



Chinsurah

THE DUTCH HERITAGE

www.dutchinchinsurah.com



Preface

I am delighted to present a beautiful part of Bengal in this booklet. Chinsurah is not far from Kolkata and it was once the largest and most splendid trading post for the Dutch East India Company in India. The Embassy of the Netherlands in New Delhi is joining hands with the Tourism Department of West Bengal to showcase this idyllic spot on the banks of Ganga in an attempt to prompt you to explore the place. The Dutch had a lavish lifestyle in Chinsurah 400 years ago which is evident in the opulent buildings in the area thanks to the brisk business opportunities Bengal offered at that time. In the later days of the Dutch, Chinsurah was known as the rural retreat from Kolkata, where the wealthy spent their weekends. As heritage plays an important role in the identity of a place, a detailed architectural and cultural documentation of Chinsurah is also available on the website www.dutchinchinsurah.com. I hope our efforts help you enjoy Chinsurah's character and rediscover its beautiful face.

Alphonsus Stoelinga

Ambassador of the Netherlands in India



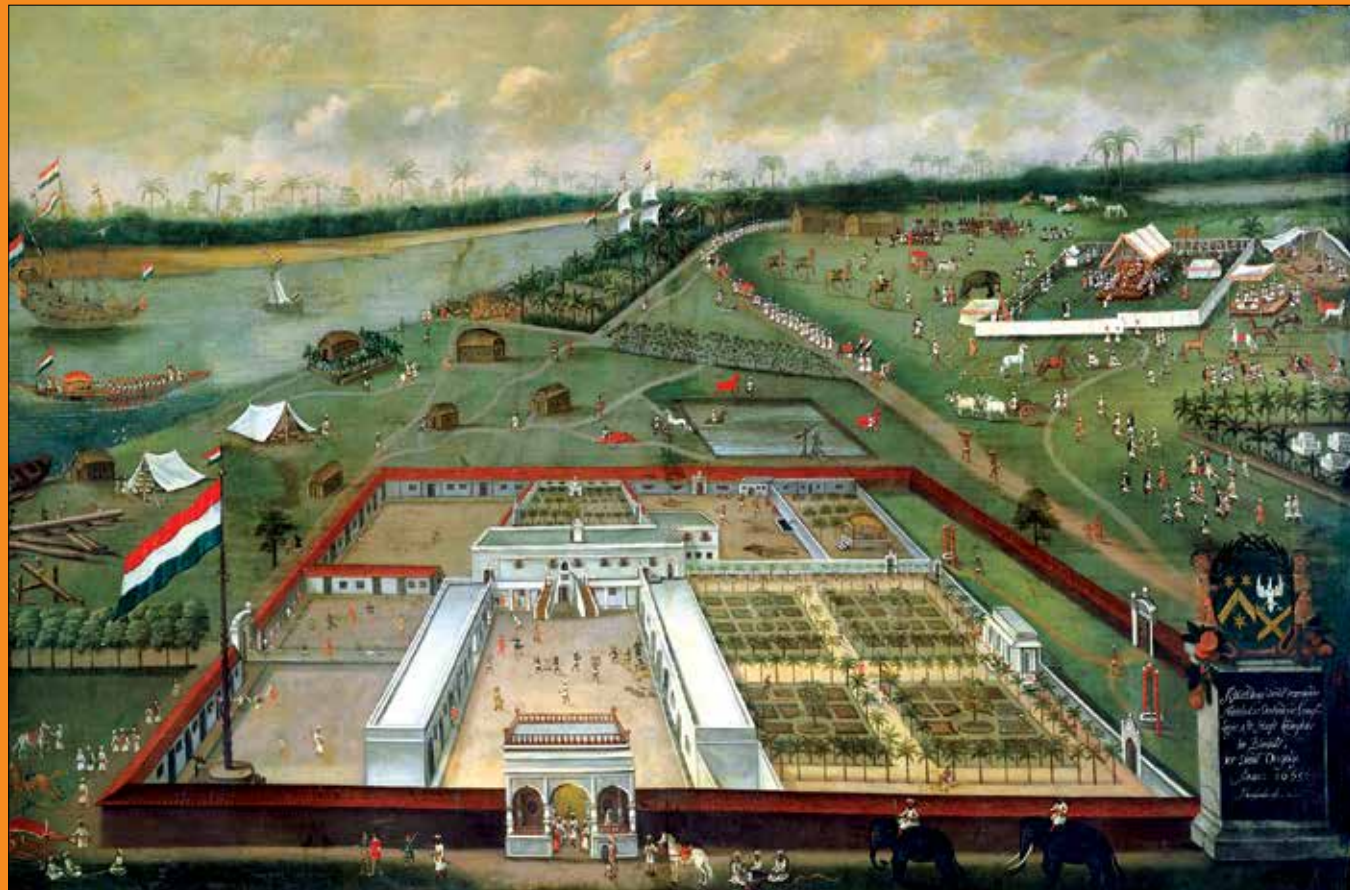
The Dutch in India

A JOURNEY OVER 400 YEARS

Dirck Gerritsz Pomp, also known as 'Dirk China', is the first known Dutchman to have arrived in India, as far back as in 1568. However, a 'formal' beginning of the relationship between the Netherlands and India could be dated to 1604, when Admiral Steven van der Hagen set foot on the shores of Malabar and signed a defence and trade treaty with the Zamorin of Kozhikode. Thus began an era of trading between the two countries. Controlled by the Dutch East India Company, known as VOC (an acronym based on its Dutch name), this period of vigorous trade and commerce lasted up to 1795. However, cultural engagement between the two countries continued over the next two centuries as is evident from the writings of travellers such as Maurits Wagenvoort (1855–1944).

The historical legacy of the vibrant Dutch presence in India is today visible in the form of sturdy fortresses, beautiful tombs, grand country houses, silent factories, sprawling cemeteries and other remains in brick, stone and plaster. Some are ruined, others are well preserved. They are scattered along the entire Indian coastline from Surat to Kolkata, including Vengurla, Kochi, Nagapattinam, Pulicat, Visakhapatnam, Baleshwar and several others. Enthused solely by trade, and with no political ambitions in India, the Dutch looked beyond the coastline and ventured further inland along the great Indian rivers to places like Ahmedabad, Patna, Hyderabad, and, in Bengal, Chinsurah.

◀ A print by Isaac Commelin (1598-1676) from *The Beginning and Progress of the Dutch East India Company* shows the Dutch being welcomed by the Zamorin in 1604.



The Dutch in Chinsurah

IMPRINTS ALONG THE HOOGLY

The presence of European settlements along the Ganga, upriver from its mouth on the Bay of Bengal, has prompted the description of Bengal in the 17th–19th centuries as ‘Europe on the Ganges’. For Dutch traders of the VOC, who had been settling here since 1607, Bengal was the most profitable region in India, and the trading post in Chinsurah, less than 50 kilometres from Kolkata on the banks of the Hooghly river, was the biggest and most impressive in the entire country. After 1740, the VOC’s director of Bengal, Jan Albert Sichterman, commissioned a fort in Chinsurah to strengthen their presence. The fort, with four corner bastions, was named Gustavus after the governor-general, Gustaaf Willem van Imhoff. Unfortunately very little of it now survives.

The Dutch had populated an attractive and strategic location on a river bend. The advantage, apart from quick access to the waterway, was, no doubt, the cool and serene setting. Fanned by the Hooghly’s breeze and blessed by its lovely vistas, it was a

location perfect for pleasure gardens and mansions, with steps leading down to the river. Dutch observers of the time termed these buildings “bangelaers”, or play houses, a word which likely derives from the place of origin: Bengal. Some of these mansions still survive, evoking scenes of afternoon siestas and evening parties, and of a leisurely pace in general—images which largely hold true of the Dutch rhythm of life in Chinsurah. Travelogues and accounts, official reports and records reveal fascinating facets of 200 years of Dutch presence in this area. These range from the perils of navigating the Ganga, to give-and-take relationships with temples, and to delightful tales like that of Clara the rhinoceros, who became a celebrity in the Netherlands.

Many of the Dutch folk who made Chinsurah their home also breathed their last here, and if not their tales, at least the fact of their existence in Chinsurah is etched on the gravestones of the Dutch cemetery at Gorosthan.

◀ Hendrik van Schuylenburgh’s immense painting titled *Head-office of the Dutch East India Company at Oughly in Bengal, A.D. 1665* shows not only how the Dutch lived and worked but also how the Bengalis celebrated their Hindu rituals. The painting is displayed at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



Chinsurah Today

FLOWING OVER THE PAST

A mid-sized town today, Chinsurah acts as a suburb to metropolitan Kolkata. As the seat of the district administration, it engages many of its residents in government service, while others travel to Kolkata everyday for work. Sticking to its character of the 17th century, and the centuries that followed, Chinsurah remains a multi-cultural town; the Hooghly Imambara, Armenian Church and Sandheshwar Jiu Temple attract pilgrims from across the state. Although the history of the Dutch in Chinsurah is almost forgotten, Dutch remains continue to form the canvas for the people's daily rituals and activities. For example, the old Dutch cannon within the compound of the Hooghly Madrasah doubles

up as a wicket for children playing cricket. Today's Maidan ("open field"), large green lungs of the town, was once the vegetable gardens of the Dutch. The esplanade for the British garrison is now the heart of the local community. It is a buzzing place where children play and practice football; elders, women and young adults rendezvous and conduct conversations over numerous cups of *cha* (tea); and where families flock in the evening for street food and entertainment.

The Dutch trading post and their ships may be long gone but the Hooghly river continues to be the lifeline of the town for transportation, recreation and sacred rituals.





Exploring Chinsurah

Chinsurah is located 40 kilometres north of Kolkata. The demarcated area on the map is the extent of the original town during Dutch times. Consequently the concentration of Dutch buildings is in this zone. A suggested heritage walk trail (indicated by the segmented brown line on the map) through the 1.25–square kilometre core of this zone takes in its ambit some of these buildings. The walk takes roughly two hours. The Hooghly

Imambara, Dutch Cemetery and the Tomb of Susanna Anna Maria are outside the demarcated area and visiting them requires an additional hour by motorized transport.

Some of the primary sites and buildings are described in this booklet.

GETTING THERE AND AROUND

Chinsurah is well connected to Kolkata by road and suburban railway. It falls on the Burdwan line, and suburban trains run regularly from Howrah station, getting you there in 50 minutes. Private taxis from Kolkata take about 1.5 to 2 hours. There are many buses that ply regularly between the two places as well.

Within Chinsurah the best modes of transport are cycle-rickshaws and e-rickshaws which are available aplenty at the railway station and at Ghorir More. Shared auto-rickshaws are also an option.

Armenian Church of St John The Baptist

ARMENI TALA, ARMENIAN CHURCH LANE

The foundation stone of this church was laid by Daniël Anthony Overbeck, the last Dutch governor of Chinsurah, and it was built during 1695–1697 by the Armenian Khojah Joseph Margar. His son Joseph Margar's tomb in the same cemetery is the oldest tomb over here.

The present spire was erected in 1822 under the patronage of Sophia Bagram in memory of her husband Simon Phanoos Bagram. Visible from a distance, the two storied high steeple, topped by an onion shaped dome, is a prominent marker in Chinsurah's urban landscape. Records show that Joseph Beglar was the last Armenian to get married here in 1868. The last baptism was performed in 1867, and the last burial was in 1881.

Set in a large compound, the single storied church follows a Latin cross plan with deep verandahs on either side of the naves and a semi circular sanctum at one end. A belfry and steeple rise over the other end. Classical columns of the Ionic, Doric and composite order, as well as cornices and semi circular arched openings with fanlights are notable elements of the building.

The Church remains closed throughout the year and is open for worship only on 13 and 14 January every year to celebrate the feast of John the Baptist whose relics (bones of the hand) are thought to be in the Armenian Church of Holy Nazareth, 65 kilometres away, and are brought here on that day.



Dutch Cemetery

GOROSTHAN, GOROSTHAN ROAD

Built by Louis Tallefert, then director of the VOC in Bengal, the cemetery was active during the 18th–19th centuries, and houses about 45 graves of Dutch citizens who died between 1743 and 1846. The oldest tomb belongs to Sir Cornelius Jonge who died in Chinsurah in 1743. Other prominent people buried here are Daniel Overbeck, Gregorious Herklots, a high official in the VOC, and George Vernet, another VOC director. The latter's tomb has no inscription.

Encompassing roughly 7400 square meters of area on a flat piece

of land, the cemetery is enclosed by a high brick wall and holds mausoleums, tombs and graves.

The mausoleums are typical of the then architectural style and are similar to those found in other Dutch cemeteries in South India. The southern part of the compound is home to 24 extant Dutch tombs, which are of three types: pyramids, tomb boxes, and plain gravestones. Besides memorials to those who have passed on, the cemetery has an interesting bio-diversity in the form of mature trees and beautiful butterflies.





Hooghly Imambara

IMAM BAZAR ROAD

Financed by the endowment of a rich gentleman called Hajee Mohammed Mohsin, the Imambara is reported to have cost Rs 2,17,413 to build during 1841–1861. Of this, Rs 11,721 went towards a large clock procured from England.

The Imambara has a lofty clock tower. Rooms are built around the central quadrangular courtyard. At the northern end there is a large hall paved with marble, within which stands a pulpit with seven steps. The sides of the pulpit are covered with plates of silver, and a verse of the Koran is inscribed on each plate. The walls of the hall and portico are also ornamented with Koranic verses, or passages from the Hadis, in the Tughra character. There is a library on the first floor.

The Imambara's multi-foliated arches, terracotta and stucco formwork on the parapet, friezes on the facade, decorative timber fanlights and a robust entrance archway attract attention.

Strategically located along the banks of the Hooghly near the Jubilee Bridge, the Imambara is one of the most picturesque and frequently visited sites of Chinsurah.

Moti Jheel Mosque

AMRATALA LANE, KHAGRAJOLE ROAD

Chinsurah's only Shia mosque, modelled on the Prince Golam Mohammad Mosque in Kolkata, was constructed in the 1830s by the Persian merchant Nusratulla Khan. Khan Jahan Khan, the last faujdar (imperial Muslim administrator) of Bengal, lies buried here. Situated in a large open space on a raised plinth, the mosque stands out with its magnificent gold coated minarets.

The building is a good example of the amalgamation of the Mughal and colonial

styles. The structure has an inner shrine and a large courtyard. The rectangular inner shrine is divided into five equal bays. The three central bays are topped by a bulbous dome, and each of the corners is covered by a smaller dome. Two minarets, rising from the central area, punctuate the skyline. A decorative stucco parapet with multi-foliated arches and small spherical urns wraps around the shrine.

Worship is performed at the mosque till date.



Shandeshwar Jiu Temple

SHANDESHWAR TALA, SHANDESHWAR TALA ROAD

According to legend, almost 500 years ago, local fishermen rescued a representation of Shandeshwar (a form of Shiva) from the waters of the Ganga, and a local landlord created a temple for the deity. Daniel Overbeck, the last Dutch governor, gifted the shrine two brass drums, the sounds of which still reverberate during ceremonies. The temple ghat was established by Shyamram Shome, a high official of the VOC. There are more small shrines in the complex.

The five or six-storied shrine's square sanctum is surrounded by a verandah used as a circumambulatory path. Besides the main spire, there are smaller spires on the white marble façade. Although the sanctum dates back to the 18th century, the superstructure is a recent construction.

The temple is the site of the 10-day long ritual and Gajan festival and fair held to mark the end of the Bengali year (April).



Tomb of Susanna Anna Maria

KAEIPARA, DHARAMPUR, GRAND TRUNK ROAD

The eye-catching neoclassical and baroque hybrid monument, situated in the middle of a large garden, belongs to an important Dutch lady of the same name. Susanna (d. 1809) married twice: once the Dutch director of Bengal, and later, a well-to-do English businessman. According to local tradition, however, she is credited with seven husbands, though there is no evidence to support this. In any case, she was the inspiration for Ruskin Bond's novel *Susanna's Seven Husbands*, based on which a Hindi film was made in 2011.

The property on which the octagonal monument stands was used as a burial ground for English and Dutch residents. Surmounted by a dome with a steeple, the tomb is an exact replica of Tammerus Canter Visscher's tomb in Cossimbazar. It bears an inscription in Dutch which includes a poem. The building is raised on a high plinth accessed by a series of steps. It features Corinthian columns and semi-circular arched openings. The ornamentation is in the form of dentil cornice bands, pediments and floral patterns in stucco.



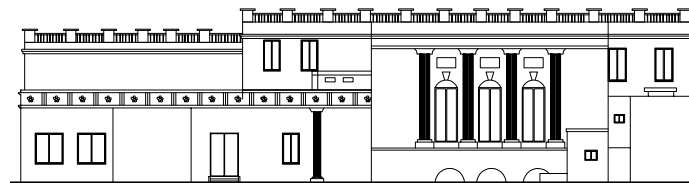


Hooghly Collegiate School

CHOWMATHA, COLLEGE ROAD

Once part of the Dutch governor's pleasure garden facing the river, and now the location of a government boys' school, this colonial style building was acquired by a local merchant in the 19th century. A thakurdalan—pillared chamber for worship, usually of the goddess Durga—was added by him.

Situated in a large compound along the river at a prominent location, the building has a portico and garden facing verandah. The façade flaunts a pediment in the centre, a decorative stucco frieze band with a dentil cornice, Ionic columns and timber louvered doors and windows. A large room that appears to have been a grand ballroom at some point is noteworthy for the intricate stucco work around arches and columns.

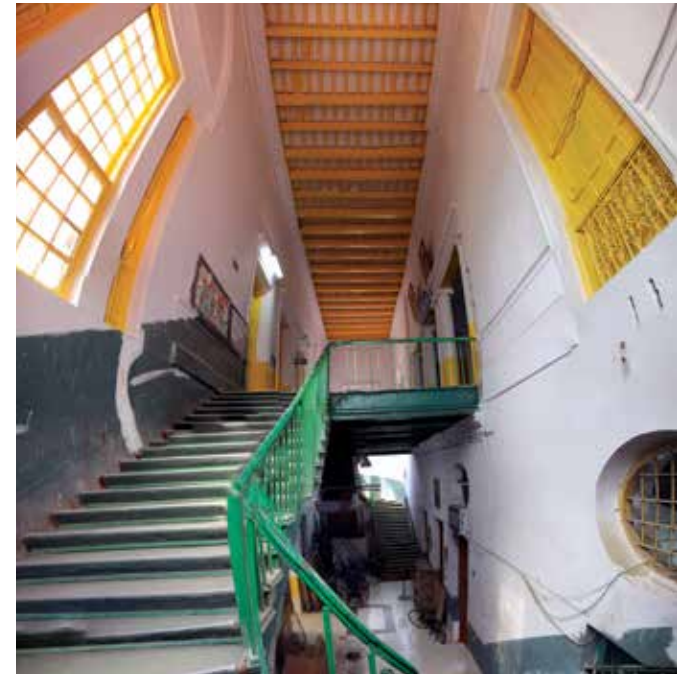
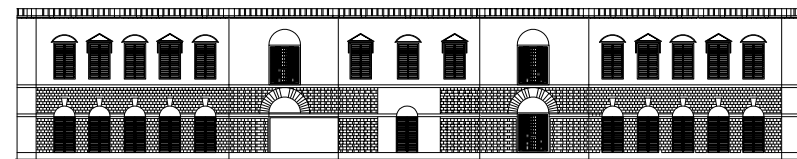


Hooghly Mohsin College

COLLEGE ROAD

As its name "Welgeleegen" meaning "well-situated" suggests, the VOC director of Bengal Albert Sichterman's airy garden residence overlooked the more than agreeable waterscape of the Hooghly. In 1804–1805, it was remodelled by General Perron, a French general in the Scindia army, into a Palladian mansion, and later, in 1836, became the Hooghly Mohsin College.

Inside, two U-shaped staircases on either side lead to the first floor. The large hall supported on Ionic columns was originally used as a ballroom. At the end of the hall is a colonnade that leads to a semi-circular verandah facing the riverfront—a feature that is clearly visible in an 1828 archival painting by Marianne James. Besides the usual dentil cornice bands and architraves, pediments and semi-circular arched openings, the timber louvered shutters and panelled glass windows add to structure's old-world charm.





Shome Bari

SHYAMBABU GHAT, SHYAMBABU GHAT ROAD

Another grand garden house by the Hooghly, this was the home of the wealthy Shome family. Though not in good shape, it has surprisingly survived the years, and now functions as a secondary school.

The compound is enclosed by a high boundary wall, almost like a fort with circular bastions, on the river's edge and two entrance archways facing the streets. A grand arched gateway with spiral ornamentation leads to the river ghats. The building has the characteristic colonial features of the time such as deep verandahs, timber louvered screens and decorative stucco work.

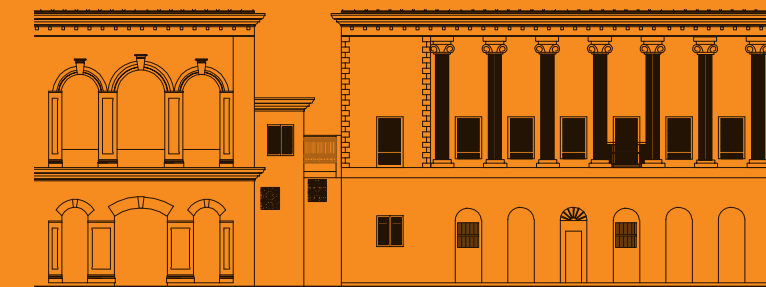


Bara Seal Bari

SEAL PARA, SEAL BARI

The once majestic mansion was built in 1763 by Nilambar Seal, another rich and influential merchant of Chinsurah. Designed in the Indo-Dutch style, the house is planned around multiple courtyards. Here too imposing Ionic columns hold up the verandahs, while thin fluted columns with Corinthian capitals support the arches of the thakurdalan. The projecting semi-circular balconies are embellished with decorative metal grilles, and some of the intricately carved timber panelled doors still exist.

Through its illustrious existence Bara Seal Bari has been the centre of many political and social activities, and it is host to one of the oldest Durga Pujas in the community. (Durga Puja is Bengal's most celebrated festival centred on the worship of the goddess.)



Ghorir More

GHORIR MORE

This 19th century Gothic tower, imported by the British in memory of King Edward VI, is Chinsurah's iconic landmark. Crafted in cast iron, its clock in working condition, Ghorir More, as it is popularly known, stands at the intersection of four important streets. The fact that this was an important nodal point even before the British advent in Chinsurah is apparent from 18th century Dutch maps of the town. Supported by slim columns on a broad, robust base, the tower's elegant profile is enhanced by four lanterns hanging gracefully on the corners of the squares of the clock faces.



Hooghly Madrasah

BARA BAZAR, BARA BAZAR ROAD

The only surviving feature of Fort Gustavus, the primary Dutch settlement at Chinsurah, is its artillery wall. Today it is part of the buildings of the Hooghly Madrasah, a 19th century construction raised on the remains of the fortification. Four Dutch cannons scattered on the site are resilient reminders of its bygone guardians.

Semi-circular arched openings, sweeping grand staircase and a deep verandah running the entire length of the structure represents Indo-European architectural style.





Bankim Bhawan

JORA GHAT, BHUDEV MUKHERJEE ROAD

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, a key figure in Bengal's 19th century literary renaissance, lived in this house, originally a part of Qassim Mallik's huge mansion, during 1877–1881. Legend has it that he composed *Vande Mataram*, India's national song, on the river embankment of Jora Ghat.

The building displays the characteristic stucco architraves, timber louvered screens, Italianate balusters, cornice bands, and a multi-foliated archway.

Locally known as the Paatal Bari, it currently functions as a museum for Chinsurah.

Court Building

COURT LANE

Reputed to be one of the longest buildings in Asia, running 300 meters (presently 266 meters) east and west, it was built as the barracks for British soldiers in 1827–1829 on the foundations of Fort Gustavus, when the Dutch ceded Chinsurah to its new colonial masters. A typical example of robust British military architecture, it now houses government offices within colonnaded spaces and wooden louvered doors and windows.

Commissioner Of Burdwan's Residence

FERRY GHAT, MAIDAN

Even though the VOC monogram on the staircase is a very small element of this 19th century British bungalow, yet it is an emphatic announcement of its Dutch connection. The tablet bearing the logo was originally embedded in the north gate of Fort Gustavus when it was reconstructed in 1687. The logo also manifests on two cannons in the gardens, which are the other Dutch relics in the wooded estate now used as the commissioner's residence. The river facing building incorporates the classic elements of colonial architecture.

Entry to the compound is restricted.



Some More Landmarks of Note

HOUSES

BORO JAGANNATH BARI | GHAT, SHYAMBABU GHAT ROAD An important house in the native town, with a courtyard in the centre. It was inhabited by the priests of Raja Mallick.

MANDAL BARI | KAMARPARA BALARAM LANE A large house built around a central courtyard, it belonged to one of the most important merchant families in Chinsurah. It is now the home of the Mandal family.

NARENDRA BHAWAN | KACHEHREY PARA, KACHEHREY PARA ROAD A garden house characterised by a deep portico on the northern edge of

the erstwhile Fort Gustavus. It is believed to have been called "Linden Rust" and belonged to A. Boggard, second in council of the VOC.

RAJENDRA VILLA | COLLEGE ROAD An octagonal stair house at the edge of this 19th century building dates back to the Dutch period. Now owned by the Sadhu family.

DUTCH VILLA | MAIDAN One of the older Dutch houses in Chinsurah, it was bought by the Mandal family at the turn of the 19th century. A very small portion of the original survives in a poor condition.

OFFICE OF THE PUBLIC WORKS DEPARTMENT | PUBLIC WORKS PARA, PRASAD DAS SEN ROAD An example of the military architecture of the town, the building was the house of Gregorious Herklots, the last fiscal officer of Chinsurah.

GHATS

DHALA GHAT | COLLEGE ROAD One of the oldest ghats in Chinsurah, it is used by the community for recreational purposes.

DATTA GHAT | DATTA GHAT LANE Significant as a socio-cultural space within the town, it was endowed by the Seal family to the town in the 19th century.

GHANTA GHAT | COLLEGE ROAD Marking the entry into Chinsurah, it gets its name from the belfry of the church that once stood at the location. It is now one of the most visited ghats of the town.

PRASAD SEN GHAT | KACHEHREY PARA, KACHEHREY PARA ROAD A bathing ghat, more or less in its original condition. It defined the northern edge of the Cantonment of Chinsurah. The CBP pillars and remains of a Dutch cannon are close to it.

OTHERS

WATER LEVEL MARKERS | BARA BAZAR, DATTA LODGE Remnants of Dutch engineering, the markers were built in the 17th century.

DUTCH DRAINS | GHANTA GHAT An example of Dutch water-works engineering, these are still in working condition.

CANTONMENT BOUNDARY PILLARS | PRESENT AT VARIOUS SPOTS Surviving markers of the boundaries of Chinsurah's British / Dutch cantonment.

Ghanta Ghat



Water Level Markers



Boro Jagannath Bari



Mandal Bari



Prasad Sen Ghat



Conservation: The First Steps

RETRIEVING MEMORIES, RECORDING REMAINS

Chinsurah's unique heritage comprises its urban form, street pattern and ensemble of non-monumental historic buildings. However, only two of these sites are protected by the Archaeological Survey of India: the Dutch Cemetery and the Tomb of Susanna Anna Maria. The Hooghly Imambara, Moti Jheel Mosque and Bankim Bhawan are protected by the West Bengal Heritage Commission. The rest of the substantial list of structures is highly vulnerable.

Old buildings are rapidly deteriorating and becoming derelict and dilapidated; some are being demolished to make way for more rewarding economic investments. There is an imminent risk of the irrevocable loss of Chinsurah's valuable heritage even before it is identified, documented and appreciated.

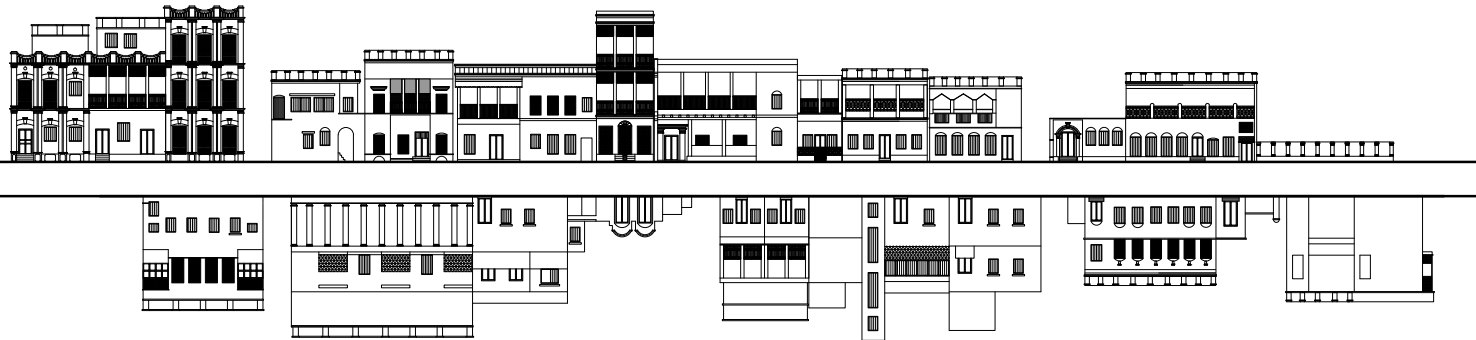
A multi-disciplinary project was conceptualised with the aim to contribute towards preservation of the significant buildings

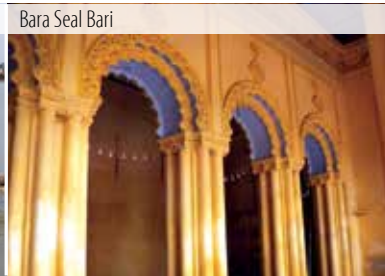
and elements from the Dutch period, as well as create positive development within the town. Funded by the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, New Delhi, this project is being managed and executed by Aishwarya Tipnis Architects (ATA) in collaboration with Presidency University, Kolkata. Documentation and digital mapping of heritage structures has been accomplished and adapted as an open source digital database. This database can be used to plan future restoration works. Community engagement activities, such as heritage walks and training of local historians have been successful in creating awareness. Proposals for development of the Maidan and riverfront, and for introducing

signage plaques and interpretation, have been offered to the local authorities. Individual efforts of restoration and maintenance of heritage structures in public ownership are undertaken on a regular basis.

Along with this there is a need to develop a vision and cultural strategy for the town and the larger cultural landscape. It is hoped that this project would intertwine heritage conservation and the economic, social and cultural enhancement of the town.

For more information, visit www.dutchinchinsurah.com





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