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The Irreplaceable Construct of a Place in History: Dhanyakuria, India

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Abstract:

The rich annals of history are illuminated by stories of great civilizations. However, Dhanyakuria, West Bengal, India flourished little known, concurrent with rise of the most powerful empire in the world at the time which had its capital in neighbouring Kolkata. This study looks at identification of this place that nurtures socio-cultural processes from its inception, through analysis of socio-political and resultant economic circumstances leading to creation of a unique arrangement of physical spaces. While establishing pointers towards reasons for creation of this built asset it traces relationships and connections with authorities, occupants and larger community. It is realised that a sense of awe in the present day lingers because the soul of the place is enshrined within and beyond the tangible, reaching much wider realms of consciousness. This acknowledgement of spiritual and cultural resilience of Dhanyakuria provides great impetus to the dynamic circularity and protective transmission of the spirit of a place.

Keywords: socio-cultural, socio-political, spaces, resilience, spirit

1. Introduction

The rich annals of the history of our country are illuminated by stories of great civilizations and their inherent culture, politics and economies. Historians of India and other parts of the world have given us abounding contributions in the understanding and interpretation of these tales. The various aspects of British rule in India are especially well recorded not only because it was a recent era but due to the Britisher's penchant for documentation and chronicling. Yet, some stories are less equal than others. Some narratives are lost, disconnected but their remnants serve as reminders of illustrious times.

Dhanyakuria is located about 55km north-east of Kolkata, West Bengal, India, and 9 km from Chandraketugarh¹. It is an instance of such a settlement that did not locate itself in the pages of official historical accounts. The little information that exists about Dhanyakuria can be found in a small number of newspaper reports, blogs and few articles. As understood from these sources a trading community established by a few families settled there around mid- 18th century and succeeded in building a fairy tale world of castles, gardens and gateways. Concurrent with rise of one of the most powerful empires in the world at the time (19th century), which had its capital in neighbouring Calcutta (now metropolitan city of Kolkata), the small settlement of 'Dhanyakuria' flourished, little known and less recorded.

The little village is indeed a compelling slice of history, exciting our interest in almost unknown socio-economic and political processes that have manifested in architectural novelties. Recorded history, to the best of our knowledge and investigation, does not show such any other such example of an Indian trading community having forged a settlement with indigenous planning principles while their own residences, replete with English and European features, succeeded in building a fairy tale world. Not much more is known about the reasons of Dhanyakuria's origin, its relationship with rulers or local people and cause of present state of decline and neglect of some of its structures.

¹ Chandraketugarh, in West Bengal, India shows remnants of a port-city that in all probability flourished from about 4th century B.C. to Post-Gupta age. It is alleged that the city had trade contacts with countries in Southeast Asia and Mediterranean and perhaps with later Greco-Roman world. (Sen & Patnaik, 2019).

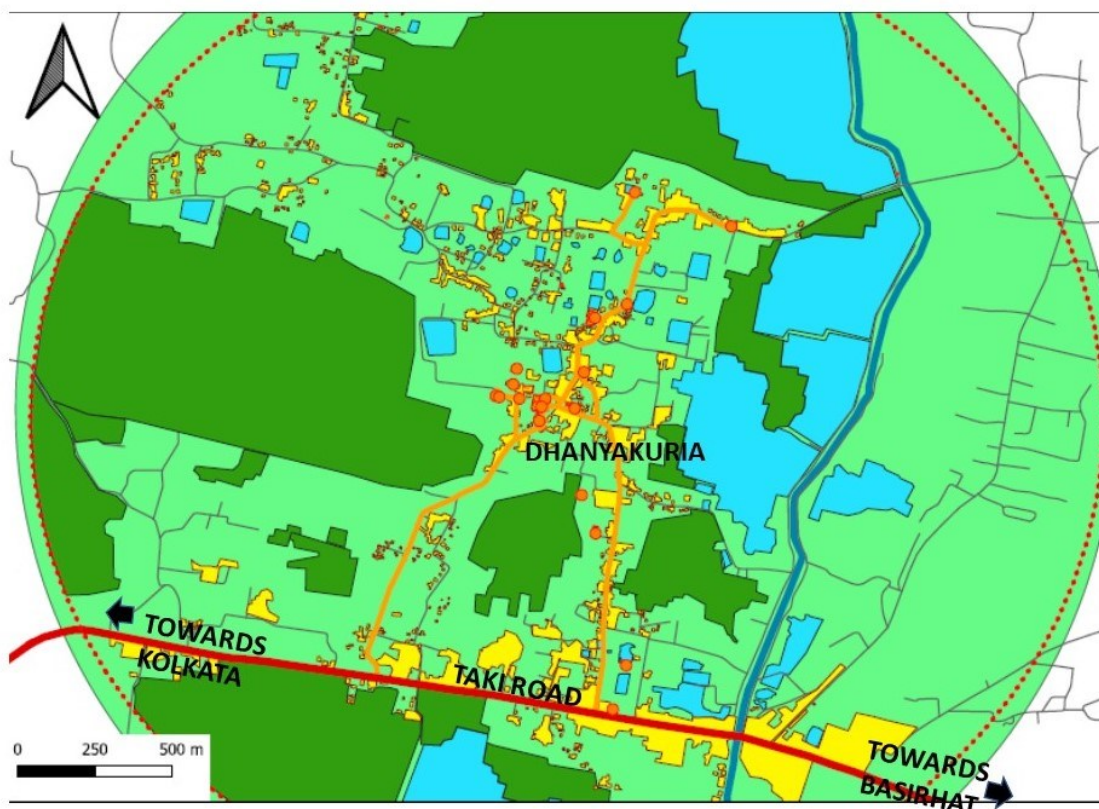


Figure 1. Map showing location of Dhanyakuria

2. Methodology

The 'Irreplaceable Construct of a Place in History: Dhanyakuria, India' can be brought forward by experiencing its remarkable attributes and facets that successfully created that unique *genius loci*. Although we realised from available definitions of *genius loci*, that we were striving to hold a moonbeam in our hand, Laurence Loh's (2007) statement "genius loci or the spirit of place in historic sites encompasses the meanings of the place accrued through time and through its past and present uses, and that these intangible values are expressed through tangible built heritage" (Loh, 2007, pp. 10–12) expresses our approach clearly.

Observations of the physical space were made in accordance with the definition proposed by architect, historian and theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz that "place is defined by concrete characteristics or structures and also by abstract features or meanings: both are aspects of the same, reality" (Norberg-Schulz, 1978, Aziz Amen & Nia, 2018, Amen & Kuzovic, 2018, Amen & Nia, 2021, Aziz Amen, 2017). A close investigation involving members of families of merchants, (who had dealt with rice, sugarcane and jute) members of community, records wherever available, authorities, local establishments and businesses was attempted with the sincere hope that an unknown aspect of the socio-economic and architectural history of this part (state of West Bengal) of India, especially with respect to Indo-British relations, will perhaps reveal this spirit. Literature Review from secondary sources was made to frame an overview about the place. Other than newspaper articles, very few publications could be located. However, from discussions with officials and families, some relevant information including timeline of the development of Dhanyakuria could be obtained (Nia & Suleiman, 2017).

The reconnaissance survey trail comprised farmhouse and residence of Gayen/Gaine Family, Dhanyakuria hospital, Dhanyakuria High School, farmhouse and residence of Sahoo/Sawoo/Sahu family, residence of Ballav/Ballabh family, Rasmancha, vicinity study and study of context.

3. Research and findings

In the absence of scholarly articles and publications, this paper will be written as a narrative rather than a structured technical paper. Pointers towards the present condition of this idyllic village can be gleaned from the responses of locals, authorities and larger citizenry.

One of the very few available publications says that when Bengal (then undivided into West and East) [was attacked by Maratha marauders, its people wanted a safe refuge.² Thus in 1742, the family of one Jagannath Das arrived and settled at the present location of Dhanyakuria, which was then part of the Sunderbans, the famed mangrove forest of India- Bangladesh. They were followed by the families of ‘Mandal’, ‘Sau’, ‘Gayen’ and ‘Ballabh’. Das and later migrants were all agricultural labourers (Chakrabarti, 2013).

The importance of Dhanyakuria as a trading and health centre can be understood from the fact that Martin Burn Company³– which used to run private trains (Banerji, 2019)– had a stop at a station named after Dhankuria Gaine Garden in their Hasnabad Shyambazar line of the Barasat-Basirhat Light Railway (Banerji, 2019).

3.1 Layout and Architectural Features

The village is closely set together, flowing organically and knit in a logical manner. The entrance is through a guard temple metaphorically protecting the precinct and leads to the arrangement of houses around water bodies of various sizes. Although most of the settlers are agricultural labourers and their trades here included that of jute, sugarcane, rice and jaggery, the localities or ‘paras’ are traditionally named after the profession of the inhabitants such as Hazra (brassmiths) para, Gaine (singers) para, Sawoo (moneylenders) para, Dhanyakuria ‘Bene’ (mercantile group from West Bengal dealing in gold and silver) and Saha (grocers, shopkeepers) para. These paras yet thrive in the same physicality. True to the ‘spirit of the place’, the paras have found new meaning with shifting occupations and progressively the Gaine, Sawoo and Ballav families rose to prominence as rich and benevolent ‘zamindars’ (landlords).



Figure 2. Gaine Garden gate on left and Gaine castle building on right with captioned features

Gaine Garden/castle is the first visible structure in this settlement located on Taki Road (Refer Fig 1) which connects Kolkata city to Basirhat town, predictably, a major trade depot for rice, jute, spices and other agricultural products. This castle was built in 1935 on a 12-acre land primarily to entertain the British ‘business’ partners. However, it was never completed due to occurrence of World War II. The flooring is of Italian Marble, but perhaps due to disturbances with the war, intended Belgian glasses never arrived for the missing window panes (Das, 2017). The impressive gate of the Garden was visible from Dhanyakuria garden station (Chakrabarti, 2013) (Refer Fig.2). Its true arch gateway is complete with ‘French Santo’ (Dasgupta, 2021) statues and horseshoe arches that have blended in perfectly with the Indo-Saracenic features of ogee arch. The Gaine family’s coat of arms –a complicated entwining design of what might be assumed are the letters ‘G’ and ‘S’– can be seen on at least three spots on the exterior walls (Gupta, 2019). Gargoyles (sculptures of faces of jesters) stick out from the walls below the first-floor balcony, as spouts for rain water pipes from the roof. The turrets, spires and stepped-gable roofline of of Gaine Garden (Chaudhuri, 2018) were in imitation of English (and European) castles of the time, but finished with marble from

² A celebrated Prime Minister of the Ahmadnagar Sultanate in ancient India, had instituted the practice of guerrilla warfare. These swift hit-and-run guerrilla tactics became a part of the military heritage of the Deccan(south) India, being used to great effect by the Marathas (residents of Maharashtra state of India) against residents Bengal. Marhatta Ditch Lane in Baghbazar in North Calcutta/Kolkata is an actual ditch built in the 1740s to stop Maratha cavalry from looting Bengal at the time (Daniyal, 2015).

³ Martin Burn Company - Burn & Company was formed in 1781 in Howrah, West Bengal and built many important structures in Kolkata. The company’s construction business was taken over by Martin & Co that was founded in 1890 and jointly it came to be known as Martin Burn (Get Bengal, 2018).

Rajasthan, the stone capital of India (Chakrabarti, 2013). Inside, a roofed and columned portico leads to a stunning transition space before showing the way to a grand, now brittle (mild steel structure finished with marble) staircase.

The house itself is situated behind a water body to seem like it is floating as if surrounded by moat of medieval castles. The crenelations and proportionate pointed arch with quatrefoil are built in brick to imitate those in stone of England and Europe such as Windsor, UK and Corvin, Romania. In an effective and sensible way of adaptive re-use, this building along with its visually matched outhouse was acquired by the Social Welfare department, Government of West Bengal and a state-run orphanage was instituted. However, that shut down a few years ago. [Since then, its condition has worsened but a glimmer of hope comes with the news that the West Bengal Heritage Commission has taken an active interest in taking over the property for restoration (Gupta, 2019). West Bengal Heritage Commission (WBHC) Officer on special duty paid a visit to the castle on July 12, 2022 (Dasgupta, 2021) and a follow up was being planned for May 12, 2023

Going inside Dhanyakuria village road, located almost opposite the Gaine Garden, Dhanyakuria charitable hospital set up in 1888 by Ashutosh, Charuchandra and Gyanendranath Gaine caters to the residents' medical needs effectively until present times. Along the same road, Dhanyakuria High School (first English medium school of the village) bearing a marble plaque with the name of Woopendra Nath Sawoo, P.C. and W. Sawoo (1885) and further, Philomel Public School commissioned in 1893/1894 are functional to this day (Mukherjee, 2021).



Figure 3. Gaine Mansion with captioned features

Just ahead a sudden opening up of streets forms a little triangle that slows down visitors to choose the flow of motion. This inevitably leads to the residence/mansion of the Gaines (Refer Fig.3). Revealing itself in stages, it is obvious that Gaine Mansion was climate-sensitively designed with long, open corridors around courtyards and many wings. Use of pediments (though smaller in proportion), unfluted ionic columns, circular towers crowned with ribbed semi-circular domes speak volumes about the colonial (a blend of prevalent British and local Bengal style) influence on built forms of the precinct. Features of the Classical period such as paired Doric columns and pilasters, louvers, stained glass and patterned (with marble and terrazzo) flooring blends seamlessly with courtyard house of Bengal. Its 'thakurdalan' or place dedicated for idol worship, consisting of three equal recessed semicircular arches with bundled columns has featured in Indo-French produced films, Indian films and tele-serials. Villagers have named it 'shooting bari' or 'the house where films are shot'. Teacher and writer Monjit Gaine lives with his elderly father, in one part of this grand structure and utilises the rent from film production companies to aid in the upkeep and maintenance of the huge mansion (Chaudhuri, 2018). A three-storied pentagonal domed tower named Nazar Minar stands inside the premises. Decorative Corinthian pilasters form corners of the tower, which has an amalgamation of architectural features (Gupta, 2019) including semi-circular and multifoil (Hindu) and pointed arches in the three

floors. The zamindars perhaps realised this with intention of respecting diversity and maintaining religious harmony (Das, 2017).



Figure 4. Sawoo Mansion showing Thakurdalan, stucco work on lunette, and insinuated wall above

Further ahead, a short walk along streets lined with structures that remain quietly in the background, all the time creating necessary shade, is the mansion of the Sawoos. A resident informs us that the owners do not live here. This house built by Patit Chandra Sawoo 200 years ago was the first of the residences belonging to the merchant families. The Sawoos were reputed as 'zamindars' of Dhanyakuria. The white Sawoo Mansion's Corinthian columns, intricate stucco work, window and stained-glass arches are striking features (Refer Fig.4). Its Thakur Dalan has five archways, as compared to Gaines' three, each with rich stucco work on the lunette⁴ and a wall with insinuated spaces above (Gupta, 2019). Thus, Sawoo's residence reflects some Romanesque (of medieval Europe) and Baroque (of around 17th century) architectural features blended in with Bengal's courtyard house. The entrance gate to Sawoo's Farmhouse reminds us of Roman Triumphal Arches. Right opposite Sawoo Mansion is the Dhanyakuria public library built by Sawoo-Ballav families (Chakrabarti, 2013). This building also acts as a primary school in addition to continuing library functions.

⁴ Lunette - Crescent or semi-circular shaped arched aperture/recess in a wall. Lunettes may function as windows or as a section of wall framed by an arch or vault. In the latter, the area may be decorated with mural (Tikkanen, n.d.).



Figure 5. Ballav Mansion with cast iron gate, railing and rich stucco work

A turn in the road leads to Ballav Mansion (1894) which locals know as ‘putul bari’ or dolls’ house, named after the figurines on the central arch of this building and those on either end of the roof (Chaudhuri, 2018). The Ballav/Ballabh descendants still live here but a huge mansion of the Ballav family stands in north Kolkata (Gupta, 2019). Ballav Mansion, in green and white, has splendid cast iron gates and coordinated boundary railing reminiscent of Art Nouveau features (Refer Fig.5). Stucco work over the verandah roof and a well-maintained garden reflect the present wealthy status of the family.



Figure 6. Rasmancha with nine-pinnacled roof and five-arched entrances

Just beyond this residence the two-storied ‘Rasmancha/Rasmandir’ with a nine-pinnacled roof, forms a change in the visual fabric. It has a five-arched entrance on each side and like Thakur Dalan of the Sawoo house, each pillar

besides the archways comprises a number of small Corinthian pilasters (Refer Fig.6). During the Vaishnava⁵ Ras Festival, idols of Radha Krishna are worshipped here. Many Vaishnava texts were written here, mainly by the old Kavasi family and distributed by the Ballavs. (Chakrabarti, 2013). The huge rasmancha is evidence of this history (Gupta, 2019). The functional Dhanyakuria Rathkhola Free Primary School located right opposite of Rasmancha was built as early as 1884.

3.2. Socio-economic and political backdrop

Although it was the family of Jagannath Das who arrived and settled here in the mid 1700s, the three leading families of Gaine, Sawoo and Ballav families not only amassed wealth but worked for the development and benefit of the area. The hospitals, roads and schools they built over 100 years ago are yet functioning as such. One of the very few available publications attributes the immense wealth of the merchant families to rice and sugarcane trade. Shyamacharan Ballabh was one of the richest from jute trade. Benevolent, too, he fed people for one year during famine (Chakrabarti, 2013). The Gains too created their fortune trading in jute, jaggery and other agricultural products while working in partnership with the families of Sawoos and the Ballavs. Their success may be attributed to the fact that British rulers offered their continuous patronage. During the middle of 19th century, Mahendranath Gaine became a prominent member of the Bengal Chamber of Commerce⁶ (Chaudhuri, 2018). 'Rai Bahadur'⁷ title was awarded to zamindar Ashutosh Gaine, another member of this family (Das, 2017).

Durga Puja, the quintessential Bengali cultural extravaganza, has been celebrated in all the mansions of Dhanyakuria. As learnt from present residents, the artisans from the same family have been making the Durga idols for the Gains, the Sawoos and the Ballavs from the initiation of the Pujas. Subsequent generations of priests preside over the rituals as well (Chaudhuri, 2018). The entire village is part of festivities of the Puja and descendants of priests and dhakis (ceremonial drum players) are yet playing their active roles. (Das, 2017). During Sandhi Puja (a special time of the festival), two or sometimes four gunshots are fired in the air now, unlike the number of gunshots equalling the number of years of the Puja in the past.

In addition to Durga Puja and Ras, the Gaine family has been celebrating 'Punaradhisthan Dibash'(re-establishment day for family deity) for last 15 years during which thousands of villagers are invited for lunch. This was originally established around 1821 for the family deity of 'Shyamsundar Jiur' occurring on 2nd /3rd of February (Das, 2017).

4. Analysis

The creation of this microcosm of England or Europe may be understood as a direct corollary of socio-economic processes but its preservation can almost entirely be attributed to the careful nurture of shifting values that are timeless. It is this quality of eternity that successfully enchanted us every time we visited Dhanyakuria or browsed over photos and accounts. The less significant repercussions of a nearby park for picnics or kindled interest in nearby historic sites can be considered serendipity but the close-to-200 year old living structures standing testimony to continuing socio-cultural processes can only be considered treasure of a very rare kind. The vibrant spirit that pervades the entire village/settlement does not falter but tempers at the Garden, the latest, the best and the least inhabited structure. Whether or not it proves itself worthy of restoration by WBHC, it is marked by a spiritual distinctiveness that will remain eminently palpable to every visitor or passer-by. The incompleteness of the unfinished window panes is a marker of time and political processes associated with it just as the Garden's neglect signifies apparently insurmountable socio-bureaucratic hurdles.

Our curiosity is raised with respect to the honed abilities of designers and various craftspersons that created such an ambience of structures without having visited their places of inspiration in England or Europe. The celebration of Ras festival as a collective continues to this day when all non-residents of merchant families come to this village. The persevering tradition of taking expertise from the same families in terms of Durga idol making, presiding over rituals and unified participation of villagers in festivities speaks volumes about the inclusiveness and amalgamation that has greatly contributed to the sustained spirit of the place. This spreads to the wonderful and apt nicknames given to each of these mansions by locals - 'putul bari' and 'shooting bari'. The economic model though critiqued at the present time, worked towards the benefit of all stakeholders – merchants, locals, British authorities while also

⁵ The agricultural labourers were Vaishnavas, i.e. followers of Lord Krishna, a Hindu God. Thus Ras, Krishna's rituals were so popular. Radha is Krishna's consort.

⁶ The Bengal Chamber of Commerce and Industry was set up in 1853 and for the last one and a half centuries, it has been playing a pioneering role in steering the evolution of Commerce and Industry in India.

⁷ The honour of Rai Bahadur was conferred to prominent Indians by the British rulers for performing great service in visionary leadership to the nation.

creating for today's generation, a veritable reserve of legacy and memories that could, with proper care, live hundreds of years more.

The families were not in conflict as one would expect, since they traded in the same types of goods. They were cooperative in their approach to business and welfare activities for the villagers. Contrary to the image of oppressive landlords, they were benevolent and inclusive. Much like some industrialists of present time, these merchants who did not hail from the elite class (agricultural labourers) brought social development to the area. Education, health and culture tempered by benevolence has made this town a microcosm of a circular model that we strive for at this time.

We can deeply appreciate the lifeline taken up by the residents of mansions in the form of renting out for movie and serial shooting.

Analysed in detail, all of this collectively immerses us in the palpable genius loci of the village that is singularly enhanced by its existence as a 'place within a place'. Study of vicinity reveals that the settlement displays this strong sense of place by the visual contrast evident from photographs (in Figure 7) yet just as in a figure-ground relationship, the total picture of the identity is made possible by the flourishing of the dichotomy. The experience of the complete collective without nudging the equilibrium of duality calls for immediate care and sustenance.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

It is difficult to understand why this settlement did not find itself described in the pages of history books. Its timekeeping and subsequent progression is a model to cherish and it can be said that the achievements of a trading community was perhaps considered too humble or unimportant by British rulers to record for future generations. However, the interest generated now could be capitalised for recognition, recording, rejuvenation and relaying to the greater world. In addition to rentals for shooting, boutique hotels and experiential stays could be an economic model for forthcoming times.

This history must be shared with a large selection of population beginning with school students and reaching across to professionals and concerned authorities. E-conferences and other modes of regular engagement with different entities may then yield knowledge exchange in best way forward for kindling interest, enabling preservation and ensuring continuity of this priceless asset.



Figure 7. Experiential journey route with display of immediate context.

The experiential journey could include an entire walking trail of 1.8 km, (Refer Fig.7) beginning with soaking in the regal ambience at Gaine Garden and moving onto the streets of intimate and human scale to reach the other landmarks. Each of them could be entered/partially accessed according to comfort and permission of individual

house owners at different times of the day and year. The residences of the Gaines, Ballavs and Sawoos have already been endowed with names by locals, in keeping with their special characteristics and serve as markers on the route. The other places, in keeping with their nature, i.e. private (temples inside house, schools) or public (community temples with sizeable gathering spaces, library) could be approached with sensitivity and care.

The visiting period could be encouraged to begin with Durga Puja, the biggest cultural festival of Bengal now listed as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO, which is celebrated in September/October and extend until the festival of Ras in the month of April. As is now known to many, the economic component of the festivals, especially that of Durga puja (Rs. 450,000 million or US \$5500 million) presents great opportunity for local businesses to thrive around the year (PTI, 2022).

Above all, the place and its existence are dependent on the empowerment of the community and this could be ensured by adaptive reuse of many of the large spaces that now lie vacant in the residences of the three zamindar families. Literacy and Skill centres for women and children, awareness and interpretation centres for a place with such strong historical and existential identity are functions that could be imbibed within the physical and social fabric for a promising future in tune with local aspirations. Circularity in use, for places such as these with strong genius loci, is a great system for present generation of this world to nurture and preserve a resource and pass it on to the next generation with minimum damage and modification.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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