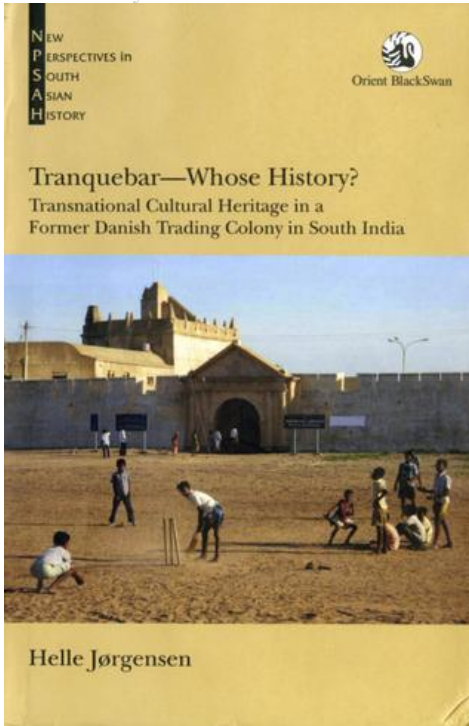


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Sharing history across cultures

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Tranquebar - Whose History? by Helle Jorgensen

The Hindu

For a 'post-colony' like Tranquebar, with its rich Indo-Danish built heritage, it was, ironically, a disaster in the form of a tsunami that triggered a tangible heritage development initiative. When such heritage development takes shape as post-colonial heritage construction, it engenders certain national narratives of former colonial power (Denmark in this study) vis-à-vis local narratives and histories.

With the sensitivity of the anthropologist, Helle Jorgensen, straddles the heritage discourse in a post-colony, cautiously aware of her vantage point as a Dane, and by default being held as a representative of a Danish national narrative.

Studying the discourse of heritage development in Tranquebar, the author locates the project as a 'protracted and reiterative process' that engages multiple agents — cooperating and competing to control and negotiate the idea of development and heritage.

Here, history is at once shared between the formerly colonised and the former coloniser and simultaneously contested at certain levels. Then how does a shared heritage construction include and exclude at the same time?

So, when heritage development becomes exclusive, it leads to displacement and dislocation of "lifeworlds". The study of Tamil vernacular houses converted into heritage hotels beyond the reach of the local people, is a reflective positioning of irony of heritage development that simultaneously 'invisibilises' subaltern lived realities. Here, such development inadvertently erases subaltern experiences and histories, in the name of vernacular restoration. Here is when an authoritative idea of heritage conceived on a bourgeois aesthetic framework poses the danger of erasing 'ambiguities' in history.

The richness of the study is in its detailed engagement with the locals, and their idea of history, heritage, aesthetics and their deviance as perceived by heritage agents that include the Danish Tranquebar Association, INTACH, the ASI and other stakeholders.

There is a politics, sociology, economics, and aesthetics to heritage development. This study, albeit on a limited

townscape of a Tranquebar with a post-colonial heritage holds out such a template of heritage development, and its exclusivity through snippets of ethnographic studies from other post-colonies.

The contours of history keep shifting, and varying according to the agents and their vantage point. This position determines the understanding of the processes of heritage development for various stakeholders, both transnational and the local people of Tranquebar.

Here, Jorgensen seeks to establish Tranquebar as a postcolony in a qualified manner, reiterating the shifting and multiple narratives of history in social memory. This is evident in the many instances of Dutch (whose colony was Nagapattinam) and Danish colonial intervention used interchangeably by the locals.

For the locals of an erstwhile colony that had snapped its colonial linkage centuries ago, long before the larger decolonisation — a linear colonial construction of history may not hold the same memory or relevance as for the nationals from that former coloniser-nation. These points of meeting, divergence, conflicts and contestations of memory are played up in heritage development project.

Yet contemporary heritage development promotes a conscious historical narrative — that of its colonial legacy. This is evident in the restoration of buildings, commemorating a particular aspect of Danish colonial history in Tranquebar.

Restoration of buildings, and recalling the memory of colonial use of the buildings, steps up heritage construction from a particular perspective. It promotes a particular history and this history gets reinforced in local memory through heritage construction.

At the same time, there is a persistence of local histories in the everyday narratives. It is here that the author terms Tranquebar as a “heritage palimpsest” for the reason that it holds multiple and overlapping historicities persisting in local memoryscape — despite the dominant narrative of colonial history guiding the heritage project.

When heritage development of a post-colony calls upon transnational participation from a former colonial power such as Denmark, there are latent tensions, engagement, alienation, and contestations, between the locals as primary stakeholders, and heritage agents, both national and transnational.

The author sensitively explores the idea of history held onto by the locals and its material manifestation in the buildings and the new ‘materialities’ (such as concrete) that populate the townscape.

Locating history as memory, the author explores the contours of cross-cultural heritage development, when it attracts intervention of a former colonial power and of their acceptance in the midst of locals of an erstwhile colonial outpost.

Studying heritage development in Tranquebar, with its colonial buildings that testify to a 200-year-old Danish rule in a small fishing coast, Helle Jorgensen unravels the idea of history and heritage as held by competing agents.

The author’s consistent reflections on various encounters with locals and national and transnational agents engaged in heritage production, speak of an abundance of narratives that demand space in an otherwise unidimensional elitist idea of heritage construction.

This ethnographic study that draws strongly from empirical experiences of heritage discourse and practices, takes a reflective tone that constantly engages with subaltern notions of history, heritage, entitlements and participation.

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