

The French Quarter of the Hooghly: Examining Colonial Heritage in Historic Chandannagore

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Abstract

The Hooghly River served as a very significant global waterway for trade and commerce across the Indian Ocean in the sixteenth century, and attracted Europeans of different nationalities. It integrated the world in the twentieth century not only in terms of merchandise but also culturally. Riparian settlements to the West of Hooghly towards North of Kolkata, developed by the Portuguese, Dutch, French and Danish forces invading India consist of four historic towns namely Bandel, Chinsura, Chandannagore and Serampore, respectively. This paper attempts to understand and highlight the characteristic settlement and architectural heritage of the colonial town of Chandannagore within this identified unique Colonial Heritage Zone along Hooghly. Colonial architectural expressions and settlement planning ideals blended seamlessly with the local social, cultural and climatic needs, resulting in unique neighbourhood character, and which, as Das et al put forth, yielded building typologies derived through this meeting of cultures and worldviews. Chandannagore's French legacy, a post-colonial phenomenon may have been a product of Indian interests, had it been utilized optimally by preservation and conservation of heritage; and promoting tourism. Recommendations have been made in the interest of the heritage to reap manifold benefits off this French legacy.

Index Terms: Hooghly, Chandannagore, architecture, colonial, heritage.

1. Introduction

Riparian settlements to the West of Hooghly towards North of Kolkata, developed by the Portuguese, Dutch, French and Danish forces invading India consist of four historic towns namely Bandel, Chinsura, Chandannagore and Serampore, respectively. This region located on the Western banks of the River Hooghly is perhaps the most comprehensively modelled as glimpses of these foreign forces setting their feet and later on cementing their presence in India can be seen within this 'European trail'. The cultural imagery and edifices are the evidences of the foreign presence. Though lying inside the demarcated boundary of Kolkata Metropolitan Region, due to close proximity of these settlements to the city of Kolkata, these colonial towns have fallen into the state of oblivion on regional or macro scale. This paper attempts to understand and highlight the characteristic settlement and architectural heritage of the colonial town of Chandannagore within this identified unique Colonial Heritage Zone along Hooghly. The confluence of the primordial legacy of India and the quintessential French values imparts an old world charm to the historic town of Chandannagore whose architecture is reminiscent of an era bygone. Sinha (2019) argues that any change in architecture, which is the physical manifestation of

culture, has the power to gradually bring about a change in the latter.



Fig. 1 Colonial forces on the Western Banks of River Hooghly (Source: Author)

2. Methods

The research methodology focused on four main areas of data collection, followed by analysis and ethical considerations.

The first component involved extensive historical research using both primary sources (like colonial records and maps from French and Indian archives) and secondary materials to understand Chandannagore's development from the 17th century onward. This helped place the town within the broader context of European influence in India.

The second component consisted of field research and direct observation. Researchers documented colonial architecture through surveys, photographs, and interviews with local experts and residents. This helped capture both the physical state of colonial structures and the living heritage of the town.

The third aspect involved in-depth architectural analysis of selected colonial buildings, examining their design features, construction methods, and how European styles adapted to local conditions. This included comparing Chandannagore's architecture with other colonial settlements nearby, like Bandel and Serampore.

The fourth component examined the social and cultural aspects that shaped the settlement's development, particularly how colonial and local practices merged to create unique neighbourhood layouts and building styles. This involved interviewing cultural historians and community members to understand the French colonial legacy's on-going influence.

The analysis phase organized the collected data thematically, examining French architectural influences, cultural integration, historical development along the Hooghly River, and current heritage preservation efforts. The research followed ethical guidelines throughout, obtaining informed consent from participants and considering the implications of heritage preservation and tourism on the local community.

3. The River System and its Role in the Genesis of Colonialization

A distributary of the River Ganga, Hooghly River, roughly 500 kilometres in length as on date and lacking natural depth, was once the cradle of global trade. As water from River Saraswati got directed to Hooghly channel and it dried due to negligence of the erstwhile authorities (Halder & Bardhan, 2012), trade also shifted to River Hooghly as Port Saptagram was profoundly impacted by the change in course of river flow, triggering the influx of wealthy traders (Ghosh & Siddique, 2018). Hence, the Hooghly River, in due course of time, served as a very significant global waterway for trade and commerce across the Indian Ocean, and attracted Europeans of different nationalities. The Hooghly River integrated the world in the twentieth century not only in terms of merchandise but also culturally. The river is in fact envisaged as of the previous centuries 'as the site of the encounters and connections between heterogeneous peoples and cultures' and 'a local and global space at once' (Ivermee, 2020).

Voyages in the Indian waters to Bengal were lengthy since the route from Hooghly to Serampore was a long passage. The increase in the trade and development of the settlement was a collateral event facilitated by the climatic conditions (avoiding the south-west monsoon) of the Bengal coast in the autumn as voyager's stay prolonged till the following year (Velschow, 1972). Vasco da Gama, the Portuguese explorer landed on the west coast of India in 1498. In less than a century later, West Bengal became a stronghold of every major colonial power in Europe. The Europeans, using Hooghly River as the main network of navigation, started making inroads in Bengal (Singh, 2015).

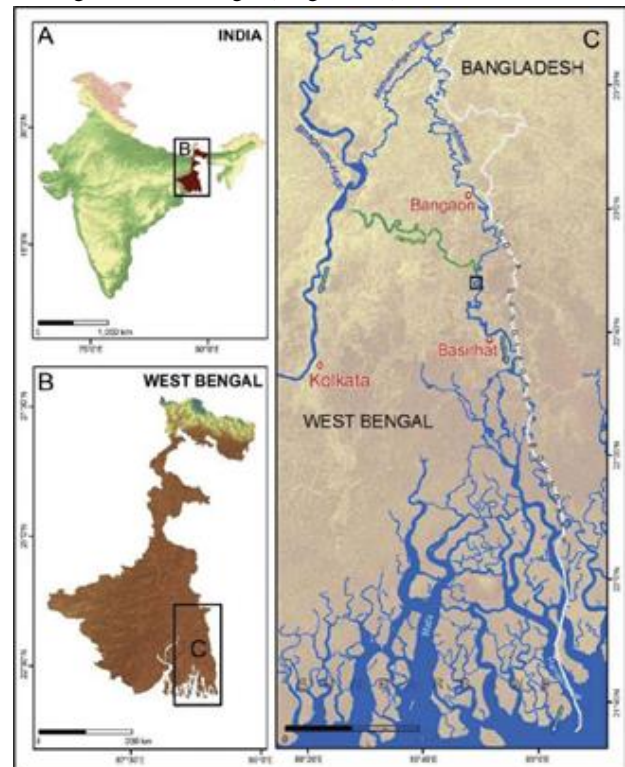


Fig. 2 Hooghly River System (Source: Hossain Das, & Dasgupta (2019))

4. Colonial Towns to the West of River Hooghly

4.1. Bandel

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to have set foot on the banks of Hooghly. They were granted Bandel by the King of Gaur in return of their services against disputes between the rich zamindars. The Portuguese built a square plan fort in 1599 along the River Hooghly with ditches on three sides, flanked by bastions for their security. Bandel was the only settlements of the Portuguese in the Hooghly region. The Portuguese neither tried to learn English nor the native languages of India to sustain in this country (Toynbee, 1888). By the end of eighteenth century, the power of the Portuguese became extinct in Bandel as they were driven out by the Mughals (Pal, 2020).

4.2. Chinsurah

The Dutch, though initially could not compete with the Portuguese in trade, took advantage of the gap created by the

exit of the Portuguese. They got themselves trading license from the Mughals to deal in muslin, salt, spices and opium and prospered immensely by adoring the local culture; and eventually settled in Chinsurah, also known as Chuchura, Chunchura and Chuchro (De, 2014). Locally, they devised a system of land measurement and distribution for the benefit of farmers and developed drainage system. The Dutch built Fort Gustavas without evicting the inhabitants from the premises. They also built church and factories in Chinsurah of which only a little is left to be appreciated as on date. The Dutch presence in India is evident through architectural structures like sturdy fortresses, tombs, imposing country houses, factories, cemeteries and other remains in brick, stone and plaster. Being a Dutch colony, Chinsurah exemplifies a unique character of multi-cultural heritage; The Armenian Church, the Hooghly Imambara and Sandeshwar Jiu Temple. At present, the surviving structures are appropriated according to the daily activities and rituals of the inhabitants of the town (Tipnis, 2016). In 1827, as Chinsurah surrendered to the British, the English destroyed Fort Gustavus which consequently led to change in the settlement pattern of the colonial town of Chinsurah.

4.3 Serampore

The Danish East India Company started trade with South and South-East Asia in 1618. The Danish established Fort Dansborg in Tranquebar in 1621 for settling in the area after being granted due permission from the Nayanka of Tanjore but later, Tranquebar fell to the English. The French Governor at Chandannagore was inclined towards the Danish against the combined forces of Dutch and English in the region. In 1625, the Danes expanded their intra-Asian trading horizons and ventured Bengal (Subrahmanyam, 1989). By 1670s, the Danes enjoyed duty-free trade in Bengal and Odisha. The War of American Independence shifted focus of the Danish Company's from Tranquebar to Serampore for trade with India (Feldbaek). Having learnt lesson previously in Tranquebar, the Danes were very cautious while settling in Serampore by 1750s, which they initially named as Frederiksnagore after King Frederick V (Feldbæk, 1964). They abided by the life and culture of Bengal. Being aware that they were the weakest of the European players, they preferred keeping a low profile and in spite of the proprietary rights, they did not right away fortified Serampore. Stavorinus (1769) thus describes Serampore as 'the most inconsiderable of the European settlements on the Ganges' having only a few European houses and insignificant trading activities.

With the boom in trading activities of the Danes and proclamation of the Indian colonies by the Danish Crown in 1777, Serampore changed rapidly. Danish Company Manager's house got a European uplift. Strong houses with thick walls of brick and mortar were built. Wide roads were laid out. The Crown Market was set up. The Protestant Church, Court Building and prison were also built. Serampore remained a peaceful town and functioned as weekend resort for the English noblemen of Calcutta. Serampore played an important role of dissemination of modern education in Bengal and the Baptist Mission was the trendsetter.

4.4 Chandannagore

Chandannagore, as French colony in India, located on the western banks of River Hooghly, may be perceived as the conservatory of oriental life and laboratory of European ways. The name of the town is derived from the crescent form of Hooghly river bank along which Chandannagore is located (Saha, 2016). Also, this sleepy historic town first evolved in the 15th century due to presence of temple of Goddess Chandi (Ghosh & Siddique, 2018). In fact, the first generation of rich Bengali traders turned to the construction of Hindu Temples (Banerjee, 2012).

Heteroglossia is typical of a colonial settlement like Chandannagore which witnessed brief periods as British colony too, in addition to being a French colony primarily for a long period of time. Urban design and architecture assumed an important role in popularizing colonialization among Europeans and somewhat 'towering' over the governed subjects in order to intimidate them with the colonial presence. Urban culture was consciously employed as a cornerstone to project and fulfil political endeavours. As Wright (1987) notes, the notion of culture by French colonizers emphasized simultaneity and variety, and by no means was monolithic.

3.4.1 Brief History of Chandannagore

Chandannagore, situated forty kilometres north of Kolkata, India, germinated during the medieval period, later became a thriving French Colony in Bengal, is a little-exposed gem which can offer novelty and hedonics together (Kar, Basu, Kundu, & Giri, 2022). Gondalpara, Boro Kishanganj and Khalisani were the oldest neighbourhoods which became centres of development for Chandannagore. In 1673, a trading post on the bank of Hooghly was established by the French after duly taking permission from the then Nawab of Bengal, Ibrahim Khan. In 1688, Chandannagore became a permanent French settlement by obtaining legal ownership of the area (Mondal & Ghosh, 2018).

Joseph-François Dupleix was appointed the Governor of Chandannagore in 1730. The British Navy captured Chandannagore in 1757 after a war. Chandannagore was restored to the French in 1763, but recaptured by the British in 1794. The city was later returned to France in 1816, along with 7.8 square kilometres enclave of surrounding territory. It was governed as French Indies until 1950, under the political control of the Governor-General in Pondicherry. The French were the most prominent non-British European power to have a presence in India until the mid-twentieth century (Magedera I. H., 2010).

Jørgensen (2017) states that historiography tends to portray two competing and conflicting master narratives of French colonialism and decolonisation in India: One of enduring fraternity and positive intercultural relations; and one of French colonial oppression and Indian resistance. The exploitation of the Indian space for utopic discourses reveals a negotiation of the triangular relationship between France, India and Britain, as explored by Magedera & Marsh (2005),

The characteristic picturesque French style of architecture is predominant in each of the built structure which is discussed as follows:

Plan: The buildings are short, wide, and high. Length is roughly about four times the width, as seen in the Duplex Palace.

Elevation: Strong and bold horizontal continuous lines in façade/ elevation are prevalent. Intricate mouldings, graceful cloisters, pilaster and prominent classical orders adorn the rich decorative facades of French buildings. Symmetry in elevation is an important component, and so is ornamentation.

Interiors: While considerably less ornate than other styles of European architecture, they owe their effect and grandeur largely to their great height.

3.4.3 Architectural Styles and Elements

Site survey reveals that there is an amalgamation of European and indigenous architectural elements which is common in almost all the colonial towns. European architectural elements like Renaissance windows, orders, verandahs, porticos, arches, pediments, etc. have extensively been used in these colonial towns along the River Hooghly. The typology of some of the historic buildings was such that the interior planning was of indigenous nature, whereas the external façade showcased the European features.

Below are listed the prominent architectural elements:

- **European Facades:** facades with round arches, columns, domes, vaults, protruding balconies and windows with intricately designed French elements with stucco work.
- **Houses Planned Around Courtyards:** houses were planned around courtyards in typically Bengali architecture which was later used as a ballroom or a place for gatherings and parties by the French.
- **Stucco Work on Walls:** intricately designed French elements made on walls using stucco work.
- **Meandering Streets:** streets with no particular direction, forming blind alleys.
- **Promenades:** a paved public pathway typically present on a waterfront.
- **Cast Iron Railings Inspired By French Motifs:** cast iron railings were used in houses of indo French architecture.
- **Louvered Windows:** horizontal louvers were used on window panes.
- **Wrought Iron Balconies:** balconies had wrought iron jali patterns.
- **Chajjas Supported On Brackets:** pitched protruding chajjas supported on brackets
- **Vaulted ceilings:** Vaulted ceiling used in the sacred heart cathedral
- **Raised Basement:** raised basements were found in the houses of indo French architecture. because of which the houses have a high plinth level
- **Columns:** Corinthian, ionic and doric order is used as the intricately carved capital for columns

- **French Double Doors with Tainted Glass:** French double doors with tainted glass skylights were prevalent in indo French architecture. The skylights were arched.
- **Colonnades:** the area around the courtyard is lined with a colonnade providing internal porches for shaded sitting areas.
- **Imposing Domes :** inspired from the French architecture, domes were used in few notable heritage structures
- **Chandeliers and other lighting fixtures:** stained glass chandeliers were used which were imported from France.
- **French Tiles:** French tiles in the shades of blues and whites were prominently used.
- **Indian Jalis:** jalis in Indian patterns were used on blinds and partition walls.
- **Fresco Art:** Fresco work can be witnessed in the interiors of mansions

The architectural elements of these colonial structures showcase a distinctive blend of European and local design features. The buildings are characterized by entrance porches incorporating wooden slatted louvers extending from the lintel level, complemented by continuous projected balconies that run along the façade. The ground floor displays careful articulation, while the parapet exhibits intricate detailing. Classical influences are evident in the exposed structural members, particularly the Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian columns. The entrance gates, crafted from either wood or cast iron, add to the building's grandeur. The fenestration pattern is notable for its semicircular arched openings fitted with timber louvers, alongside other openings featuring pointed arches and segmental arches with emphasized keystones. A unique example of architectural hybridization can be seen in the thakurdalan, where multifoliated arches blend colonial and local styles. The balconies are adorned with decorative cast iron grillage railings, adding both aesthetic appeal and functional value to the structure.

Prominent architectural features of some important heritage structures are discussed in Table 1.

S.No.	Name of Structure	Date of Construction	Original Usage	Present Usage	Use Profile	Present Condition	Architectural Style	Prominent architectural features
1	Duplex Palace	1812	Residence	Public	Museum and library	ASI Protected Monument vide Gazette of India notification dated 04.03.2003	French Colonial	Short, wide and high building. Strong and bold horizontal continuous lines in facade. Symmetry in elevation, solid timber louvers, deep verandah. Also called 'Bans Sabar Bazar'.
12	Sacred Heart Church	1875	Public	Public	Religious	Listed "Protected" by West Bengal Heritage Commission (WBHC) vide notification dated 03.11.2017	French Colonial	East facing built in burnt brick, double storied church with dome in the centre. Characteristic admit light into the Church and are glazed with decorative stained glass showing scenes from the life of Jesus Christ. Roof windows and verandah suggest that it is heavily influenced by Gothic style of architecture. Pilasters in elevation lend colonial character.
3	Nityas Gospel Street	1922	Public	Public	Library, Community Hall	Listed "Protected" by WBHC vide notification dated 26.4.2010	French Colonial	Massive North facing ornate brick building with exquisite decoration and grandiose detailing. Elaboration, Corinthian orders have been employed along with decorative arches and pilasters.
4	Patil Bari	1881	Residence	Residence	Residence	-	Hybrid	Wooden sunshades and decorative rain water drainage system of this underground house whose lower floor is submerged during monsoon when the level of the river rises, and hence. It is a unique structure. Babubanshwar Tagore was greatly by Patil Bari which found mention in many of his famous novels.
5	Doyal Manzil	1875	Residence	Residence	Residence	-	French Colonial	An arched gateway leads to an expansive courtyard. A sweeping Rajasthani staircase flanked by two concrete masonry sculptures leads to the first floor. Pictographs.

6	Clock Tower	1880	Public	Public	Police Station	Listed "Protected" by WBHC vide notification dated 28.02.2006	French Colonial	Primarily single storey bungalow style symmetric structure having a double storey clock in the centre. Planted green wooden windows lend a lot of colonial character.
7	Lal Dighi	-	Public	Public	Water Source/ Utility	Listed "Protected" by WBHC vide notification dated 16.08.2016	-	Lal Dighi is a rectangular pond dug to ensure drinking water supply for the local residents.

Table 1 Prominent architectural feature of some important heritage structures



Fig. 5 Duplex Palace

Fig. 6 Sacred Heart Church



Fig. 7 Nritya Gopal Smriti

Fig. 8 Patal Bari



Fig. 9 Doyal Manzil

Fig. 10 Clock Tower

5. Observations

The architectural styles adopted by the French in Chandannagore are mainly those in vogue in Europe during the contemporary period, but they were adapted to suit the native conditions of the Site through the use of local materials and artefacts. The buildings represent the roots of a unique Indo- French style which developed during French control of the territory, which lasted for almost two and a half centuries until 1950 when the Government of India took over the administration (*de facto* transfer) of Chandernagore after Government of French Republic, in agreement with the Government of India declared in 1948 that "it intends to leave to the populations of French establishment in India themselves the right to pronounce their future fate & future status". This long and extensive period of French rule deeply influenced the way of life as well as the architectural style of Chandannagore, confined to the town only due to presence of other colonial powers in nearby towns, creating a unique fusion of Eastern and Western culture and traditions.

The Sacred Heart Church has been systematically conserved to safeguard the integrity of structure, which allows historic use and function, as also seen in Lal Dighi, thus safeguarding functional authenticity of the property and adding to the intangible value of the property.

Dupleix Palace has been adaptively reused as museum and library and its 1.948 acres of area is declared 'Protected Monument' by Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) vide Gazette of India notification dated 04.03.2003. Since it is the National Heritage, it is managed under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains (AMASR) (1958) and Rules (1959), and its Amendment and Validation Act (2010). The latter limits any type of construction and/ or mining activities in prohibited and regulated areas, located 100 m and 200 m respectively from the protected site.

Unlike the government owned properties, privately owned buildings are in pathetic state, much like being in wilderness, owing to poor upkeep and maintenance. The owners have either moved out or do not have enough resources 'to treat the heritage right.' Some owners are even exploring the prospects of economic development by doing away with their properties to clear the ground for new construction. Doyal Manzil is a very apt example in this regard.

The town's French legacy, a post- colonial phenomenon may have been a product of Indian interests, had it been utilized optimally by preservation and conservation of heritage; and promoting tourism.

6. Recommendations

Das, Mitra and Nag (2020) note that the neighbourhoods in the colonial towns of 'little Europe' are at risk of losing their diverse architectural heritage. To ensure that the heritage passed on by the French- Indies is not lost, mobilizing financial and technical support is required for conservation of the French legacy to work towards which various government agencies and private organisations may come together. Thorough evaluation of conservation needs of each monument, including requirements for training of personnel for conservation is prerequisite, followed by review of the existing Site Plan for enhancing the coherence in relationship between heritage buildings and their historic urban context. Assessment of the suitability of each heritage building for listing them under West Bengal Heritage Commission (WBHC), Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) or United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is required for preparation of project proposal accordingly. Development of an integrated and multi- sectoral approach in safeguarding of the site will ensure that the integrity of the heritage structures is not undermined by physical infrastructure and public utilities. Transfer of privately owned heritage buildings of French era in Chandannagore holding significance in terms of art, culture and architecture, to the government will prevent demolition of heritage. Identifying socio- cultural and economic value shifts can help in the recognition of the impact of interventions on the preservation, and thus sustainability, of heritage places, as advocated by Özçakır, Altınöz, & Mignosa (2022). A

Heritage Management Plan for the town of Chandernagore should be devised for targeted development taking into account the emergence of the concept of 'right to heritage', as an inclusive tool, which Vigna (2017) notes, establishes the conditions for the residents to appropriate the city and consequently, for building an urban space. However, as crucial in any other conservation project, right balance is to be stricken between the preservation of historic document value and the aesthetic value. Another aspect in conservation of heritage, as Porcari & Guida (2022) observe, is to fulfil the needs of modern living without altering consolidated character over time, with interventions related to the original constructive, typological, functional and technological characteristics.

Sengupta (2017) observes that three conservation projects, namely, Heritage Chandannagore Project, Dutch in Chinsurah Project and the Serampore Initiative work in isolation. Development of a tourist trail to the West of Hooghly towards North of Kolkata, covering four historic colonial towns of Bandel, Chinsura, Chandannagore and Serampore in conjunction to each other is of paramount importance for holistic understanding of the combined architectural Heritage Zone from Bandel to Serampore. Likewise heritage assessment of respective Portuguese, Dutch, French and Danish settlements of Bandel, Chinsura, Chandannagore and Serampore, respectively will integrate the erstwhile colonial region and will add to its historic value. As observed by Rahkshit and Chaudhuri (2020), recent activities of the French government are evident of the French enthusiasm for revival of the Chandannagore's lost glory for which crowd funding by the French Government, the Government of India and the Government of West Bengal may arrange the capital required for investment.

7. Conclusion

The four historic towns of Bandel, Chinsura, Chandannagore and Serampore in consideration are living examples of colonial towns which have retained their original characteristic river-facing feature. Colonies of European settlements along the mouths of Hooghly and their vivid architecture are still evident. These towns present a representative symbolic dimension to the architectural style of each of the native rulers left upon it. They have significant intangible value which has gone unnoticed for long; to warrant any dismissal.

Development of a European tourist trail stretching between Bandel and Serampore will usher in a breath of life to the currently bleak economy of the region. Upgradation of infrastructure and investment in hospitality industry will be promising to the future of the region on whole and of Chandannagore in particular.

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