

Serampore College
NSS (Units-III & IV)

Report of Special Camping Programme

March 24-30, 2012

NSS Units III & IV of Serampore College, under the University of Calcutta, organized a 7-day Special Camping Programme from 24th to 30th March, 2012. The theme of this programme was **Preservation of Heritage (Natural, Cultural and Architectural) of Srirampur Town and Sub-Division**. The selection of the theme for the camp is very significant given the rich history of Srirampur town, of which, that of Serampore College is an integral part. Relics and dilapidated mansions of nineteenth century are littered in and around the town, silent but eloquent interlocutors on the history of Bengal. It also continues to bear a largely unexplored wealth of resources of material and cultural history. Srirampur had once been an epicenter of the Bengal renaissance. A town synonymous with William Carey has many a first to its credit, be it printing or publication, bank or botanical garden. Besides, this subdivision is endowed with nature's bounty, from the timeless flow of the Ganges to the extremely rich biodiversity of its extensive, if diminishing wetlands. The Special Camp was aimed at capturing the heritage of Srirampur and its surrounding from all the three dimensions and raise awareness about it, especially among the students.

The Inaugural Session started with the welcome address by Dr. Ratna Datta, the Teacher-in Charge of the College. She stressed on the need for building awareness among the local residents and students about the heritage of the town and sub-division. Prof. Pratap Gain, Vice Principal, Theology, emphasized the need for restoration of the old buildings that mark the glorious history of Srirampur. Sri Mohit Ranadip, a local resident and counselor by profession, broached the idea of restoration of the *ghats* along the Ganges, each one of which has a history of its own. Prof. Jishnu Dasgupta of the Department of History gave a brief outline of the area from pre-colonial times, marking the continuities and disjunctures. Prof. Priyankar Dey, also of the same department, explained to the students the rationale behind selection of John Nagar (Also called Jan Nagar), for the purpose of conducting a cultural-demographic study of the population of this locality, which was originally a settlement of nineteenth century converts to Christianity. Prof. Chandrani Roy, Department of Geography, volunteered in framing the survey questionnaire and illustrated the nitty-gritties of survey to the NSS volunteers in this inaugural session, in order to prepare them for the task at hand. Several of the volunteers, with previous experience in conducting surveys in various fields, also participated in the discussion and enlightened their compatriots.

The second day of the camp started with a tour around the sub-division to enlighten and make the volunteers extract/ gather experience about the architectural as well as cultural abundance of the district as a whole. Under the enthusiastic guidance of Dr. Prabhakar Bhattacharyya, professor of Philosophy and in-charge of Unit I, NSS volunteers visited *Aatpur*, Chanditala Block, Hooghly, where Swami Premanada, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna had set up an *ashram*. Swami Vivekananda, along with eight other fellow disciples of Ramakrishna, entered monkhood at this temple on 24th December, 1886. The volunteers also visited some temples with terracotta architecture which were popular pilgrimage sites for the *Vaishnavites*. Furfura Sharif, an important destination for the Muslim ascetics, was also on the tour-agenda. In this mosque female visitors are strictly denied entry, and so the male volunteers, empathizing, also refused to enter. The last stop on the tour was the Srirampur Rajbati, ancestral seat of the Gosain family, the local Zamindars. NSS volunteers talked to the local residents of the respective sites for documenting the oral history surrounding those places.

A Citizens' Convention was organized in the afternoon to sensitize local people about the urgency of preservation of heritage in and around Srirampur. Some eminent personalities of the locality including doctors, teachers and people already connected with official and unofficial endeavours of preservation and restoration, including members of several clubs and Non-Governmental Organizations were present at the meeting.

The third day was devoted to the history of labour in Hooghly. Dr. Arup K. Sen, Department of Commerce and a social scientist of note, gave a masterful exposition on the history of labour and capital in Srirampur, placing it within the larger story of the growth and decline of the Hooghly Industrial Region. He brought out the multicultural and multilingual identity of mill workers in and around Srirampur and also on the specific mode of labour control and pattern of labour leadership prevalent in the jute mills and other industrial units in the region.

The fourth day morning saw the volunteers undertake the ethnographic study of John Nagar, in the outskirts of Srirampur. The purpose of the study was to find out the present state of the locality, which was originally settled by nineteenth century converts to Christianity (under the aegis of the Srirampur Missionaries). The purpose of the survey was to trace those families to their roots and study the reasons for their conversion as also their present status. Prof. Jishnu Dasgupta, Programme Officer, Unit IV, took the volunteers to the proposed area, and was aided by Prof. Priyankar Dey. The volunteers, divided into ten teams and working under the scorching sun, painstakingly visited sixty three families from which twelve Christian families could be identified. A demographic shift that happened after the influx of refugees in 1947 and a shift in the residence of the surviving Christian families to a margin of the settlement came out from the day's survey. The volunteers recorded the initial inputs from their interactions with the residents of John Nagar and it was decided to interview the Christian families more intensively the next morning.

In the afternoon, Dr. Tapan Kumar Banerjee, Curator, Carey Library and Research Centre, Serampore College discussed the contribution of missionaries to the regional history of Srirampur. He revisited William Carey and his time and enumerated the multifarious activities that the Srirampur Missionaries undertook. The following discussion session brought out the complexities and even some of the failings of the much-hallowed Missionary Project.

The fifth day saw the continuation of the survey work in the morning by the spirited teams of volunteers. The volunteers under the leadership of Prof. Mausumi Bhattacharyya, Programme Officer, Unit III, made an in depth survey of the Christian families identified on the previous day. She was assisted by Prof Shouvik Dasgupta (Department of Bengali), the Programme Officer of Unit III. The interactions with the families were made more fruitful as the unstructured questionnaires helped open up many unknown and undocumented episodes of history. The Christian families quite uniformly represent the third generation of the converts. All the families have their origin in Bangladesh. The Christian residents of John Nagar repeatedly expressed their despair about the sorry state of the church in their colony. The ethnography threw up interesting issues regarding the remembered history of these families, their present socio-economic status and their demands grievances regarding these, and the divisions within this small and outwardly well-knit community.

The afternoon was largely dedicated to the natural heritage of Serampore. Dr. Suman Dutta of Botany Department left the audience spellbound with his highly charged and inspiring speech titled “Bio-diversity: Study and Conservation”. Dr. Subhadeep Sarkar of the Zoology Department took us to an unknown journey into our known world. He spoke on “We and our environment: some sharing”, and brought to life many unknown aspects of the animal life in and around the college campus itself. Their deliberations, quite obviously, encompassing the within and without of Srirampur, took us close to nature and reminded us of the dire consequences of the ‘progress of civilization’! The day ended with Prof. Biswanath Bandyopadhyay, Associate Professor, Government Teachers’ Training College, Hooghly, who spoke on “Printing of books in Bengal: Bengali society and William Carey”. Volunteers appreciated his story-telling style of bringing to life many of the more ignored side of the role of books and readership in the Bengal Renaissance.

The sixth day’s session was very live and interactive. Shri Soumit Chowdhury, a student of Serampore College narrated the historical extravaganza of his family. He belonged to one of the branches of the aforementioned Goswami family (on the distaff side). He projected a family tree along with many snaps of their elaborate and palatial buildings and shared many anecdotes about his family in his own style. The second speaker also offered the audience a genuine essence of Srirampur. Dr. Pritimadhab Roy, an octogenarian resident of Srirampur and a formal civil servant, passionately shared his feelings about some eminent personalities from Srirampur’s history. He introduced us to many of the national level activists in the freedom movement of India whom history who never received due recognition. His speech was a tribute to many of the

forgotten heroes Srirampur was endowed with. He donated two books on the same theme that he authored to NSS.

The seventh and last day of the camp was enriched by the scholarly and lucid deliberations by Dr. Atig Ghosh, Research and Programme Associate, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group and Assistant Editor, The Bengal Post. He problematised the very category of *ancholik itihaas* and argued that although this very genre of history-writing emerged following the pattern of writing District Gazetteers, but in course of time, it acquired a unique identity of its own. In fact, the methodology of *ancholik itihaas* was informed by the contemporary trends of historiography and the processes of identity formation in the colonial period. It is within this context that it established itself as an independent mode of writing local/district history. However, 'emotional excess' remained an organic part of this genre of history. He revisited mofussil as region and region as history. The day ended with a musical journey that captured the cultural heritage of the region. Prof. Bhaskar Chowdhury of Bengali Department and Mrs. Samapti Chowdhury presented a lecture-demonstration session to trace the musical tradition of Hooghly district. The duo being excellent folk singers enthralled the audience with their narratives and renditions. The camp closed with a hearty vote of thanks by Prof. Jishnu Dasgupta.