With the restoration of a Danish tavern in Serampore, a forgotten chapter of history comes to light

The tavern was witness to much history.

by Arup K Chatterjee
Published Jan 08, 2018 · 11:30 am

India’s colonial past or heritage – depending upon the context in which it is seen – was not necessarily one of homogeneous imperial exploitation, and certainly not only by the British. While the Portuguese and the French histories of India are less exceptional, it is not quite common knowledge that the Danish East India Company came to India as early as 1620. Having brokered a settlement in the Thanjore Kingdom, the Danish founded an enclave in Tranquebar, where Jesuit missionaries had already arrived 30 years before, after being converted by Portuguese Jesuits in Goa and Kerala. This entry of an alternate European trading and colonial power in a place dominated by the Portuguese East India Company defines what Professor Saugata Bhaduri of Jawaharlal Nehru University has termed the “polycolonial” or plural legacy of India.
In fact, the Portuguese were not the only competitors to the Danish. There was also the Swedish East India Company, which, along with the Danish, monopolised the tea trade between Europe and South Asia, illegally trafficking around 90% of their tea imports to Britain – a country that began consuming tea, rather fashionably, in and around the age of reason.

In *Hind Swaraj* (1909), MK Gandhi wrote that the British were not in India necessarily “because of their strength, but because we keep them”. The same can be said for British architecture, cuisine, historical legends, and politics, all of which never quite went out of currency in India. In spite of this or, perhaps as a consequence, a large body of historical accounts, *objets d’art* and monuments pertaining to the four other European cultures that settled in India – the Portuguese, French, Dutch and Danish – lie in oblivion. One such example is the dilapidated Danish tavern at Serampore, which is now about to be restored to a shadow of its former glory, in February 2018.
With the restoration of a Danish tavern in Serampore, a forgotten chapter of history comes to light

Painting by L. Hammer: Danish Tavern, in 1810. Credit: The Maritime Museum of Denmark, Elsinore

A polycultural heritage

The tavern’s restoration is part of a larger project involving other Danish buildings, such as the Government House, a British-built Red Building inside the Danish enclave, and some elements of the Serampore College, following the restoration of St Olav’s Lutheran Church, which was concluded in 2015, with assistance from the Ministry of Culture, Denmark. The National Museum of Denmark is in charge of the restoration of the tavern, while the project is also being supported by the West Bengal Heritage Commission, and a local body called the Shrirampur Heritage Restoration Initiative.

Pitted against three East India Companies, while in throes of European wars, especially with Sweden, Denmark sought to reinforce its position in India and arrived in Bengal in the late 17th century. Their trading enclave at Dannemarksnagore collapsed by 1714. But they were back as the Danish Asiatick Company, in the 1720s, and were permitted by Ali Vardi Khan to trade with Bengal and settle at Fredricksnagore, in 1755 – two years before the Battle of Plassey.

The French, who were in Chandernagore, were especially wary of British trade expansion. Historical records suggest they shared military intelligence with the Danish during the Napoleonic wars. More interestingly, British Baptist missionaries staying at the Danish tavern aided in this seditious exchange. The tavern was to become the site of a wartime conspiracy, carefully suppressed – from being executed or any possible press coverage – by the British.
With the restoration of a Danish tavern in Serampore, a forgotten chapter of history comes to light

A tavern of the Napoleonic Wars

Amita Das writes in her book, *Defending British India Against Napoleon* (2016), that during the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815), French espionage was in operation at Serampore, with spies trafficking intelligence from the “highly unpopular” British Baptist missionaries to Charles Mathieu Isidore Decaen, the Governor of Pondicherry, and Napoleon’s commander-in-chief. In that political climate, William Carey, the British Baptist missionary settled in Serampore, in 1799. It was the only place in Bengal where he could find refuge, since Baptist evangelicals were out of bounds in British Indian territory, by now. Carey began staying at the Danish tavern, and it was from here that he founded the Serampore Press, one of the cornerstones of his religious and revolutionary activity.

The *Calcutta Gazette* of March 16, 1786, reported that a Mr. Parr, who was the owner of the London Tavern at Calcutta, had taken up proprietorship of the Danish tavern at Serampore, adding, “Gentlemen passing up and down the river may be accommodated with breakfast, dinner, supper, and lodging, and may depend on the charges being very reasonable, as his terms are ready money…Dinners dressed and sent out at short notice; also liquors sold by the single dozen, for ready cash. A good Billiard Table and Coffee-room with the Newspapers, etc.”

Two years later, the *Gazette* followed up with a report that John Nichols, the erstwhile proprietor of the Harmonick Tavern in Calcutta, had taken up the Serampore tavern, which provided “a good Larder and best Liquors, etc.”

It appears there were two adjacent taverns, one run by Mr. Parr, and another, by My Myer, and it is the former which is now undergoing restoration.

The tides turned
Carey left a record of the importance of the Danish tavern, in his book, *The Good Old Days of Honorable John Company* (1882): “A trip up the river in cumbersome budgerows and pinnaces on pleasure excursions was a very common custom at the time. Large parties used to proceed as far as Bandel and other stations on the riverside, and remain absent from home for days. A wayside inn, like those at Serampore, must therefore have been a treat for the voyagers; and that there should have been found room for two in one settlement, proves that the visitors to Serampore must have been many, and that the town itself was worthy of notice.”

Ships of 600-800 tonnes used to be moored across the town. Ishera, a neighbouring area, also used to be an important port for mooring ships of 500 tonnes. By the end of the 18th century, the waters of the Hooghly had risen considerably to facilitate the mooring of the British East India Company’s ships of heavy tonnage. Serampore and Ishera, on the contrary, began losing their water depth, which made it impossible for ships of more than 200 tonnes to penetrate north of Calcutta. Steamships had just come up in England, and although Charles Stanhope’s experimental navigating vessels – without masts or sails – had acquired some renown in the English Channel, they were still far from being sailed on subcontinental waters.

On the one hand was a Danish town falling out of favour with maritime conditions, and on another an unpopular press that had begun translating the *New Testament* into Indian languages, while its founders went about supplying information acquired through the Church of England to the French, from the Danish tavern. In 1808, Denmark declared war on Britain, and Lieutenant Colonel Carey (not to be confused with the missionary), was sent to capture Serampore. French spies in Tranquebar and Serampore were arrested and deported back to France. Although Danish civilians and the Baptist missionaries continued to stay in Serampore, its military aid to the French cause was reduced to history. The enclave was eventually sold to the British, in 1845, eleven years after Carey’s death.

Recounting the history of the evangelical mission in Serampore, the *Baptist Magazine* of 1849 reported the story of Lieutenant Colonel Ole Bie, the Danish Governor of Serampore, who had invited the British missionaries: “‘If you will come to Serampore,’ he said, ‘I will give you a place to live in and a place in which to worship God.’” The *Magazine* added that it was a “striking thing that the first
house in which those brethren obtained a resting place was the house of a publican or tavern-keeper.”

In a month or so, that very house will see the light of day as a hotel and a bakery, by the banks of the Hooghly.