

**CENTRE FOR STUDIES IN SOCIAL SCIENCES, CALCUTTA,
R-1 BAISHNABGHATA PATULI,
KOLKATA 700094**

GENERAL SEMINAR

Erica Mukherjee
PhD Candidate (History), Stony Brook University
will give a talk titled:

“Steam Dredging the Nuddea Rivers: An Attempt to Tame Nature with Technology”

Abstract:

The idea of steam-driven modernity came into its own in the opening decades of the nineteenth century. In Bengal, one of its earliest realizations was a steam engine dredging vessel launched in 1828 to improve commercial navigation on the Nuddea Rivers. Nearly a decade in its planning and construction, within three seasons of use the East India Company seriously questioned the vessel’s efficacy in keeping the rivers open and became more and more reluctant to expend funds to maintain it. By focusing on the material aspects of this narrative—the alluvial character of the rivers, the imported iron steam engine, and the specially designed shallow-draft boat—a nuanced account of the East India Company’s relationship with the Bengali environment emerges. The men intimately connected with the project neither questioned their assumption that bringing these rivers into a state of permanent navigability was in the best interest of the public, nor that increasingly sophisticated technology would succeed where previous attempts had failed. At the same time, they did not forget their long-honed local knowledge of the river system and betrayed little surprise when the steam engine dredging vessel failed to live up to their expectations. The tentative character of the East India Company’s unsuccessful attempt to use steam-powered machinery to manipulate a complex fluvial environment for commercial gain reveals a period in which technology was not yet imagined as the unquestioned conqueror of nature. It reveals a period in which the Company was in active negotiations with its surroundings.

Date: Monday, 25th July, 2016.

Time: 3 – 5 pm.

Venue: CSSSC’s Seminar Room, Patuli Campus.

Trina Nileena Banerjee
(Convener, Seminar Committee)
All are welcome to attend.