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# **SOCIO-CULTURAL SURVEY OF SERAMPORE'S HISTORICAL TOWN CENTRE**

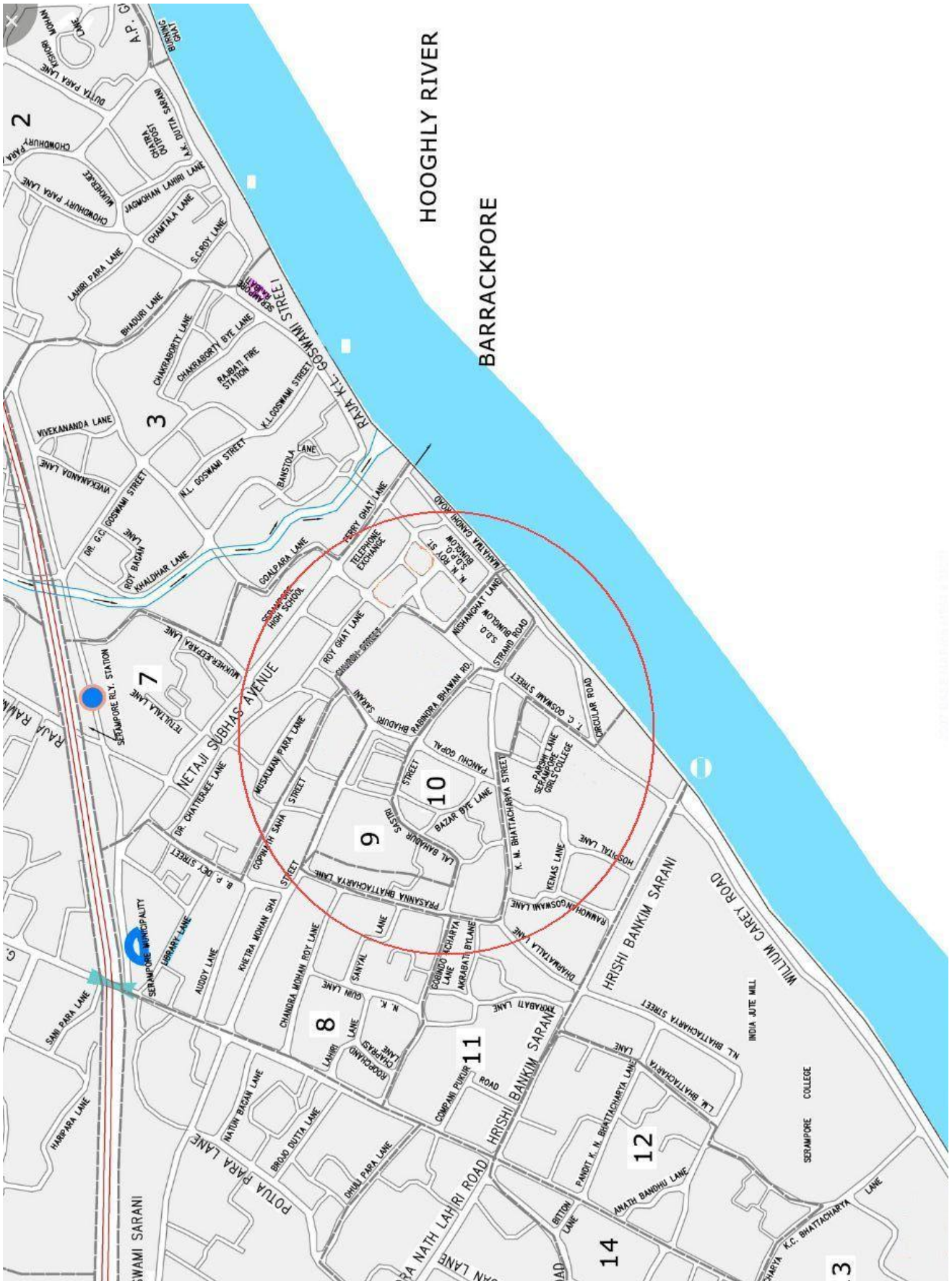


## **SUMMARY AND MAIN FINDINGS REPORT**

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HOOGLY RIVER  
BARRACKPORE

SERAMPORE MUNICIPALITY

## **1. Introduction**

This sociocultural research project has been carried out in relation to the restoration of significant historical buildings that form part of the common Indo-Danish cultural heritage in Serampore. The objective has been to examine and document the present situation and challenges of Serampore and its citizens, and to explore local use of urban space in Serampore. Moreover, the survey has included in-depth studies of local visions, needs and wishes, in relation to urban development in the historic town centre.

The research team consisted of one local social researcher, functioning as the team leader, one other local research assistant and one Danish research assistant (See work description in Appendix 1).

### **1.1. Design of the survey**

The study was carried out over a four months period from December 2012 – March 2013. The respondents were residents in the historic town centre, more specifically around the Court Compound. The respondents were mainly from Hindu and Muslim communities, and only a few were from Christian communities, reflecting the population composition in the area. The occupations held by the respondents were that of jute mill workers, rickshaw pullers, government employees, day labourers, bus drivers, small business and shop owners and middle class private employees (See appendix 2).

### **1.2. Methodology**

This is a qualitative survey based on field work and interviews. The areas around the court compound were divided among the three researchers, who completed a total of 30-40 interviews each.

A questionnaire was used for guiding structured and semi-structured interviews (See questionnaire in appendix 3). The first part focuses on demographic facts aimed at gaining an understanding of the respondents' backgrounds. Also, the respondents were asked about what facilities they have in their neighbourhood, in order to get an idea of their current living conditions.

The second part of the questionnaire contained more open ended questions aimed at extracting general opinions about, and usage of, urban space in Serampore. More specifically, this part of the questionnaire revolved around St. Olav's church, the Court Compound and its surroundings, the Ganges riverside, as well as opinions about the location of the bus stand, which is situated on the

square in front of St. Olav’s Church. Furthermore, the respondents were asked about what knowledge they have of the historical buildings in Serampore.



## 2. Main Findings

### 2.1. General considerations about living conditions in Serampore’s town centre

A number of issues regarding the overall living conditions in Serampore are raised by the respondents as follows:

- Almost all remark upon the decrease of greenery and open spaces in their areas.
- It is a lot more congested than it was 20 or 30 years ago; some of this is due to the great increase in population.
- Some feel that their area is more polluted than before and others that it is the other way round.
- Regarding the roads, it all depends on which area you ask in, but overall the roads are in a satisfactory condition, except by the South Gate to the Court Compound, where the road is in a really bad state.

- A considerable number mention the need for recreational areas, particularly playgrounds for the children. Many draw a direct line between the lack of playgrounds and social activities for children, caused by the closing of St. Olav's Church and changed circumstances at the Court Compound, and children falling into addiction, crime or other "immoral" behaviour.
- There is a large number of clubs in Serampore, but the number of clubs in the different neighbourhoods varies. There can be from 0 to 16 clubs per neighbourhood<sup>1</sup>.
- A great number of respondents remark on the difficult living conditions due to a high price rise on everyday commodities not matched by a similar rise in income.
- They additionally mention a problem with high youth unemployment.

The conclusions drawn here are based on the respondents' opinions about their amenities in their immediate surroundings or neighbourhoods (See map of Serampore city centre).

#### **2.1.1. Water, sewages, toilets and garbage**

- Generally, the clearing of household garbage and cleaning of sewages is satisfying, but some have to clean the sewages themselves because it is not done regularly by the municipality workers. Particularly around K.M. Bhattacharyya Street (See map) there seems to be a problem with both garbage and the drains.
- Most have sufficient access to water, from mainly outside taps or pumps, although a few have to queue up because too many people share a water tap.
- All the respondents have access to toilets, but in some neighbourhoods they have to share with many families. One example is 5 bathrooms for around 300 people (See Christiansen, Interview 10).

#### **2.1.2. Maintenance and guarding**

Time and again the importance of not only maintenance but also guarding of buildings, parks, playgrounds etc. is stressed by the respondents. If buildings are restored and parks and playgrounds constructed they must be maintained and also guarded by people employed specifically to carry out these jobs, or all the effort will be in vain. Buildings will become dilapidated

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<sup>1</sup> There is a great club culture in Serampore. Members pay a monthly members fee, and after work they go there and play cards, keram, watch TV and gossip. Sometimes sports, often cricket, tournaments are organized, where the clubs compete against each other and win prizes.

and playgrounds ruined. Also, trees and flowers must be watered and looked after.



## 2.2. Heritage Buildings and the History of Serampore

Overall, the interviewees have limited knowledge of Serampore's history and many think that buildings such as the Government House and St. Olav's Church were built by the British. But a few are aware of the town's Danish era and the buildings originating from that time.

- The great majority believe it to be vital that these buildings are restored and preserved for future generations as they make out an essential part of Serampore's history and urban environment.
- Many state that they think their own government should be responsible for the preservation of heritage buildings, but – seeing that this is not really happening – welcome foreign organizations willing to do the work.
- A few, though, are hesitant about inviting foreign powers to do the work, stressing that India is a liberated country and should stay that way.
- The plan to turn the old Danish Government House into a museum is appreciated by most and seen as a good way to pass on historical knowledge to the children.

### 2.3. In and around the Court Compound

The Court Compound is the heart of Serampore, and a big part of the urban life in central Serampore is acted out within this space. Almost everybody (with a few exceptions) interviewed come to the Court Compound several times per day for various reasons. Besides its main function, which is administration and legal affairs, people come for recreational purposes. Moreover, both inside and around the Court Compound various businesses reside.



#### 2.3.1. At the Main Gate

Regarding renovation of the Court Compound and in particular the Main Gate:

- Several respondents suggest that a sign board must be placed at the main entrance to the compound informing visitors that this is where the Court lies.
- The many small stall owners stress that they welcome new developments in the area but are worried that it will affect their businesses negatively and their stalls will be removed. The stall owners wish to be accommodated in any development activities (see P. S. Banerjee 2012-2013:154-156). Relaying a focus group discussion with 12 stall owners in front of the Main Gate, Banerjee writes:



At present they own small temporary stalls, situated on the roadside and they have no legal entitlement on the land on which their stalls are set up. Due to the temporary nature of their stalls, they cannot keep sufficient goods inside their stalls permanently. They suggested that they would be very willing to relocate their stalls if the administration provides them alternative area for setting up permanent stalls. They want to take part in the activity of development of the surrounding area of Olav church. They suggested that a suitable area inside the court compound for relocating their stalls would help them very much. They want development, but not at the cost of their loss of livelihood means. They just want a permanent place to earn their livelihood by honest means (ibid:155).

An additional wish, expressed by a handful of respondents, concerns a repainting of the series of paintings beautifully depicting the history of Serampore. They were painted on the SDO Bungalow compound wall in front of the Court Compound around 1990 on the initiative of the then Sub Divisional Officer of Serampore, Mrs Sharmistha Ghosh. Unfortunately, they no longer exist.



### **2.3.2. The Bus Stand situated by the Main Gate of the Court Compound**

The location of the bus stand is a controversial issue, and depending on whom you ask there are different opinions. Some respondents think that the bus stand should be shifted away from the Church Square and the Main Gate of the Court Compound because:

- It would decrease the pollution and congestion in the area, thereby making the city centre more attractive and safe for everyone, including tourists and other visitors. At present there are too many accidents and people are worried about their children's safety. Some suggest that a cleaner and more beautiful area will attract more visitors, making up for the lost income caused by a relocation of the bus stand.

The people against relocating the bus stand can generally be divided into two groups:

- Those who are economically dependent on the current location of the bus stand. They are small tea and snack stalls, mechanics and tire shop owners as well as rickshaw pullers based at the entrance to the Court Compound. Though some of them agree that a relocation of the bus stand would make the area less polluted and more attractive, they fear that it will have a negative effect on their businesses. Some of the stall owners mention that people going to the Court Compound are not their main customers, instead travellers on the busses in general are.

- Those who often use the transportation system and for whom the current location of the bus stand is convenient. A shifting of the bus stand will furthermore create a transportation problem for people going to the Court Compound, as they will have pay for auto rickshaws or bicycle rickshaws. For poor people the extra cost of that was mentioned as a considerable problem. A few suggest that at least a bus stop should remain, and others that the bus stand be moved to the riverside at the at the SDO residence.



### 2.3.3. At the South Gate

The scenario at the South Gate to the Court Compound is different than the one at the Main Gate. At the Main Gate, more than the renovation of the Main Gate itself, the pressing issue is a relocation of the bus stand. At the South Gate the renovation of the actual gate and the wall is the main concern. Both issues will alter the urban space significantly, and could entail various positive and negative consequences for different people.

- Some owners of the restaurants and shops opposite the wall are very happy about the coming renovation, and seem to have no concerns about the outcome. They see it as a positive change in relation to the development of the area and their businesses.
- Other shop and stall owners outside the South Gate and at the Tin Bazar near the South Gate are also interested in a development of the Court Compound and the surrounding area, but are concerned about being evicted from their shops and stalls. In contrast to the

stall owners at the Main Gate they are reluctant to have their businesses moved inside the Court Compound, mainly because they are worried they will lose income if their business hours will be restricted to that of the Court (See Interview #3-6, 10-12 by S. Bhattacharyya).<sup>2</sup>

- Owners of small shops located at the wall are more apprehensive about the development, because they will be relocated. However, they too seem to be aware of the possible benefits for the businesses in the area when the gate is reopened.
- The rickshaw pullers are worried because they are afraid they will lose their rickshaw location, immediately adjacent to the wall of the compound.



#### **2.3.4. The compound ground**

A couple of interviewees think that the Court Compound should be for official legal use only, and not for recreational purposes. A few have reported that they never go there. The vast majority of respondents, however, wish for the area to be a recreational and social meeting place, and somewhere to catch a breath of air. The Court Compound is generally described as being of great social and cultural importance for the inhabitants of Serampore.

The large grass covered grounds of the Court Compound is used for:

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<sup>2</sup> In fact it is a misunderstanding, caused by rumors, that the shops opposite the South Gate and the stalls at the Tin Bazar will be affected or moved due to the development of the Court Compound and the restoration of the South Gate. It is only the stalls directly outside the South Gate that will have to be relocated.

- Football and cricket tournaments.
- Republic Day and other national holidays.
- It is used as one of (if not the) main recreational areas for adults and children alike.

The survey expresses a general view that the grounds are a lot less attractive for recreational purposes today because:

- New buildings – especially the Court House - have been erected, reducing the area of open space.
- Both the grounds and the buildings lack maintenance.
- New and stricter rules for the use of the area seem to have been introduced:
  - People are no longer allowed to enter the compound at night.
  - People are no longer allowed to sleep on the grounds to escape tiny, hot and overcrowded living quarters in the summer.
  - Some say that children are no longer permitted to play on the grounds and that playing cricket is forbidden children because of the danger of broken windows in the new court buildings.
  - Other interviewees, though, say that cricket is still played on the ground, also by children. The surveyors have observed that this is the case.

There is a general sentiment that much could be done to improve the area:

- Cleaning away garbage.
- Constructing a park and gardens with flowers.
- Putting up benches or other sitting arrangements for visitors.
- Reconstructing the former green playground used for cricket tournaments and as a children's playground.
- Turning the pond into a swimming pool.
- Installing more lamps to light up the grounds at night time.
- Installing more toilets on the compound as the lack of toilets creates a major problem with people urinating everywhere.

It should also be noted that some of the respondents are concerned that renovations and landscaping in the Court Compound will result in them being denied access to the grounds, so that they can no longer play and spend their free time within that area (Christiansen, Interview 6).



#### **2.4. St. Olav's Church**

Everybody speaks nostalgically of St. Olav's Church and all agree that it should be restored and reopened. Apart from the Christian Methodist sermons performed weekly by Serampore College, the building has been used mainly by Muslim and Hindu communities in the neighbourhoods around the church, due to the charitable activities that have been carried out there. St. Olav's Church has therefore previously played an important social role in the surrounding neighbourhood, particularly in relation to the poorer segments of the population. Thus there is a great desire for the church's functions to be restored.

Before the church was closed down, the Emmanuel Ministries in Ripon Street, Kolkata, offered a number of social and educational activities and services in the building:

- Free education for young children (English, Hindi etc.).
- Vocational tailoring training, safety pin manufacturing and candle making for women.
- Literacy training for adults.
- Sports and musical activities for children.
- Clothes and food was given to the poor.
- There was a free medical clinic.

- There was a program for young people with addictions.
- Young brides from poor families were offered financial support.
- A yearly lottery was held for women who helped save up a small fund.

In addition to the wish for these social and educational activities to be re-established, there are a number of other explanations for the existence of a general desire, shared by both people in the surrounding neighbourhood and those living further away, for the church to be renovated and reopened:

- St. Olav's church is a landmark and a great pride of Serampore town and it is a place that could potentially attract tourists.
- Some people have memories of the sounds of the church bells over the city. Moreover, when it worked, the church clock was very convenient for knowing the time.
- Many people have childhood memories of attending Christmas ceremonies and celebrations on 25 December in the church.
- The respondents (who were mainly Muslim and Hindu) feel sorry for the Christian community that they cannot worship in the church.

Furthermore, there is a great wish for:

- The restoring of a children's playground on the church ground.
- A general clearing and maintenance of the grounds, including trees and flowers.

A smaller number of the interviewees did not know anything about the activities of the church.



## 2.5. The Riverside

The riverside is one other public free space in Serampore widely used for recreation, religious rituals and bathing:

- It is used for morning and evening walks and for getting some fresh air.
- The sitting area by Nisan Ghat is used for “time passing” with friends.
- The Hindu community uses the Ganges river for morning baths, as well as collection of Ganges soil and water for ritual purposes.
- Many respondents who have to share water taps/pumps in their crowded neighbourhoods use the riverside every morning for bathing.
- In the evening it becomes a “lovers’ point” for young couples.
- At night it is also occupied by youth that are drinking and using other intoxicants, making it a less attractive area for others to use.

Concerning the riverside, there is a general opinion that it could and should be developed, and a number of improvements are suggested:

- Cleaning up the riverside as well as the river.
- Enriching the area with parks, flowers and trees.
- Construction of a children’s playground.
- Putting up benches.



- Repairing the Ghats as they constitute a danger for particularly children and elderly people using them.
- A few of the interviewees also remark on the lack of a suitable place for women to bathe, or to change clothes after having bathed.

Several of the respondents are of the opinion that if the area is made more inviting and beautiful it could attract more tourists. Moreover, it is thought that this would result in employment opportunities for some of the local unemployed youth, who could sell tea and local craftworks from vendor stalls.

The riverbanks of Chunchura and Chandannagar are repeatedly mentioned as examples to follow, since they are more beautifully constructed and maintained.

## Appendix 1

### **Proposed Socio-cultural study of population in Serampore's historical centre**

#### **Introduction and background**

The Serampore Initiative of the National Museum of Denmark was established in 2008 with the aim of documenting and preserving the tangible built heritage of the Danish period in Serampore 1755-1845. In the process of documenting and restoring significant parts of the common Indo-Danish legacy, it is essential to understand the present situation and challenges of Serampore and its citizens. The Serampore Initiative therefore wish to support a field study to create an overview of the present population groups, including in-depth studies of local visions, needs and wishes, especially in relation to the urban space in the historic town centre.

#### **Research staff**

- 1-2 researcher(s): E.g. anthropologist(s) with experience in field research, structured and unstructured/informal/open-ended interview techniques, and preferably also participant observation. Fluency in Bengali and preferably knowledge on other languages common in Serampore.
- 1 assistant/trainee: Postgraduate student from a Danish University (Anthropology or Contemporary South Asian studies).

#### **Study (4 months)**

##### **Qualitative study. Interviews and fieldwork in selected households**

Representative samples of households from abovementioned population groups, e.g. 10-15 households, representing e.g. traders (shop/street), factory workers, school children, officers/professionals, old zamindaris, new land owners, etc.

Focus areas, based on several in-depth interviews and preferably some degree of participant observation:

- Number of generations in Serampore
- Main economic priorities of household
- Use of urban space: within household and immediate surroundings, street and other public areas; temple/church/mosque; schools; comparison to other known places outside own neighbourhood or town
- Wishes/needs: e.g. areas for sports, playgrounds, undisturbed space (for reading/socializing or other); buildings for social/community/religious purposes
- Knowledge about and view on Serampore's history and historic buildings
- Relationship to the public authorities e.g. on municipal and district level

#### **Design and outcome of study**

- The study shall be planned and carried out by the researcher(s) in close cooperation with the Serampore Initiative of the National Museum of Denmark.

- The project should lead to a report that summons the findings in a clear and useful form that could be applied in the future town planning and heritage conservation projects.
- The results, in a generalised form, will also form an important part of a planned book on Serampore's Indo-Danish heritage.

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## Appendix 2

### **Socio-cultural study in the Serampore heritage site**

After discussions with the local Councillor Mr. Pappu Singh, SC-ST leader Anchal Roy and Muslim community leader Mahammad Kalim, the following streets/locality around the Serampore heritage site is marked for our study.

- 1) N N Roy Street
- 2) Mahatma Gandhi Street
- 3) Ray Ghat Lane
- 4) Biswanath Mukherjee Lane (Church Street)
- 5) Musalman Para
- 6) Gopinath Saha Street
- 7) Burobibir Lane
- 8) T C Goswami Street
- 9) Tinbazar
- 10) Silbagan

The total number of families living in these streets and localities is around 2000 families that can be divided in the following population groups:

- 1) Jute Mill worker- 1000
- 2) Rickshaw-pullers- 200
- 3) Bus drivers and conductors- 100
- 4) Construction workers and day labourers- 200
- 5) Fisher-men and other vendors in the local market- 100
- 6) Small businessmen and shop-owners- 150

- 7) Middle class private company employees- 150
- 8) Government employees and small industry owners- 100

### **General instructions for the study**

- 1) We would take up roughly 5% of the total population, with minimum 10 from each population groups, total 120 families for the qualitative study in the following fashion:
  - a) Jute Mill workers- 50
  - b) Rickshaw-pullers- 10
  - c) Bus drivers and conductors- 10
  - d) Construction workers and day labourers- 10
  - e) Fisher-men and other vendors in the local market- 10
  - f) Small businessmen and shop-owners- 10
  - g) Middle class private company employees- 10
  - h) Government employees and small industry owners- 10
- 2) Apart from these samples, we would try to conduct focus group discussions (FGDs) with representatives of each population group, clubbing them together in a community centre or open space that might be suitable for their gathering. Ideally these FGDs would be attended by 7-10 members of the respective groups.
- 3) Each individual sample will represent one family that comprises members having a common kitchen, i.e. cooking and sharing food together.
- 4) The samples will be chosen randomly, but should be spread over the whole area. The number of samples will be more where a particular population group stay in a cluster.

- 5) The court compound is the centre of the heritage site in Serampore while the surrounding area includes the riverside along with other sides.
- 6) As transpired from the division of population groups, the area under our study comprises mainly low income labouring people predominantly from the Muslim and SC-ST communities with low literacy rates.

## Appendix 3

### Questionnaire for the Socio-cultural study in Serampore

#### Information about the respondent and his/her living space

- 1) Name and address:
- 2) Age
- 3) Male/female
- 4) Religion:
- 5) No. of family members:      a) adult-              b) child
- 6) Level of education?
- 7) Source of income of your family:
- 8) Yearly family income (roughly):      a) below Rs.50,000  
   b) Rs.50000 to Rs.200, 000  
   c) Rs.200, 000 to Rs.500, 000  
   d) Above Rs.500, 000
- 9) Area of your living space
- 10) Ownership or rented house
- 11) Number of years living in this house
- 12) Where did your family migrate from
- 13) How many generations did your family spend in this area
- 14) What amenities do you enjoy in the surrounding area
  - a) Condition of roads
  - b) Conservancy
  - c) Garbage clearing
  - c) Greenery
  - d) Availability of free space
  - e) Playing ground

f) Place for social/community activities like club, library, religious place etc.

g) Water and sanitation, toilets

15) How has the living conditions changed over time, say in the last 20/30 years or so.

16) What activities does the household do for family time/leisure?

17) What is your general opinion of the public space for time pass and playing in Serampore?

### **Use of court premises and its surroundings**

18) Distance of your house from the court compound (in meters)

19) How frequently do you visit in or around the court premises?

20) How has Serampore changed since your childhood (or since you moved here)?

21) What are the public uses of the court compound?

22) Do you feel the court compound and the surrounding areas require renovation of old buildings, cleaning, increased greenery etc?

23) Do you use the river bank often? What should be improved?

24) What is your opinion about the St. Olav's church?

25) Who in your opinion should take the initiative for improving the situation?

26) Did you suggest any steps to the local authority?

### **Knowledge about the heritage site**

27) What do you know about the historic buildings in the town center?

28) What do you feel about the preservation and renovation of the old buildings?

29) Who in your opinion should take the responsibility of renovating and preserving the old buildings?

30) Would you welcome any such step on the part of a foreign country, say of Denmark?



31) Do you think it is a good location for the bus stand or would you like it to be moved?

Are you aware that such steps are taken by the government?