

## **ST01- Community, Sustainability and Heritage**

The legacy of Patrick Geddes in India and conservation of shared Indo-Danish Heritage in Serampore as an example of a current approach

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### **Abstract**

India's cultural heritage is so complex and overwhelming that the concern for a timely conservation often concentrates on the historic monuments of outstanding importance, leaving less concern for ordinary heritage that otherwise play a vital role in the immediate environment, where people live and work. Often people get so accustomed to the place they are living, that they hardly notice the qualities in the build environment and in a rapid process of modernization there is an imminent risk that historic buildings and heritage values are being irrevocably lost, even before they have been identified, documented and appreciated.

Far ahead of his time the Scottish town planner, Patrick Geddes advocated a 'conservative surgery' taking point of departure in a civic survey of the whole set of existing conditions. Engaged with planning of eighteen Indian cities between 1915 and 1919 he left an important legacy that remains an underrated source of inspiration for modern city improvement that is less expensive and provide more enjoyment.

Serampore, previously a small village on the Hooghly River, was in Danish possession for about 100 years from 1755 to 1845. During this time the place developed as a thriving trading post, and more recently it has become an industrial and commercial town that forms part of the greater Kolkata urban conurbation. In a nutshell the town represents all the problems facing conservation of heritage and urban development in India due to rapid population growth, rising land value, poverty and lack of proper sanitation and infrastructure.

For about five years the National Museum of Denmark has been concerned with conservation of the Indo-Danish Heritage working in close cooperation with local partners. This presentation explains the context of work and explains why conservation of heritage is beneficial to local citizens.

**Key words:** Identity, community, stakeholder, participation, urban change, sustainability.

### **Patrick Geddes in India.**

Between 1915 and 1919 the Scottish planner and consultant Patrick Geddes (1854-1932) was commissioned to draw up town planning schemes in 18 cities in various parts of India. Although still a British colony Geddes was commissioned as an independent consultant and did not in any way represent



the British Crown and often suggested alternative and less costly proposals intended to better the living condition in the multicultural communities<sup>1</sup>. While working in Indore, he exchanged letters with Mahatma Gandhi in which they expressed a sense of common purpose. In Bengal, he became a close friend of the poet and writer, Nabindra Tagore, exchanging dreams and ideas in a lengthy correspondence which greatly influenced on the development of Tagore's university for higher education in Santiniketan<sup>2</sup>.

## **Philosophy**

Originally trained as a biologist, Geddes came to think the process of city growth as an evolving organism – one in which every generation makes its own contribution to the physical space. In his seminal book on urban planning, Camillo Sitte<sup>3</sup> had recorded and analysed cityscape from its spatial and monumental appearance - emphasizing on the aesthetic values of the historic city. Geddes introduced a social dimension to the process of analysis, which he called 'civic survey', and drawing on established, medical practices and dicta, such as 'diagnosis before treatment' and 'conservative treatment', he described a process for adapting historic buildings and urban space to modern requirements that focused on minimal intervention in existing conditions and maintenance of the already existing qualities in the environment<sup>4</sup>.

## **Diagnostic Survey**

In all his reports Geddes expressed a human approach. He starts to investigate and consider the entirety of the existing conditions, seeking out how the place has grown to be what it is, and recognizing its advantages and its difficulties in striving to meet the ideas and ideals of the people concerned. Using allegories drawn from nature, he saw the processes of repair, renewal, and rebirth as natural phenomena of development, which should be sustained by voluntary co-operation and civic responsibility<sup>5</sup>.

## **Conservative surgery**

In the case of Madras, present day Chennai, the Municipal Plan suggested extensive house demolition and street widening in an effort to relief congestion. As an alternative, Geddes advocated his method of 'conservative surgery' which implied a modest and less costly selective demolition of individual derelict houses in favour of creating new open space planted with shade trees to improve the local living condition and create more civic concern by the local residents to the betterment of the immediate neighbourhood<sup>6</sup>. Based on his experience of upgrading slums in his home city of Edinburgh, he brought this experience forward in India, where he challenged the existing colonial hierarchies related to poverty and race.

However, only a few of the plans were ever executed, partly because they were far ahead of their time and not widely understood, and partly because few educated planners were able to convert his visionary ideas

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<sup>1</sup> (Beattie 2003: 7-19).

<sup>2</sup> (Meller 1990: 221-223).

<sup>3</sup> Sitte, C (1889): *Der Städtebau*; first published in Austria the book was subsequently reissued in many editions and languages that greatly influenced on city planning in Europe

<sup>4</sup> (Bandarin and Van Oers 2012: 12)

<sup>5</sup> (Tyrwhitt 1947: 24; extracts from Geddes 1917: *Town Planning in Kapurthala*, and : 11, introduction by Lewis Mumford)

<sup>6</sup> (Tyrwhitt 1947: 40-59; Geddes 1915: *Report on the Towns in the Madras Presidency*)



to actual plans and projects. The First World War brought his work in India to an abrupt stop, but his advanced ideas have since inspired many individuals, who have worked the same way<sup>7</sup>.

### **Serampore, - a historic town with specific identity**

About a century has elapsed since Geddes worked in India and proposed urban improvement of the deplorable health conditions in the Barabazar of Kolkata<sup>8</sup>. Much have changed since then, but the basic problems of population growth and poverty still remain a challenge to the development of modern Indian cities suffering from the exponential growth and increased traffic congestion.

Greater Kolkata Metropolis is now the third largest urban conurbation in India, and the surrounding districts and towns have been absorbed into one continuous urban sprawl that is about to change the special character of the place. Serampore lies at the Hooghly River about 30 km north of Kolkata, and is but one of the many towns encountering this frantic growth. However, it retains a specific historic identity from the time when the place developed as a Danish trading post from 1755 to 1845.

It is fascinating to imagine the first Danish sailors and merchants who sailed up the Hooghly River and anchored next to Fredriksnagore, as they named the place in the 18<sup>th</sup> century after the Danish sovereign King Frederik V. The thought stirs of course a special feeling of nostalgic in a Dane with knowledge of the past adventures of the sailors, who endured a long sea voyage from Denmark around the Cap of Good Hope of South Africa.

Today we fly from Denmark to India in less than 12 hours and the globalisation in all its forms contributes to the notion that all mankind shares a common destiny and the possibility of enjoying the rich diversity of cultural expressions has become an important international concern<sup>9</sup>.

When Europeans sailed to India in the 18th century they were not simply searching adventure – commercially, the enterprise was aimed at establishing trade connections, returning with exotic goods and making a profit. Successful Danish merchants earned a fortune on the Indian trade enabling them to purchase large town houses and magnificent mansions in the countryside north of Copenhagen.

C. W. Duntzfelt (1762-1809) was born in India and employed by the Asiatic Company serving with the administration in Serampore. After his return to Copenhagen he started his own company and became the leading figure of the Danish trade with India and one of the wealthiest citizens at the time. Local Indian middlemen also prospered on the trade, and the Goswami family in particular became well established in Serampore enabling them to acquire land and build a large Rajbari (palace) divided into several sections for use by the extended family.

It is important to remember that Serampore - as well as Tranquebar in Tamil Nadu - was formally established as trading posts in full agreement with the local rulers, and that tax was duly paid of all exported commodities.

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<sup>7</sup> Most notable are the contemporaries Patrick Abercrombie and Lewis Mumford, and more recently Jane Jacobs and Christopher Alexander.

<sup>8</sup> (Beattie 2003: 7-19).

<sup>9</sup> UNESCO World Heritage Convention of 1972 and Convention for the Diversity of Cultural Expressions of 2005.





*Fig 1. The Goswami Rajbari, southern part of the complex, is now in ruin and partly collapsed behind the impressive façade with European classical details mingled with purely Indian features (F.Aalund 2009).*

### **Conservation of Shared Indo-Danish heritage**

A request for help to restore the derelict St Olav Church prompted the National Museum of Denmark (NMD) to initiate a survey in 2008 to identify the condition of the shared Indian-Danish heritage buildings, and suggest possible ways to assist. The survey resulted in new on-site observations and access to historical sources in Denmark and Norway supplemented the information<sup>10</sup>. Subsequently the NMD succeeded to raise funds and a Serampore Initiative was launched as a five years' program from 2012-18 for restoration of selected historic buildings and dissemination of information about the history of Serampore<sup>11</sup>.

The major historic edifices, such as the Main Gate and the former Danish Government House (dating back to 1755, when the Danish Asiatic Society established the trading post), possess very obvious heritage significance: However, the real value of buildings of more modest appearance may be difficult to recognize when they have been modified without respect for the original architectural qualities or left abandoned in derelict conditions, as for example in the cases of the former British Land Register Office,

<sup>10</sup> (Aalund and Rasten:2009)

<sup>11</sup> Project implemented by The National Museum of Denmark and funded by Realdania, a private Danish foundation, and the Ministry of Culture; head of project Bente Wolf, PhD., curator for South-East Asia.



the South Gate to the former Danish Government Compound and a large mansion formerly known as the Danish Tavern and Hotel. These historic buildings had been neglected and subsequently declared condemned by the Public Works Department (PWD). In consultation with the Local Government these buildings were selected for restoration by the National Museum of Denmark and the work is about to be completed adjusting the buildings to a new appropriate use that will justify continuous maintenance and upkeep<sup>12</sup>. Simultaneously the former Danish Government House is being restored by funds provided by the Central Government.

While all these buildings are government property many other buildings of similar significance in private ownership will inevitably meet a sad fate due to lack of public funding and support, whether it is the grand houses of the important families of the Goswamis, the Roys, the Deys and the Shahs, or local vernacular architecture such as the jute mills workers living quarters.



*Fig. 2. Restoration of St. Olav Church was completed in 2016 on behalf of Calcutta Diocesan Trust Association of the Church of North India, CDTA. The church has been in continuous use for services by the Serampore College since its inauguration in 1805 and is now used primarily by the local Christian congregation; apart from its religious function as a church, it is an important historic monument and landmark. The work received the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Award for Excellence in Restoration; consulting architect Manish Chakraborti (F.Aalund 2016)*

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<sup>12</sup> All projects are initiated in cooperation with the Local Government; special thanks are due to Intach convenor for Bengal, G.M.Kapur and the architect consultants Gopa Sen and Manish Chakraborti, as well as to the contactors and their employees: Ray and Mitra, Ali Akhbar, and Mascon.





*Fig.3. Denmark Tavern and Hotel under restoration; the large ruined mansion facing on to the river has a strategic location on the main axis stretching from the landing place towards the former Danish Government House. The restored building will help to maintain the authentic feeling along an important stretch of the river edge, and transformed into a modern Coffee House the building will serve a public purpose as an attractive meeting place; consulting architect Manish Chakraborti (F.Aalund 2017)*

### **Creating awareness and civic concern**

Of course, the amount of physical change that the Serampore Initiative may achieve in the course of five years is limited, but the actual restoration of five key buildings has proved inspiring and helps create more attention to the need for urban conservation at a larger scale. So far a group of concerned local citizens have formed the ‘Shrirampur Heritage Restoration Initiative’, SHRI, and started to publish a local newsletter. As a complementary effort the Faculty of Architecture at CEPT University in Ahmedabad is conducting two courses in which the students get a first-hand experience of all phases of work relating to the conservation of built heritage, including interaction with property owners and stakeholders, preparing building survey and documentation, condition assessment, and proposal for conservation, as well as the production of booklets and presentation posters<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> Instructors are Jigna Desai, PhD, Area Chair for Conservation, CEPT University; Khushi Shah and Shristina Shrestha, conservation architects; <http://cept.ac.in/news/partnership-with-national-museum-of-denmark-for-conservation-at-serampore-west-bengal> (online accessed October 2017)





*Fig 4. Interior of the south wing of the former Danish Government House during restoration. Originally constructed in 1771 the building was extended several times, most lately by the British, and modified after independence when it functioned as a court until it fell into ruin. Restoration started in 2008 with funds provided by the central government and work will be completed in 2018 when the building will serve as a cultural centre and museum; consultant architect Gopa Sen ( F.Aalund 2014).*

Five properties were documented in December 2017 and in December 2018 work will focus on the industrial heritage centred on the Jute Mills and workers living quarters. As the main commercial enterprise and single largest employer in the town the Jute Mill factories are vital to the livelihood of a very large number of the citizens. Additionally, a total of five individual Master Studies will be completed, and their endeavours have contributed considerably to creating awareness about cultural heritage conservation as a means to improve the quality of the build environment.

### **Urban change affecting the historic townscape.**

Improvement in living conditions of a new middle class has resulted in urban congestion, a boom in demands for better housing, and subsequent speculation in land values which is about to transform the urban environment. Without any specific regulation, apart from a general clause restricting new constructions to a height of five stories, the historic townscape is facing dramatic transformation. It goes without saying, that the increased population density puts a heavy burden on infrastructure and reduces access to public open space.



Building owners have a legitimate and long-established interest in rising land values and politicians are reluctant to change established practice. As a consequence, historic houses will be demolished in favour of new high rise constructions unless individual owners are genuinely interested in preserving their inherited property for sentimental reasons<sup>14</sup>. The dramatic change of streetscape is well justified in the commercial districts, but otherwise consent for demolition and replacement with new constructions should be evaluated on basis of an overall conservation and development plan for the historic part of the town. The purpose should be to maintain and improve aesthetic, environmental and recreational qualities that take their point of departure in local identity and the specific history of Serampore.

From a Danish perspective, priority is directed towards the conservation of the central part of the town, where the Danish administration was located, but other areas of the town have similar importance, if the character of Serampore is to be conserved. Specific interest relates to the large residences of the former Indian landlords, the famous Serampore College and associated buildings, as well as the more recent industrial heritage of the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The Municipal Act 1998 requires that the municipalities prepare adequate plans to guide future development. The first Draft Municipal Development Plan for Serampore provides analysis of the current situation and outlines the future planning objectives, pointing to three priority areas pertaining to heritage: i) Increase in the percentage of open spaces and green cover; ii) conservation and restoration of historic and heritage buildings; and iii) Improvement of the river banks by way of river front development projects. These sound and well-intended objectives have, however, never materialized and the Plan has been left on the shelf.

So far it has not been possible to gain any support for the implementation of a policy that can control and direct the future town development, and it will hardly be within the capacity of NMD to make this happen<sup>15</sup>. However, an architect design competition for the reconstitution of the Town Square was organized by NMD in 2016 and subsequently the winning team was commissioned to prepare a detailed report for conservation and development of the Sub-divisional Office and Court Compound. The plan is now being drafted in agreement between NMD and the Hooghly District Magistrate with the explicit aim to conserve and sustain the authentic feeling of the place at the same time as new development is possible<sup>16</sup>. Uniquely, the compound has been in continuous use from its foundation by the Danish administration in 1755 and the development plan shall ensure that the place continue to thrive and serve as the main administrative centre of town.

Behind the various initiatives there is a profound reference to Patrick Geddes doctrine of ‘civic reconstruction’ that can be summarized from one of his letters: ‘...we now start with the idea that cities are fundamentally to be preserved and lived in; and not freely destroyed, to be driven through, and speculated upon’<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> In one single and unique case the family has established a fund from the sale revenue of the land with the express purpose of maintaining the historic building Golok Dham for prosperity.

<sup>15</sup> Indian Institute of Engineering Science and Technology, IIST, Shibpur, was commissioned to prepare a ‘*Heritage Survey and Integrated Conservation and Development Plan for Serampore’s Historic Core*’, January 2016.

<sup>16</sup> *Upgradation and Landscape Master Plan*, Draft, September 2017, architect consultants Ashish Acharjee and Sujoy Das.

<sup>17</sup> (Miller:1990, p. 263)





Fig.5. Plan of the historic core with identification of significant heritage buildings (- survey and mapping is prepared by the Indian Institute of Engineering Science and Technology, IIST, Shibpur, under contract with NMD; survey team headed by professors Souvanic Roy and Subrata Paul).

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## **Bibliography**

Flemming Aalund, architect MAA, Ph.D., consulting architect with a long record of experience in restoration of historic buildings, integrated conservation planning and cultural tourism development in Denmark and internationally, including consultancies for ICOMOS and UNESCO. Assigned as external consultant to the National Museum of Denmark since 2009 advising on conservation of Indo-Danish heritage in Serampore, West Bengal.