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# The Europe on the Ganges goes Digital: Visions and Revisions

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**Abstract:**

The advent of Digital Humanities has changed the way academia deals with Humanities. It has also led to the reformulation of various academic discourses associated with Digital Humanities itself. This paper shall look into how digital intervention in the nature of the archive enables the process of heritage conservation in developing, Postcolonial societies. The digital culture is contributing in a large way to restore the colonial heritage of the postcolonial sites and the phenomenon is unique in its way as it overcomes many of the previously encountered challenges in a pragmatic and efficient manner.

As a case study, I would like to look into the area from Kolkata to Bandel in West Bengal is sometimes known as the "Europe in the Ganges". The name comes from the existence of the colonial remnants of the Portuguese, Dutch, Danish, French and English concentrated in an area of about 20Kms. The area, rich in colonial heritage, has suffered abject neglect post-1947 and is in the danger of being obliterated completely. My paper aims to show that how recent Digital conservation projects in recent times have used the power of the digital world to show directions in heritage conservation that not only focuses on the built heritage but also takes into cognizance community memory and "intangible heritage".

**Keywords: Digital Humanities, Postcolonial Studies, Archive, Little Europe, Europe on the Ganges, West Bengal.**

The area around Kolkata, India, known as "Europe on the Ganges" (*Dutch in Bengal: Heritage Urban Planning and academics*)It is a stretch of about 33kms starting from Bandel in North to Calcutta in South along the river Hugli. This region is remarkable for existence of the erstwhile colonial pockets of European powers, not only the British, but also Portuguese, French, Dutch and the Danish. The first Europeans in this region were the Portuguese and they set up a thriving trading post at Bandel-Hooghly by the end of the 16th century. (Crawford n.pag) They were soon followed by the Dutch in Chinsurah, French in Chandannagar[1], Danish in Serampore and the British at first at Calcutta and then over the region. However, it must be mentioned that most of these trading posts were handed over or captured by the British by the 19th century, except Chandannagar which existed nominally as a French colony till 1952[2]. The built heritage in this area is quite remarkable consisting of some of the oldest churches in Bengal, forts and administrative buildings and cemeteries.

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[1]the name Chandannagar is used throughout the paper unless specified otherwise.
[2]See Sen for details of Chandannagar's independence

After a systematic neglect, post-independence there has been some effort in the last decades to preserve the heritage of this region. But it is not merely a preservation of the built heritage, a lot of preservation projects have also explicitly focussed on preserving the "intangible cultural heritage" of this region. The internet has played a very vital role in mediating the preservation measures. It is beyond doubt that the advent of the field of Digital Humanities has altered the way we look at Humanities and other associated fields. The strategies, methods and ways that have been associated with humanities have also faced a radical shift. This paper seeks to consider the heritage conservation efforts in the region in the larger sphere of Digital Humanities and would like to discuss the following aspects. First one needs to describe the systematic neglect of heritage of this region post-independence and other contingent factors of decolonization has influenced the archive of knowledge about this region. Secondly, I would like to consider the *Heritage Chandernagore* Project, *Dutch in Chinsurah* Project and the *Serampore Initiative* as the representative heritage conservation measures and how digital intervention has reconfigured the concept of heritage.

The degradation of the heritage structures I would argue is a product of decolonization. The attitude towards these heritage structures, as I would argue suffered from a deliberate nationalistic amnesia about the colonial past after decolonization.The neglect was even more stark for the non-British European heritage because the histories of these settlements had little or no value outside their immediate local surroundings. Their colonial function was often remodelled and instead an attitude based on its modern utility prevailed. For example, Laldighi, a lake which used to be inside the now demolished Fort of Orleans of Chandannagar now serves as a fishing pond for the local communities.

It did not help that the archival records of these colonies were irrevocably lost due to successive years of neglect or in some cases due to their actual physical transportation to the Mother Country (the administrative records of Chandannagar can be found in France)[3].Therefore, we need to be also aware of the (un)availability of archival materials in shaping a perception of heritage. There was also no effort to compile the oral historical tradition of shared memories of the colonial the regions. The state of affairs was even intensified by the fact that most of these colonies (except Chandannagar) were re-colonized by the British, adding another layer of difficulty is assessing the Non-British history of this region. The larger political aspects of the decolonization also intervened, and therefore the archives and scholarship about these colonies in other European languages became largely inaccessible to the Anglophile postcolonial citizen of India. There were also no tangible efforts to promote these places as tourist attractions. Therefore, the common people of this region had no stake in keeping up the heritage of the area. The fate of these invaluable colonial heritages seemed to languish in inaccessible archives and in the hands of a few enthusiasts.But the advent of the World Wide Web has opened a lot of archives that might help to build a more democratic archive of the region. But Jim O'Toole reinforces the idea that power may have corrupted the archive as a repository for social memory (qtd.in Blouin 7) Therefore, one needs to use the archive with the knowledge of its limitations and an effort

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[3]Ibid.

to supplement the myopia of a given archive, or as Mary Bartlett puts it, "curatorial patronage and mediation of more selective, fluid and mobile group identities, those defined outside of a single, modern nation state." (qtd.in Blouin 8).  Only then, one can perhaps reach a fuller picture of the story. Herein, comes in the value of "intangible cultural heritage" whichis defined by UNESCO as

> … traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts. ("What is Intangible Cultural Heritage?")

However, in our scenario, there is sharp binary of identification between written archive and intangible cultural heritage. Recorded archive is primarily the colonizers view while intangible heritage is almost identified with the indigenous people. But to simply posit the idea of a European archive against the indigenous local memory would be to play along the grand narrative of colonial encounter. We must therefore look for intersections and interactions more than conflicts and oppositions when the purpose is documenting the heritage. Our task is not simply to critique the existing archive but also achieve a redefinition of an archive, which in turn, redefines the wider discourses that have given birth to these archives. This reclamation,

> entails a struggle against very powerful institutional forces that toy with our imaginings for reasons of monetary, political, or professional gain. It is a struggle for our individual and collective identities that call us to appropriate the making of our own memories. (Blouin 10)

The abovementioned problems seem to be addressed by the three projects of heritage conservation taken place in the region in the recent years in "The Europe on the Ganges". The *Dutch in Chinsurah* Project was the first one to be undertaken and completed in 2015. The next project was *Heritage Chandernagore* project that was also completed in early 2016. Another project underway aims at the restoration of the Danish colonial remains in Serampore[4]. I want to use these three projects as case studies to illustrate how Digital Humanities can make a fruitful intervention in reconfiguring the heritage of a region.

Both the Chandannagar project and Chinsurah Project were headed by Aishwarya Tipnis Architects, a heritage conservation company operating out of Delhi and majorly funded by the embassies of France and Netherlands. Thus, there was some concurrent ideological underpinning of the first two projects. The purpose was to create a "memory bank" and set up a database online and to unravel "the various layers and interconnection of natural and cultural, tangible and intangible, international and local values that defines the town." (*Dutch in Chinsurah*) In the first phase both the projects catalogued the built heritage of this region. In Chandannagar, the team headed by Tipnis created a list of 99 buildings in 2011. (Gupta "A French toast to Chandannagar.") Similar documentation was carried out for Chinsurah. In the next phase, team of students and academics went round the town to unearth

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[4]For details, see "The Serampore Initiative.".

oral histories and anecdotes of the residents. For Chandannagar project, such people were called "citizen Historians" and for Chinsurah they were called "Rangers".

> This had two advantages firstly that it built trust amongst the locals and allowed access and deeper penetration into the community …and secondly it became a word of mouth medium of dissemination of the information collected during the survey to the others in the community. Local enthusiasts and historians, school teachers came forward and shared their insight into the history of the town. Interviews were conducted with residents, students, rickshaw pullers, teachers, doctors, people on the street to gauge the sense of place (*Dutch in Chinsurah*)

The common people who have some memories or photos of the region were asked to share them on social media with appropriate hashtags for a comprehensive album. (*Heritage Chandernagore*)

For Chinsurah, an additional survey of the Dutch cemetery was carried out in association with the Presidency University Kolkata. It was published as a separate database called Dutch cemetery In Chinsurah linked to the main site. The digitization aimed,

> [1]To transcribe headstone inscriptions and insert architectural, biographical, geographical, demographic, literary and historical metadata.
> [2] To record such data in a digital database with facilities for framing flexible and comparative searches, the building of timelines and creating map locators.
> [3]Link the information that is at present available only in scattered fragments across information repositories, cemetery databases and genealogy websites.(*The Dutch Cemetery in Chinsurah*)

The team for the Chandannagar Project also undertook a project to update the library and holdings of the *Institute De Chandernagore* by digitizing them to make them widely accessible.  (Gupta "A French toast to Chandannagar")

Both the projects held extensive community outreach programmes in the region involving local people. The purpose was not only to collect memories and heritage but also to engage the community with their heritage in a creative way. It consisted of heritage walks, drawing and quiz competitions, the larger purpose of this project was to form:

> a base for the "integrated development" of Chinsurah where the goals of urban heritage conservation are intertwined into the economic social and cultural development of the town. The project methodology is guided by UNESCO Recommendations for the Historic Urban Landscape (2011), which is an approach to the management of heritage resources in dynamic and constantly changing environments. (*Dutch In Chinsurah*)

The Serampore Initiative was founded with the help of national Museum of Denmark to protect the built heritage of the erstwhile Danish colony or Srirampur. (previously called Fredricksnagar) The Initiative seeks to

> …enhance the specific historic identity of Serampore and improve the aesthetic and recreational qualities of the town heritage buildings through citizen-centric inclusive conservation projects by actively involving the local populations. (Banarjee and Bandopadhyay)

The websites of these two projects are formed with keeping their interactive nature in mind. The website of the *Heritage Chandernagore* welcomes users with a video that makes us aware of the unique experience of the area. The page that opens after the video contains a collage of pictures of from the past and present of Chandannagar. The pictures cover not only buildings but also the people. On clicking the button called "Flag your memories" a short video explains people how to flag the memories in a geo taggable map of Chandannagar with yellow flags on it. A timeline below lets users jump to the older memories of Chandannagar. Each memory contains an anecdote with a picture pertaining to the history of the region. Examples include the foundation of the important institutions of Chandannagar, unique rituals and customs of the town and various other oral memories that can be classified as the "Intangible Cultural heritage". The page is totally user centric and encourages users to make valuable contributions. It is a crowdsourcing measure that does not discriminate between European or indigenous memories, or oral and written memories. Another section lets one know about the built heritage of the region and it can be classified based on the type of heritage, state of preservation, architectural style. Options are available to add more such memory flags makes it an open, participative archive. The site needs proper promotion and participation so that not only locals but also ancestors of people related to Chandannagar may come forward with more memories to enlarge the database.*Dutch in Chinsurah* website is slightly wider in scope but it is not as interactive as the previous one. It contains interactive maps that gives people a sense of the growth and development of the place. The maps are achieved by overlapping GIS mapping, graphic mapping and historic overlay to convey a sense of continuity and simultaneity of past and present(georeferencing). By following the maps one can get a quick idea about the evolution of the area over the centuries. The Dutch project has also rightfully taken into cognizance the intermingling of the Dutch and British heritage of the region.The digitization of the cemetery project exists as an independent yet integral part of the website. The various stages of the formation of the website is also chronicled in the website to give a sense of the methodology of the practise. Both the websites are invaluable and the Dutch project "claims to be the first of its kind database in India enabling research." ("About the Project" *The Dutch Cemetery in Chinsurah)*

The subtitle of the Dutch Project reads as "A Digital Humanities approach to archiving and researching the Dutch heritage in Bengal." It is also called a "digital Archive of memories" thus privileging the role of memory. (Hence, we find short videos which inform us about the community's perspective on its heritage. According to Tipnis,

> The idea is not to bring back the old Chinsurah or freeze it in time. If we want any development in tourism and urban planning, then it should respect its history. The site provides a way of how to go about things in the future. Urban planners and municipalities can take cue when they design anything new. (Dutch *in Chinsurah)*

The question that we must address now how digital interventions can bring about a reconfiguration of the archive. There is no doubt that it becomes very easy for someone with a passing interest to glean detailed knowledge from these websites. It also makes history enjoyable due its multimedia presentations. Andrea Witcomb says that multimedia copies of heritages "…heightens the sense of "affect". "This occurs when a physical reaction to an object involves an emotional response that leads to more understanding." (41) In other words, it encourages responses beyond disinterested and academic, and focusses on intimate and relatable responses, thus democratizing the archive. It "offers an entry point for imagination to play a role in the process of coming to know." (42) In a way,

> By drawing communities into the consumption and creation of digital content, cultural institutions can take a proactive role in developing new literacy by enabling direct experience of content production and creating environments for community engagement. This initiative is termed ''community cocreation'' and its implementation is comparatively straightforward: the cultural institution [digitizing organization] provides ICT [Information communication Technology] infrastructure and training programs, and communities provide original content in the form of narratives, which the community itself produces. (Russo and Watkins 151)

There is also the possibility of polysemic documentation and shared interpretative approach (Cameron and Robinson165-192) by putting information in the form of metadata. A similar approach has been taken in these projects where additional information can be accessed for those who want a detailed study of the topic. By using these websites, one can also move from one archive to another through links in the Internet and therefore facilitates movement across the archive.

But these projects are merely the beginning of a process of sustainable development. "Efforts are on to nominate a part of Hooghly district, known as Hooghly Zone to archaeologists and historians, for the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites" (Gupta "Heritage") There should be an active role of the government to promote the tourism in this region. Most of these heritage conservation projects show a curious relationship with the "market". Nobody can ignore the link between tourism and these projects. In fact, tourism can be considered as the primary motivator behind these projects. It is no surprise that these projects are often funded by the embassies and governments of the colonized countries. The process is again two-fold. By preserving colonial remnants, these countries will be able to be a player in the "search for roots" tourism,[5] which entails a citizen of the colonizing countries would come back to the colonized countries to search for some long-lost colonial ancestor who might have lived or died here. The digitization of cemeteries can be explicitly related to this project of unravelling romanticized personages from one's own genealogies. On the other hand, by preserving the colonial heritage one can also interest the members of the local communities to travel to the Mother country. In the age of fierce international tourism,

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[5]See Buettner.

preservation of such token of cultural exchange acts as free tourism promotions. "These heritage structures must also pay for themselves"[6]to sustain theirselves in future

Paul Conway alerts us to two possible pitfalls of this overdependence on technology in this "Age of Google". He says that on one hand, Google (which he uses as a metaphor) churns out data "…that is simultaneously fixed and fluid yet decontextualized for use and reuse in ways that may in no way represent the original intent of the creator." (63) Therefore, the specialized knowledge of this area tends to be diluted. The other problem that he mentions is,

> What is now clear is that large-scale information providers are competitors with the cultural heritage community in defining what preservation means in the future. In the age of Google, nondigital content does not exist, and digital content with no impact is unlikely to survive (64)

This phenomenon has a two-fold impact. On one hand, it takes the onus of heritage from communities into itself and becomes entangled in the process of manipulation of the market. Therefore, information and preservation of cultural heritage needs to continuously "market" itself for survival. We must ensure that repositories of such valuable knowledge must sustain itself over the internet for the future generations.

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[6]For details see "UNESCO: Need public participation to preserve Hooghly's heritage."

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