# Chapter 5
# Heritage Tourism in Tranquebar: Colonial Nostalgia or Postcolonial Encounter?

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## Introduction

"Welcome to Denmark!", exclaimed an Indian guide with enthusiasm, as he and his Danish colleague along with their group of around 20 Danish tourists travelling in South India got off their tour bus by the town gate of Tranquebar. "In fact", he continued, "you should be welcoming me!" The object of this welcome, which I experienced during fieldwork in 2007, was a small fishing town with some 7,000 inhabitants, situated in the state of Tamil Nadu. It was also a town which, in the years 1620–1845, served as a Danish trading colony. On this spot, which in 1620 was already a small town with commerce of its own, the Danish East India Company established a fort, and later a fortified townscape, from which to conduct trade in items such as spices and textiles.[1] Eventually, diminished trade and the increasing dominance of Great Britain in India caused an unsentimental sale of the small Danish colony to the British. Now, however, the Danes are back—in the guise of tourists and developers of Indo-Danish (post)colonial heritage (Fig. 5.1).

Though constituting a relatively brief interval in the history of Tranquebar, the history of the 225 years of Danish rule has gained increasing relevance to the town in recent decades. Due to its hitherto limited economic growth, Tranquebar has retained much of the architecture which characterised the town while it was under the rule of the Danes (Figs. 5.2 and 5.3). The well-preserved townscape with its mix of Tamil and colonial architecture was in 1980 declared a so-called heritage town by

[1] Prior to this, the town was known in Tamil as Tharangambadi. Tranquebar is an Europeanised form of the Tamil name (the transliteration of which varies slightly). Both names continue to be used locally. Here I use Tranquebar as the internationally known name.

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**Fig. 5.1** The town gate of Tranquebar (Photo by the author)

the state of Tamil Nadu. Both Danish and Indian agents, ranging from public authorities to NGOs, researchers and private investors, have engaged in attempts to preserve the built heritage of the town and to use it to promote development by means of attracting heritage tourism.

The development of colonial heritage in the postcolonial present, which is taking place with increasing speed across the globe, has sparked much discussion concerning the relations and narratives which are produced in this process (e.g. Hall and Tucker 2005; Graham and Howard 2008). One concept which is frequently discussed in this context is that of nostalgia, which many analysts have taken to imply that the commemoration and development of colonial heritage constitutes a yearning for—or a revival of—the colonial past, or even a form of neocolonialism (Rosaldo 1989; Fisher 2005). Here I will focus on the question of what sort of narratives and encounters are produced, as Tranquebar is being developed and visited as a site of Indo-Danish heritage, and how nostalgia enters into and is shaped in this particular context. In other words, which sentiments and reflections on the past are engaged and negotiated in situations such as that when the Indian guide was welcoming the Danish tourists to Tranquebar? The "welcome to Denmark" might indeed seem to address a form of colonial nostalgia, but as I will show, the colonial past is subject to more complex reengagements and appropriations in the heritage town of Tranquebar,

**Fig. 5.2** Fort Dansborg, built by the Danes when they acquired Tranquebar in 1620, now serves as a museum (Photo by the author)

in which nostalgia is both expressed and challenged, negotiated and used strategically within limitations (Fig. 5.2).

## Heritage Tourism: Colonial Nostalgia?

What, then, do Danish tourists feel as they visit Tranquebar today? For some, the travel is motivated by deep-seated interests in history, which a number of such tourists told me had been sparked by reading books such as the classic Danish historiography on "Our Old Tropical Colonies" (Brøndsted 1952–1953, author's translation). Conversely, since Tranquebar is often one stop only on the tours of South India, which are sold by various travel agencies, other tourists' encounters with the town result in surprise. One Danish comment in the guest book of Tranquebar's New Jerusalem Church, dated 4/12/2003, reads: "Fancy that Denmark had a 'colony' in India, I had no idea!"[2]

[2] Here and in the following, unless otherwise noted, I have translated the comments quoted from guest books from Danish.

**Fig. 5.3** King Street, a main street in Tranquebar (Photo by the author)

The guest books at hotels and churches in Tranquebar demonstrate a broad selection of tourist views. The comments from Danish visitors are replete with fixed expressions that characterise the experience of visiting Tranquebar as "feeling the presence of history", "walking in the footprints of the Danes", wishing that "the walls could talk" and "feeling at home" in Tranquebar due to the perception of the former colony as "a little piece of Denmark in India". A recurring sentiment in these comments is one of national pride and nostalgia (Fig. 5.4). Though the majority of Danes who arrive in Tranquebar know English and the occasional note in English is left by visitors with people in Tranquebar as the intended audience, for instance to say "Thank you for taking care of our heritage so that we can show it to our children" as one visitor did in the guest book of the New Jerusalem Church on 21/3/2007, the comments are often written in Danish, thus being directed at a national audience. As a characteristic Danish entry in the same guest book, dated 22/9/1999, declares: "it is impossible not to feel a bit sentimental when you meet old Danish history so far from our part of the world. Think of all the stories that hide under the old gravestones". Another typical comment in the same book, dated 12/11/2000, reads: "Impressive to see something so Danish so far from the fatherland. You feel proud to be Danish!"

**Fig. 5.4** Danish tourists admire a building constructed in the colonial period on King Street (Photo by the author)

The sentiment of Danish visitors in Tranquebar has been strikingly portrayed by Poul Pedersen, an anthropologist visiting the town in 1985 as part of a cross-disciplinary Danish survey team that was to document the townscape:

> If you come to Tranquebar as a Dane today, it is hard not to be touched. When walking through the Land Gate and the streets, seeing the old mansions, the mission houses and churches, you are caught up in unreality, being struck by a romantic and sentimental atmosphere. The past is so distinct, and that in the special derelict shape that calls forth melancholy. All this past can let the present down. Tranquebar of today easily fades out of sight in favour of yesterday. The small, poor town on the south-east coast of India can hardly bear the comparison with Tranquebar of 200 years ago. (…) Tranquebar of today is diminished to the sad appendix of a better past. The illusion in Tranquebar is real, but it does not last long. If you stay in the town for a longer period; some weeks, some months, it is worn out by daily use. (…) The town is set free from the yoke of colonial perceptions that you carry with you from home. The place ceases to be a mental province in the history of the realm of Denmark (Pedersen 1987:50–51, author's translation).

Indeed, for the people who live in Tranquebar, the town—as the frame of their daily life—is anything but "a mental province in the history of the realm of Denmark". Nonetheless it is only a fraction of the Danish visitors to Tranquebar who stay for "some weeks, some months", as in Pedersen's attempt to deconstruct

the sentimental Danish gaze on Tranquebar. Notably, tourists generally stay for a day or at most two. Hence the questions emerges: As Tranquebar is developed as a heritage town intended to attract tourism, with the period of the Danish rule emphasised as a defining moment in the history of the town, what sort of (post)colonial narratives and relations are constructed?

Edward Bruner and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett have argued that tourism gives colonialism a second life by bringing it back as a representation of itself (Bruner and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2005:33). Indeed, tourism has often been criticised as constituting a form of imperialism or neocolonialism in economic as well as in cultural terms (Nash 1977; Britton 1982; Hall and Tucker 2005). Thus, while in his description of the town Pedersen is careful to move beyond, but not to devalue the "[r]omantic and sentimental (…) mood that takes possession of you during the encounter with Tranquebar", observing that "I put no condescension into this [characterisation of the visitors]" (Pedersen 1987:50, author's translation), many analysts would engage a more critical perspective here. For instance Renato Rosaldo has coined the term "imperialist nostalgia" to frame a critique of the mode of "innocent yearning" (Rosaldo 1989:70) which he finds constructed to engage the imagination and conceal colonial power relations in popular representations of colonialism, not only in the past by the agents of colonialism themselves, but also in modern sources such as films.

It is not only in the controversial historic context of colonialism that the identification of nostalgic sentiments requires qualifying remarks, such as Pedersen's in the above, to make it explicit that the analysis of such sentimental attachments is not meant to be disparaging. As Svetlana Boym has observed, nostalgia is "something of a bad word" (Boym 2001:xiv), which is frequently used in a dismissive way, implying selected memories of an idealised past. A claim often associated with heritage is precisely that it is essentially a nostalgic venture, a perspective which implies a critical approach on the part of the analysts due to the perception that "Nostalgia … is essentially history without guilt" (Krammen, in Boym 2001:xiv).

Analytically it might seem easy to frame the heritage town of Tranquebar as for instance David Fisher approaches the case of Levuka, the old capital on Fiji: "A colonial town for neocolonial tourism" (Fisher 2005:126). Here, I would however argue that such a framing of the ongoing development in Tranquebar would be *too* easy. In "Tourism and Postcolonialism" (Hall & Tucker 2005), a recent anthology on cultural tourism in postcolonial environments, replete with the term "neocolonialism" (such as Fisher's article), the editors Michael Hall and Hazel Tucker conclude that a crucial topic of future research would be to investigate in more detail how the practice of tourism engages the colonial past. They propose to ask how, and to what extent, tourists—and others engaged both with the promotion and the analysis of tourism—"negotiate, dismantle, resist or sustain the colonial elements of contemporary travel discourse and industry in their travelling practices" (Tucker and Hall 2005:187). It is inquiries along this line which I aim to undertake in this article.

Space does not permit that I draw in Danish colonial historiography, but the fact that I met several Danish tourists in Tranquebar who cited Brøndsted's classic work on "Our Old Tropical Colonies" as the source of their fascination with colonial history illustrates that heritage tourism also draws on existing publications, creating

what might be termed an intertextual field, which is played out not only in actual text but also in the practice of tourism itself. The fact that the antique coin dealers in Tranquebar sell their goods not only with arguments like "your national memory, madam", but are also equipped with Danish publications on numismatics and the history of minting coins during the Danish period in Tranquebar, shows that they have caught on to this reality quite well. Regarding published Danish accounts on Tranquebar and the other former tropical colonies of Denmark, Kirsten Thisted has observed that the distinction between travelogue, novel and (popular) historiography often appears erased (Thisted 2008:3). As the travelogue merges with historiography, so, one might say, does the practice of travelling and tourism.

## From Danish Postcolonial Narratives to Postcolonial Encounters

In her work with another former colony of Denmark, the Danish West Indies (presently known as the US Virgin Islands),[3] Karen Fog Olwig has argued that the dominant Danish narratives about colonialism have not been confronted with the perceptions of history in the former Danish tropical colonies. These colonies, she argues, were sold at earlier points in history and were therefore not associated with Denmark during the process of decolonisation in the late twentieth century under which postcolonial critique has predominantly been directed at greater colonial powers, leaving the national narrative of Denmark relatively unaffected (Olwig 2003). In this context both the practices of tourism and the wider Danish engagement in the development of Tranquebar as a heritage town emerge as potential loci of both change and contestation, but not, as I will argue, only between Denmark and Tranquebar as former coloniser and colonised, but also cross-cutting such simple binary distinctions. For instance the same guest books in the local churches and "heritage hotels" which document a considerable Danish nostalgia also demonstrate a reflexive engagement with colonial history and the question of how to relate to it.

A Danish comment in the guest book of the New Jerusalem Church, dated 14/06/1999, reads: "Danish imperialism—fortunately it is over. Let the Indians keep their religions. Christianity has brought nothing good to India. In a sense one is a bit ashamed as a Dane in Tharangambadi". This is not the only entry into local guest books which shows that colonial history may also be associated with shame on the part of the erstwhile colonial powers. Interestingly, in this respect the guest books can also be read as a dialogue. It is evident from these books that many tourists leaf through the pages to read what others have written and comment on their experiences from Tranquebar. A number of entries constitute commentaries on what other visitors have written on the nature of colonial and postcolonial history and relations. As a Danish entry in the same book, dated 2000, reads:

[3] These three Caribbean islands (the last Danish tropical colony) were sold to the USA in 1917.

> Then here one sits on a church bench which is no more Danish than the priest who founded the church.[4] But of course it was financed out of Danish funds. To those [Danish visitors] who write that the Danish cultural imperialism is somewhat cloying or that Christianity has brought nothing good to India, one must say that they ought to study their Indian history more closely. The Protestant missions have (…) accommodated themselves and become absolutely independent. The social dimension which the missions have contributed to India in the form of schools and hospitals should not be disparaged.

The writer then proceeds to recommend visiting local schools and hospitals to see for oneself.

The guest books of churches and hotels in Tranquebar are in fact full of instances where visitors comment upon, play with or distance themselves from imaginations of colonial relations. For example, in the first "heritage hotel" of Tranquebar, the restored residence of the former district administrator, comments range from that of a Norwegian visitor who in 2005 wrote (in English) "Thank you for the hospitality (…), and let me add: We should appreciate that we have fewer and fewer colonial powers" to three other Norwegians who conversely played with colonial identities in a comment dated 05/08/2007, stating that "We have walked in the footprints of the old Scandinavians in the colonial period. (…) The hotel also gave us a little taste of colonial dominion". The latter comment seems akin to that left by a Danish lady in the New Jerusalem Church who jokingly wrote on 16/03/2000 that "I would have made a good governor's wife here", illustrating that tourism moves in a field of fanciful play with history as well as more serious reflection.

As distancing and identification with colonialism alternate, tourism thus becomes an occasion for debate on perceptions of history—with others engaged in the tourist encounter or in the form of more personal reflections. An example of the latter is a Danish couple whom I met in Tranquebar's Zion Church during a Christmas service, where they were making an effort to pay their respects by participating as actively yet inconspicuously as possible, humming along wordlessly on the Tamil psalms, the text of which they as Danes could not follow. It was the second time that they were visiting Tranquebar, they told, and as we struck up a conversation in a break, they commented on the idea of what they termed "the traces of the Danish presence". As the husband explained, his impression was that "people [here] mainly remember us for good things (…); but then we haven't done anything [adverse] here; whereas in Africa [where Denmark had forts and plantations on the Gold Coast, in present Ghana] there was slave trade".

The above comment is not a complete picture of the past, though an accurate one of what is recalled in the present. Tranquebar is mostly associated with a more uncontroversial history of trading, whereas the Danish engagements in Africa and the Caribbean have in recent decades increasingly been subject to critique due to Denmark's role in the atrocities associated with slavery and the transatlantic slave trade (Stecher-Hansen 2008). A little known fact amongst Danes and Indians alike

[4] The missionaries sent by the King of Denmark from 1705 came from *die Pietistische Stiftung zu Halle* in Germany.

**Fig. 5.5** A Danish tourist takes photos of residents in Tranquebar (Photo by the author)

is that since slavery was commonly accepted at the time and was not limited to Europeans but was also practised amongst the Indians, the trading goods that passed through Tranquebar also included slaves, just as the Danish company and the Europeans in Tranquebar owned slaves although the colony was not—like the Danish West Indies—directly dependent on slavery (Bredsdorff 2009:148–149). On the Coromandel Coast where Tranquebar is located, there is evidence of a periodic export of slaves eastwards, although not of regular slave trade. Slaves were supplied through local wars or kidnapping, and severe famines or devastations caused by local warfare would also lead the destitute to offer themselves for sale at the ports along the coast (Arasatnam 1986:104–105, 210–212).

Some facts of the past in Tranquebar thus remain unknown. Nonetheless the use of the national "we" that demonstrates identification with past colonial agents and events as it implicitly calls forth an imagined community in quotes such as the above reflects the fact that heritage tourism implies the imagination of both colonial and postcolonial relations and of the nations implied in them. Tourism becomes an occasion both to contemplate historic identities associated with what "we" did during the colonial period and how "they" in the former colony might think of "us" in the present. Thus, through tourism national narratives are reconnected with the notion that colonial history constitutes encounters which have had effects for both colonisers and colonised—and that these colonial encounters also have implications in present relations and identities (Fig. 5.5). As the following will show, this realisation is also a key element in the transnational process of contemporary heritage development in Tranquebar.

## Negotiating (Post)colonial Relations

The handling of postcolonial relations and national interests in Tranquebar requires continual negotiations. Thus, when the Danish fort Dansborg was to be inaugurated after a restoration to which the Tranquebar Association, a private Danish organisation of volunteers, had contributed in 2001, the association approached the commissioner of archaeology in Chennai with a plea. As one of the founders told:

> We inquired very carefully, like: Could we get permission for [hoisting] a *tiny* Danish flag [at the ceremony]? Then he said: "Same height, same size, we are two friendly nations, we will make a new flag pole", so we got an extra flag pole on fort Dansborg, and then we first hoisted the Indian flag and sang the Indian national anthem, and then [the Danish flag and anthem] (…); we stood with tears in our eyes.

That this ceremony was so touching to the Danish participants is not surprising, also above and beyond the conventional symbolic value that is invoked by national flags and anthems (Billig 2008; Hobsbawm 2009). The sentiment has its own historical background in the established narrations of Danish colonial history. In Danish publications the image of the flag that "waves over" the colonies or is "taken down for the last time" is firmly established as a recurrent metaphor for the Danish presence in—and loss of—the tropical colonies of Denmark (Thisted 2009). Being allowed to hoist the Danish flag was thus a very tangible symbol of a Danish return to Tranquebar.

The hoisting of flags at the inauguration of the restored fort indicates that some degree of national sentiment can be expressed in a common space between Danes and Indians in Tranquebar without conflict—but also that the associated postcolonial relations need to be carefully negotiated. So does another circumstance: Accidentally it turned out that the Danish flag which the Tranquebar Association had acquired and brought with them from Denmark for the inauguration was bigger than the corresponding Indian flag which was to be used in the ceremony. The Danish flag ended up being hoisted after all. First, however, it was sent to a local tailor to be cut down to size and sewn together again: "same size, same height". In this scheme of things the fact that the Indian flag was hoisted first also carries symbolic value, sending a subtle message about Indian independence.

Certainly, perceived from the perspective of ongoing developments in India, it is far from an obvious approach that colonial history ought to be remembered or actively commemorated, let alone with sentiments of nostalgia. Danish agents engaged in Tranquebar thus have good reasons to consider how their interests in the commemoration of colonial heritage in India are received here. After independence many locations in India have, for instance, been subject to name changes, in which cities and streets have been renamed, partly to reflect the linguistic boundaries of the reorganised local states rather than the (mainly British) colonial divisions and partly as explicit political acts of anti-colonialism. In more recent years such name changes have taken place in some of the major commercial hubs in India. Thus in 1996 the name of Tamil Nadu's capital city Madras was officially changed to Chennai, just

like Bombay was renamed Mumbai in 1995, and the name of Calcutta was changed to Kolkata in 2001, making some of India's largest cities subject to an ongoing symbolic decolonisation.[5]

That attempts at present commemorations of colonial history can prove highly problematic in India was evidenced by a case published in the New Indian Express during my fieldwork. When Sir Mark Allan Havelock, the great-great-grandson of the British Major General Sir Henry Havelock, visited India for the 150th anniversary of his forebear's role in the British–India war of 1857, angry public protest resulted as he made a thwarted request to put up a plaque at the Major General's grave in Meerut to commemorate what he referred to as the "bravery" of his forebear's battalion in 1857. Under the acerbic headline "150 years on, no place for 1857 British 'heroes'", the article describes outbreaks of public demonstration, while a senior leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party ("Indian People's Party"), a major political party in India, is quoted to the effect that such a celebration was "an insult to India" (Pande 2007:9).[6]

Considering such politics of history, there does seem to be reason for Danish agents to reflect on what sort of implications it might have to advance Danish heritage interests which are associated with the colonial period in India. But it did not seem to follow from these examples that Danish interests in Tranquebar were necessarily interpreted as acts of neocolonialism perceived from the vantage point of the former colony. For example, one Indian historian who worked with Tranquebar indicated that India might receive the Danish engagement in research and development in the town with considerable self-confidence:

> Research has to be tied to geopolitical interest or colonialism, especially in the relationship between East and West. With respect to the marginal position of Denmark in world politics, its orientation has to be towards its former colonies. I also wouldn't discount the growing importance of India in the world economy.

This comment directs attention to relations of the present, indicating that the colonial past is not just "there" in Tranquebar to be commemorated or forgotten. Rather, it is produced in the course of contemporary encounters that bring present interests to bear, creating specific narratives and views on the Indo-Danish colonial period. In the following I will look more closely into the character of these narratives.

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[5] While decolonisation is frequently an explicit argument in the politics of name changes in India, it should be noted that these name changes are also applied as political tools for expressing regionalist political stances, such as Dravidianist sentiments in the context of Tamil Nadu (Hancock 2008:52). Thus the renaming (which can be seen as appropriations of history) is also very much part of internal Indian politics, even as it may be justified and understood in part on anti-colonialist grounds.

[6] Such a commemoration runs against the grain of the effort of post-independence politics of history in India, where the state has worked to build a public history in which this war (which the British termed a mutiny) has been presented as the 'First War of Indian Independence' (Cohn 1971:56).

## Reengaging with the Colonial History of Tranquebar: Narratives of Anti-conquest

Mary Louise Pratt has coined the term "anti-conquest" to connote "strategies of representation "in modern travel and exploration" whereby the European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony" (Pratt 2006:9). In Tranquebar, too, one might identify narrations of anti-conquest, but in quite particular ways, which indicate that anti-conquest need not only be a narrative strategy of the erstwhile colonial powers, but can in some contexts also be used to serve the interests of the formerly colonised. For instance, the assessment of Tranquebar which I got from the Tamil Nadu Tourism Development Corporation was that

> it is a very good location; (…) it has history. Previously Danish people made trade with our local people—reciprocally you sold and purchased, [carried out] these commercial activities; then only the British came. Consequently the British took over India. Where the Danish people landed, they constructed a small fort—a safety for them to make business there. Now it is maintained by [the] State Archaeology Department, telling history like a museum.

Notwithstanding the presence of a museum in the fort (Fig. 5.6) and the intensifying work to develop heritage tourism with the Danish colonial rule and its traces as the point of interest, the fact remains that the colonial history which is recalled by the residents of Tranquebar is largely that of the century of British rule which followed the presence of the Danes. The awareness of the historic presence of the Danes and the attempts at strategic use of this history in various business ventures have increased in the course of the development of Tranquebar as heritage (Jørgensen 2009, 2011, forthcoming; Fig. 5.7). Nonetheless, amongst the population of Tranquebar, recollections of the period of Danish rule are limited, and the Danes are often confused with other half-forgotten colonial powers that have resided on the coast of Tamil Nadu (notably the Dutch). Yet to the extent that the period of Danish colonial rule is known of locally, it tends to be spoken of in positive terms. As one elderly man from a neighbouring village expressed it: "The Danish people came here for business only. They were good people". He contrasted the Danes with the British, whom he characterised as "harsh on the local population, gathering all of the country in their hands". Denmark is thus not associated with imperialism, as opposed to its British successors, and the prevailing image of the Danes amongst the population of Tranquebar is that of "good trading people" who did not come to India to conquer and dominate. As such the Danish period can be subject to both Indian and Danish sentiments of more or less diffuse nostalgia and narrations of positive relations, in a way which would hardly be possible for the British colonial past in India.[7]

[7] From a Scandinavian perspective this narrative of anti-conquest is not unique. Ipsen and Fur have noted that the discourse on colonialism in the Scandinavian countries generally positions Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland as insignificant and relatively innocent and benign colonial powers as compared to agents with greater powers such as the Netherlands and the Great Britain, which are associated with imperial oppression (Ipsen and Fur 2009, see also Fur 2012, this volume).


**Fig. 5.6** Reengaging with the colonial past. Indian and Danish archaeologists explain a joint excavation of fort Dansborg's moat (Photo from the author's fieldwork)

In the booklets on local history which are available for sale at fort Dansborg, the term "anti-conquest" can be said to apply quite literally to representations of the colonial relationship between Denmark and India. Here, emphasis is put on the acquisition of the colony through negotiations which led to the signing of a lawful treaty between the ruler (*nayak*) of Tanjore and representatives of the King of Denmark (Nagaswamy 1987:4–5, 22–25). Thus, if one looks at the booklet "Tarangampadi", published in 1987 by the then Commissioner of Archaeology in Chennai (Nagaswamy 1987), the treaty on the establishment of Tranquebar as a trading colony of the Danes is included in its full length. It is also emphasised that a "golden letter of friendship" from the nayak to the representatives of the Danish King, as well as the treaty which the parties concluded, is still preserved at the Danish National Archives in Copenhagen (Nagaswamy 1987:4). Demonstrating how the narration of history is entangled in the politics of the present, the booklet was originally brought out in honour of a visit to Tranquebar by the then Prime Minister of Denmark Poul Schlüter, its author being the same commissioner of archaeology under whom the museum at fort Dansborg had been established. This formal visit from Denmark, along with the development aid for the local fisherman population, which the contact with Denmark also entailed in the form of new boats and nets, is still widely recalled amongst the inhabitants of Tranquebar.

On the part of Danes and Indians alike, there appears a common interest in narrating anti-conquest in the history of Tranquebar. Thus, in 1983 a book entitled


**Fig. 5.7** A local businessman alludes to Tranquebar's colonial history in the name of his "Danish shop" (Photo by the author)

"India—Denmark: Connections and Cooperation" (Mølgaard 1983a, author's translation) was brought out in Denmark in honour of a visit of the then Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi. In the foreword, the Indian Minister of Foreign Affairs, P.V. Narasimha Rao, states that "The connection between our two countries has always been characterised by warmth and cordiality" (Rao 1983, author's translation). The first article in the book is on the topic of "Indian-Danish historical relations", and its very first lines read:

> A treaty between the King of Tanjore, the state of Tamil Nadu in India, and Christian IV, King of Denmark, signed in the year 1620 marks the beginning of the Danish-Indian friendship, which has remained cordial in more than 350 years as a tribute to the peace-loving peoples in both India and Denmark. (Nagaswamy 1983:5, author's translation)

Continuing its narration of anti-conquest the article states that "the Danes (…) kept the place [i.e. Tranquebar] (…) till 1845, when the entire Danish possession was sold to the English, mainly because of the increasing power of the English at the time" (Nagaswamy 1987:7). The article might have emphasised the dwindling economic success of the trade in the colony as the cause of the sale to the British, but clearly the narrative strategy is rather one of emphasising a positive and enduring relationship between India and Denmark. Thus it is also claimed that "Apart from very few insignificant quarrels the Danish stay in India took place in perfect

friendship" (Nagaswamy 1987:7). One example of events in the relations between the Danes and the rulers of Tanjore that are generalised as "insignificant quarrels" is mentioned in the following article in the same book, where a Danish author states that "Many enemies were watching the Danish colony—pirates, Portuguese, Dutch and later English competitors—also the Indian rulers several times sought to besiege the town to pressure the Danes to pay higher rents—but they benefited from the trade, so no serious attempts were made to drive out the Danes when they kept the colony after the lease expired" (Petersen 1983:13, my translation). It is similarly emphasised that "It was the Indian ruler who had the power (…). Tranquebar was, as other colonies at the time, first and foremost a trading colony, and both Indians and Danes benefited from the trade" (Petersen 1983:13, my translation).

The colonial relationship between Denmark and India did differ from that which developed with the dominant colonial power in India, Great Britain, in the age of imperialism. Tranquebar was a small colony which never had territorial expansion as its purpose. The colony consisted of a fortified town and a small encompassing territory of 50 $km^2$ at its largest. For Denmark the main importance of Tranquebar was that of a trading colony which provided access to coveted tropical goods such as spices and cotton cloth and contributed to the building of Danish merchant capitalism. At the same time the colony also participated in a wider network of colonial and global relations. Denmark especially profited from the small colony in 1775–1807 when Denmark's neutral position in the contemporary conflicts between Great Britain and France made it attractive for trade and capital to operate under the cover of the Danish flag (Feldbæk 1969). The fact that the Danish settlement in Tranquebar was established by a treaty with the nayak of Tanjore does indeed reflect an Indian interest in the establishment of the trading colony, as a means to increase the nayak's power base and the local trade as well as offsetting the rights of trade given to the Portuguese who were already established in the region. Thus there were mutual benefits, although this did not preclude conflicts or more unpalatable aspects of the trading relations, such as the existence of slavery.

The "perfect friendship" alluded to in the mutual strategy of narrating a history of anti-conquest more likely refers to the primary field of relations between India and Denmark at the time of the above mentioned publications, namely, that of development aid, which was given from Denmark to India in the period 1963–2005, reaching a peak in the 1980s. This relationship has been characterised in a recent Danish publication as one between "The Rich Mouse and the Poor Elephant" (Folke and Heldgaard 2006, my translation). The metaphor implies that "Denmark [as a small nation] became a faithful but never a big donor in India" (Schaumburg-Müller 2006a:43, my translation).[8] India had an interest in such a relation in order to

[8] In terms of state-to-state development aid, there are at present no such relations between Denmark and India. In 2005 India, which had itself become an economic power of global significance, terminated its bilateral agreements with a number of smaller donors such as Denmark, Sweden and others, insisting that development aid would in the future only be received from larger donors, e.g. the USA and the EU (Schaumburg-Müller 2006b:39). When the bilateral agreement was terminated, Denmark had in total provided around 6 billion DKK in development aid to India, making India the largest recipient of Danish development aid next after Tanzania (Schaumburg-Müller 2006a:40, 43).

promote social and economic development, thereby consolidating its status as a newly independent state, but Denmark was (in addition to maintaining a national image of humanism) also aware of the prospects of private commercial cooperation with India, with its "impressive industrial development since independence" (Mølgaard 1983b:85, my translation). Both nations in other words had an interest in portraying a history of benign relations, which Tranquebar and its trading history served well to symbolise.

## Conclusion

The redevelopment of the material traces of colonial encounters as heritage constitutes a reengagement of both Danes and Indians with the colonial past and with the relations which it has produced. Equally important, this reengagement produces its own postcolonial encounters, identities and narratives that build on the present relations between the former colony and the former colonial power. Historians might easily deflate the notion that the relationship between Denmark and India at the time when Tranquebar was under Danish rule was more benign than the relations with other contemporary colonial powers. As the Danish historian Ole Feldbæk has noted, the Danish administration in Tranquebar followed "exactly the same policy which as a matter of principle was followed in all of the European trading posts along the coast of India" (Feldbæk 1980: 187, my translation). But one thing that does characterise the Danish engagement in Tranquebar is that it was the engagement of a minor colonial power, which today has an even more marginal status in world politics than it had in the colonial period, while the global economic significance of postcolonial India is on the rise. The fact that Denmark was a marginal colonial power which never grew into an imperial power on the scale of Great Britain, and that Denmark might at present be characterised as a half-forgotten colonial power in the eyes of many Indians, makes the history of Tranquebar more open to contemporary reengagements that can emphasise narratives of anti-conquest and mutually beneficial economic relations in both past and present. Through the development of Tranquebar as a heritage town, spaces are created where sentiments of nostalgia concerning the Indo-Danish colonial connections of the town may be expressed and used strategically, yet within limitations. At the same time tourist encounters with Tranquebar as a heritage town also constitute reengagements with the colonial past that open to reflections concerning the nature of colonial relations in Tranquebar and beyond. These encounters draw the attention of the tourists to the fact that colonialism constituted encounters that engaged both colonisers and colonised, with effects on past as well as present relations and identities, thus creating scope for dialogue and more reflected reengagements with the past rather than reproducing unmitigated colonial nostalgia.

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