

August 22, 2017

Royal remnants of a bygone era

- Nabobs, colonial England's upstarts, amassed great wealth that is still enjoyed by their successors today
- Swapna Sathish, a history buff, will present a talk on the legacy of the Nabobs in the city on August 23

● Roshne Balasubramanian

In 18th century British India, a group of people who served the East India Company returned to Britain. They saw that the country had prospered with its ill-gotten wealth, and its people had an insatiable appetite for luxury with a desire to climb into the elite spheres of power and influence. Such men were called the 'Nabobs'. Swapna Sathish, a history buff, chats about these 'nouveau riche nabobs', ahead of a talk.

It was back in 2010, when Swapna got the chance of working with historian S Muthiah on the Raj Bhavans of Tamil Nadu, that her love for colonial history was tapped. "I wanted to know more about colonial history and artefacts. I was intrigued by what went back and what was taken with them," she explained.

While researching on the subject, Swapna bagged a postdoctoral fellowship from Charles Wallace India trust and was sponsored a visit to the UK. "I visited the country estates of the Nabobs...they are still in pristine condition and very well maintained," she shares.

On their return to Britain, the Nabobs either bought or built residences that were in keeping with their new standing in society. "They came here poor, lived half their life and went back with all the wealth. They weren't looked upon well by people back home. But, since they wanted to go up in life, they bought fancy houses and made them obvious. It was a derogatory space that the Nabobs occupied back in Britain," she shares.

Lord Clive and Warren Hastings were some of the biggest names and often, the most ridiculed. "Clive came with nothing to India and Hastings came here to make a fortune. So, when they went back with wealth and tried to mingle with the aristocrats, it didn't go well," she says.

A trail that began in Madras led Swapna to the houses in Britain. "For the lecture, I will focus on three aspects — intrinsic value of objects, an element of nostalgia or mere showmanship by using the houses and its contents to take the audience through the idea of what was taken back," she shares.

From the 'Pitt diamond', a large diamond mined in India, silver which was gifted and taken, to riches acquired after the siege of Srirangapatnam like Tipu Sultan's cannon, the nabobs took them all. "A dress worn by lady Curzon, called the peacock dress, is still in a museum. But, nothing can be bigger than creating a home - building a piece of India right in the heart of England," she says citing to the Sezincote estate, a 4,500 acre country estate. "It's a fine example of the neo-Mughal style of architecture and was built in the middle of traditional England."

Englefield house and Shottesbrooke are two other structures that are under the National Trust properties and still well preserved. "I was taken around the Englefield property by a descendant of the Benyon family that owns the place. It's amazing how they remember stories told to them by their ancestors!" she smiles.

Swapna will present the talk, 'Value, Nostalgia or Showmanship — How the Nabobs took a Part of Empire Back Home' at Press Institute of India, Taramani, on August 23 at 5 pm

TEMPLE FACTS

A temple inscription in Kundrathur describes a temple watchman who ran away, but was brought back and reinstated

Inscriptions in Mylapore mentions that barbers who also doubled as doctors.

Traders came together to contribute to building temples, feed people and also set prices of commodities.

A Chozha palace existed close to the Kapaleeswara temple. The king who sat in the palace, also gifted 20 velis of land to a temple in Thiruvannamur.



Englefield House



Tipu Sultan's cannon



Sezincote House