

Polycoloniality: European Settlers in Bengal from the 13th to 19th Century

Arnab Chatterjee¹, Dr. Varsha Sarswat²

¹Ph.D. Research Scholar Dept. of English

Mansarovar Global University

²Dept. of English, Mansarovar Global University

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16791628>

Abstract

Polycoloniality in Bengal refers to the complex and multifaceted interaction between the region and various European powers, including Portuguese, Dutch, French and others from the 13th to 19th century. This concept challenges the traditional focus on Anglo-centric colonialism. This paper deals with the history of polycolonialism in Bengal.

Key Words:

Polycoloniality, Colonialism, Anglo-Centric colonialism, Firman, Nishan, Bighas, Farman, Dinemār.

Introduction

The socio-cultural history of Bengal depicted the poly-colonialism rather than anglocentric colonialism. Non-English European colonial powers were operational in Bengal as Portuguese (1512-1797, they established their base in Bandel, Hooghly district. Moreover the name of the district Hooghly has come from Ugulim and founded in 1579, by the order of Luis de Ataide, 1st Marquis of Santarém, Viceroy of Portuguese in India), the Dutch (1623-1825), the French (1673-1950), the Danish (1698-1845), the Austrians (1723-1794), the Prussians (1753-1760), the Swedes (1731-181, the Swedes did not establish any colonial base rather they carried out colonial trade in Bengal under the Swedes East India Company or Svenska Ostindiska Companiet in Swedes or SOIC), and the Greek (17th Century, the Greeks had settled in Rishra and established themselves as a trading community).

Saugata Bhaduri stated:

The term “polyclonial” refers to a situation where multiple imperial powers are in the process of simultaneously vying to colonies the same tract or nation or continent—as was the case in early modernity with the Portuguese, the Spanish, the Dutch, the French, (and) the Danish etc. concurrently colonizing parts of Asia, Africa, the Americas...¹

Discussion

Duarte Barbosa (1480-1521) the first Portuguese who wrote about Bengal in his book the *Book of Duarte Barbosa* (1516). He visited in Bengal in 1510. In October, 1521, Diego Lopes had sent his commander Antonio de Britto in Gaur—the court of Nusrat Shah (1519-1532) the Sultan of Bengal, with a view to spreading Portuguese influence outside of Chittagong. Another Portuguese troop led by Rafael Prestelo had already been reached to the same court of Nusrat Shah just a few days before of Britto’s reaching. A military conflict broke out between them to prove who the real ambassador of Portugal was. Gonçalo Tavares, representative of Britto secured the total exemption of duties in trade for them in Bengal. Though, Ralph Fitch (1550-1611) was the first Englishman who came in Hooghly, Bengal circa 1585 and he visited different parts of the then Bengal from 1585 to 1586 and he wrote about the experience of trodding in Bengal in his travelogue which was composed after his returned to London in 1591. After Nusrat Shah, Mahmud Shah adorned the throne of Bengal. He agreed to grant land to the Portuguese in Chittagong (now in Bangladesh) and Satgaon (in Hooghly district, West Bengal), even he allowed them to build factories and forts over there—on condition when Sher Shah attacks, the Portuguese should help Mahmud Shah in every way. When Sher Shah attacked Gaur, the Portuguese sent two ships under the command of João de Villalobos and João Correa. Though, they did not win the war for Mahmud Shah. But, they secured the right from him to built factories and forts in Satgaon and Chittagong. Between 1536 and 1537 Portuguese built their colonies in Bengal under the command of Nuno Fernandez Freire and João Correa respectively in Chittagong and Satgaon. After establishing their colony in Satgaon, they built many subsequent colonies on the bank of river Hooghly. It sprawled from Satgaon to Hooghly and in the next phases Hooghly to Bandel. Satgaon was then an established river port on the southwestern bank of the river Saraswati which is presently silted up, near the juncture of the Hooghly River. It became the place of fusion of different cultures where the Hindus, Muslims and Europeans all lived side by side. The river Saraswati gradually began to recede, so the river port was forced to be shifted to Betor at Howrah, on the bank of river Hooghly, just opposite

side of today's Kolkata port Garden Reach. The *Bengal District Gazetteers: Hooghly* of 1912 said that:

In the Hooghly River their large ships came up to Bator, while smaller ships went up to Satgaon.²

Italian traveler Cesare Federici came to Bator during the time of his travelling in Bengal in 1565. He observed the Portuguese settlement in Bator and his view was being reflected in the *Bengal District Gazetteers: Hooghly* of 1912. It says:

Every year in Buttor they make and unmake a village with houses and shops made of straw, and with all things necessary to their uses, and this village standeth as long as the ships ride there, and till they depart for the Indies, and when they are departed, every man goeth to his plot of houses, and there setteth fire on them, which thing made me to marvel. For as I passed up to Satgaon, I saw this village standing with a great number of people, with an infinite number of ships and bazaars, and at my return coming down with my Captain of the last ship, for whom I tarried, I was all amazed to see such a place so soon raised and burnt, and nothing left but the sign of the burnt houses.³

This is very important note that, from the anglocentric point of view that the British Job Charnock in 1690 founded the colonial Calcutta then. But, it is monocolonial historical perspectives that would force us to believe in it. Joaquim Joseph A. Campos wrote in his book *History of the Portuguese in Bengal* that:

Gradually these goods swelled the markets of Calcutta and Chitpore, which were then very insignificant villages. It is to these thatched houses and villages which has Federici and Manrique say, were made and unmade by the Portuguese when they went back, that can be traced the origin of the great city Job Charnock founded. It is in those marts of Betor, Chitpore and Sutanuti which were supplied by Portuguese goods that can be seen the first glimmerings of the great commercial importance that Calcutta attained many years later.⁴

Betor was temporary arrangements for Portuguese and beginnings of Calcutta to become a pivotal city in future. In May, 1578 a delegation of Portuguese had to be sent to the court of Mughal emperor Akbar (1556- 1605), headed by Pedro de Tavares. In *Akbarnama* this Pedro de Tavares describes as Partab Bar Feringui who met Akbar and received a Farman to establish a new city in Bengal having with full religious liberty to preach and build churches as well.

They established their colony in Ugolim or today's Hooghly or Hugli⁵, just two miles east from Satgaon on the bank of the river Bhagirathi-Hooghly. Though the *Bengal District Gazetteers: Hooghly* put the reference from the *Badshahnama* that Hooghly was established by the Portuguese during the rule of Bengal Sultanate and the king of Odisha Mukunda Dev had lost his control over this area between 1560-1567 and then to the Mughal after 1575. Rakhal Das Bandyopadhyay wrote in *Saptagrāma or Sātḡānw*:

In the year 1540, its harbor was becoming difficult of access for ships. [...] The growing Portuguese trade and the increasing shallowness of the river Saraswati necessitated a change of route for the incoming ships. The only alternative route was by the Bhagirathi, which was not deep enough for large sea-going vessels. This again, necessitated a transshipment from the larger sea-going ships to smaller vessels, which gave rise to Betur and ultimately to Calcutta. [...] with the final conquest of Bengal by Mughal, the last blow was dealt to Sātḡānw by Emperor Akbar. The permission given to Captain Tavaréz to erect a permanent town near Hugly brought about the desertion of Sātḡānw.⁶

The privileges what was granted by Akbar to the Portuguese had been maintained by Jahangir (1605-1627), but the situation or the relationship was changed with the next Mughal emperor Shahjahan (1628-1658). Though there was a reason behind it. When Nurjahan, the wife of Jahangir had tried to make the fourth son—Shahryar Mirza as the heir of the throne, the Prince Khurram (latterly known as Shahjahan, who was the son of Jahangir and Jagat Gosain) the rightful claimant of the throne revolted in 1621. Though, Shahryar Mirza was also the son of Jahangir and Jagat Gosain. But he had married Mihr-un-Nissa Begum or Ladli Begum, who was the daughter of Nurjahan and her first husband Sher Afgan. That is why, Shahryar might be favored. Shahjahan had to flee to Bengal and he sought a military assistance from the then Portuguese Governor of Hooghly, Miguel Rodriguez. At first he agreed but later reneged on his promise. In 1627, Shahjahan emerged as the successful heir to the Mughal throne. The traveler Fray Sebastião Manrique told in *Itinerario* which is referred by Campos also that:
...there was a government which did not think it fit to send an embassy to Shahjahan on his ascending the throne.⁷

Moreover, Shahjahan received numerous reports against the Portuguese regarding smuggling, kidnapping and slave trade which compelled the emperor Shahjahan to sent Kasim Khan (1628-1632), the Subedar of Bengal to take the possession of Hooghly in 1632. Portuguese would not able to stand against them. In 25 September, 1632 Mughal conquered the whole colony of Portuguese from Bandel to Satgaon to Hooghly itself. Some had tried to escape down the river to Betor, but they had captured duly in the course of their journey. Rest were managed to flee to Saugor (Sagar Island) and with the help of the king of Arakan some of them settled their and rest moved to Chittagong.

Though, in July, 1633 Shahjahan gave 777 bighas of plot of land to the Portuguese in that same place in Hooghly. They also got a Parwana from the Subedar of the then Bengal—Shah Shuja in 1641. They settled in Bandel and all the administrative power would have been vested on João Da Cruz—the Father of the church. He had the power to administer all the civil and criminal matters, except administered any death sentence. Why had Shahjahan given this land to the Portuguese again after the seven months of evacuating them from the same land? It is another mystical story. Dr.Wise wrote in *Statistical Account of Hooghly*, which was taken as a reference in *The Bengal Catholic Herald*, 21 May, 1842. It stated:

A Firman was promulgated by beat of drum through all the country, ordering the immediate return of the captives, who were loaded with presents and sent back to their former residence. The Portuguese, thus received into favour, obtained a charter signed by the Emperor, by which he allowed them to return to Hooghly and to build a town to the north of the former fort, still known by the Europeans as Bandel...The land was assigned 777 bighas was given free of rent...They were even allowed to exercise magisterial power over Christians, but not in matters of life and death. The Christians returned to Bengal in 1633.⁸

The Dutch obtained a new Farman in 1634 from Azam Khan, the Mughal Governor of Bengal to establish a factory in Hooghly. It was confirmed by Islam Khan, the successor of Azam Khan in 1635 and at last in 1638 Shahjahan himself had given them a Farman which allowed them to trade and establish factories in other parts of Bengal.⁹ Under Pietar Sterthemius, the first director of Bengal, the VOC (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie, means United East India Company or commonly known as Dutch East India Company) had taken a lease to three villages as Chinsurah (Southern part near Hooghly), Baranagar (northern part of Calcutta), and

Bazar Mirzapur in Burdwan for annual rent of Rs. 1,574.¹⁰ In 1656, the Dutch had established a fort, church and several buildings in Chinsurah and making it the pivotal colony. On 29th October 1662, the Dutch had managed to get a Farman from Aurangzeb (1658-1707), and they empowered to make their business free from transit duties in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. But their custom duties were same, 4% in Hooghly.¹¹ On 25 December 1678, the Dutch had got the 'Nishan' from Prince Muhammed Azam Shah, the son of Aurangzeb and Subahdar of Bengal, confirming the rate 4% in Hooghly, but reduced it into 3.5% in 1679. Shah Alam I or Bahadur Shah I (1707-1712) reduced it further into 2.5%. In return Dutch used to provide military usually naval support to the Mughals. In spite of that, there is record of periodic conflict between the Dutch and locals Mughal's administrator and it carved out into a permanent tussle when the Dutch established a factory for salting pork in Baranagar.¹² In 1686 a trouble broke out between the English and the local administrator of Mughal. Mughal had used the Dutch as buffer for them and resettled them again in Baranagar.¹³ In 1700 when Murshid Quli Khan took charge as the Dewan of Bengal the situation had gone different to the Dutch. In 1704, the Dutch had to shut down their Cassimbazar factory permanently. Since then the Dutch were losing their prime position in Bengal gradually.

According to the English factory records, the first settlement of the French in Bengal was made at Hooghly and was the result of an accident.¹⁴

The French arrived in Bengal in 1673 under the leadership of Duplessis and got permission from the Nawab of Dhaka to set up a small house just south of Chinsura in Taldanga, Barkishonpur Mouza in 1674. In January 1693, Deslandes had received a Farman from Aurangzeb which empowered them to set up a colony in Bengal.

By a curious coincidence, each city was constructed out of three villages. The French colonists built up Chandernagore from three rural settlements—Barkishonpur, Khalisani and Gondalpara.¹⁵

The name Chandernagore referred by Deslandes and Palle—the officials of the French East India Company in 1696, in a letter to the officials. In the local parlance of Bengali the place used to refer as Farashdanga, the land of French.

In 1731, Joseph Francoix Dupleix was appointed Intendant of Chandernagore, and during the ten years in which he held that office he transformed the place.¹⁶

After the departure of Dupleix on transfer to Pondicherry (1741), the Maratha raids, the unsettled condition of the country, wants of funds and lack of vigor on the part of successors, all combined to reduce the trade of the French in Bengal. [...] For instance, M. Renault, the Governor of Chandernagore, in a letter to Dupleix dated 30th September 1757, stated that ...it was in debt to the extent of 26 or 27 lakhs, [...] 24th November 1756, it is said that the French 'have done no business these last few years'...2nd January 1757 they wrote that 'what the French are about to send by Pondicherry and the Danes by Tranquebara, will be of but trifling importance'.¹⁷

The situation was getting worse when Nawab of Bengal—Siraj-ud-Daula attacked Calcutta in June 1756. Anglo-French war broke out in Europe in December 1756.

Both Siraj-ud-Daula and the English applied for help to the French, who declined to side with either party, but offered to shelter the English in their fort. While on his march to Calcutta, the Nawab forcibly took the French boats to transport his men across the Ganges, and on his return he levied from them a fine of Rs. 3, 40,000. [...] In December 1756 news came that war had been declared between France and England. [...] next month the Nawab concluded a treaty with English, and on his way back past Chandernagore, sent friendly message to M. Renault, repaid him one lakh out of the fine he had levied, granted the French a Parwana with all the privileges allowed to the British, and even offered them the town of Hooghly if they would ally themselves with him. The French took the money, but declined the alliance. The English believed, however, that they had a secret alliance with Siraj-ud-Daula and determined to crush the French before attacking the Nawab.¹⁸

On 12 March 1757, the English army under Robert Clive had marched to within two miles of Chandernagore, demanding their surrender, and not having been got any response from their end on 14 March 1757 with the Navy leaded by Admiral Watson started to siege from the river side. 'M. Renault at about 9:30 a.m. hoisted the white flag'.¹⁹ The English fully captured the Chandernagore on 24 March 1757 and they returned it to them on 25 June 1765. After the Battle of Plassey (23 June 1757), the English had become the discriminating power in the trade

and the administration, first in ‘Subé Bangla’ then throughout the whole country until India became independent.

The Danes are commonly known as Dinemār in Bengali language. Dansk østindisk Kompagni or Danish East India Company founded on 17 March 1616 and had got Farman from the Mughal emperor Muhammad Shah (1719-1748) on 11 March 1721, for their settlement in Gondalpara in Chandernagore. Latterly, they renamed the place as Danmarksnagore, and in local tongue it became Dinemārdanga the land of Danish. In 1818 they established a college in Serampore and built Catholic Church in 1776, the Old Danish Church in 1805, the Baptist and Danish Cemetery—they made in Serampore also.

Austrian East India Company with the help of the French had got permission from the then Nawab of Bengal Murshid Quli Khan to build a factory at Banquibazar (Bankibazar, today’s Palta, near Barrackpore, 24- Parganas) and Hydsapour (Ichapur) on the east bank of the river Hooghly in 1723. On 24 January 1753, King Frederick the Great had established a second Prussian company, the Bengal Company of Emden or Bengalische Handelkompagnie.²⁰ The Germans also had a colony in today’s Bhadreswar, Hooghly circa 1753 to 1760.

The failure of Frederick the Great’s efforts to secure for Prussia a share in the India trade, resulted to some extent from the jealousy of the rival European Companies in India. The Dutch, French and English pilots refused to show the way up the dangerous Hugli River to the Emden ships, ‘or any other not belonging to powers already established in India’.²¹

Alivardi Khan, the Nawab of Bengal himself had warned the English about the Prussians. Alivardi didn’t want that they would step in the soil of Bengal.

‘If German comes here’, the Nawab had written to the English merchants on a rumor of the first Emden expedition reaching India, ‘it will be very bad for all the Europeans, but for you worst of all, and you will afterwards repent it...Therefore take care that these German ships do not come’. ‘God forbid that they should come’, was the pious response of the President of the English Council... ‘I am in hopes they will be either sunk, broke, or destroyed’.²²

The Prussians had obviously some difficulties to face before gaining a footing in Bengal [...] Still the Prussians appear to have established themselves in the districts (Hooghly) ... before 1756...²³

The year 1756 was a disastrous one for the Prussians. In June Siraj-ud-Daula extorted Rs. 5,000 from them. In August their only ship, the Prince Henry of Prussia was wrecked while entering the Ganges, owing to the misconduct of an English pilot Hendrick Walters, whom the Board dismissed for his carelessness [...] their position was, in fact, so bad that Mr. John Young, the Chief of the Prussian factory, seeing himself “detested, despised and not knowing how to support himself with honour”.²⁴

Swedish East India Company (Sevenska Ostindiska Companiet or SOIC) was founded in Gothenburg on 13 June 1731. As per Abhay Kumar Singh, the Swedish Company ‘aimed at creating conducive climate for developing direct Bengal-Sweden oceanic trade but operating without establishing any commercial headquarter in Bengal’.²⁵

The Swedish company did not have any trading settlement in India and preferred to obtain Indian goods through other trading companies [...]²⁶

The last European traders came to Bengal was Greeks. The Greeks had an outpost at Rishra.²⁷ From the 17th Century, Calcutta was home to a Greek community.²⁸

The Greek Church stands in Amratollah Street [...] It was erected in the year 1780 [...] It owes its foundation to Hadjee Alexias Argyee...²⁹

The Greeks did not restrict themselves in trading or building churches in Calcutta. The then Calcutta was the pivotal city for Greeks where they could build revolutionary network, the Society of Friends.

In the year of our Lord 1802, in the Spring and Easter of our Lord, all the Greek traders residing in Calcutta from Ponto and Bithynia and Cappadocia and Aeolia and the land of Ionia and mainland Greece [...] We shall place in custody in Calcutta our spare money and gold and silver and other property for the resurgence of the race of the Greeks.³⁰

After getting the Independence in 1947, most of the ‘Greeks started to leave India and move to London, Johannesburg, [and] some moved back to Greece even’.³¹

There were three other communities who came from outside of India and started to reside in Calcutta—the Armenians, the Chinese and the Jews. But, I have restricted the focus of the article on the European settlers those who stepped in Bengal. The Polycoloniality offers a nuanced understanding of Bengal's complex history, highlighting the region's interactions with multiple European powers and challenging the traditional narratives of colonialism. By exploring this concept, researchers can gain a deeper appreciation for the diverse influences that shaped Bengal's culture, institutions and modernity.

Reference:

¹ Bhaduri, Saugata. 2018. Polycolonial Angst: Representations of Spain in Early Modern English Drama. Theatre

Cultures within Globalising Empires: Looking at Early Modern England and Spain. Ed. Joachim Küpper and

Leoni Pawlita. Berlin: De Gruyter. P-150-159.

² O'Malley, L.S.S. and Monomohan Chakravarti. Bengal District Gazetteers: Hooghly. 1912. Calcutta: The Bengal

Secretariat Book Depot. P- 47.

³ Ibid. P- 47- 48.

⁴ Campos, J. J. A. History of the Portuguese in Bengal, with Maps and Illustrations. 1919. Calcutta: Butterworth &

Co. P- 114.

⁵ Hooghly has been spelt differently in many historical sources:

In Fr. Monseratte's Map (1560) marked as Goli. Ralph Fitch (1588) spelt it Hugeli, in Ain-i-Akbari (1596-1597) as

Hugli, Fr. Fernandez (1599) as Gullum or Gullo, Bocarro (1612-1617) referred as D' Ogolim, Golim and Dogolim,

Huges and Parker (1620) as Gollye, Manrique (1628) as Ugolim, De Late (1630) as Ugoli, Van den Broucke

(1660) as Oegli or Hoegli, and Bernier (1665) as Ogouli. (Campos. 1919. P- 64).

⁶ Bandyopadhyay, Rakhal Das. Saptagrāma or Sātgānw. Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, New Series. July, V (7). 1909. Calcutta. P- 256.

⁷ Campos, J. J. A. History of the Portuguese in Bengal, with Maps and Illustrations. 1919. Calcutta: Butterworth & Co. P-62.

⁸ O'Malley, L.S.S. and Monomohan Chakravarti. Bengal District Gazetteers: Hooghly. 1912. Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot. P- 52.

⁹ Winus, George D. and Marcus Vink. The Merchant-warrior Pacified, the VOC and its Changing Political Economy in India. 1991. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. P- 21.

¹⁰ Prakash, Om. Precious Metals and Commerce: The Dutch East India Company in the Indian Ocean Trade. 1994. London and New York: Routledge. P- 269.

¹¹ Ibid. P- 271.

¹² Chatterjee, Anjali. *Bengal in the Reign of Aurangzeb 1658-1707*. 1967. Calcutta: Progressive Publishers. P-193.

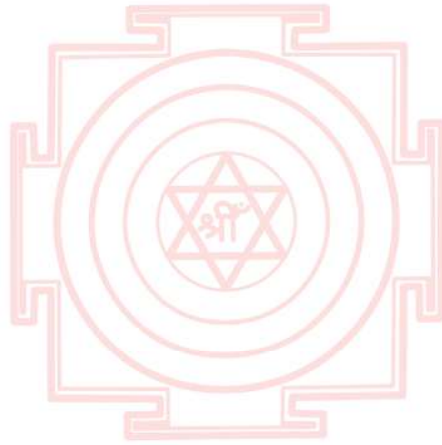
¹³ Kail, Owen C. *The Dutch in India*. 1991. Delhi: Macmillan. P-130.

¹⁴ O'Malley, L.S.S. and Monomohan Chakravarti. *Bengal District Gazetteers: Hooghly*. 1912. Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot. P- 80.

¹⁵ Banerjee, Sumanta. *A Tell of Two Cities under Colonial Rule: Chandernagore and Calcutta*. 2012. IIC Occasional Paper 39. New Delhi: India International Centre. P- 1.

- ¹⁶ O'Malley, L.S.S. and Monomohan Chakravarti. *Bengal District Gazetteers: Hooghly*. 1912. Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot. P- 81.
- ¹⁷ Ibid. P- 83.
- ¹⁸ Ibid. P- 84.
- ¹⁹ Ibid. P- 85.
- ²⁰ Schui, Florian. *Prussia's Trans-Oceanic Moment: The Creation of the Prussian Asiatic Trade Company in 1750*. *The Historical Journal*, 49 (1), March. 2006. P- 152.
- ²¹ Hunter 1886, Despatch from the Calcutta Council to the Court of Directors, 6 September 1774, Para 11.
- ²² Hunter, 1886. Letter from the Nawab of Murshidabad: Bengal Consultation of 19 August 1751.
- ²³ O'Malley, L.S.S. and Monomohan Chakravarti. *Bengal District Gazetteers: Hooghly*. 1912. Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot. P- 87.
- ²⁴ Ibid. P- 88.
- ²⁵ Singh, Abhay Kumar. *Modern World System and Indian Proto-Industrialization: Bengal 1650-1800*. Vol. I. 2006. New Delhi: Northern Book Centre. P- 567.
- ²⁶ Ibid. P- 702.
- ²⁷ Betts, Vanessa. *Footprint Focus—Kolkata and West Bengal*. 2013. Bath: Footprint Handbooks. P- 47.
- ²⁸ Shah, Manashi. *The Only Greek of Calcutta: Sister Nectaria Paridisi of the Greek Orthodox Church is the only Greek left in the city*. *The Telegraph*. 3 February 2019. <http://www.telegraphindia.com/culture/heritage/all-greek-to-calcutta/cid/1683507>.
- ²⁹ Cotton, H.E.A. *Calcutta Old and New: A Historical & Descriptive Handbook to the City*. 1907. Calcutta: W. Newman & Co. P- 41-42.
- ³⁰ Vassiliadis, Dimitrios. *Three Centuries of Hellenic Presence in Bengal*. *ELINEPA*. 31 December 2005. <http://elinepa.org/en/three-centuries-of-hellenic-presence-in-bengal>.

³¹ Shah, Manashi. *The Only Greek of Calcutta: Sister Nectaria Paridisi of the Greek Orthodox Church is the only Greek left in the city. The Telegraph.* 3 February 2019.



Tripuri