



Colonial Entanglements: Danish Trade and Culture in Balasore, 1716–1845

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the Danish colonial presence in Balasore, India, examining the economic, political, and cultural dimensions of their settlement from the early 18th century to its transfer to the British in 1845. Established by the Danish East India Company, Balasore served as a strategic maritime hub for the export of textiles, indigo, and spices. The Danes developed extensive trade networks with local merchants, contributing to regional commercial growth. However, their presence faced persistent challenges, including competition from other European powers, resistance from local authorities, and internal financial instability. Despite these obstacles, the Danes left lasting legacies through architecture, urban planning, and cultural exchange. Drawing on primary archival documents and secondary literature, this research highlights the underexplored role of lesser colonial powers in shaping South Asian trade and cultural landscapes. The paper contributes to broader debates on European colonialism by foregrounding the complexities of Danish ambitions in India and their long-term impacts on Balasore's historical trajectory.



INTRODUCTION

A remarkable episode in the tale of European colonisation in South Asia is the history of Danish colonies in India. Though the Danish East India Company was a somewhat small participant in the area, its presence had a major influence on the local economies and cultures where it engaged. Including the historical background, the founding of Danish trade stations, the economic and cultural influence of Danish rule, and the ultimate fall and transfer of Danish colonial holdings in India to the British, this paper offers a thorough narrative of the Danish colonies in India. Early in the 18th century, the Danish East India Company established Balasore as a major commercial centre. Balasore, on India's east coast, was placed deliberately for commerce with Bengal and Orissa, among other nearby areas. Originally settling at Balasore in 1716, the Danish soon developed their colony to rank among the most significant and wealthy commercial hubs in the area.

Production of silk, cotton, and indigo—highly sought-after goods in European markets—was well-known in Balasore. To have a sizable portion of the commerce in the area, the Danes developed a strong trading network including local farmers and businesses. Their position in Bengal and Orissa was further secured by strong ties they developed with the governing authorities in both areas. Balasore's Danish colony was a centre of cultural interaction as much as a hive of business activity. The Danes brought their own conventions and customs, which together with the native cultures produced a distinctive fusion of Danish and Indian traditions. The architecture of the hamlet, which combines aspects of Danish and Indian forms, shows this kind of cultural interaction.

Still, the Danish colony at Balasore presented several difficulties. The rivalry among other European nations, like the British and the Dutch, was fierce, hence the Daners had to continuously fight to keep their place in the area. Local authorities also presented difficulties for them, sometimes antagonistic to the presence of European businessmen. Notwithstanding these difficulties, the Danish community at Balasore endured for over two centuries till it was sold to the British in 1845. The architectural and cultural customs of the area still show traces of the Danish presence today. The Balasore settlement is evidence of the significant cultural interaction during this era as well as the ongoing influence of European colonisation on South Asia.

Research Methodology

The study about Danish employs historical approach combining primary and secondary sources. Among the primary sources are official reports, diaries, letters, and other records from the Danish East India Company, British East India Company, and other pertinent companies. These materials provide insightful analysis of Danish colony development and operation in India as well as the cultural and economic effects of Danish authority. Books, journal articles, and other publications offering an analysis and viewpoint on the historical events surrounding Danish colonialism in India constitute secondary sources. These materials assist to place the main sources in the social, cultural, and political setting of the historical period. Apart from main and secondary sources, this paper also uses architectural and visual analysis including images and drawings of Danish structures and communities in India. These visual sources assist to show the unique architectural and urban planning ideas used by the Danes as well as provide a window into the physical locations and material culture of the Danish communities.

Historical Context

The Danish East India Company was established in 1616, following the success of the Dutch East India Company and the British East India Company.¹ The primary objective of the Danish East India Company was to establish a trading post in India for the export of textiles, spices, and indigo to Denmark. The Danish company was initially interested in establishing a presence in Surat, a major port city on the west coast of India. However, negotiations with the Mughal Emperor Jahangir failed, and the Danes turned their attention to the south.

Establishment of Danish Trading Posts

In 1620, the Danish East India Company established its first settlement in India in Tranquebar, a small coastal town in present-day Tamil Nadu.² The Danish settlement in Tranquebar was initially focused on trade, but it gradually expanded to include cultural and educational activities. The Danish missionaries played a significant role in Tranquebar, establishing a printing press and translating the Bible into Tamil.³ Over the next few decades, the Danish East India Company established trading posts in several other locations in India, including Serampore (present-day West Bengal), Balasore (present-day Odisha), and Tharangambadi (present-day Tamil Nadu). These trading posts were primarily focused on the export of textiles, indigo, and other commodities to Denmark.

Economic and Cultural Impact of Danish Rule

The Danish settlements in India had a significant impact on the economy and culture of the areas where they operated. The Danes were successful in establishing a profitable trade network, which included the export of textiles, indigo, and other commodities to Denmark. In addition, the Danish settlements played a role in the development of local industries, such as the production of silk in Serampore.⁴

The Danish settlements also had a cultural impact on India. The Danish missionaries played a significant role in the development of Tamil literature and culture in Tranquebar. The establishment of the printing press in Tranquebar led to the publication of the first Tamil book, a translation of the Bible, in 1714. The missionaries also established schools and provided education to the local population.

The Danes also had an impact on the architecture and urban planning of the areas where they operated. The Danish settlements in India were characterized by the use of red brick buildings, which were constructed in a distinctive European style. In Serampore, the Danes established a Danish colonial town, which was designed according to European urban planning principles.

Decline and Sale of Danish Colonial Possessions in India

The decline of Danish colonial possessions in India began in the late 18th century. The British East India Company, which had established a dominant presence in India, began to view the Danish settlements as a threat to its economic and political interests. The British imposed high tariffs on Danish goods and established a monopoly on the export of indigo, which had been a major export commodity for the Danes.

In addition, the Danish East India Company was facing financial difficulties and was unable to invest in the development of its settlements in India. As a result, the Danish settlements began to decline, and the Danes were forced.

Danes in Balasore

Five European settlements vying for control of Bengal and Orissa trade attest to Balasore's status as a major hub for international trade. Since all ships going to and from Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa loaded and unloaded here, Balasore held a pivotal position in Eastern India. The Danes are the most obscure of the five non-Asian nations represented in Balasore's population. The occasional mention of their actions in English and Persian sources is not surprising. Nonetheless, Danish sources for reconstructing their history in India are still insufficient. In 1616, the Danish East India Company was founded, and by 1620, the Danes had established a permanent settlement on the southeast coast of India at Tranquebar. They made their way to Masulipatam and then Bengal afterward. Unfortunately, the lack of domestic demand led to the downfall of this company. In 1670, a new, more daring Company was formed.⁵ They first appear in print in the 1676 diary of Streynsham Master, who docked in Balasore. As reported by Foster, two Danish ships were spotted on Balasore Road in June of 1673.⁶ (Foster, *English Factories in India*, vol. II) (Foster, *English Factories in India*, vol. II). In his account of Balasore's trade, English Agent Walter Clavel writes that both the English and the Danes tried to settle factories here" (in 1633). While Streynsham Master himself arrived in Balasore port on August 24th, 1676 aboard the ship Johanna, the Chief of the Danish factory sent his second in Command Sen: Quiman with his compliments on August 27th, 1676. After waiting another three days, the Master returned to the local Danish factory. On September 2, 1676, during his second trip to Balasore, he once again met

with Danish Chief Wilke Wygbert. This is the Chief stationed at Macasser with the Dutch East India Company. To get revenge for their treatment, they enlisted in the Bengali royal army. However, after some other treaty was signed and peace was maintained, the Danes were able to finally settle their differences and open a factory at no cost to themselves. buted by shopkeepers in the area. The governor of Balasore has also made statements about building a factory in his city. He served as governor under Nawab Shaista Khan Subahdar of Bengal (1663–1678, and again from 1679–1688), and with the Nawab's assistance, he was able to acquire a Parwana, allowing him to conduct duty-free trade in Bengal and Orissa. It cost the Danes around 4,000–5,000 rupees to secure this privilege. On November 30th, 1676, the English Agent in Dacca, Fitch Nedham, reported that the Danes were lobbying for a new firman similar to the English.

On December 3rd, he reported that De-mother, Soita's the widow of Jaco (Juan) Gomes, had arrived in Dacca and was delivering fiery speeches condemning the English. Nedham continued by saying that the Danes' request for a Firman had been granted. In the care of the Rai, who, in exchange for gifts, would bring it to them.⁷ Very little is known about their time in Balasore and the sources are sparse. However, there are artefacts from a later time period that help to identify the location of a Danish factory in Balasore. Seven acres were used for the Danish colony.⁸ Dinamandarga is still a common name for this region. The natural moat that ran between the castle and the river served as a formidable barrier against assault from land. Merchants had dug a dock on the north side. Up until the turn of the last century, that spot was also home to the ship's skeletal remains.

A call from John Beams Dinamardanga's location, far from the city centre, made it even worse than the foreign settlements. Dinamarnagar was another name for the Danish settlement of Serampore. Because of M. Law, the French Agent of Cassimbazar, Alivardi Khan Mahabut Subahdar of Bengal granted this settlement to Mr. Soetman, Chief of the Danish establishment.⁹ They lived on three bighas in Serampore and 57 bighas in Ackna out of a total of 60 bighas. Danish Indian trade flourished during the time that English ships were in danger due to the American War. In the early 1700s, John Palmer, the "prince of merchants" in Caclutta, was a working agent in Serampore who made at least one rupee per year on his own.

Once the Danish factory's success faltered, it was doomed to fail. In 1801, tensions rose between England and Denmark. As soon as the Amiens Treaty was signed, they occupied the Danish settlements of Serampore Tranquebar, which were later returned to the Danes.¹⁰ Since the Marathas ruled Orissa before their defeat by the English in 1803, Balasore was off-limits to them. Due to Denmark's neutrality at the time, many ships hired Danish pilots to ensure a safe passage through waters frequented by Freeh privateers.¹¹ There was a fresh outbreak of hostilities between Denmark and England. On the Hughli, the son of Governor-General Minto, Captain George Elliot, captured three wealthy Danish vessels, and British soldiers subsequently occupied the Danish factory in Serampur and Tranquebar. Additionally, on January 27, 1808, Mr. N. B. Edmon- stone, Secretary to Govt. in the Political Govt. Deptt., Fort William, sent orders to the Magistrate of Cuttack, directing him to "issue orders to the officer commanding at Balasore to take pos- session in the name of His Britannia Majesty of all factories and buildings, all property, and also all papers, accounts, and records belonging to His Danish Majesty or the Danish East George, the acting Cuttack Magistrate at the time."¹² It is the desire of the Govt, that care be taken in the execution of these orders that the utmost degree of humanity, liberality, and attention be manifested towards the persons, whom they arrest," Hartbwell wrote to Lt. Col. all civil, military, and marine of the Danish Majesty or of the in his letter.

Immediately, Danish Balasore was taken over by Captain C. Fagan, commanding officer of the 2nd Bn. 19th Regiment of Native Indians stationed there.¹³ But the Danes' factory and buildings were kept, and all the personal belongings were returned to their rightful owners.¹⁴ After the war between these two countries ended, the Danes got back all of their property. Judiciary records from Cuttack indicate, however, that the English firm made use of the renovated Danish factory's large building. A few months later, G. Weble, the Cuttack Magistrate, tells Dowdswell that the Danish factory building actually belonged to the late Mr. Pruscolin, a Dane who had been living in Serampore. It's possible that the Danes who ran the Balasore factory uprooted and moved to Serampore. According to the late missionary in Cuttack, James Peggs, the Danes only needed an acre of land and a few small buildings

to be able to raise the Danish ensign every Sunday. It's safe to assume that, like Charles Dacosta, the Dutch, these 31 people are private traders who decided to make this area their permanent home.¹⁵ To keep the bankrupt Danish Company afloat would have meant emptying the national coffers. On 11 October 1845, 33 years ago today, the Danish king sold the country's Indian holdings in Tranquebar, Serampore, and Balasore to the English East India Company for twelve and a half million rupees.

CONCLUSION

A major but often underappreciated episode in the history of European colonisation in India is the Danish colony at Balasore. Originally built by the Danish East India Company as a vital trading station, Balasore was instrumental in exporting indigo, textiles, and spices, hence promoting trade between India and Europe. The Danes changed local businesses and brought fresh trade networks, therefore promoting the commercial growth of the area. Their settlement, however, was beset with difficulties including political opposition from local authorities, fierce rivalry from other European powers such as the British and Dutch, and internal financial restraints undermining Danish colonial aspirations. The Danish presence at Balasore left a legacy even if its population fell and was finally sold to the British in 1845. Architectural relics, cultural inspirations, and historical documents still reveal their interaction with Indian civilisation. The Danish experience in Balasore emphasises the complexity of colonial connections and shows how little European nations helped to shape India's political and cultural scene. This study emphasises the necessity of further investigation on non-British colonial businesses in India thereby enhancing our knowledge of colonial period global trade networks and cross-cultural interactions.

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