Drexel University's Department of History Colloquium Presents:

Cat and Mouse: Plague, Vernacular Biomedical Technologies and Public Health from Below

with Projit B. Mukharji, PhD, Assistant Professor

History & Sociology of Science, University of Pennsylvania

Tuesday, May 24
3:30 to 5 pm
Hagerty Library, L-33

Abstract: From around 1907 a small but vocal minority of British Indian doctors persistently advocated the use of cats to prevent the repeated outbreaks of plague. This overturned hallowed medical opinion dating from the early modern period that called for the destruction of cats and dogs during the outbreak of plague. The uptake of the cat as an anti-plague technology however was mixed. Whilst in Mandalay a government cat farm was started and some Hong Kong officials attempted to import Indian cats, others remained unconvinced of the effectiveness of cats. Both supporters and detractors of cats however, defended their respective positions by marshalling a rich and complex array of statistical, ethnographic and laboratory data. Revisiting the contested construction of the cat as a medical technology for battling a key imperial public health crisis makes us rethink a number of the extant historical conclusions.

Professor Mukharji argues that interrogating the interests and arguments put forward both for and against the use of cats to battle the plague reveals much about the nature of colonial medicine, its relationship with local knowledges, medical technologies more generally, and above all the then-precocious interest in bio vector control.