Proceedings of the South Indian History Congress

Journal of the South Indian History Congress since 1981

ISSN No.:2229-3671

UGC CARE Listed Journal

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Source: Proceedings of the South Indian History Congress 41(2023)

Stable Url: http://journal.southindianhistorycongress.org/show_articles.php?atl_id=MTA5

Published By: South Indian History Congress

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# PALLIKKUNNU CHURCH AND BRITISH CEMETERY CULTURES: A HISTORICAL INQUIRY

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The St. George CSI Church located at Pallikkunnu in the present Idukki District of Kerala, India was built in 1862 by the British.[1] The land for the church measuring fifteen acres and sixty-two cents was donated by the Government of Thiruvithamcore. The construction of the Church was completed by Henry Baker Jr. and other plantation owners in 1862. The Church was known as St. George CSI Church in its early days. Initially, only the British were allowed to worship. Mass and liturgy were conducted in English. After a few years, others were allowed to enter and the rites were arranged in Malayalam and Tamil.[2] The peculiarity of the Church is that the corpse of a horse is also buried. J. D. Monroe's white horse named Downey rests here. There are also the tombstones of thirty-four foreigners here including John Daniel Munro, who was instrumental in planting tea in Munnar.[3]

For Europeans, Pallikkunnu was the same place as their natives, so the place attracted both Europeans and natives. Though they built so many churches in Kerala they preferred Pallikkunnu to bury their folk.

Against this backdrop, this article explores changes in the British way of death in imperialism, the eastern Indian city of Calcutta (contemporary Kolkata), and the separate British cemetery at Pallikkunnu Church are its major focuses. It argues that monuments to the dead became important tools for

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projecting British power in India, as Calcutta was transformed from a vulnerable commercial enclave into the capital of a vast British-Indian empire.[4] The city of Calcutta was itself a significant engine of British imperialism in Asia. Founded at the end of the seventeenth century, it soon overtook Madras to become the most commercially valuable of all the British East India Company's settlements in India.[5] At the same time in Kerala, British planters established churches in selected areas particularly where there is climate and geography equate with that of Europe. The Pallikunnu Church was also in such a place where one can find the same climate and geography as Britain.[6]

The Company invested heavily in eastern-Indian textiles, especially cotton, and also in fortifications for the rapidly expanding city. As wealthy Indians were drawn to Calcutta's markets, so the Nawabs of Bengal, provincial rulers upriver at Murshidabad, cast an increasingly wary and jealous eye on the English Company's populous settlement. The Company destroyed the independent power of the Nawabs in the wars of the 1750s and 1760s, drawing on the abundant resources of its headquarters in Calcutta. Thereafter Calcutta was restyled as the political capital of Bengal, and then (after parliamentary acts of 1773 and 1784) as the capital of the whole of British India'.

Calcutta's journey from a few villages of huts to a 'city of palaces' was startling and swift, and by 1800 Calcutta was one of the largest cities in Asia and the world.[7] British death monuments were at the time, and remain today, one of the most striking and remarked-on architectural features of this phase in Calcutta’s history. The prominence of monuments and burial grounds arose from a confluence of factors, not least the persistence of very high mortality among a transient British population which never rose above a few thousand in this period. Historians of medicine have warned against anachronistically projecting nineteenth-century fears about tropical climates back into earlier periods. Eighteenth-century writers were often relatively optimistic about the

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potential for European bodies to adapt to the 'Asiatic' climate.[8] Yet the sense of Calcutta as a dangerous place for Europeans, because of disease as well as potential invaders, was ubiquitous in European writings in the eighteenth century. For much of Calcutta's early history, British fears that their small community of settlers could be entirely destroyed by diseases or hostile armies appeared very real.

If this fear might have encouraged the British in Calcutta to keep their dead out of sight and out of mind, other factors pushed them to turn the potential weak point of high mortality into a symbolic resource. Tombs were a useful medium for the new city to borrow prestigious metropolitan and imperial styles, whether from the Mughals in the early period or from the British capital of London later on. The Company did not easily shed its habits of commercial greed and spent relatively little of its money on major 'public' buildings, other than the functioning of the military at Fort William. Thus, as British traders assumed the style of imperial governors, tomb-building became (along with the construction of grandiose private houses) a valued opportunity to project an appropriate pride. Moreover, for a new rich band of Nawabs branded as upstart foreigners by Indian elites and as over-mighty plunderers by Burkean critics [9] in Britain, memorials to the dead were tools for displaying the assumed aristocratic manners of the East India Company service, and for promoting a narrative of sacrificial service on behalf of the nation and empire.

Finally, death practices were also a significant arena for negotiating relationships with the diverse ethnic and religious populations of eastern India. At different points, tombs and monuments could be a means either for linking the British with other Indian elites or for differentiating more sharply between peoples. As we shall see, the mix of influences on British death practices in eighteenth-century India, and especially in the cities where they established

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their sovereignty and position on the unstable frontiers of British power, combined to make it highly unusual as a city of the dead.

This study has identified three broad stages in the eighteenth-century history of Calcutta, the city of the dead, and a separate cemetery for British Planters in Kerala particularly at Pallikkunnu Church. From the earliest days of European settlement, rites of burial were seen as a means of differentiating Christians from Hindus, who often practiced cremation.[10] They also offered potential links between European settlements and Indo-Muslim elites in Mughal India. In the first phase of Calcutta's growth, in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the building of elaborate tombs was one way in which the British tried to assert their power within the political and cultural world of late Mughal India. In the second phase, as British conflicts with Indian rulers intensified in the mid-eighteenth century, the perceived threat that small British communities would be wiped out by Indian rulers or European competitors offered a powerful justification for British conquest.

British deaths in these conflicts were interpreted through the prism of ideas about Asiatic despotism, and used to brand Indian rulers as arbitrary, cruel, and inhumane; built memorials to the British dead functioned as patriotic rallying points for the British. And thirdly, after the initial conquests, representations of death, both in written texts and built monuments, helped to shape the identity of the expanding British Empire. By the end of the century, neoclassical churches and burial grounds symbolized a more unified brand of Britishimperial nationalism and that is why they build separate cemeteries for their dead, which we can see in Pallikkunnu Church. There they built a separate cemetery for British people and converted natives. Thus, it is a symbol of the separation of British identity from the native converts. particular; monuments and burial grounds, in a vital outpost of eighteenth-century

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## Endnotes and References

[1] Manoj Mathirapalliy, *Idukki Desham, Samskkaram, Charithram* (Idukki Region, Culture and History), Geo Books, (Kattappana, 2017), pp. 94-96

[2] *Birth and Burial Register*, St. George CSI Church, Pallikkunn, 1862 & *Mathrubhumi* News Paper, 1st June 2021

[3] *Malayala Manorama* News Paper, 2nd June 2021

[4] Historians of British India have not explored the history of death very much. An excellent study of bodily practice in British India is mainly confined to living bodies. E. M. Collingham, Imperial Bodies: The Physical Experience of the Raj, c. 1800-1947 (Cambridge, 2001) The only book-length study of British deaths in India is by a former officer of the Gurkhas and the colonial service; it is highly informed active, if also unabashedly nostalgic for the days of the British Raj.

[5] P. J. Marshall, *Bengal: The British Bridgehead. Eastern India, 1740-1828* (New Cambridge History of India,Part- 2, Vol. II, Cambridge, 1987), pp. 91-92

[6] George Thengummoottil, *History of Peermade*, (Kottayam, 2000), pp. 2-5

[7] Bayly estimates that Calcutta may have grown from about 120,000 inhabitants in 1720, to 200,000 in 1780, to 350,000 in 1820: C. A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (New Cambridge History ofIndia, Part 2, Vol. I, Cambridge, 1988), p .68

[8] Mark Harrison, *Climates and Constitutions: Health, Race, Environment and British Imperialism inIndia, 1600-1850* (Delhi, 1999), pp. 215-221

[9] Edmund Burke- British statesmen who criticized the actions of the British government towards their colonies.

[10] Those who could not afford wood and materials to burn dead bodies sometimes deposited the dead in rivers, especially the sacred river Ganges and its branches. Some Britons thought the sick were deliberately drowned when there appeared no hope of recovery, as in Alexander Dow's description of the 'inhuman customs' of widow burning and the drowning of the sick. Alexander Dow, History of Hindostan, translated from the Persian: To Which Are Prefixed Two Dissertations, the First Concerning the Hindoos, and the Second on the Origin and Nature of Despotism in India, 3 vols. (1768-1772; repr. Calcutta, 1985), Vol. III, p. cxxv

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