

# Heritage hope in Danish plan for Serampore

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Writing about the once bustling town of Serampore with its buildings constructed in the neo-classical architectural style, which was in vogue then, a traveller wrote in 1803: "they (the houses) were in themselves picturesque being white, with expensive porticoes to the south, and the windows closed by Venetian blinds painted green."

As in Calcutta and most district towns in West Bengal, most of these elegant structures have been superseded by concrete boxes which have usurped the riverside, and elbowed aside old and graceful private houses as well. But now, it seems, change is in the air, and heritage could get a new lease of life.

The West Bengal Heritage Commission (WBHC) in tandem with the National Museum of Denmark and Intach have grand plans for the revival of Serampore, a former Danish colony, once known as Frederiksnagore in honour of the Danish king, Frederik V, who ruled from 1746 to 1766. The Danes held sway from 1755 to 1845. Now they are back again on a mission to restore some of its lost glory all but wiped out, save in pockets such as the compound of Serampore sub-divisional court, where the old single-storeyed, colonnaded Danish Government House (1771) or Governor's House is located; the town's most visible landmark, St. Olav's Church (1806), whose steeple can be seen from Barrackpore on the opposite bank of the Hooghly; the Catholic Church (1776); and further down the strand, the well-looked-after Serampore College (1823), which, in spite of its grandeur, is beset by the ugliest of modern structures that threaten to eclipse its magnificence.

Restoration of the Danish Government House has been under way since 2009, when the WBHC decided to refurbish it. But now that the Danes — a team from the National Museum of Denmark that has been shuttling back and forth since 2008 — have joined hands, more ambitious plans are afoot to turn it into a tourist destination linking it with other former colonies along the Hooghly.

Serampore is famous for its jute mills, which are in bad shape now as elsewhere, carpentry, block printing and textiles, the Government College of Engineering & Textile Technology being located there. The market here is the second biggest after Calcutta and the Rathyatra of Mahesh draws crowds. A class of trading middlemen had prospered under Danish rule, and after the Danes were compelled to hand over the entire property to the English for a paltry sum of Rs 1.2 million on October 11, 1845, Serampore became industrialised. It attracted hordes of poor landless workers from the neighbouring states and slums burgeoned all over.



Bente Wolff, curator, National Museum of Denmark, and (right) architect Flemming Aalund check out the restoration work being done at the former Danish Government House. Pictures by Pradip Sanyal



Bente Wolff, conservation architect Manish Chakraborti and Flemming Aalund survey the heavily damaged St. Olav's Church



The south gate of the former Government House of Denmark as it is today; a watercolour by Flemming Aalund gives an impression of what it should look like after its restoration is complete



Clearing away the morass and showcasing isolated heritage structures will be a formidable task but those who have undertaken it seem undaunted. The aim of the National Museum of Denmark "is to enhance the specific historic identity of Serampore, but also to improve the aesthetic and recreational qualities of the town". The truly democratic mindset of the Danes has expedited matters because, apart from the thorough and painstaking research that they have done, and the stress that they lay on documentation, they are eager to ensure that the conservation projects are inclusive and that local people feel they are part of it.

The Hooghly district magistrate Manmeet Nanda voices their opinion when she says: "Serampore is a historical town and the projects are citizen-centric. So they are all happy that certain heritage buildings will occupy a visibly prominent place." If this very ambitious Serampore Initiative is even partially successful, it will serve as a model for similar conservation projects

not only in the entire state but for heedless Calcutta in particular.

Partha Ranjan Das, chairman, project committee, WBHC, says a draft master plan for the entire 15,000sq ft court compound will be ready by the end of this month and submitted to the district magistrate. "We are waiting for

feedback and then it will be revised. We will then declare a heritage precinct in Serampore. The buildings belonging to the Goswami family and the riverfront will not be left out. There will be a control mechanism for new buildings. It should be a mix of old and new buildings. There should be no tall buildings. New buildings

should be of exposed brick. The bus stand in front of the court will be removed. A new location has been identified but a new building for the bus terminus is not ready as funds are not available."

"The National Museum of Denmark has earmarked funds for the restoration of St. Olav's Church and the south

gate of the old Government House. If the bus terminus is shifted new funds for further projects will be released. Restoration of a ruined building next to Nisan ghat, which appears in a painting by Peter Anker of 1790, is likely as well. Landscaping of the river bank, restoration of the Danish cemetery and a tourist master

plan are also proposed," says museum curator Bente Wolff, who was recently here along with restoration architect Flemming Aalund. The latter and historian Simon Rasten had earlier produced the report titled *Indo-Danish Heritage Buildings of Serampore*.

The state government has no allocation for restoration. Last year, the Centre had granted Rs 80 crore. Initially, Rs 34.8 lakh was spent on the Government House in the court compound, and in the second phase the expenditure will be Rs 34.5 lakh. The brick wall around the former Danish compound was originally erected in 1780 by Lieutenant Colonel Ole (Olav) Bie, governor of Frederiksnagore. The former Government House was built in several stages but the original façade from the 1770s still exists. Till 1999 it was used as a court house and it was condemned thereafter.

Now, the restoration work is on at full pace. A concrete staircase erected at some stage has been removed. The original beams had earlier been replaced with steel joists. Some architectural features are

being recreated. Gopa Sen, an architect, had started the work, and has now been joined by conservation architect Manish Chakraborti who is providing further expertise. The back gate of the compound will be restored first, followed by the main gate, according to the plans of the National Museum of Denmark.

The mason who is heading the team is Mia Sardar of Murshidabad, who says he was involved in the restoration of the Victoria Memorial Hall, Currency Building, Metcalfe Hall and Jorasanko Thakurbari. His speciality is working with lime, an old skill which some architects are trying to revive. Wolff and Aalund say the Government House may be turned into a museum and they wish that the compound would be used for the recreation of local people.

Denmark's forthcoming project is the once-perfectly-symmetrical south gate of the building, whose construction is attributed to the Danish engineer, Major B.A. von Wickede, who was responsible for building the prison, the main building of the Serampore College and the completion of St. Olav's Church.

After the construction of the new land registration office building and the godown for storage of election material next to it, the derelict gate was hardly visible, obscured even further by the promiscuous growth of plants, and the hawkers and rickshaws. The Danes will restore it on condition that the election godown is demolished. Hawkers and rickshaws may remain at the side of the gate, but not directly in front of it. "If we put in money in the restoration the management must be in place," says Wolff.

G.M. Kapur, state convener and governing council member, Intach, says the organisation which the Centre has recognised as a "centre of excellence" and for which a budgetary allocation of Rs 100 crore has been made, is managing the project on behalf of the National Museum of Denmark.

St. Olav's Church, which has a square in front of it, where the bus terminus is located, adjoins the court compound. Aalund says: "The church is in a precarious condition. So it was closed. Wooden beams are falling and parts of the roof have collapsed. Rising damp and termites have made it more vulnerable. Scaffolding will prop up the beams during work."

This identifying mark of the town is held in veneration by people of all religions. The report on the church, a property of the Calcutta Diocesan Trust Association, will be ready within three months, and a year and a half more will be required for its restoration.

But as Wolff says: "St. Olav is a saint in Norway at a time when Denmark and Norway were one country. We are very concerned that the church be used." Of what use is conservation if it is not for the people?

## BACK TO LIME AND BRICK DUST FOR RESTORATION



Mason Mia Sardar along with Bente Wolff and Flemming Aalund before a lime pit at the former Danish Government House

Lime or *chuna* along with *surki* or brick dust were the two most important building materials at one time. Lime was used in Mohenjodaro. But builders stopped using them once cement became easily available. Using lime and *surki* is a time-consuming and laborious and hence expensive process despite their obvious advantages. But now there is a movement all over the world to popularise the use of lime.

In Serampore, lime is being used extensively, and the previous governor, Gopalkrishna Gandhi, had ordered the restoration of Raj Bhavan using lime. Lime is porous and flexible like terracotta and it can breathe, says Bente Wolff, curator, National Museum of Denmark. Cement and lime are incompatible media and if the former is

used it will disintegrate over a period of time.

In buildings over 100 years old, lime mortar was used, says Partha Ranjan Das, chairman, project committee, WBHC. Lime mortar and plaster of different qualities and mixes are used in various countries. In India, lime with different binding properties are produced in different regions. Buildings more than a century old reject foreign material.

The waterproofing quality of lime is better, and when lime is cured it gets stronger over time. Lime is flexible, whereas cement is rigid. When water seeps in through masonry it stays there and causes damage. Lime plaster can be reused, as was done when the Town Hall was restored.

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