



Research Paper

Bengal's Little Europe: Colonial Architecture, Identity and Cultural Transformation along the Hooghly

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the architectural legacy of the European settlements that developed along the Hooghly River in Bengal, focusing on Portuguese Bandel-Hooghly, Dutch Chinsurah, French Chandernagore and Danish Serampore. It explores how commercial settlements gradually developed into distinctive colonial towns marked by forts, churches, administrative buildings, residences and educational institutions. The study argues that these structures were not simple reproductions of European architecture. European Renaissance, Baroque, Palladian and Neoclassical elements were combined with Bengali building traditions, locally available materials and features suited to the tropical climate. Architecture also served to express European identity, authority and cultural prestige. At the same time, political conflicts, changes in ownership, and subsequent alterations resulted in the loss or transformation of many colonial structures. The surviving buildings, therefore, represent a layered architectural heritage shaped by European ambitions and local conditions. Together, they reveal the Hooghly region as a distinctive cultural landscape that may aptly be described as "Bengal's Little Europe".

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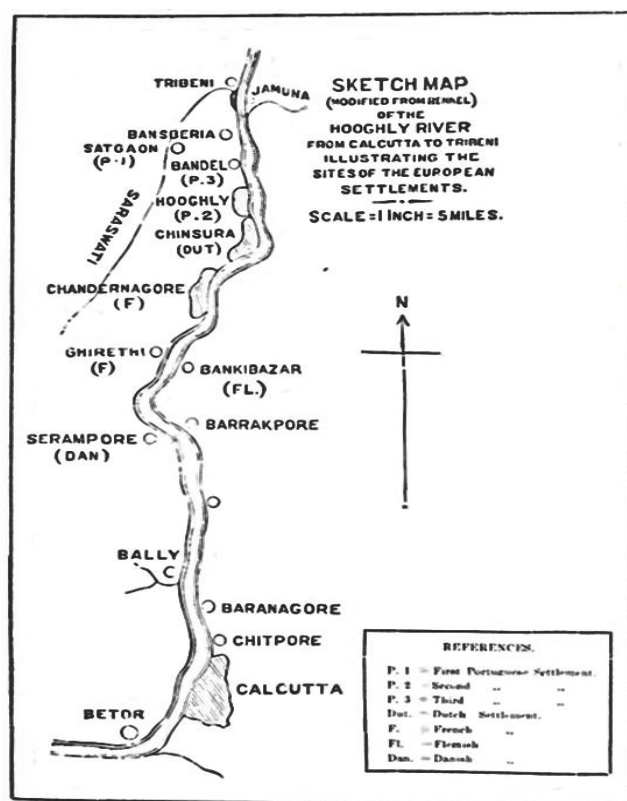
I. INTRODUCTION

The European expansion that began with the Age of Discovery in the fifteenth century gradually developed into a wider process of overseas trade, political expansion and colonisation. Portugal and Spain were the first major powers to undertake these ventures, followed by the Dutch, English, French and Danes (Ivermoe, 2021). Their interest in distant territories was shaped by the search for wealth, commercial opportunities and political influence. India attracted these powers because of its favourable geographical position and its rich agricultural and commercial resources. From the arrival of the Portuguese onwards, various European groups established trading settlements across the Indian subcontinent. Their presence affected not only political and economic life but also the cultural landscape. Architecture became one of the most visible expressions of this change (Whyte, 2006).

European settlers constructed buildings that provided them with familiar surroundings while adapting to the conditions of their new environment (Isa, 2022). In this respect, their activities were not entirely different from those of earlier groups who had entered India and developed architectural forms that combined inherited traditions with local practices (Thapar, 2004). Colonial architecture, therefore, cannot be understood simply as an imported European style. Buildings served practical purposes, but they also represented the identity, authority and aspirations of their builders. The arrangement of spaces, structural forms and decorative features could communicate ideas about power, culture and belonging. Architecture thus functioned simultaneously as a place for living and working, a means of representation and an expression of aesthetic preferences. For historians, buildings are consequently valuable sources for understanding the societies that constructed and used them. Since architecture develops within particular historical and cultural circumstances, the study of buildings can also provide insight into wider processes of cultural interaction and change (Whyte, 2006; Ehteshami, 2018).

By the time of Akbar, the Mughal Empire was already connected through extensive commercial networks with Persia, the Ottoman world, southern Europe and East Africa. The Mughal rulers generally permitted European merchants to participate in this expanding commercial environment. From the sixteenth century, European trading companies consequently began to establish themselves in India. Bengal became especially important because of its prosperous economy, textile production and connections with overseas markets (Lahiri, 2015). Among the most significant areas of European activity was the Hooghly region in western Bengal. Within

a relatively small geographical area, several European powers established settlements and competed for commercial and political influence. Portuguese, Dutch, English, Danish, French, Flemish and Prussian interests were present in the region (Map 1), while Armenian and Greek communities are also mentioned in some historical accounts (Campos, 1919; Thakur, Kulshrestha and Singh, 2020).



Map 1: Sketch map of the river Hooghly illustrating the sites of European settlements on both banks along its course. (Source: Joachim Joseph A. Campos, *History of the Portuguese in Bengal*, 45)

The western bank of the Hooghly became attractive to European merchants because of its established commercial infrastructure. Satgaon, located on the western bank of the Saraswati, had long been an important port of western Bengal. The surrounding settlements were also centres of silk and cotton production, and their goods had access to overseas markets. Arab and Persian merchants had been active in this area from the medieval period. European traders, therefore, entered an already developed commercial environment rather than an economically isolated region (Das and Chattopadhyay, 2014; Mukherjee, 2021). Their settlements gradually formed a chain along the Hooghly, linking commercial centres such as Satgaon, Hooghly, Bandel, Chinsurah, Chandernagore and Serampore.

The history of the name Hooghly is itself connected with the Portuguese presence. It was originally the town, rather than the river, that was known as Hooghly. The settlement is generally associated with the Portuguese establishment of about 1580. Earlier Bengali and European references commonly identified the river as the Ganga or Bhagirathi. Joachim Joseph A. Campos, based on historical evidence, argued that the name Hooghly came into use with the Portuguese settlement. He noted that the name does not appear before this period and that one of its earliest recorded forms, "Hugeli," appears in Ralph Fitch's 1588 account (Campos, 1919). Early European travellers referred to the river as the Hooghly River, indicating that its later name was derived from the town (Das and Chattopadhyay, 2014).

There are various explanations for the word's origin. One popular interpretation connects it with *hogla*, the tall reed that grew along the riverbanks. Fr. Hosten, however, suggested that the Portuguese may have derived the name from *golas*, referring to the storehouses constructed along the river. Neither explanation alone provides a completely certain answer. It is possible that the two ideas were connected, since such storehouses could themselves have been covered with *hogla* thatching (Campos, 1919). Whatever the precise linguistic origin, the historical evidence strongly associates the emergence of the name Hooghly with the Portuguese period.

The European settlements that developed along the river were geographically close but politically and culturally distinct. The Portuguese moved from Satgaon to Hooghly and Bandel; the Dutch established themselves at Chinsurah; the French developed settlements at Hooghly and later Chandernagore; and the Danes first settled

at Gondalpara and subsequently at Serampore (Campos, 1919). These settlements were situated within roughly twenty-five kilometres of one another, creating what has appropriately been described as “Bengal’s Little Europe” (Thakur, Kulshrestha and Singh, 2020). Their presence transformed the region in political, economic, social and cultural terms. Although the colonial settlements later declined or disappeared as political centres, their architectural remains continue to preserve memories of this period.

Several surviving buildings illustrate this colonial heritage. Bandel Church represents the former Portuguese settlement. Chinsurah retains buildings such as the Hooghly Madrasa, the Bungalow of the Divisional Commissioner of Burdwan, Hooghly Mohsin College and Hooghly Collegiate School, associated with the Dutch period. Chandernagore preserves the Sacred Heart Church, Dupleix Palace, Chandernagore College, the Court and the Registry Building, reflecting its French past. Serampore, formerly Danish, contains structures such as the Immaculate Conception Church, St. Olav’s Church, the Danish Government House and Serampore College. These buildings demonstrate how traces of the European presence became incorporated into the later historical landscape of Bengal (Das and Chattopadhyay, 2014).

The architecture of these settlements was not a simple reproduction of European models. European builders brought their own architectural ideas, construction methods and stylistic preferences, but they also adapted them to local circumstances. Features such as verandahs, balconies, and porches were incorporated into buildings because of Bengal’s climate and geography. The availability of local craftsmen and materials also influenced construction (Ehteshami, 2018; Sharma, 2023). As a result, buildings in different European settlements shared certain broad features while retaining distinctive characteristics associated with their respective European traditions.

The growing power of the British gradually changed the balance of importance among these settlements. Calcutta, situated downstream on the Hooghly, developed into the principal British colonial centre, while Bandel, Chinsurah, Chandernagore and Serampore lost much of their earlier prominence. The widespread nature of British rule also contributed to greater scholarly attention being given to British colonial architecture, whereas the Portuguese, Dutch, French and Danish buildings received comparatively limited attention. Their more regional character, combined with the deterioration and disappearance of many structures, made sustained research difficult (Gautam, 2017; Saria, 2022). Yet their architectural remains show that the non-British European powers also left a lasting impression on Bengal’s built environment (Tipnis, 2015).

The architectural identity of these settlements is particularly significant because the four colonies were located only a short distance from one another, yet their buildings display subtle differences. Although many of the structures broadly reflect Neoclassical principles, they also contain architectural details associated with the respective European traditions. Their differences, therefore, reveal the interaction between European architectural ideas and Bengal’s local environment. They also demonstrate how architecture could preserve the distinct identities of communities even after their political authority had declined (Kostof, 1995).

II. ECHOES OF A PORTUGUESE PAST: BANDEL AND SERAMPORE

Bandel, now a small town in West Bengal’s Hooghly district, was one of the important Portuguese settlements in Bengal. Situated on the western bank of the Hooghly River and about fifty-two kilometres north of Kolkata, it has a history closely connected with the wider Portuguese expansion in Bengal (Campos, 1919). The Portuguese first established their presence at Chittagong in 1517, when Bengal was ruled by Alauddin Husain Shah (r. 1494–1519). Chittagong, then the principal port connected with the capital Gaur, was called Porto Grande by the Portuguese. Their interest in Bengal, however, began somewhat earlier through occasional commercial visits. The prosperity of Bengal had already become known in Portugal through Vasco da Gama’s voyage to India in 1497–99, while Duarte Barbosa’s later writings also described the region’s fertile land, flourishing trade, and large foreign merchant communities (Biedermann, 2020). Following the establishment of the Estado da Índia, the Portuguese expanded their commercial activities from the western coast towards the Bay of Bengal (Das and Chattopadhyay, 2014). After capturing Malacca in 1511, they became increasingly interested in Bengal because of both its overseas commerce and its connections with inland markets. In 1517, D. João de Silveira led the first official Portuguese mission sponsored by the Portuguese Crown to seek trading privileges and permission to establish a factory. Although the mission itself was unsuccessful, Portuguese ships continued to visit Bengal regularly.

Portuguese relations with Bengal’s rulers developed through both cooperation and conflict. During Sher Shah’s invasion of Bengal in 1534, Sultan Mahmud Shah III sought Portuguese military assistance. Portuguese forces helped defend the strategic passes of Teliagarhi and Sikiguli. In return, they received permission to establish factories and customs houses at Chittagong and to settle at Satgaon. Satgaon, known to the Portuguese as Porto Pequeno, was then a major commercial centre on the western side of Bengal (Rozario, 2017). Its importance, however, declined as the Saraswati River gradually silted up, making it difficult for ships to navigate.

Consequently, commercial activity shifted towards Hooghly, which developed into the second major Portuguese settlement in the region.

The rise of Hooghly received important support from the Mughal emperor Akbar. In 1578, Portuguese merchant Pedro Tavares visited Akbar's court after being invited by the emperor. Impressed by Tavares, Akbar granted the Portuguese a *farman* permitting them to establish a settlement in Bengal. Hooghly was founded around 1579–80, and its growth was remarkably rapid. Within a few decades, it had become one of the major commercial centres of western Bengal and attracted ships from India, China, Malacca and Manila. Portuguese merchants also maintained settlements at Chittagong, Satgaon, Hijli, Banja, Dacca and several smaller ports (Ivermee, 2021).

Akbar's *farman* also permitted the Portuguese to practise and propagate Christianity and to construct churches and monasteries. Missionaries consequently became an important part of the Portuguese settlement. Although Jesuits were among the earliest missionaries to arrive in Bengal, the Augustinians became particularly influential at Hooghly. Supported by Portuguese merchants and the Mughal authorities, they developed Hooghly into an important missionary centre from which religious activities extended into other parts of Bengal (Ivermee, 2021).

The growing Portuguese population and the increasing number of converts created the need for permanent religious buildings. In 1599, the Augustinians established a convent dedicated to St. Nicholas of Tolentino and a church dedicated to Our Lady of the Rosary at a village about two kilometres north of Hooghly. This settlement later became known as Bandel. The religious buildings were deliberately located away from the busy commercial centre of Hooghly, where markets, warehouses and residences dominated the landscape (Rozario, 2017).

Portuguese prosperity at Hooghly, however, did not last. After Shah Jahan became emperor in 1628, Mughal policy towards the Portuguese changed. Their refusal to pay the expected tribute, their control over river traffic and allegations of piracy and slave trading increased Mughal hostility. These tensions eventually resulted in the siege of Hooghly in 1632. The Mughal forces greatly outnumbered the Portuguese defenders, and after more than two months of resistance, the settlement fell. The Portuguese buildings, including the convent and church, were destroyed, while many inhabitants were captured (Toynbee, 1888).

The Portuguese were allowed to return the following year because the Mughal state still valued the economic benefits of their trade. Shah Jahan granted them another *farman*, restoring their commercial and religious privileges and providing 760 *bighas* of land for a new settlement. They selected an area north of the Hooghly where their earlier religious establishment had stood. This settlement came to be known as Bandel. The name is generally associated with the Persian word *bandar*, meaning port or wharf. The Portuguese referred to the place as the "Bandel of Oglum," or Bandel of Hooghly. They rebuilt their church at a slightly different location beside the river, dedicating it to Our Lady of Happy Voyage. It subsequently became known as Bandel Church (Rozario, 2017).

By the late seventeenth century, Portuguese influence in Bengal had weakened considerably. Hooghly had become a Mughal port, while Dutch and English trading companies increasingly dominated Bengal's commerce. Although Portuguese trade continued to some extent, their political and economic importance gradually disappeared. By the end of the eighteenth century, their influence at Bandel had become largely symbolic. Their most enduring legacy in Bengal, therefore, survives in the religious buildings they constructed (Das and Chattopadhyay, 2014).

Bandel Church (Figure 1) remains the most important surviving architectural reminder of the Portuguese presence in Bengal. Originally founded in 1599 by Augustinian missionaries, it is generally regarded as the oldest surviving Christian church in Bengal. The original structure was destroyed during the siege of Hooghly in 1632, but after the Portuguese returned, the church was rebuilt around 1640. Gomez de Soto, a wealthy Portuguese merchant, played an important role in its reconstruction. The church was enlarged in 1676 because the growing Portuguese population could no longer be accommodated within the existing building.



Figure 2: The present structure of the Bandel Church, which is now known as Bandel Basilica. (Courtesy of the author)

The church suffered further damage during the political conflict of 1756, when Siraj-ud-Daulah attacked Hooghly. Its documents were destroyed, and the building was ransacked, although the church itself survived. The 1897 earthquake caused additional damage, including the destruction of the southern tower and serious cracks in the walls. Subsequent repairs restored the structure and added a new tower. In 1989, Bandel Church was elevated to the status of a Minor Basilica. Renovation work undertaken for this purpose introduced granite and marble, enlarged the balcony, replaced the old glass windows and renewed the floors, walls and altars, while the basic structure was retained (Campos, 1919).

The present Basilica is a two-storeyed building with a tall bell tower rising to about 105 feet and ending in a cross. Its entrance portico carries a balcony above it, while the main doorway opens into a three-aisled prayer hall. The nave and side aisles are divided by two rows of semicircular arches supported by piers. An open courtyard-like space on the eastern side is surrounded by corridors with similar arched openings. A staircase connects this area with the balcony where the image of Our Lady of Bandel is displayed. The building combines European religious forms with a relatively restrained architectural treatment.

Another important but less-recognised Portuguese building is the Immaculate Conception Church in Serampore. Its Portuguese origin has often been overlooked because Serampore was later associated with the Danish settlement and because Colonel Bie, the Danish governor, contributed towards its construction. Its original dedication was to *Santa Madre de Deos*, and the church received its present name, Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in 1869.

The building began as a small chapel constructed by Portuguese merchants and settlers in 1764. The present church was erected in 1776 by the Luso-Indian Barretto family to serve the growing Catholic population. Renovation in 1994 added a reinforced-concrete floor within the nave, producing its present two-storeyed appearance (Aalund & Rasten, 2010). The façade is simple and is dominated by a large semicircular pediment supported by four Doric columns and crowned by a cross. The interior consists mainly of a small rectangular prayer hall with the altar at the northern end. Comparison with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century representations shows that some decorative details, including the original finials and surface ornament on the pediment and cornice, have disappeared. Nevertheless, the principal form of the façade has survived.

The modest appearance of the Bandel and Serampore churches becomes more meaningful when compared with the grand Portuguese churches of western India. Their simplicity may partly reflect the practical traditions of Portuguese military, maritime and commercial construction, where economy and functionality were important. Art historian George Kubler described a related architectural tendency as “Portuguese Plain architecture,” characterised by simple forms, limited ornamentation, functional divisions and clear proportions. The economic difficulties faced by Portugal from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century also encouraged a move away from the highly ornamented Manueline tradition towards more economical forms. The churches at Bandel and Serampore can therefore be viewed within this wider architectural development.

At Bandel, however, certain elements reveal more specific Portuguese influences. The semicircular arches and piers used in the long corridors and prayer hall resemble military construction, while the bell tower resembles the Portuguese *torre*, an important feature of Manueline architecture. Considering the church’s position beside the river and its exposure to repeated political conflicts, the tower may have had a practical defensive or strategic significance in addition to its religious function.

The Portuguese architectural legacy in Bengal extends beyond Bandel and Serampore. Churches were also established in Kolkata and in places such as Hijli, Pipli, Tamluk, Sripur, Dacca and Chittagong. These buildings reflect the close relationship between religion and commerce within Portuguese imperial expansion. Portuguese overseas activity was not driven by trade alone; Christian missionary work was an important part of the imperial project. The Crown supported religious missions, while merchants provided transport and material assistance. Religious orders, in turn, sometimes participated in commercial networks and maintained a presence even where Portuguese political authority was limited. Thus, the churches of Bandel and Serampore should not be viewed merely as religious monuments. They represent the broader interplay of commerce, missionary activity, political ambition, and architectural adaptation that shaped the Portuguese presence in Bengal.

III. DUTCH IMPRINT ON BENGAL: CHINSURAH'S ARCHITECTURAL LEGACY

The success of the Portuguese Estado da India encouraged other European powers to expand their maritime activities in Asia. The Dutch Republic founded the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC) in 1602 and granted it a monopoly over Dutch trade in Asia (Lahiri, 2015). Although the VOC was formally a commercial corporation, it operated in close cooperation with the Dutch state (Kehoe, 2023). Its early trade centred on spices from the Spice Islands, but the limited demand for European goods in Asian markets and the difficulty of supplying bullion encouraged the Dutch to seek other commodities. Indian textiles, which were highly valued in Southeast Asian markets, offered an important alternative. Bengal, one of the major textile-producing regions of India, therefore became an important destination for Dutch commercial activity. By 1605, the VOC had established a presence in India, and during the seventeenth century, it developed factories at several important centres, including Surat, Masulipatam, Patna, Balasore, Cossimbazar and the Hooghly region.

The Dutch interest in Bengal can be traced to the late sixteenth century, when the Dutch merchant and traveller Jan Huyghen van Linschoten visited the region in 1589. Hooghly was already a flourishing port, but Portuguese influence initially restricted Dutch expansion. Their opportunity came after the Portuguese were expelled from Hooghly by Mughal authorities in 1632. Following an unsuccessful attempt in 1634, the Dutch seaman Melchior van Santvoort reached Hooghly in 1635 and obtained permission from the Bengal authorities to establish a factory. Emperor Shah Jahan subsequently confirmed this permission through an imperial farman in August 1635. The Dutch selected a site south of the former Portuguese settlement on the western bank of the Hooghly. The locality was known as Chuchura, probably after the cane called *chichira* that grew there, and the Dutch rendered the name as Chinsurah (Pal, 2019). Although the VOC temporarily relocated its operations to Pipli due to conflicts with local revenue officials, it returned to Chinsurah in the mid-1640s, as the settlement proved more suitable for trade.

The establishment of the Bengal Directorate of the VOC in 1655 gave further impetus to Dutch settlement. Following the pattern used elsewhere, the Dutch developed a fortified factory close to the river and surrounded it with a settlement that supplied goods for export. Chinsurah gradually became the principal centre of Dutch trade in Bengal, particularly after the flooding of the VOC headquarters at Cossimbazar. By the late seventeenth century, the town had become an active commercial centre. William Hedges noted the regular presence of several trading vessels at Chinsurah, reflecting its importance within the wider network of Dutch maritime commerce. The factory, constructed between 1655 and 1665, served both commercial and administrative purposes and included offices, residences, workshops, storage facilities and other institutional spaces (Hedges, 1887).

The strategic importance of Chinsurah also encouraged the fortification of the Dutch settlement. Between 1743 and 1753, Bengal Director Jan Albert Sichterman strengthened the factory against Maratha attacks and renamed it Fort Gustavus. The earlier enclosure was replaced by substantial walls, bastions and gates, and the fort was equipped with artillery. Much of Fort Gustavus has disappeared, but important traces survive in the present Hooghly Madrasah complex. Historical maps, contemporary paintings and the Hooghly District Gazetteer help to identify this connection. The portion of the Madrasah that once formed part of the Dutch barracks lies close to the location shown for the VOC settlement in Hendrik van Schuylenburgh's 1665 painting and on the Dutch map of Chinsurah of 1721. The surviving sweeping staircase on the western side of the building may also represent a Dutch architectural contribution. Its form resembles the *perrons* commonly used in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Dutch architecture. VOC cannons bearing the company emblem, preserved near the building, provide further material evidence of the Dutch presence (Tipnis, 2013).

The commercial importance of Chinsurah continued for nearly two centuries. Bengal supplied the VOC with silk and cotton and also became an important source of opium for the Batavia trade. However, corruption and the growth of private trade among company officials weakened Dutch commercial interests. The situation deteriorated further after the English victory at Plassey in 1757, which established the English East India Company as the dominant European power in Bengal. Dutch attempts to challenge this position ended with their defeat at

Bidera in November 1759. The resulting restrictions prevented the VOC from fortifying its settlements or maintaining a substantial military presence, effectively reducing its political influence in Bengal.

The subsequent Anglo-Dutch conflicts further altered the position of Chinsurah. The English temporarily occupied the Dutch settlements during the war of 1781, although Chinsurah was restored to the Dutch after the Treaty of Versailles in 1783. Dutch possessions again came under British control following the French occupation of the Netherlands in 1794. Finally, the Treaty of London of 1824 resulted in the transfer of the remaining Dutch settlements in India to the British. Chinsurah was formally handed over on 7 May 1825, and Fort Gustavus was demolished in 1829. The decline of Dutch political power, however, did not erase their architectural imprint on the town.

Chinsurah's surviving buildings offer important evidence of this architectural legacy. Its position beside the Hooghly, with easy access to river transport and a pleasant environment, encouraged the construction of gardens and residential mansions. Among the surviving structures associated with the Dutch period are the Divisional Commissioner's Bungalow, Hooghly Collegiate School and Hooghly Mohsin College. These buildings are particularly important because they reveal an architectural interaction between European styles and local building practices.

The Divisional Commissioner's Bungalow, originally known as *Welgeleegen*, was built by Jan Albert Sichterman around 1744 on the site of the fiscal quarters of Fort Gustavus (Tipnis, 2013). Although its present appearance reflects nineteenth-century reconstruction and later additions, several features point towards its earlier history. Its large garden, river-facing orientation, sweeping staircases, verandah and extensive use of Doric and Ionic columns reflect the character of a colonial residence. A tablet carrying the VOC monogram, together with two VOC cannons preserved in the garden, provides particularly strong material evidence of its Dutch association. The use of columns as decorative elements also recalls the Renaissance architectural tradition of the Netherlands, although such features were later incorporated into Neoclassical architecture.

The oldest portion of Hooghly Collegiate School (Tipnis, 2013) provides another example. The site appears on the Dutch map of 1721 as the Director's garden, and the location corresponds with the surviving structure. The building contains a verandah, Ionic and Composite columns, semicircular arches and decorative stucco work. Its river-facing section once featured a triangular or gabled roof form characteristic of Dutch colonial architecture. The building was later acquired by Prankrishna Halder, who added a *thakurdalan*, and was eventually converted into an educational institution. These changes illustrate how Dutch-period buildings were adapted to new social and institutional uses while retaining elements of their earlier architectural character.

Hooghly Mohsin College (Figure 2), formerly known as Perron's House, provides a similar example of architectural continuity and transformation (Zachariah, 1936). Although the history of its original construction is debated, evidence suggests an association with a Dutch VOC director. A nineteenth-century painting by Marianne James shows the house beside the Dutch church and the riverfront. The building follows a Neoclassical scheme, with Ionic columns, pediments, colonnades, a large central hall and a river-facing verandah. At the same time, the decorative treatment of the walls with classical columns recalls the Dutch Renaissance tradition. Its history, involving Dutch ownership, later private possession and eventual conversion into a college, demonstrates the changing functions of Chinsurah's colonial buildings.



Figure 2: The Hooghly Mohsin College, Chinsurah. (Courtesy of the author)

The identification of Dutch architectural influence in these structures must nevertheless be approached with caution. Fort Gustavus and the Dutch Church have disappeared, while several surviving buildings have undergone reconstruction, alteration and changes of ownership. It is therefore difficult to separate original Dutch features from later additions with complete certainty. Yet certain elements provide useful architectural clues. Bannister Fletcher identifies decorative classical orders on walls as a feature of Dutch Renaissance architecture, while *perrons* were prominent in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Dutch buildings. Marsely L. Kehoe, meanwhile, associates triangular gables with Dutch townhouses in both the Netherlands and Dutch colonial settlements. The decorative columns of the Divisional Commissioner's Bungalow and Hooghly Mohsin College, the possible *perron* of the Madrasah complex and the triangular gable of Hooghly Collegiate School can therefore be considered significant indicators of Chinsurah's Dutch architectural heritage.

More importantly, these buildings should not be viewed simply as European structures transplanted to Bengal. Their architecture represents an interaction between European forms and local conditions. The colonial bungalow itself derives, both architecturally and linguistically, from the Bengali *bangla* hut, with its rectangular plan, raised platform, sloping roof, and projecting verandah. Such features were well-suited to Bengal's hot, humid climate and were constructed using locally available materials and local craftsmanship. European patrons subsequently incorporated classical columns, pediments, ballrooms and other elements to express their cultural identity. Chinsurah's surviving buildings, therefore, represent a process of architectural adaptation rather than simple imitation. Their Dutch features, combined with Bengali spatial forms and later British interventions, preserve the layered history of a settlement shaped by trade, colonial competition and cultural interaction. In this sense, Chinsurah's architectural remains constitute an important material record of the Dutch presence in Bengal and of the complex processes through which European and local architectural traditions came together.

IV. CHANDERNAGORE: TRACING A FRENCH LEGACY IN COLONIAL ARCHITECTURE

France entered the Asian commercial competition relatively late compared with Portugal, the Dutch and the English (Kadam, 2003). The French East India Company, or *Compagnie des Indes*, was established in 1664 under the auspices of Louis XIV and Jean-Baptiste Colbert. Initially interested in trade with China and Japan, the Company gradually turned towards India after travellers such as François de La Boullaye Le Gouz and François Bernier drew attention to the commercial opportunities of the subcontinent (Das & Chattopadhyay, 2004). Bernier's observations on Bengal were particularly important because he had witnessed its productive agriculture, flourishing trade and the presence of other European settlements (Bernier, 1884). The French first established themselves at Bandel-Hooghly in the 1670s, but later sought a separate settlement. In 1688, they obtained permission from Emperor Aurangzeb and the Bengal governor Shaista Khan to establish a trading post (Banerjee, 2012). They acquired land south of Dutch Chinsurah, in an area comprising villages such as Boro-Kishanganj, Gondalpara, and Khalisani (Kar *et al.*, 2020). A permanent French settlement had emerged by 1690–91 and was known as Chandernagore (Bose, 2021). The factory was fortified in 1696, giving rise to Fort d'Orleans, and in 1701 the settlement was placed under Pondicherry.

By 1705, Chandernagore had become the principal French trading centre in Bengal. Its factory contained commercial and residential facilities, while a church was also established for French traders and soldiers. The present Sacred Heart Church represents the later development of this religious establishment. Built between 1875 and 1884 under French supervision, it displays a combination of European ecclesiastical traditions. Its façade features towers, arched openings, and Ionic and Tuscan columns, while the interior includes vaulted ceilings, stained glass, decorative cornices, and a domed sanctuary supported by classical columns. Some of these features show Gothic and Baroque influences, while others recall French church architecture, including that of Saint-Germain in Paris. The building, therefore, reflects the continued French architectural presence in Chandernagore even after the earlier colonial structures had disappeared.

The settlement reached an important phase of prosperity under Joseph François Dupleix, who became governor in 1730–31. He expanded the existing European trade network and encouraged inland and private commerce. Chandernagore consequently developed into an important commercial centre and was also enlarged and beautified. The surviving Dupleix Palace, now the Institut de Chandernagor, belongs to this period (Sen, 1958). Although it has been repeatedly renovated, the structure is believed to retain much of its original plan. It is a low, symmetrical building organised around open-pillared verandahs. Its high plinth, wide verandahs, and large openings show a clear adaptation to the Bengal environment, while its triangular pediment, Tuscan columns, Venetian blinds, timber screens, and roof balustrade introduce European classical elements. The balustrade has been compared with the Versailles-style treatment used in French architecture. The central part once served as the residence of French administrators and is now a museum housing maps, documents, paintings, sculptures, and other objects associated with the French presence (Bailey, 2022).

The prosperity of Chandernagore was repeatedly interrupted by Anglo-French rivalry. During the Seven Years' War, the English attacked and captured the settlement on 23 March 1757. The French regained it after the Treaty of Paris, but Chandernagore had already lost much of its earlier political and commercial importance. Fort d'Orleans was destroyed, many large buildings were damaged, and the population declined sharply. French control was again interrupted during later Anglo-French conflicts. Although the settlement was restored to France at various points, permanent French rule was established only after 1816. Chandernagore remained a French possession until it became a free city in 1947 and subsequently joined India after the 1949 referendum. The repeated transfer of authority between the French and British had a lasting impact on the town's architectural heritage, as many earlier buildings were destroyed, altered or neglected (Sen, 1958).

Several nineteenth-century buildings, however, preserve important traces of the later French period. Chandernagore College developed from the Ecole de Sainte Marie, founded in 1862 by Rev. Magloire Barthet. It became a public school in 1887 and was affiliated with the University of Calcutta in 1891. After several institutional changes, it was renamed Chandernagore College in 1947. Its main building is a simple, single-storeyed structure raised on a high plinth. A broad staircase leads to a long verandah supported by paired Tuscan columns, with timber louvered screens between them. The design combines the familiar verandah-based form of Bengal with a restrained European classical treatment (Bose, 2021).

The Registry Building, constructed in 1875, represents another important French-era structure. Located near the riverfront, it served as the Registry Office and French Court. The two-storeyed brick-and-lime building has a deep upper verandah, paired columns, timber screens and a sweeping curved staircase. Venetian blinds and dentil cornice mouldings further contribute to its colonial character. Much of the building is now damaged, although it was declared a heritage property by the West Bengal Heritage Commission in 2017 (Bose, 2021). The present Chandernagore Court occupies another nineteenth-century structure, formerly known as the Hotel de Paris or Thistle Hotel, founded in 1878. Its symmetrical façade, central portico, Tuscan columns, louvered screens and decorative parapet give it a distinctly Neoclassical appearance, while the raised plinth and pillared verandahs retain strong connections with Bengal's indigenous building tradition (Bose, 2021).

These buildings demonstrate that the architecture of Chandernagore cannot be understood simply as an imitation of European models. Rather, it represents an interaction between French architectural ideas and the local building tradition of Bengal. The Dupleix Palace (Figure 3), Chandernagore College, Registry Building and Court share features such as rectangular plans, raised plinths and broad verandahs. These were practical responses to the tropical climate and were closely related to the form of the Bengali *bangla* hut. European elements, including classical columns, pediments, porticoes, balustrades, Venetian blinds and decorative mouldings, were added to these local forms. The resulting buildings were therefore both climatically suitable and visually connected with European architectural culture.



Figure 3: The entrance of the Institut de Chandernagor, also known as Dupleix Palace. (Courtesy of the author)

This architectural mixture may also be understood in relation to the French colonial idea of cultural association. The policy, developed more explicitly in French colonial territories during the nineteenth century, emphasised limited interference with local customs and institutions and sought to engage with indigenous cultures. Architecture could serve this purpose by combining European forms with local traditions. Similar tendencies have been identified in French colonial architecture in Pondicherry and French Indochina. Chandernagore's buildings

show a comparable process in which indigenous spatial arrangements were retained while European classical elements were used to express French identity.

At the same time, the French did not abandon the desire to project European prestige. Classical architecture, especially the Graeco-Roman tradition, provided a visual language of order, authority and refinement. The repeated use of columns, pediments and porticoes helped give the buildings a distinctly European appearance. The decorative roof balustrade of the Dupleix Palace, for example, recalls the architecture associated with Versailles and may be read as an assertion of French cultural and political authority. Thus, the architecture of Chandernagore served both practical and ideological purposes: it responded to Bengal's climate and materials while simultaneously representing the identity and status of the French colonial establishment.

Yet the architectural heritage of Chandernagore remained relatively modest when compared with larger French colonial centres. Its limited size, vulnerable inland location, and repeated British occupation restricted the possibility of developing an extensive architectural programme. The French were also prohibited from maintaining troops after 1763, making the settlement particularly insecure. Jean Law de Lauriston therefore advised the Company in 1767 to keep construction expenditure in Chandernagore to a minimum. Political uncertainty, therefore, was as important as climate and colonial ideology in shaping the town's architecture.

V. SERAMPORE: TRACING THE DANISH ARCHITECTURAL LEGACY

The history of Serampore as a European settlement is closely connected with the Danish attempt to participate in the profitable trade of Bengal. The present town, situated on the western bank of the Hooghly River about twenty-five kilometres north of Kolkata (Mukherjee, 2021), emerged as a Danish settlement in 1755 and was named Frederiksnagore after King Frederick V of Denmark (Bose, 2022). The Danish presence in Bengal, however, had begun much earlier. In 1698, the Danish East India Company obtained permission from Azim-us-Shan to establish a factory at Gondalpara, near the French settlement of Chandernagore. Known as Denemardanga or Dannemarksnagore, this settlement was abandoned in 1714 because it failed to generate sufficient profit. The Danish Asiatic Company, reorganised in 1732 with royal support, revived Danish commercial interests in Bengal. Its representative J. S. Soetman secured permission from Nawab Alivardi Khan to acquire land for a new factory, and Serampore was selected for this purpose (Aalund & Rasten, 2010).

The early years of the settlement were commercially difficult. Danish trade remained limited until the Crown took direct control of the Danish possessions in India in 1777. The situation improved considerably during the American War of Independence because Denmark remained neutral while Britain, France and the Netherlands were involved in the conflict. Danish ships consequently became useful to merchants seeking relatively safe means of transporting goods. Serampore enjoyed its most prosperous period during the long governorship of Ole Bie (1776–1805). His commercial enterprise and interest in developing the settlement were accompanied by considerable building activity. The Danish Government Compound, St. Olav's Church and other surviving structures belong to this important phase of Serampore's history. Danish prosperity, however, declined after Denmark entered the Napoleonic Wars. The British occupied Serampore between 1805 and 1815, after which it was returned to Denmark. Unable to restore its earlier commercial importance, Denmark eventually sold its Indian possessions to Britain. Serampore was formally transferred to the British on 11 October 1845, ending nearly ninety years of Danish rule (Bose, 2022).

The surviving buildings of the Danish period provide important evidence of the character of this small European settlement. The Danish Government Compound, which served as the administrative centre from 1755, retains a substantial portion of the brick wall constructed under Ole Bie in 1780. Its principal gateway, dating originally from 1772 and rebuilt after the Danish restoration in 1815, displays a distinctly Palladian Neoclassical character. The entrance is framed by paired pilasters with Ionic capitals and crowned by a triangular pediment with dentil decoration. Although some earlier features have disappeared, the present gateway preserves the basic form of the original structure. At the centre of the compound stands the Danish Government House, the residence of governors and senior officials. The present two-storeyed building has a flat roof, balustrade and an open portico supported by Ionic columns. Its symmetrical arrangement of doors and windows, Venetian blinds and pedimented openings reflects the European Neoclassical taste that had become widespread in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Aalund & Rasten, 2010).

Another important monument is St. Olav's Church (Figure 4), whose construction began in 1800. The nave was completed in 1806, while the portico and bell tower were added later. The building was constructed from designs prepared by Lieutenant Robert Armstrong and completed under Major Bernard Wickede. Its western façade has an open Ionic portico crowned by a triangular pediment bearing the royal monogram of Christian VII. The church is divided into a central nave and two aisles, while the tall steeple, topped by a globe and cross, forms a prominent element of Serampore's skyline. Its external appearance reflects European Neoclassical church architecture, with similarities to churches in Copenhagen, London and Calcutta. At the same time, certain interior features, including the compact form, whitewashed surfaces and spiral staircase of the steeple, recall the Baroque

ecclesiastical tradition of Denmark. St. Olav's therefore represents an interesting combination of different European architectural influences rather than a purely uniform style.



Figure 74: Western façade of St. Olav's Church, Serampore. (Courtesy of the author)

Serampore also became an important centre of missionary and educational activity. The arrival of William Carey, Joshua Marshman and William Ward in 1799 strengthened this aspect of the town's history. Under Danish protection, the missionaries established educational institutions, most notably Serampore College, founded in 1818. The college building, constructed with support from the Danish royal family, remains one of the most impressive architectural landmarks of the settlement. Its high Neoclassical portico consists of eight Ionic columns and is crowned by a triangular pediment. Inside, both floors contain large halls divided into three sections by Ionic columns. The arrangement, together with the original apse-like projections, gives the interior something of the appearance of a church. Large windows with Venetian blinds and restrained classical decoration further strengthen its European character.

The relatively plain appearance of these Danish buildings is significant. Their architectural simplicity can be understood in part through the Danish tradition of military and institutional architecture, which valued proportion, functional planning, and limited ornamentation. The influence of Neoclassicism also encouraged clear forms, simple façades and controlled decorative elements. Practical considerations were equally important. The Danish administration was primarily interested in trade and had neither the resources nor the political circumstances to create an elaborate colonial capital. The buildings of Serampore, therefore, remained modest in scale and decoration while still communicating their European identity (Faber, 1963).

At the same time, the architecture of Serampore should not be viewed as exclusively Danish. Neoclassicism was a wider European architectural language, and its use in Bengal was adapted to the local environment. The buildings employed materials such as brick and timber that were readily available in the region. Their windows combined wooden shutters with glass panels, allowing ventilation while admitting natural light. Open porticos and verandahs also helped respond to Bengal's hot and humid climate. Thus, European architectural forms were adapted to local requirements rather than simply reproduced unchanged.

The Danish buildings of Serampore consequently reveal a meeting of European architectural ideas and the practical realities of Bengal. Their Ionic columns, pediments, porticos, Venetian blinds and formal symmetry expressed the cultural identity of a European power, while their materials, ventilation arrangements and open spaces responded to the local climate. St. Olav's Church is especially significant in this respect because its Neoclassical exterior incorporates elements recalling Denmark's earlier Baroque church tradition. The architectural remains of the Danish period, therefore, represent more than the physical presence of a European trading power. They preserve the ways in which Danish commercial ambitions, European architectural traditions and local environmental conditions came together in the making of Frederiksnagore

VI. CONCLUSION

The European settlements that developed along the Hooghly River from the seventeenth century onwards created a distinctive cultural and architectural landscape in Bengal. Portuguese Bandel-Hooghly, Dutch Chinsurah, French Chandernagore, and Danish Serampore were established primarily for commercial purposes,

yet their presence gradually transformed the region's physical and cultural character. Factories, forts, churches, administrative buildings, residences, educational institutions, and pleasure houses became visible reminders of the European powers competing for a share in Bengal's prosperous trade. Although many of these settlements have changed considerably over time, their surviving architectural remains continue to provide important evidence of this shared colonial past. Taken together, they justify the description of the Hooghly settlements as a kind of "Bengal's Little Europe".

The study of these buildings, however, shows that European colonial architecture in Bengal cannot be understood simply as the transplantation of European architectural forms to Indian soil. The buildings discussed in this study reveal a continuous process of adaptation and architectural exchange. European styles such as Renaissance, Baroque, Palladian and Neoclassical were combined with local forms, materials and methods of construction. The verandah, raised plinth, rectangular plan, open spaces, and arrangements suited to the tropical climate of Bengal were retained and incorporated into buildings that also featured European columns, pediments, porticos, balustrades, arches, louvred screens, and other decorative elements. The resulting architecture was therefore neither completely European nor entirely indigenous. It represented a hybrid architectural expression produced through interaction between European ideas and the local environment.

The examples from Chinsurah particularly demonstrate how Dutch architectural traditions survived through features such as decorative columns, perrons and triangular gables, even when later alterations made their original character difficult to identify. Chandernagore similarly preserves an Indo-French architectural vocabulary in which local Bengali building practices were combined with Neoclassical forms and classical decoration. The buildings of Serampore, on the other hand, reveal the restrained character of Danish colonial architecture through their simple façades, Ionic columns, open porticos, and Neoclassical forms, while St. Olav's Church also preserves elements of the Danish Baroque tradition. These examples demonstrate that each European power left a recognisable architectural imprint, although none developed in complete isolation from the others or from the Bengali context.

Architecture also served purposes beyond practical accommodation. Colonial buildings were spaces through which European identity, authority and prestige could be displayed. Classical columns, pediments, formal symmetry and carefully designed façades helped create an image of order and European cultural superiority. The use of such forms in administrative residences, churches and public buildings made architecture part of the wider colonial project. At the same time, the incorporation of indigenous forms and climate-responsive features made these structures functional within Bengal. Thus, colonial architecture involved both practical adaptation and ideological representation.

The history of these buildings also reflects the changing political fortunes of the European powers. Wars, changes in commercial priorities, territorial transfers, and the growing dominance of English affected the survival and use of colonial structures. Forts were demolished, churches disappeared, buildings changed ownership, and several structures were reconstructed or converted into educational and administrative institutions. Consequently, the present architectural landscape is not an untouched record of the colonial period. It is the result of continuous alteration, reuse and adaptation over several centuries. This complicates the interpretation of surviving buildings, but it also demonstrates how colonial architecture continued to acquire new meanings after the decline of European political power.

The surviving structures of the Hooghly settlements should therefore be understood as important records of cultural interaction rather than merely as remnants of European colonialism. They reveal how commerce, politics, climate, local craftsmanship and European architectural traditions came together in the making of Bengal's colonial towns. Their significance lies precisely in this mixture. The "Little Europe" of Bengal was never a European world reproduced in isolation; it was a European presence reshaped by Bengal. The architectural remains of Bandel-Hooghly, Chinsurah, Chandernagore and Serampore consequently provide a valuable window into the complex encounter between Europe and Bengal and into the emergence of a distinctive Indo-European architectural and cultural landscape along the Hooghly

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