

CHANDANNA

French journalist Jean-Claude Perrier's visiting card has a picture of Lord Ganesh with his Paris contact details! He has cards specifically for his Indian tours as no one uses them in France. Jean-Claude recently launched the English translation of his French book in Kolkata, India, - *Travels in French India* - a journey through the past and present of the five erstwhile French enclaves of India, namely Mahé, Pondicherry, Karaikal, Yanaon and Chandernagore (now Chandannagar). He published the original - *Dans les comptoirs de l'Inde: Mahé, Pondichéry, Karikal, Yanaon, Chandernagor: carnets de voyage* - in Paris in 2004.



GAR

THE WANING MOON OF

FRENCH INDIA

The first French settlement in India, the moon-shaped city of **Chandannagar**, is struggling to preserve its French connection

BY **SRAVASTI GHOSH DASTIDAR**





Aesthetic renovation of St. Joseph's Convent, retaining the original facade.

From his childhood, Jean-Claude dreamt of the French dominions in India and the names of ancient Indian cities that carried a romantic tune, which lured him to travel to the distant land. On Jean-Claude's maiden tour in 1981, India 'exploded' in his face with her myriad scents, scenes and people. After some enriching journeys, the French Ministry of Culture commissioned him, in 2003, to open the window of French India to the contemporary world by extensively researching the five former establishments, focusing on the Francophones, and writing a historical travelogue.

Jean-Claude traversed 4 states and mastered 5 languages to gather comprehensive material for a passionate account of two old civilizations. The French language is flourishing at Alliance Francaise institutes in the Indian metros. However, excluding Pondicherry, the four remaining French enclaves have a decreasing French-speaking population. The interest in its French past is gradually fading.

THE FRENCH ENTRY

■ Due to British domination, many are unaware of the Dutch, Portuguese and French colonial aspirations that left indelible marks in certain territorial pockets in India. They encompassed towns, not just comptoirs (trading stations).

The French and the British often engaged in warfare on Indian soil, extending their native rivalry and taking sides with Indian rulers to outdo each other. The French actively instigated Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah to attack the British Fort William in Calcutta. The decisive Battle of Plassey that paved the way for British rule in India was a direct fallout of this act. France was the last entrant to the Indian trade market. In 1668, they set up factories in Surat. In 1673, the Mughal Governor of Bengal Nawab Ibrahim Khan permitted them to set up a kuthi (trading post) in Chandannagar, in Bengal. The initial customs duty of 3 ½ percent was later reduced to 2 ½ percent. The French used Indian interpreters-cum-middlemen (dobhashi) as business agents.

The town of Chandernagore developed into a French settlement in 1688. It flourished as one of the chief commercial towns under General Joseph Francois Dupleix. It was near the Portuguese, Dutch, Danish and English settlements in Hooghly, Chinsurah, Serampore and Barrackpore, respectively. Armenian, Jewish and Rajasthani traders also frequented Chandernagore. The acquisition of Pondicherry, Yanaon, Mahé and Karaikal followed quickly. The French ruled Chandernagore for 250 years. The original parwana issued by Diwan Murshid Quli Khan in 1707 of granting the renewal of trading permission is displayed in Dupleix's House, which is now Institut de Chandernagore. It houses



French language courses offered at the Institute of Chandernagore,



The witty Jean-Claude Perrier



Murals on houses add colour to the dreary streets,

historic relics and records of the bond of the two countries. Its manicured lawns have a statue of a lady with a flag to memorialise Chandannagar's support of the French Revolution of 1789. Although officially closed on Thursdays and Saturdays, Jean-Claude wryly adds that it is closed most days, unless you acquire government permission! Jean-Claude is pleased with the repainting of this building, but ashamed of the sub-standard maintenance of artefacts and manuscripts, many of which have been lost to humidity, dust and theft. Chandannagar voted to join the Indian Republic in 1954 and is part of the state of Bengal. Yet, the French government proposed to help upgrade the institute by appointing a historian and a librarian from France. The proposal got stuck in India's bureaucratic quagmire.

CHANDANNAGAR - THE MOON-SHAPED CITY

■ According to popular theory, Chandannagar gets its name from the moon-shaped look of the bank of River Hooghly, where it is situated (Bengali: Chand - moon, nagar - city). Some ancient texts carry the name Chandernagore or Chandra Nagar, and others say the city used to be the trading centre for Sandalwood (Bengali: chandan). The French occupation rendered its other name - Farasdanga or France don-mgi (Bengali: Farasi - French, danga - land).

From Kolkata, it takes 1½ to 3 hours by road to reach Chandannagar. It is also accessible by boat and train. There is hardly any standard hotel in the city. In 2003, Jean-Claude lodged in the dormitories of Rabindra Bhavan. He is amused that he had to use the squat toilet and a plastic bucket with a mug.

FRENCH ARCHITECTURE AND LANGUAGE

Once a clean and deliberately planned city, with splendid colonial and native architecture, bustling with trading activities, Chandannagar has now acquired the characteristic chaos of Indian towns. It was a French holiday destination with a Bengali flavour. Now, very few distinctive French features remain. It is struggling to retain its old world charm, yet relenting to mindless modernisation.

A bridge on the erstwhile moat of the Chandernagore Fort marks the entry to the city from the south. It leads to two square pillars crowned with urns. Inaugurated in 1937, it commemorates the Fall of Bastille. The words "Liberte, Egalite & Fratarnite" (Liberty, Equality & Fraternity) are written on them. Sadly, now garbage, posters and flies surround the pillars. Most of the colonial structures line up the bank of the Hooghly. The Strand is the flagship creation of the French era. A paved pathway with delicate lights and lush foliage, overlooking country boats on the Hooghly, is ideal for strolls. The 1920s pavilion of Durgacharan Rakshit Ghat,



Murals on houses add colour to the dreary streets, Thakur Bari (Durga Temple) of Mankundu Rajbari

opposite Institut de Chandernagore, built on the former bandstand, is in honour of Durga Charan Rakshit, recipient of the French award of Legion d'Honneur. The structure has slender columns with ornamental stucco work comprising elephant heads and floral designs.

Opposite the Strand are some French buildings in varied stages of survival. The Sacred Heart Church (1884) is near Duplex's House. Designed by French architect Jacques Duchatz, the church is a fine model of French architecture. The white and blue two-storied church has a welcoming statue of Christ at the entrance, and boasts of colourful stained glasses and reliefs. The organ, wooden pulpit, confession box and vaulted roofs have seen better days. Jean-Claude marvels at Father Orson Wells' initiative of conducting free French language classes at the church on Saturday mornings for students, young and old. Ironically, most schools in Chandannagar do not offer French language as an option. The French established many good schools. Of them, St. Joseph's Convent, founded by the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny in 1861, is worth mentioning. It is situated near the church. The chapel and the façade of the school are undergoing aesthetic renovation. Principal Sister Anne Maria proudly relates stories of the institution's excellence in education, co-curricular activities and social service. However, French is not taught here. The French-me-



dium Kanailal Vidyamandir (former College Duplex - 1862) is one of the eight schools teaching French in Chandannagar. It is the 'fountainhead of Francophony in Chandannagar'. It has a student strength of 2,000. Alliance Francaise du Bengale of Kolkata aids it. In 1949, the city municipality instituted the C.E.P.E diploma to support French as the second foreign language after English.

Jean-Claude presented a 'diploma in French language' to qualified students. It was a lengthy ceremony where almost a hundred 10 to 11-year-old children went on stage, one by one. He was very moved when the well-groomed children touched his feet respectfully. He blessed them by touching their heads. The experience was bizarre, emotional and memorable. Despite being isolated from Pondicherry, Francophones have miraculously survived in Chandannagar.

Diagonally opposite the convent is Patalbari (Underground House), a 150-year-old French mansion. The current owners, the Khans of Mankundu, bought it 60 years ago. The quaint house has beautiful wooden sunshades, ornate water outlets, verdant gardens and unused steps leading to the river. Rabindranath Tagore spent some days here in 1934. The easy chair he sat on is used even today. Patriarch Ashim Chandra Khan lives alone in this house that has an entire floor under the level of the Hooghly complete with bedrooms, bathrooms and a kitchen with clay ovens. The underground floor can be better maintained. Callous renovation and negligence plagues Chandannagar. Restoration of the 19th century Old French Cemetery on the Strand, where famous meteorologist Henry Piddington is interred, is shoddy. The demolition of interesting architecture is also evident in the derelict Mankundu Rajbari (palace). The 250-year-old, Greek-styled palace with orchards, ponds, a lake and a temple to Goddess Durga was built by Raman Lal Khan on 40 acres of land. A dilapidated slice of the grand structure with antique furniture and relics, the Durga temple and the ashta-dhatu (8 metals) idol of Durga are all that remain. The original gold Durga and most of the property are lost to theft and unaesthetic practicality.

SWEET FAREWELL

■ Jean-Claude does not harbour hopes that the French Language will gain popularity in Chandannagar, due to never-ending bureaucratic tussles. The French Embassy has, however, reinstated Chandannagar on its cultural development map. The writer does carry home the sweetness of Bengal and Chandannagar's original jol-bhara taalshansh sandesh (a sweet made of cottage cheese) from the famous Subodh Kumar Modak sweetshop.

Jean-Claude Perrier is a travel-journalist from La Figaro; contributes material to the Livres-Hebdo magazine; has produced 10 titles, three novels, a biography and three essays; and has brought out a pocket book on French rap. ●

