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Topic of Research: **Tracing the European Architectural footprints and Transformations on the French town of Chandannagar, West Bengal**

Findings

European powers established major settlements along the Hooghly River in West Bengal from the late 15th century, following Vasco da Gama's arrival in India in 1498. The Portuguese at Bandel, Dutch at Chinsurah, Danish at Serampore, and French at Chandannagar left a lasting architectural and cultural imprint on the region. Among these, Chandannagar, founded in 1673 on three villages—Borkishonpur, Khalisani, and Gondalpara—presents a unique case of colonial urban design and architectural hybridisation. With its grid-iron street pattern, monumental Strand Road along the Hooghly, and civic structures of Indo-French character, the town illustrates how European planning principles adapted to Indian contexts, resulting in a distinctive cultural landscape.

While British colonial architecture in India has been widely studied, the French contribution—especially in Chandannagar—remains underexplored. This thesis addresses this gap by analysing the architectural and urban development of Chandannagar, focusing on the synthesis of French colonial and traditional Bengali elements. Guided by the Burra Charter and employing archival research, field surveys, documentation, and heritage evaluation frameworks such as the Nara Grid, the study systematically assessed the historical, architectural, and cultural significance of Chandannagar's built heritage.

The findings highlight Chandannagar as an exceptional example of Indo-French fusion in both urban form and architecture. The town's spatial structure reflects French rational planning, yet its adaptation to the riverfront setting and local customs ensured a degree of cultural integration. The grid layout, punctuated by public squares and religious precincts, seamlessly merged with Bengali spatial practices, while Strand Road evolved into both a civic axis and a social interface with the river.

Architecturally, Chandannagar demonstrates a hybrid style wherein European features—arched windows, colonnades, and classical ornamentation—were adapted with local techniques such as raised plinths, shaded verandahs, inner courtyards, and jali screens. This blend was not superficial but climate-responsive and socially rooted, creating buildings that were functional in Bengal's humid climate while retaining European elegance. The Thakurdalan courtyards exemplify this hybridity, transformed over time into ballrooms or reception halls, embodying layered cultural interactions.

The study documented 103 historic buildings, classifying them by type, style, and significance. This cataloguing revealed the range of Chandannagar's architectural heritage—residences, civic

institutions, religious structures—each carrying traces of cultural negotiation. The research also identified urban zones that mark different developmental stages, providing insight into how Chandannagar's form evolved under successive influences. Importantly, the analysis of riverside spaces showed the transformation of ghats from utilitarian steps into multifunctional sites of commerce, worship, and community life, underscoring the dynamic interplay between town and river.

Land-use analysis between 1961 and 2022 revealed dramatic urban expansion, with nearly 80% of the land now developed, accompanied by declining vegetation and farmland. This growth has placed unprecedented pressure on the historic fabric. The study emphasises that Chandannagar's built environment today embodies both its colonial past and the challenges of rapid urbanisation.

Key contributions of this research include:

1. Establishing a systematic framework for assessing colonial hybrid architecture through archival, field-based, and evaluative methods.
2. Demonstrating how Indo-French architecture in Chandannagar represents a dialogue between European planning ideals and Bengali cultural practices.
3. Providing a detailed catalogue and valuation of heritage buildings, which serves as a foundation for conservation priorities.
4. Highlighting the broader significance of French contributions to India's colonial architectural legacy, often overshadowed by British examples.

Overall, the thesis underscores Chandannagar's heritage as more than a static colonial relic; it is a living testimony to cultural negotiation, adaptation, and resilience. The study reveals how colonial authorities and local communities shaped one another's built environments, producing hybrid forms that remain relevant to both architectural history and heritage conservation today. By contextualising Chandannagar within India's broader colonial urbanism, this work not only expands scholarly understanding of French influence but also informs contemporary strategies for managing heritage in rapidly urbanising towns. It advocates for an inclusive conservation approach that values hybridity as central to cultural identity, ensuring that Chandannagar's unique Indo-French legacy endures amid modern transformations.

Keywords: Chandannagar, Architecture, Colonial Urbanism, Hybridisation, French Heritage in India, Hooghly Riverfront