



# THE TRACES OF A COLONIAL MONUMENT:RE-FIGURING THE HISTORY OF FORT ANJENGO

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## Introduction

Nested between the Arabian Sea and the Anjengo backwaters, the quaint coastal village of Anchuthengu, situated in the Chirayinkeezhu taluk of Thiruvananthapuram district, has evolved into a tourist destination. The primary draw for visitors is the historically significant Anjengo fort, the first stronghold erected by the English East India Company in Kerala, and the recently renovated lighthouse that stands sentinel alongside. This strategic coastal outpost, with its rich legacy offers a fascinating glimpse into the regions colonial past, making it an indispensable addition to India's cultural heritage.

## Historical Background

The English East India Company, having secured the charter for Indian trade in 1600, initially focused on establishing a foothold in Kerala's spice market, particularly pepper. Seeking to minimize Dutch influence, they set up factories in Rettorah(now Vettur) and Brinjohn(now Vizhinjam). However, to bolster trade and security, the Company sought a strategic location for fortification.

The Rani of Attingal, Aswathi Thirunal Umayamma, extended an invitation to the British to establish a presence within her territory. Initially, the British were hesitant but eventually accepted her offer. They considered two potential locations for fortification Rettorah and Brinjohn but couldn't finalise them. The Pillamars of the Rani suggested a

location to the Company officials and it was Anjengo. According to Leena More, Anjengo

first appeared in English records in 1694. That same year, with the Rani's permission, the

British constructed a factory and fortification and it was completed in 1697.

### The Foundation of Anjengo Fort: Different Perspectives

There are various opinions regarding the construction of the fort. Various historians differ in the date of the fortification. Views of prominent historians are summarised and given below:

- William Logan – it was in 1684 that the English obtained permission from the queen of Attingal to build a factory at Anjengo and fortify it.

1 Walter Hamilton, Samuel

Matteer, George Smith, C.D Maclean, Nagam Aiya and T. K. Velu Pillai also support this view.

- Col. Biddulph – “in November 1683, John Brabourne was sent to Attingal, whereby his successful diplomacy, the sandy spit of Anjengo was granted to the English as a site for a fort”<sup>2</sup>
- C A Innes – “They (Britishers) obtained a site for a factory from the Rani of Attingal in 1684 and in 1690 permission to build a fort”<sup>3</sup>
- C.A Ibrahim Kunju said that the Anjengo Factory Records were destroyed by fire and the English factory records did not give any information regarding the date of establishment of the fortification.
- A Sreedhara Menon dates it to 1690 in his A Survey of Kerala History.

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- Leena More – she notes that on July 9, 1694, the English and the Queen of Attingal entered into a treaty, whereby the English acquired possession of Anjengo and on July 27, 1694 the English took possession and raised their flag<sup>5</sup>

- In the List of Factory Records of the Late East India Company preserved in the Record Department of the India Office London (1897) it is stated that on the 29th of

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the Tonges, in Anjengo, with permission to erect a fort thereon, together with warehouses and residencies for their factors; and she also granted to them all the pepper in the Attinga country that they might contract and pay for at a certain fixed rate. The English fort at Anjengo was completed sometime in 1697.

### Historical Significance

The Anjengo fort, a monument that occupies a prominent place in the history of

Kerala is currently under the Archaeological Survey of India. The construction of the fort was completed in 1697. The fort survived a minor rebellion in the same year of its completion and it witnessed the Attingal Revolt of 1721, the first organised agitation against the British in Kerala. The natives were furious with the English officials after the massacre of the English men at Attingal targeted the fort. They tried to seize the fort, the gunner of the fort, Ince with his courage and bravery resisted the attack which lasted for six months until the arrival of British troops.

The fort has helped the English East India Company to gain dominance in commercial and military activities in Kerala. Anjengo Settlement was prominent in its initial days<sup>6</sup> as it

became the second important settlement of the English East India Company after Bombay.<sup>7</sup> Anjengo became the first port of call for outward-bound ships and the fort was so formidable to the Dutch, that they closed their factories in Cochin.<sup>8</sup>

Several treaties between the Travancore rulers and the British were signed here. It also played an important role in the Battle of Colachel, Carnatic and Mysore wars.

#### Geographical and Architectural Features of the Fort

Anjengo, the first fort of the English East India Company in Kerala was built on a sandy spit of land that protrudes to the sea and had certain geographical advantages. The fort was naturally protected by the sea on one side and the Anjengo backwater on the other. This made easy access to water transportation which was helpful for trade and communication.

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The fort was constructed at a strategic location where the English could observe any movement by the sea.

The fort was constructed of laterite but was later plastered with cement. There are two entrances on the Eastern and Western sides of the fort and stairs are constructed to reach the top of the fort. It had four bastions and it could hold guns the number of gun points is not confirmed. Towards the North-Eastern side is a 130 feet tall lighthouse. A tunnel is constructed inside the North-Western part of the fort which leads to the sea, as a precaution for any kind of attacks against the fort and the settlement. The west side of the fort contains pillars that were used for punishing prisoners and criminals. A well was dug inside the fort for water. Remains of a gallows can also be seen at the top of the fort which gives evidence

for the execution of detainees.<sup>9</sup>

The fort is of a textbook square bastion of 90 yards, the ramparts of the surviving fort prescribe a square of 60 yards and enclose an area of approximately 0.3hc, it has an elevated topography setting and a four-sided ground plan.<sup>10</sup> The fort comprised a cluster of Europeanstyle structures built from local materials and is in a military architectural form.<sup>11</sup>

James Forbes in his Oriental Memoirs describes the fort and the Anjengo settlement, he describes the factory site and mentions that towards the south of the factory site located the fort and lower batteries and adds “this fortress which reached nearly from the sea to the river, contained storehouses, accommodations for the garrisons, and apartments for the chief”<sup>12</sup>

Though the fort was constructed in a relatively strategic location, the English official Alexander Hamilton was not impressed. Alexander Hamilton in his A New Account of the East-Indies is baffled and asks “why the English built their Fort in that place where there is not a drop of good water for drinking and the road has a foul bottom for anchoring and continually great surf on the shore”.<sup>13</sup> However facing criticisms, Anjengo Fort emerged as a  
5 notable hub for British colonial operations, with the majority of their activities and anchoring their presence in the region for a long period of time.

### Conclusion

Anjengo Fort, situated in the coastal village, played a pivotal role in the British colonial era. Despite facing criticisms, the fort emerged as a cornerstone of British colonial operations in the region. As a vital hub, Anjengo Fort anchored the English East India Company’s trade and military endeavours, facilitating their expansion and consolidation of power. Through its enduring presence, Anjengo Fort bears testament to the complex legacy of British colonialism in India.

1 William Logan, Malabar, Vol.II., Trivandrum, 1981, p. 237.

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John Biddulph, The Pirates of Malabar, New Delhi, 1995, p.271.

3 C.A Innes, Malabar and Anjengo, Madras,1908, p.55.

4 A. Sreedhara Menon, A Survey of Kerala History, 1967, pp. 298-299.

5 Leena More, The History of the English East India Company’s Settlement at Anjengo (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis) University of Calicut, 1989, pp. 57-58.

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John Biddulph, op. cit., p. 270.

‘Anjengo’, The Calcutta Review, Vol. No., 107, Issue No., 214, Calcutta, October 1898, p. 201.

Ibid., p.272.

9 Bipin Kurup S. R, Vysakh A. S, “Situating Fort Anjengo in the Imperial History of Travancore”, Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology, (2021-2022), p. 588.

10 Mason, Paul, Mackenzie, The Early English Factories of South-West India: A Historical Archaeology Perspective, Durham theses, Durham University, 2014, p.110.

11 Ibid.

12 James Forbes, Oriental Memoirs, Vol. No., I, London, 1834, pp. 213-214.

13 Alexander Hamilton, A New Account of the East Indies, Vol. No., I, New Delhi, 1995, pp.

