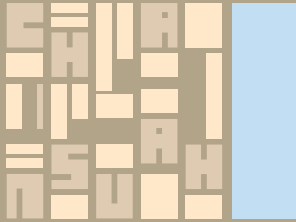




The Dutch Histories of Chinsurah



THE DUTCH IN CHINSURAH PROJECT

Concept: Aishwarya Tipnis Architects

Story: Dr Oeendrilah Lahiri

Cover Graphic : Tomb of Sussana Anna Maria

Back Cover Graphic: Satyajit Sil

Book Design : InspireConspireRetire

Illustrations in this book were created by students in Chinsurah, in response to a brief set by the collaborators on the Dutch in Chinsurah Project. The students were guided by Prabal Dhar & Sohini Dhar

Illustrators:

Sangita Bhattacharya, Satyajit Sil, Souvik Biswas,
Ahan Roy, Sayantika Mondol & Monalisha Dalui, Aikya
Banerjee, Soumi Nag, Monalisha Dalui,
Mabomita Mukherjee

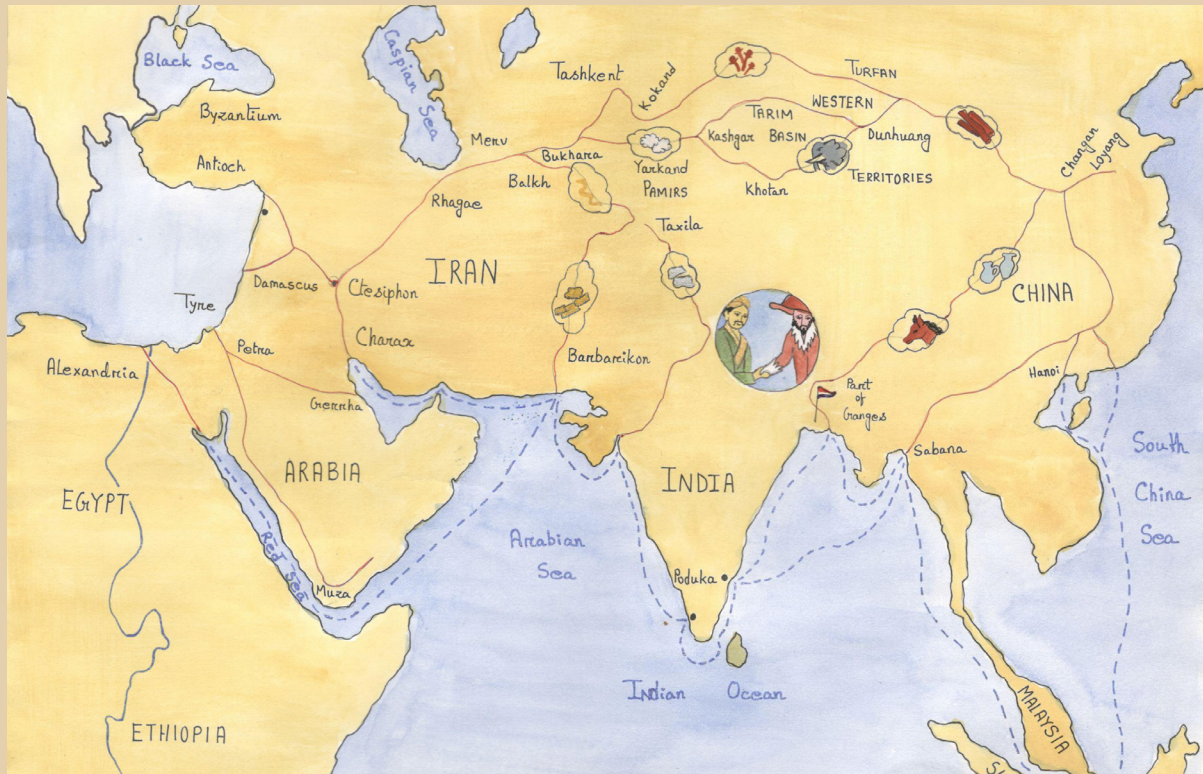


The small town of Chinsurah was once home to the trading company of the Netherlands, a country in Europe known as the Dutch East India Company. The Dutch lived here for almost two hundred and fifty years. The town grew, prospered, and reached its zenith alongside the Dutch settlement. The story of Chinsurah is in many ways the story of Fort Gustavus and the Dutch who lived here.



For hundreds of years Indian princes and merchants traded with Europeans over land and river routes. The Silk Route from China, through India, is the most famous route over which India sold spices and silk to the world. Vasco da Gama, a Portuguese explorer, was the first to discover a route over the Atlantic and Indian oceans in 1498, almost 500 years ago.

When the nations of Europe began to use this route to conduct trade they formed the 'companies.' The Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie was one such company formed in Netherlands in 1602, which alongside similar companies were set up in England and France found their way to India in the 17th Century. The Mughal Emperor of India at the time was Akbar, who welcomed these companies to come and trade in India. Silk, cotton, pepper, sandalwood and ivory were sold in exchange for silver, gold, horses, and porcelain. During his reign, India became a rich country and had over 150 million silver rupees and a mass of precious stones and jewellery of an equal value.



But after the death of the Emperor, the Mughal Empire slowly declined and eventually broke down into smaller kingdoms. This coincided with the fight between the English, French and Dutch in India for power and supremacy that lasted almost 150 years until England was successful in gaining control of the Indian subcontinent in the late 19th Century.

Once upon a time in Bengal

The European companies built factories and settlements along the coast of India, especially near river and sea ports, so that it was easier to travel and trade with the Spice Islands. In Bengal, the English set up their port and settlement at Calcutta, the French at Chandernagore, the Danish at Serampore, and the Portuguese at Bandel. The Dutch built their settlement at Chinsurah, almost four hundred years ago. It was not the only one; they also built factories in Surat, Cochin, Pulicut, Negapatam, Masulipatnam, Patna, Cossimbazar, Baranagore, Balasore, and Hooghly. The factories stored cotton, spices, and other trading items. However, the large state of Bengal became an important place for the Dutch. Bengal silk and opium were very important items

for sale to Asia and Japan. Soon Chinsurah became their favourite port. The Dutch visited Bengal many times before settling down. In 1622, the Portuguese were based at Bandel, the Dutch sent a fleet of three Dutch ships - the Scheidem, the Muys, and the Jagger - to buy saltpetre, textiles, and sugar. Finally in 1638, Emperor Shahjahan granted permission to trade and settle in Bengal to the Dutch after expelling the Portuguese.

Once upon a time in Chinsurah

For hundreds of years Chinsurah was a town full of merchants. The Portuguese, Armenians, Bengalis, and Persians, lived and traded happily together. The Dutch chose Chinsurah as their main settlement between 1635-1645. They built a huge fort known as Fort Gustavus. It had a big factory inside its walls and a large castle. Whoever saw the Fort was struck by its majesty. It was known as the most impressive Dutch factory in Asia. Travellers admired it and the Dutch took pride in it. The head of the Dutch factory, his employees, and his servants lived within the Fort. It had spacious store houses for the items of trade and



beautiful gardens. It stretched from the present Ghanta Ghat to the present Datta ghat.

At the beginning the Dutch lived peacefully with the people of Bengal and were liked by the Nawab of Bengal as well as the Mughal Emperor. During the revolt of Shobha Singh in 1695 they also helped the local people and rulers by giving them shelter and protection. Soon the new Director of the factory, Jan Albert Sichterman, built a huge stone wall around the factory and militarised the fort to protect it against enemy attacks. It was actually around this time that the name Gustavus was given to the fort, which was the name of the Governor-General of Batavia, Gustaaf Willem van Imhoff.

The Dutch remained in Chinsurah for almost two hundred years and made it their home. The Director of the factory lived like a prince. Wherever he went, a train of servants followed him. He was the only Dutch person who rode a palanquin. He looked after the company and the factory, and was also responsible for maintaining law and order. But everyone who worked for the Company lived a life of comfort and pomp. The Dutch gave very expensive gifts to the Emperor and





native rulers of India and they returned the favour. Once the Mughal Emperor gave the Director an elephant and a rhinoceros! The Dutch were extravagant even in their interactions with the English and the French. When the Director travelled to meet his English or French friends, ships were laden with soldiers, followers, food, and music.

The Dutch were particular about their dress and decorum. Even in the heat the ladies were always dressed in silk like the women in London. The men wore a waistcoat with a heavy velvet jacket and wig. Both men and women always wore a hat. Only at home in the night did they exchange the heavy layers of silk for light cotton wear. Dress, conduct, dinners, funerals and every other form of social etiquette was followed.

The factory was always full with the ships' carpenters, caulkers, riggers, and 'dockyard-mateys'. The 'craftsmen's quarters' in the factory was called the 'Ambachtskwartier' where the craftsmen lived and worked together. They made beautiful furniture for the Company.



As time went by, not only Fort Gustavus, but the town of Chinsurah began to grow under the influence of the Dutch who preferred brick houses and narrow streets. They built underground drains and canals which they used to quickly carry goods from the fort to the river via little boats. They lined the riverfront with beautiful gardens which could

be seen from the Hooghly, and visitors were awed by the quaintness of the town. Guests were entertained with a range of Dutch cuisines, a delicious variety of fruits, and with rides on pleasure boats on the river. They were especially fond of gardening and grew all sorts of vegetables including Japan beans, asparagus, 'Olondai Shooti' or peas.

The Dutch also threw grand parties which they would host in their famous pleasure gardens. One such garden was called Champonade in Chandernagore. Another famous beautiful house was built by Albert Sichterman who called it "Welgeleegen" which means "well-situated." The Dutch Church was situated on the river front right next to Ghanta Ghat and was built by Sir G. Vernet, the steeple of the church was later added by Albert Sichterman as a gift to Chinsurah. Unfortunately it was demolished in the 1980s.

A beautiful river-facing spacious bungalow along the Hooghly was built by the Dutch, it was later remodelled in the 1803 as a house for M. Perron a French General in the army of the Scindias, who sought refuge in Chinsurah before returning to France. It was later bought by a

very rich Bengali merchant named Prankrishna Haldar. This is now the Hooghly Mohsin College. Prankishna Halder also bought the house next to it, which was part of the Directors Garden Estate by the river, adding a thakurdalan to this building. He was known to have started a Durga Puja in this house. This house today has been converted into the Hooghly Collegiate School.

The Dutch cemetery we see today was built two hundred and fifty years ago and has about 45 Dutch citizens buried here. The oldest grave is that of Sir Cornelius Jonge who died in Chinsurah on 10th October, 1743. Interestingly, there are three different kinds of tombs in this cemetery -obelisks, tomb boxes, and plain gravestones. But the most famous tomb in Chinsurah belongs to that of Susanna Anne-Marie Yeats on Taldanga Road. It rests in a beautiful garden that belonged to Susanna.

It is a Neo-Classical domed structure situated in a large garden and can still be seen today. The life of Susanna inspired Ruskin Bond's novel "Susanna's Seven Husbands" and the Bollywood movie "Saat Khoon Maaf".

The Dutch were very interested in education for the children of the town. A Chinsurah Poor Fund, a Native Free School, and a Chinsurah Orphan Chamber were created and maintained by them. A hospital was also opened for all the inhabitants of Chinsurah.

The relationship of the Dutch with the local people was peaceful. The rich Indian merchants mixed freely with the rich employees at Fort Gustavus. Some of the most powerful men, the banker Jagat Seth and the Armenian merchant Khwaja Wajid were good friends of the Dutch and the Nawabs. But Chinsurah was teeming with wealthy natives who gave several gifts to their beloved town. One such wealthy merchant called Nrisingha Das Mallick built the Ghanta Ghat and the Choto Jagannath Bari.

A famous native Shyamram Shome, built the temple of the Sun god or 'Surya Mandir' at the Shandeshwar temple ghat while the Shiva temple was built by the Seal family. Daniel Overbeck, the last Dutch Governor, gifted the temple with a brass drum as a token of his appreciation.

The illustrious merchant families built palatial houses some of which still survive such as Nilambar Seal's majestic house known as the

“Boro Seal Bari” and Rajendra Shome’s garden house known as the “Shome Training School”. These palaces were witness to the grandeur of these families such as in the Seal bari. The Dutch Villa and Rajendra villa were originally Dutch houses which were later bought by Bengali families. The thakurbari dalan (courtyard for worship) was built by Madanmohan Seal in 1803 which became the venue for the grandest Durga Puja of Chinsurah.



Durga Puja celebrations were loved by the Dutch and subsequently the English - carpets would be rolled out, chandeliers lit up while perfumed halls filled with nautches, music, skits and performances.

Other important monuments and the places of interest in and around Chinsurah are the Hooghly Imambara, the Armenian Church and the Moti Jheel Mosque to name a few. The Hooghly Imambara was built by Haji Mohamed Mohsin, a Muslim philanthropist and an educationalist who also built the Mohsin college. One of the first churches in Bengal was the Armenian Church, which was built by a rather powerful Armenian merchant, Khwaja Joseph Margar.

The Catholic chapel was built in 1740 and was donated to the church by Mrs Sebastian Shaw. The original Church was made of mats and straw. Another eminent merchant was the Persian merchant Khan Jahan Khan who was famous for his beautiful garden which he called 'Nabob-bagan', which became the venue for grand balls. Khan Jahan was also Bengal's last faujdar. His body is buried in the grounds of the beautiful Motijheel mosque built by his friend Nusrat-Ulla-Khan.

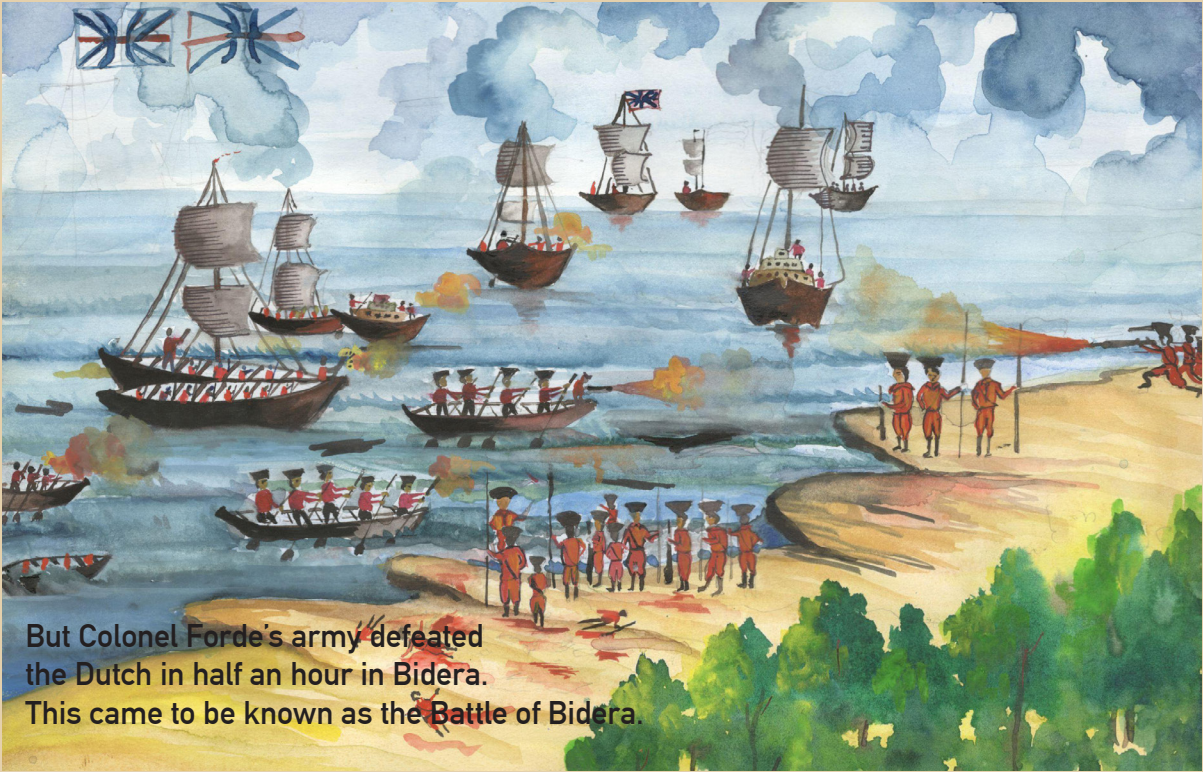


ARMENIAN
CHURCH
1695

Where did the Dutch go?

The Dutch enjoyed a good relationship with the Nawabs in Bengal but competed with the French and the English for power and prestige. At first their friendship with the English was stable. However, with time disputes arose. After the Battle of Plassey between the English and the Nawab of Bengal, Sirajuddaulah, the English became the rulers of Bengal. The Nawab remained but without any real powers. During the battle, the Dutch had not supported the British and this made the British suspicious of them.

Soon after Dutch ships full of soldiers and hired armies from the Malay islands appeared in Hooghly. The English accused the Dutch of planning a military attack and sent Colonel Forde to capture the Dutch factory at Baranagore. They tried to stop the Dutch troops from coming on shore in Hooghly. A fight ensued on the river as well as on land where the British met the Dutch troops. The Dutch had an infantry of two hundred and forty soldiers, a cavalry of fifty Europeans, besides eight hundred sepoy and seven hundred European soldiers.



But Colonel Forde's army defeated the Dutch in half an hour in Bidara. This came to be known as the Battle of Bidara.

The English now had full control over Calcutta and Chinsurah. The Dutch were forced to submit to British demands and restrict their activities to trade only. But more wars followed in Europe and America which affected the relationship between the Dutch and the British in India. Chinsurah changed hands between the Dutch and English a couple of times. In 1823 the Dutch officially handed over Chinsurah to the British in exchange for British settlements and ports in Sumatra.

Chinsurah was handed over to the English on May 7th, 1825.

Over the centuries the Dutch had settled in Chinsurah, Cossimbazar, Balasore, Patna, Dacca, and Maldah. Dutch prosperity had led to Chinsurah's prosperity and wealth. But now the town belonged to the British. The last Dutch Governor, Daniel Overbeck, and the Fiscal of Chinsurah, Gregory Herklots, chose to stay on until their death.

In 1829, Fort Gustavus and the Government House were demolished by the British and in their place the present barracks were built by Captain W. Bell. Dutch Chinsurah extended from the obelisk that stood at the crossroads of Guard Road and Netaji Subhas Road to Prasad

Sen's bathing ghat on one side; and stretched from the Shiva Mandir at the western end of Kuthir Math to Ghanta ghat. What we know now as the police barracks, Ghorir Mor (clock tower), police hospital, Madrasa, Duff School, all the present administration buildings and residential quarters, the Dutch villa, and Teen Kuthir Math all fall within the boundaries of the old Dutch area. Many native mansions and houses are lost yet some still stand. The Dutch Church no longer exists and in its place stands the present Circuit house. Herklots' residence and office now houses the current Public Works Department.

Mrs Fenton, an Englishwoman, while touring Chinsurah commented that Chinsurah looked gloomy and broken after the Dutch left. The beautiful landscape lined with trees, dotted with kitchen gardens and charming houses all were lost with the departure of the Dutch. The rich merchants also slowly disappeared and their mansions looked lonely. While they were here, the Indians and Dutch shared each other's culture, conducted business, and led a vibrant life. Dutch Chinsurah is a forgotten part of this town's legacy. It is up to us now to find ways to remember and cherish it.



**A story. And a town.
In Parts.
The Dutch Histories of Chinsurah.**

The first workshop for community engagement was conducted for the School Children in the age group of five to twenty in the form of a painting competition on the theme of "Heritage of Chinsurah". To have a wider audience reach this was organised as part of the local "Durga Puja" festival which is one of the most important festival of Chinsurah and attended by almost everyone in the community. This was envisaged as a mental mapping project, where the children drew what they defined as the most important landmarks within the town. Forty three children participated in the competition held on the 29th & 30th September 2014 as a part of the 'Tola Phatak Sarvajanic Durga Puja Committee' & 'Upasana' - Antarbagan Chuchura Durga Puja respectively.

The community survey had indicated that most children were unaware of the history of the Dutch in Chinsurah and thus a brief was prepared which was given out to the children giving them a brief narrative of the history of the town. Based on the brief, the children were asked to use their imagination to draw and illustrate the themes from the history of Chinsurah. Out of forty three children who participated in this competition the best illustrations were selected and have been compiled in the form of this children's story book of the Dutch in Chinsurah, this bilingual book in English and Bengali is available for download from the website.



An initiative by



Kingdom of the Netherlands

ATA

aishwarya tipnis architects

ARCHITECTURE | INTERIORS | CONSERVATION | PLANNING



PRESIDENCY UNIVERSITY
KOLKATA

Interpretation
planners

