by East India Company officials, to the Victoria Memorial Hall. Extending the visual dimensions of these objects into the literary realm, will be Rimli Bhattacharya (associate professor, University of Delhi), an expert on colonial literature and theatre traditions of colonial Calcutta, who is working on a book about natural history in the visual and print cultures of children’s literature in imperial India.

*Imperial Collections*: Margot Finn (professor of history, University College London), eminent scholar of modern Britain, president of the Royal Historical Society, and co-director of the acclaimed Leverhulme Trust-funded research project [\*The East India Company at Home\*](#) will bring a wealth of knowledge about the circulation of colonial art and artifacts in British country houses, to the workshop. In doing so, she will explore how the VMH can be positioned within these broader networks of collecting and exchange.

Barringer will widen our discussion of the VMH objects by drawing upon his long-standing engagement with the collections of the Yale Center for British Art and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Moreover, his research on music traditions of the British empire will be complemented by Dasgupta’s research interest in sound. Dasgupta and Barringer will, therefore, open up the sonic dimension of our project, by studying the historic music instruments, including one of queen Victoria’s pianos, in the collections of the VMH. To this end, Bhattacharya’s ground-breaking research on theater traditions in colonial Calcutta that she examines in her now classic book, *Binodini Dasi: ‘My Story and My Life as an*

*Actress* (1998), will contextualize the music instruments within the broader framework of performance and spectacle in the Indian theatrical and musical circles of Calcutta.

Finally, Rina Banerjee, the New York City-based artist will widen our conversations from an Indo-American artist's perspective to focus on how the cultural agency of imperial collecting continues to play an important role in the making of contemporary Indian and American art. The movement of imperial objects, cultures, and people whose networks we will be studying at the VMH, has long informed her installations, including her 2017 work titled *Viola from New Orleans* that investigates the commercial and cultural links in late nineteenth-century New Orleans, between Bengali merchants from Calcutta and their African-American wives with whom they had settled down in America. Banerjee's work enables us to study the broader ramifications of imperial collecting and the ways in which imperial artifacts remain entangled with post-colonial identities.

*Architecture and Gardens:* Swati Chattopadhyay (professor of art and architectural history, University of Santa Barbara), the world's leading academic authority on Kolkata's architectural heritage who is also an architect, will address the architecture and gardens of the VMH. Her numerous publications include the ground-breaking *Representing Calcutta: Modernity, Nationalism, and the Colonial Uncanny* (2005). She is a founding editor of [PLATFORM](#), a digital forum for conversations about buildings, spaces, and landscapes. She is also working on colonial gardens, a subject she explored at a 2017 workshop on "[The Garden and Territorial Sovereignty in British Colonial India](#)" that she organized at the British Library in London.

Chattopadhyay's contributions to the workshop will be complemented by the expertise of Vinita Damodaran (professor of history, University of Sussex), acclaimed scholar of environmental and botanical history in modern India, whose publications include the edited volumes, *The British Empire and the Natural World: Environmental Encounters in the Natural World* (Oxford University Press, 2011), and *The East India Company and the Natural World* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). In 2016, Damodaran organized the *Natural History Heritage of India* exhibition and conference in Kolkata and Mysore as part of the UK-based AHRC-funded [Botanical and Meteorological History of the Indian Ocean World](#), a collaborative project between the Centre for World Environmental History (University of Sussex), the British Library, the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, and the Natural History Museum in London.

Chattopadhyay and Damodaran's research interests overlap with Annu Jalais' work on environmental anthropology and human geography. Based in India (Dakshin Foundation, Bangalore) and Singapore (National University Singapore), Jalais (assistant professor, South Asia Studies) is in the process of initiating a project about colonial gardens and the Anthropocene with which our VMH project intersects, and which will extend our view further eastwards to see how the VMH can be placed in dialogue with its Singaporean equivalent—the Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall that was also built as a memorial to queen Victoria. Furthermore, Jalais' pioneering book, *Forest of Tigers: People, Politics and Environment in the Sundarbans* (Routledge, 2010) demonstrates her expertise on animals as actors in natural environments. Along with Ray, who has worked on wildlife in tea gardens, Jalais will bring a much-needed dimension about nonhuman animals to our investigation of the VMH gardens.

All the project participants are expected to engage with the leadership team, and with each other, during the planning phase, the VMH workshop, and the virtual symposium. They will consult with each other about bibliography and online resources (planning phase); contribute to the onsite workshop; produce research reports/blogposts (post-workshop); and write research papers that they will present during the virtual symposium. As such, they will work on *Taj of the Raj* throughout the duration of the grant cycle as outlined in the *Methods and Execution* and *Work Plan* sections of this project narrative. Once their research papers are presented and a publication schedule is created, we expect their participation to extend through 2024/2025 as we finalize, edit, and publish their analytical essays in a scholarly volume.

## Work Plan

*October 1 – December 31, 2021:* Planning for the Kolkata workshop will commence in October 1, 2021, as soon as the grant cycle begins. This will enable the project director to arrange hotel accommodation, local transportation, and catering. It will also give her and the leadership team enough time to organize local field trips in Kolkata, and to secure the necessary permissions from the government of India to access related collections in Fort William and Government House. Additionally, it will give all the participants the opportunity to purchase their airline tickets well in advance of their trip to Kolkata; tickets tend to get very expensive when purchased closer to departure dates. The four main research questions, bibliography, titles of digitized rare books about the VMH in archive.org, Google Books, and HathiTrust Digital Library; and digital images related to the collections, gardens and architecture of the VMH, will be compiled and circulated among all workshop participants through Dropbox. The workshop schedule will be finalized and also circulated among all collaborators.

*January 3-9, 2022:* *Exploratory workshop* at the VMH, during which the team of international scholars will engage with each other and with Indian scholars and *malis* (gardeners). Together, they will explore the four research questions outlined in the *Substance and Context* section, and generate fresh insights and new research questions. The leadership team will keep track of the all the research questions and themes that will emerge from this workshop. This will help them shape the contours of the virtual symposium that will follow in September 2022.

Goals:

- (a) Study the collections, gardens, and architecture of the VMH
- (b) Examine related collections and historic sites in Calcutta, including the Burdwan collection, Fort William, Government House, and the Indian Botanic Gardens
- (c) Discuss and frame additional research questions and themes for a virtual symposium to be held in September 2022
- (d) Generate themes for a scholarly publication on the VMH collections, architecture, and gardens
- (e) Participate in round-table discussion to brainstorm about how the research questions produced during the workshop might be taken forward in innovative and collaborative ways (possible ideas might include a research website with geo-spatial mapping, exhibitions, and podcasts)

*Mid-March 2022:* Each workshop participant will *submit a 1000-word report* on his/her findings at the VMH, to the project director. Researchers will be encouraged to write these reports for a general audience, so that they might double as research blogposts. Depending on the government of India rules and regulations, these blogposts will be linked to the VMH website at the conclusion of the grant cycle.

*April 2022 – September 2022:* (1) The leadership team will *organize a 3-day virtual symposium* with input from the project collaborators who will be asked to recommend additional researchers who can widen the research scope of the symposium. The project director will liaise with her IT department at Syracuse University to facilitate the online delivery of the symposium on the university's Zoom platform. (2) The leadership team will *create a publications advisory committee* from among the senior workshop participants. This committee will formulate a plan for publishing an anthology of scholarly essays based on the research findings of *Taj of the Raj*, with an academic press in 2024 or 2025. Members of the leadership team along with the senior research collaborators have strong connections to editors of academic presses, and are, therefore, confident that the scholarly publication will come to fruition.

*Mid-August 2022:* The symposium participants will submit their research papers on any aspect of the collections, architecture, and gardens of the VMH, to the project director, who will subsequently circulate their papers among the symposium participants. In addition, symposium participants will be paired with each other, so that they can exchange feedback about their papers in advance of the symposium.

*Mid-September 2022:* *3-day virtual symposium* at which scholars will be invited to give short, 10-minute presentations based on their longer, research papers. The symposium will round off the grant cycle.

Goals: (a) Broaden the intellectual scope of the project  
 (b) Frame research themes for a scholarly publication  
 (c) Vet additional analytical essays for the scholarly publication  
 (e) Give participants a chance to respond to each other's research papers  
 (f) Give the workshop participants the opportunity to forge new research partnerships

At the conclusion of the symposium, the leadership team, in close consultation with the publications advisory committee, will circulate a schedule for revising the research papers so that they might be worked into analytical essays for a scholarly anthology with a publication date of either 2024 or 2025.

### **Final Product and Dissemination**

This project has been designed to be interactive throughout the duration of the grant cycle. From when they meet in-person in January 2022, until September 30, 2022, when the grant cycle ends, all the workshop collaborators will communicate with each other and with the leadership team, to write their research reports/blogposts and research papers (see *Work Plan* section). As such, we anticipate that new research ideas, and new research partnerships and collaborations, will evolve from these conversations. In addition, two final products are envisioned for this project: research reports/blogposts written for a general audience and a scholarly publication.

#### *Research Reports/Blogposts*

Each workshop participant will be expected to write a 1000-word report based on his/her research findings at the Victoria Memorial Hall. Geared towards a general audience, these reports might be published with the government of India's permission as research blogposts on the main website of the VMH, at the end of the grant cycle. The report should cover each researcher's subject of choice; why the researcher chose to study that subject; how that subject contributes to one of the four research questions of the *Taj of the Raj* project; any new research questions raised by the researcher's VMH findings; and how those findings might link with objects in related collections in Kolkata, and the UK and USA. Supporting images from the VMH collections for these reports will be furnished for free by the Victoria Memorial Hall. However, researchers will be responsible for covering the cost of, and securing permissions for, any images outside of the VMH collections.

#### *Scholarly Publication*

The four research questions we have selected for this project will help us plan in advance for the symposium and a final scholarly publication. While the scholarly publication is envisioned as our main final outcome, it goes beyond the tenure of the grant cycle. Nevertheless, as noted earlier, we expect to create a publications advisory committee with the help of the senior workshop researchers who have close contacts with major university presses. This advisory committee will liaise with their university press connections, and chart the next steps for publishing an anthology of scholarly essays. This may be a single or multi-volume edited project, depending on how the press decides to proceed, and how the research papers unfold during the virtual symposium. The leadership team anticipates that this in-depth scholarly examination will be published between 2024-2025. Funding for the scholarly publication will be sought from such entities as the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and the College Art Association.

It is likely that the international team of researchers might wish to return to the Victoria Memorial Hall to continue research for their scholarly contributions. To that end, they will be encouraged to seek funding (depending on their nationalities), from such organizations as the American Institute of Indian Studies, the NEH, the American Council Learned Societies, the Paul Mellon Centre, and so forth. It is hoped that their participation in this project, should it be funded by the NEH, will give them a firmer footing for applying to other funding organizations.