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PhD Travel Report: July 14th – September 15th 2012, in Bengal and Assam

PhD topic: *Art, Pilgrimage and the Shakti Pithas*

My time in Bengal and Assam (from July – September 2012) was incredibly productive. I visited 14 *Shakti Pitha* pilgrimage sites across rural West Bengal and was accompanied by a translator so I was able to carry out interviews with the local priests and pilgrims. These sites are rarely visited and have never been studied, so thoroughly recording them was a major part of my research. I was able to purchase Bengali texts relating to the sites, and have them translated into English while in Kolkata.

While in Kolkata I consulted the archives and collections of the National Museum, Gurusaday Folk Museum, Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, Asiatic Society, Victoria Memorial Collection, West Bengal State Archive and National Library. I also had crucial meetings with academics from CSSS (Calcutta School for Social Sciences) and Calcutta University, including esteemed Professor Guha-Thakurta.

I established an important relationship with the organisers of the *Sharad Shaman Durga Puja* competition, which annually chooses the most artistically original Durga *murtis* (or enlivened sculptures) during the biggest pilgrimage festival of Bengal each year. They took me to 20 different workshops during my time there, where I was able to watch how the most important sculptors in the city work. These artists have acquired celebrity status due to the *Sharad Shaman* competition, whereas before the 1980s they would have been regarded as little more than vehicles for the creation of the divine statues.

In Assam I spent 10 days studying the most important *Shakti Pitha* pilgrimage site in India: Kamakhya, in Guwahati. It is a vast site with several temples and scattered ancient sculptures. I was assisted by a translator and a local priest. I also spent time at the National Museum in Guwahati which has an extensive library as well as an incredible sculpture collection.

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