

Summary

In the early nineteenth century, one of the largest towns within the Danish monarchy was situated in India. Under Danish rule (1755-1845), the trading post Serampore in Bengal grew from a cluster of villages into a global colonial town with a multi-cultural and socially diverse population. The dissertation explores how Serampore (also known as *Frederiksnagore*) was imagined, represented and governed during the Danish rule, including how the settlement came to be perceived as “the cleanest town in India”, and why it was important for the colonial administrators to preserve this image. Focusing on the first half of the nineteenth century, it analyses the Danish governmental strategies to plan, improve, and regulate Serampore’s population and urban space. In doing so, it considers the interrelated themes of urban planning and regulation, colonial ideologies and self-understanding, law and legal systems, medical theories and public health.

Drawing on a wide range of previously unexplored sources, the dissertation traces both the practices and rationalities of Serampore’s colonial government. It demonstrates how between 1820 and 1845 the colonial administration expanded its authority and began to intervene more directly in the daily lives of the local population, although Denmark’s central government simultaneously sought to reduce the activities in India and sell the settlement. Seeking to explain this development, it looks at a number of local Danish civil servants in a micro-historical perspective and shows how many – influenced by prevalent colonial ideologies – felt a moral obligation to “improve” the local population and urban space. This quest for “improvement” was linked to imperatives of compassion and benevolence, but also to their perceptions of Indians. As new medical theories began to explain diseases as the outcome of poor hygiene, the colonial administrators increasingly viewed the Indian population as “careless” and “unclean”, and, thereby, as a threat to Serampore’s public health and prosperity.

In actual practice, however, it was difficult for the Danish civil servants representing a small-scale power to live up to their own ideals of the “paternal”, colonial government. The local administrators struggled to navigate between multiple interests, and especially the influential Bengali elite of wealthy landowners interfered in the daily governance and challenged Danish hegemony. It is argued that, in practice, this negotiation and contestation meant that Serampore’s governance was shaped locally as a pragmatic (and often confusing) synthesis of laws, regulations and practices from Tranquebar (Denmark’s main settlement in India), British India, and Denmark. Accordingly, the dissertation uncovers more generally how a distinct form of colonialism developed in an urban setting in South Asia under a minor European state that did not possess the same economic and military strength as the larger colonial powers.

‘The Cleanest Town in India’

Danish Colonialism and Urban Governance
in Serampore, c. 1800-1845

SIMON RASTÉN



AARHUS UNIVERSITY



Nationalmuseet
National Museum of Denmark