

## **The Governor's Residence in Tranquebar: The House and the Daily Life of Its People, 1770-1845**

Esther Fihl (ed)

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*Review by Niklas Thode Jensen*

Some books are long underway – and some of them are worth waiting for. This is the case with the anthology under review here, which employs a micro-historical and multidisciplinary approach for the exploration of the house, which from 1770 to 1845 was the residence of the governors in the Danish-Norwegian colony of Tranquebar on the Coromandel Coast of India. The book is the final achievement of *The Tranquebar Initiative*, a large-scale Indian-Danish research project carried out during the period 2004-2016 and headed by the Danish National Museum. The aim of the Initiative was to promote cross-cultural understanding by presenting and preserving Indian-Danish cultural heritage. It produced more than twenty research projects employing approaches from archaeology, ethnology, museology, history etc., including a project to document and restore the governor's residence in Tranquebar. This cross-cultural approach is also prominent in *The Governor's Residence*, which itself is the result of several years of dedicated research by an international group of experts.

Tranquebar (Tarangambadi) was founded in 1620 by the Danish East India Company as the first Danish-Norwegian colony in India. The land was rented from the ruler of the Indian kingdom of Thanjavur (Tanjore), a relation that continued until 1845 when all the Danish possessions in India was sold to Britain. In the intervening 225

years, Tranquebar was the administrative centre of Danish-Norwegian (from 1814 only Danish) trade and trading stations in the East Indies. The colony consisted of the fortified town itself with approximately 3800 inhabitants and about 50 square kilometres of surrounding agricultural lands containing 14 villages and about 20.000 inhabitants (figures from around 1790). In the town itself, about 80 percent of the population was Indian. The colony remained roughly this size through most of its history; in other words, it remained in the mode of the small colonial trading post of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in which the claims to authority of both European and Indian culture remained fluent and necessitated continuous negotiation.

*The Governor's Residence* offers a new and refreshing analytical perspective in the historiography on Danish colonialism because it employs the governor's residence, everything and everyone in it and all that took place there as a prism through which the authors can analyse previously understudied aspects of the multi-layered and multicultural life in colonial Tranquebar and beyond. The aspects studied range from Indo-Danish architecture, the use of furniture, the meaning of spatial arrangements and emotions of belonging to the multiple cultural encounters, exchanges and co-productions that took place between the Danish residents of the house and their Indian staff, European guests, Indian delegates, priests, traders and many more.

With this approach, the book positions itself at the forefront of one of the two dominant research trends in the historiography of Danish(-Norwegian) colonialism in Asia. This trend was initiated in the early 1980s and is inspired by theoretical insights from anthropology and post-colonial studies. The other trend focuses on economic history or trade history and dates back the 1940s. One of the initiators and leading researchers of the anthropological/post-colonial trend has been anthropologist Esther Fihl, Professor Emerita of University of Copenhagen, who is also the editor of *The*

*Governor's Residence* and one of its authors. Since the beginning of the new millennium, this research trend has been the more active of the two. This is reflected both in the research projects of *The Tranquebar Initiative*, which was also headed by Esther Fihl, but also in the publication in 2017 of the new standard reference work of Danish colonial history titled *Danmark og kolonierne* [Denmark and the Colonies]. As the main focus in this five-volume collection, including one volume on the Danish(-Norwegian) possessions in India, is on the perspectives of the colonized and the local rather than the metropole, it is also clearly part of the same historiographic trend. *The Governor's Residence* complements *Danmark og kolonierne* both theoretically by taking a micro-historical approach instead of a comprehensive one and in terms of language since the latter work is – as yet – only available in Danish.

In relation to the international historiography of colonialism in India, *The Governor's Residence* is also offering a different approach. By presenting perspectives from Danish Tranquebar, a minor European player on the Indian subcontinent, and based on other records than the predominant history of British colonial experiences in India, the book is a valuable contribution to a growing literature concerning experiences of other European powers and agents in colonial India, such as the Dutch, French and Portuguese.<sup>1</sup>

The approach in *The Governor's Residence* to the house as a prism is further enhanced by the inclusion in the text of 25 'vignettes' and many more illustrations. The vignettes are small stories focusing on a person, an object or a theme that branch off from the main narrative but still informs it. The many beautiful illustrations, at least one on each double-page and many of them never published before, also support the narrative, especially since the captions are substantial and form yet another layer of minor stories.

The narrative of *The Governor's Residence* consists of an introduction followed by eight chapters. The chapters are based on extensive research in literature and archival records in more than five European languages. References to the sources are found in endnotes in each chapter. Furthermore, cross-references between the chapters enhances the sense of cohesion, of the text as one narrative, which is always a challenge in edited books.

In the first chapter, Esther Fihl situates Tranquebar in time and space by elucidating the colony's relations to the land and its people, i.e. the kingdom of Thanjavur, the local political hierarchy and the existing webs of performances of tribute, gift giving and rituals. In the second chapter, historian Simon Rastén presents a thorough archival investigation of the former residences of the governors of Tranquebar and the conditions under which they lived and worked before the takeover in 1784 of the house that is the focus of the book. The third chapter, authored by conservation architect Niels Erik Jensen, explores the architectural history of the governor's residence based on archaeological and archival evidence. It was a three-winged house in the typical English colonial style yet presenting a distinct combination of Danish, Indian and English elements. In the fourth chapter, historian Louise Sebro analyses the governor's residence as part of the townscape and spatial order of Tranquebar with its multiple intersecting divisions based on ethnicity, religion, occupation and economic standing. From the townscape, Sebro enters the governor's residence along with various guests and employees and sees it through their eyes, or rather through their descriptions; the layout and divisions of public and private, of inside and outside etc. Sebro pays special attention to the female residents and areas in the house, which offers insights into intimate spaces that have not been studied previously.

The fifth chapter, authored by historian Martin Krieger, explores the furniture and decoration in the European houses in Tranquebar based on archival records with the aim to reconstruct what the long lost furniture of the governor's residence may have looked like. The furniture in the European houses were predominantly European in their function while the materials and styles were Asian. In chapter six, Louise Sebro returns with an investigation of the governor's residence as the meeting place of the Pan-European community on the Coromandel Coast and in the wider region. Based on memoirs and other accounts she reveals the importance of this expat community during war and conflict, and how social networks were established and maintained by travel and visits. In chapter seven, Sebro continues with an exploration of how India and Indian culture influenced the lives of the Danish(-Norwegian) governors and their families, both while they lived in India and when they had been repatriated. Sebro brings out several interesting points, for instance that the understanding of "India" was influenced during the voyage to India by stories and experiences from fellow passengers. Another important insight is that one of the main characteristics of being a colonial family was distance and a sense of missing loved ones and familiar places. However, what the author of this review found most fascinating was Sebro's investigation of the life that took place in the European gardens surrounding Tranquebar. Sebro interprets this kind of garden as a secluded, European space, which can be seen as a cool and airy extension of the town house. Still, it seems much more could be said about the role of gardens in Indo-Danish relations in Tranquebar and that this could be a field for further research. In the final chapter, the four authors, engineers and architects Atin Kumar Das, Renate Hach, Niels Erik Jensen and Ajit Koujalgi, examines how the governor's residence was used after Tranquebar was sold to the British in 1845 and the process of restoring the building, which took place in the period

2006-2012. At the end of the book is a number of appendices with useful information, for instance glossary and a list of online resources. In recent years, archives and libraries in several countries have made quite a lot of material concerning Tranquebar available online, but since there is no coordination between them or a common point of entry, a list is a very useful tool.

To conclude, *The Governor's Residence* is a well-written anthology based on solid research and with refreshing analytical perspectives that point out new directions for further research. Yet, at the same time, its skilfully crafted mosaic of vignettes and rich illustrations will also make it accessible and an interesting read for the broader audience and not just for those with scholarly interests.

## Notes

- 1 See for instance Agmon, *A Colonial Affair*; Mailaparambil, *Lords of the Sea*; Anjana, *Fort Cochin in Kerala*; Vink, *Encounters on the Opposite Coast*; Zupanov and Xavier, *Catholic Orientalism*.

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