

Dutch Cemeteries Across India: Reflecting Cross-Cultural Architectural Influences

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is an analysis of the Dutch cemetery in India as an important but under-researched category of colonial and cross-culturally produced architecture created during the era of the Dutch East India Company (VOC-Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie). Rather than focusing primarily upon forts and trading factories, this chapter examines funerary landscapes as material expressions of identity, authority, and cultural negotiation in coastal settlements. This chapter is an analysis of the Dutch cemetery in India as an important but under-researched category of colonial and cross-culturally produced architecture created during the era of the Dutch East India Company (VOC-Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie). Rather than focusing primarily upon forts and trading factories, this chapter examines funerary landscapes as material expressions of identity, authority, and cultural negotiation in coastal settlements. In addition, the study will show that Dutch burial architecture has transitioned from simple early graves to increasingly sophisticated monumental forms as a result of processes of settlement consolidation and social stratification. The cemetery at Bheemunipatnam, with its compact pyramidal and obelisk-shaped monuments, as well as its relatively low level of ornamentation, is presented here as an example of context-sensitive Indo-Dutch architectural hybridity, rather than a replication of European prototypes. Overall, this chapter argues that these cemeteries are key to understanding architectural evidence of trans-cultural exchange and the colonial inscription of space along the coasts of India

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INTRODUCTION

The article should be prepared using Microsoft Word in *Times New Roman* font, size 11 pt, paper size A4 apply for the whole document, 1.15 line spacing and the length of the article should not be more than 14 pages.

The 17th and 18th centuries saw a great increase in the number of European ships travelling to the Indian Ocean and bringing new goods to trade with Asia. Many of the port cities in the subcontinent developed their own distinctive patterns of architecture. The Dutch established cemeteries at major ports throughout India as a way of maintaining their presence and influence in these areas. These cemeteries record the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and their efforts to build trade networks in coastal regions of India, but they also represent extensive negotiations between local funerary customs and the imported materials, climate, workmanship and art of the Dutch. They give an alternate perspective on the exchange of architecture that occurred when we consider the histories of forts and factories, or ports and markets.

The research being undertaken will explore how cross-cultural architectural influences are embodied in the Dutch cemeteries throughout India and the region's adaptations will be understood through a close review of the case study of the cemetery in Bheemunipatnam. Bheemunipatnam was a major VOC trading centre located on the Coromandel Coast, and is therefore an excellent site for this study. The remaining cemetery and the remnants of colonial structures are material evidence of the presence of the Dutch and their connections with local inhabitants in a coastal context as a result of trade, war, and cultural negotiation.

There are three main things that the sources in this paper will focus on. It can help to identify the architectural types of cemeteries built by the Dutch in India - plan of the cemetery, the design of an epitaph, the type of ornamentation, and how they were situated with respect to the surrounding environment/built-environment. The second aspect of the research is the investigation of the ways that cultural exchanges occurred within the various ways that funerary types were influenced by the indigenous methods of construction, and how locally sourced stone and regional styles of decor contributed to the construction of the cemeteries. The data on Bheemunipatnam will then serve as an example of a potential case study for field survey documentation and as a way to analyse and identify similarities and differences in how global design concepts are interpreted in India as compared/related to the local context.

As the research will highlight, funerary buildings served as an avenue for cultural equalisation in both a social and physical manner - moving away from traditional narrative views about how cemeteries were used and developed as sites of trade and distribution of power. Instead, it will identify the cemetery as a venue where memory, identity and place have created commonality and continuity. Therefore, using Bheemunipatnam as an example, this research demonstrates that Dutch Colonial architecture in India was not simply a replica of the buildings from Europe.

The historical background of Dutch Presence in India. Dutch Presence in India. The Dutch arrived and established in India during the early 17th to 18th centuries, with the aim spread commercial roots of VOC (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie) or Dutch East India Company. VOC is one of the earliest multinational monopolies chartered of Dutch trade and exercised powers similar to government in India (Li, 2006) such as sign treaties with local rulers, build and control forts, and use military force. This resulted in expansion of Dutch trade network across Asia.

The Dutch East India Company's presence in India was characterized by a dispersed network of factories, forts, and trading posts (Doel, 2010) along the subcontinent's extensive coastline, each serving specific commercial purposes within the broader VOC strategy.

- a. **Surat and Western Trade:** The Dutch landed and established trading post, first in India via Surat in the year 1616 by accessing international maritime trade routes (Clulow & Mostert, 2025). Suratte i.e. Dutch settlement in Surat, supported export of textile, indigo etc and import of spices and goods from Indonesia and around. The importance of Suratee declined in the 18th century, due to shift of trade from Surat to Bombay by Britishers.
- b. **Bengal Settlements:** In eastern India, the Dutch maintained a significant presence along the Hooghly River (Pal, 2019), particularly in Chinsurah (near modern Kolkata), which emerged as a key trading settlement from the mid-17th century (Sur, 2017). Dutch Bengal facilitated trade in silk, cotton, saltpeter, rice, and indigo, and became integral to the VOC's network connecting India with Southeast Asian and European markets. ([Kevin Standage](#))
- c. **Coromandel Coast:** On the southeastern coast, the VOC's foothold began with the establishment of its first factory at Masulipatnam (Machilipatnam) in 1605, soon followed by fortified positions at Pulicat (from c.1610) and later Nagapattinam (Arasaratnam, 2013). These Coromandel posts became central to securing Indian textiles — particularly cotton calicoes — which were exchanged in intra-Asian commerce for spices and luxury goods from the Indonesian archipelago. ([Groklopedia](#))
- d. **Malabar Coast:** In the year 1663, Dutch expanded VOC on the Malabar Coast by capturing Cochin (Vrenken, 2014). It was an important Dutch settlement, as it served as base for spices shipment and warehouses for commercial and military purposes. The Dutchess were involved in local politics and evidence of built cultural legacy were also found before their decline in the year 1799. The traces of physical culture such as forts, factories, burial grounds and cemetery are found along trading post and administrative centers.

These cemeteries served as sacred spaces for VOC employees, administrators, soldiers, and their families who died far from home and were an integral aspect of Dutch colonial presence. The cemeteries depict the magnitude of presence of the Dutch power in the region (Sur, 2017), and are place for cultural exchange, architectural identity, and collective social memory.

Analysis the evolution of Dutch cemeteries in India reveals a clear evolution in funerary practices (Etlin, 1977) and monument styles from the early to later periods of VOC activity. The evolution depicts intercultural exchange, power projection, and social structures. **Early 17th-Century Simple Graves:** During the early times of Dutch in India, the funerary practices were simple, with humble and non-decorated graves within the gardens of VOC compound. In sites such as Pulicat, it is found that burial rituals were simple, straight forward. Historical records and cemetery surveys from sites such as Pulicat note that early interments were often marked with straight forward stones or simple inscriptions, reflecting both the pragmatics of mortality in frontier settings and the limited architectural investment in memorialisation at nascent outposts. ([sharedcemeteries.net](#)). The initial graves of Dutch were not very architecturally significant and were modified as per local climate and materials available near by the settlement.

18th-Century More Elaborate Tombs: By the 18th century, VOC settlements established strong roots and Dutch tombs became grand with elaborate design (Pal, 2021). This shift was prominent at

different regions of India. The Dutch cemetery in the west at Surat, had big mausoleums and tombs with obelisks, pillars and domes. Also reflecting the competition between the English and the Dutch along with the display of culture ([The Times of India](#)).

In Murshidabad (Bengal), the Dutch cemetery showcased formalised memory with a range tombs and obelisks, dating oldest tomb from 1721, to early 18th century. At Chinsurah it is found that there is a strong influence of local funerary tradition that can be identified by the change of style in form of brick enclosure and headstone ([Groklopedia](#)). The Dutch Cemetery in Fort Kochi (Malabar) established in 1724 contains over a hundred epitaphs and tombs, some richly inscribed and displaying traditional Dutch funerary motifs adapted to Indian stone and climatic conditions. ([Kerala Tourism](#))

These large and detailed tombs show how the VOC settlers were remembered after their deaths. Many of them died while working far from their homeland (Valente & Tiwary, 2021). Their tombs were built in a way that showed who they were, their social position, and their connection to the company. Over time, the burial style changed from small and minimal to large and decorative tombs, extensive usage of local materials and craftsmanship and which indicates the strong Dutch presence with the time.

The architectural characteristics of Dutch cemeteries in India. Dutch cemeteries in India are distinct, but not many people have studied this category of colonial funerary landscapes. These cemeteries are blend of Dutch burial traditions- the way they remember the people who had departed in foreign land, local construction techniques, and adaptation of Dutch to Indian culture. In this study Dutch cemetery is analysed under the headings: Spatial organisation, typology, material and construction techniques, ornamentation and inscription.

Spatial Organization

- a-Location Patterns: Dutch cemeteries in India were typically located on the periphery of settlements, often beyond the fortified core but within manageable proximity to Dutch factories, forts, or trading posts. The location of cemeteries is desired by European sanitary practice and is dependent on land availability of the area. The way in which the cemeteries were arranged in the following colonies; such as Surat, Pulicat, and Fort Kochi; follows the same standard of slightly elevated ground that is at a distance of dense housing, yet in a common route leading to the trade quarters, for example (Baldaeus 1672).
- b-The Orientation of Graves: The way in which graves are orientated in Dutch cemeteries normally meets with Christian guidelines regarding grave orientation, orientation is typically east-west or head towards the east and the body to the west. East-west is used as a representation of resurrection and the second coming. However, deviations from the east-west alignment often occur in later cemeteries indicating that alignment is based more on the site's geometry/topography or boundaries of the enclosure rather than an adherence to liturgical requirements.
- c- Enclosure Walls, Gates and Arrangement of Cemeteries: The construction of most Dutch cemeteries was with masonry enclosure walls. These walls provide the sacred ground organisation inside the cemetery and claim ownership of this land in competition with other colonial settlements. The gates established within the cemetery were of modest standards, while they served as formal entries into the cemeteries and typically were centred within the enclosures and sometimes were signed with dates or inscriptions. The configuration of the church buildings varied greatly; most did not have fixed lunch; rather grave placements are usually in a loosely

structured manner; therefore that graves were added to the cemetery as a result of chronological addition versus having been developed from a pre-existing master plan. The placement of the graves contrasts greatly with British cemeteries that followed a more linear design method.

d-Relationship with Settlement Geography: The cemeteries maintained a close functional and symbolic relationship with Dutch settlements. Proximity to waterways: rivers, canals, or the sea, was common, underscoring the maritime identity of the VOC. Over time, as Indian cities expanded, many cemeteries became engulfed by urban fabric, transforming them from peripheral burial grounds into residual heritage spaces embedded within contemporary urban contexts.

e. Settlement Geography In Relation To the Cemetery: There was a functional and symbolic relationship between the Dutch settlements and their cemeteries. The cemeteries were usually located near waterways, including rivers, canals or the ocean, emphasising the maritime identity of the VOC. Due to the expansion of Indian cities, many existing cemeteries have been absorbed into urban fabric, changing from being on the edges of towns to becoming pieces of heritage space within the contemporary urban landscape.

Tomb Typologies

The typology of graves in Dutch cemeteries across India is a reflection of the social hierarchy, time of construction and local influences and shows a wide diversity in forms.

- a. Table Tomb: Table tombs are composed of a flat horizontal stone slab on a small pier or masonry leg. These tombs were primarily used for early burials and focus on enhancing legibility of the inscriptions; they are also a reflection of the Protestant values of modesty in terms of commemoration.
- b. Obelisk Tomb: Obelisk-shaped memorials have been seen to be very prevalent in Bengal and Surat, and became popular in the 18th century (Pal, 2021). These vertical-shaped monuments represent social status and permanence, and also reflect trends in Europe at that time while also being adapted for the available stone and masonry techniques of the locale.
- c. Pyramid/Stair Tomb: Pyramid or step tombs are not very prevalent in Dutch cemeteries; however, they do exist in a couple of cemeteries such as Chinsurah (Pal, 2019) and Pulicat. These forms of tomb structures represent cross-cultural architectural borrowing, and are possibly influenced by local funerary monuments and local temple forms. Cemeteries within Dutch cities in colonies established by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) are characterized by three distinctive burial types: barrel vault tombs, vaulted crypts (generally found underground), and pedestal tombs/flats marked with plaques.
- d. Barrel Vault Tombs: Barrel vaults are among the most recognizable burial types seen at Dutch cemeteries. These masonry tombs were built to provide a sheltered burial chamber and demonstrated how European vaults were constructed in a tropical setting.
- e. Vaulted Crypts: Vaulted crypts are an exclusive burial structure typically associated with high-ranking officials from the VOC. The construction of a crypt represents an elite status for the individual, both socially and economically, as well as the desire for the individual to have a permanent resting place. Furthermore, the construction of crypts required skilled craftsmanship and higher-quality materials than the majority of burial structures, further reinforcing the stratification of social classes through their burial traditions.

- f. Tomb Pedestal and Plaque Slab: Pedestal tombs and flat slabs used to mark the burial site of lower-ranking employees and/or family members were of simpler construction than barrel vault and vaulted crypts. These types of burial structures are found alongside monumental tombs and serve to emphasize the social diversity of the VOC burial community.

Materials and Construction

- a. Local Materials: Materials used in Dutch cemeteries in India came from the local area, including laterite stone from the Malabar Coast, sandstone from Surat, brick, shell lime, and lime plaster. Materials were selected based on their availability, durability, and appropriateness for the local climate.
- b. Brick Masonry and Lime Plaster: Brick masonry finished with lime mortar was the primary construction material in the regions; structures completed with a finish of lime plaster (often in conjunction with stucco detailing) provided protection to structures from the heavy monsoon rains that affected the area, as well as opportunities to express decorative detail.
- c. Regional Stone Variations: Regional variations in stone use occurred throughout the regions of Kochi, Gujarat and Bengal where laterite, sandstone and brick were used respectively, thus imparting distinct regional identities to the cemeteries while using a common Dutch architectural vocabulary.
- d-Imported vs. Indigenous Craftsmanship: Obtaining similar types of objects through imported versus indigenous craftsmanship was basic in terms of objects although, in regard to the construction of those objects, different design intentions were used based on traditional European forms as well as reliance upon the local artisanational craft traditions causing hybrid objects to be produced, via the interpretation of imported design through local construction knowledge and, subsequently, the production of Indo-Dutch funerary architecture rather than exact replicas of European examples [Appadurai, 1996]:

Ornamentation and Inscriptions

Through the use of ornaments and inscriptions, the ornamental elements of the Dutch cemeteries remain very restrained; this is consistent with the predominant Protestant feeling. Examples of the ornamental elements include the pilasters, cornices, pediments and even the occasional ornament done in stucco or stone; but generally speaking, the use of ornamental elements are generally restrained (Rea, 2005). Inscriptions of the tombs in the cemeteries are generally in Dutch, Latin and perhaps English; the inscriptions serve to document the names of the deceased, the dates they were buried, their ranks/titles, their moral values and act as good archives/providing insight into the overall demographic composition, the average mortality rates and the categories of the VOC administrative structure.

The process by which the form of the Dutch cemetery is adapted is quite different than the typical forms of Dutch cemeteries during the 17th century due the different meanings for funerary practices associated with being in India. For example, the different forms of burial as well as the development of monumental tombs in the Indian cemeteries are a break with the domestic norms, a product of the colonial context and the lack of church or churchyard in the context of an established ecclesiastical context.

Comparison with Dutch Funerary Traditions

- a. Adaptation from Typical Dutch Cemetery Forms: In the Netherlands, funerary practices during the seventeenth century favoured modest churchyard burials and indoor interments. The

emergence of monumental tombs in Indian cemeteries represents a departure from domestic norms, driven by colonial contexts and the absence of established ecclesiastical infrastructure.

- b. **Compromise with Indian Materials and Climate:** Climatic factors—heat, humidity, and monsoons—necessitated architectural adaptations. Thick masonry walls, vaulted roofs, and lime plaster finishes addressed environmental challenges while ensuring longevity.
- c. **Combining Indo-Dutch Craftsmanship:** The Dutch burial sites in India are thus an example of hybridized architecture that is a result of blending the European intent of memorialising a person or people with Indian building materials, building methods, and spatial arrangements. These structures are some of the first instances of transcultural architecture created through a colonial encounter rather than from a unilateral imposition (Appadurai, 1996).

About Bheemeliputnam during the Dutch period. Bheemunipatnam (also referenced as Bimilipatnam) was a major trading post on India's Coromandel Coast in the 17th and 18th centuries under the Dutch East India Company (VOC). The town, located at the mouth of the Gosthani River, has a natural harbour (which European traders greatly appreciated), which provided an easy point for many European trading vessels to access land. The area around Bheemunipatnam was very fertile, and thus produced much rice, which provided an important resource for VOC ships travelling across the Bay of Bengal (and beyond). A trading lodge was established around 1650 by the Dutch, which initially created what became a centre for local producers to connect with international markets, though this centre started off being a relatively modest commercial operation.

However, Bheemunipatnam faced its share of misfortune. In 1754, the Marathas invaded Bheemunipatnam and disrupted Dutch trade activities, thus revealing the vulnerability of the Dutch's coastal anchor point. Following this invasion, the Mughal authorities granted permission for the construction of fortifications as a means of bolstering the Dutch's ability to defend their Bheemunipatnam-based trading operations. The fort, designed by Dutch engineer Coenraad Pieter Keller, was intended to enhance security for the town's trade, however the structure reportedly collapsed twice during construction, demonstrating some of the engineering challenges and environmental concerns associated with the site.

In the late 1700s, the power of the VOC started to decrease, particularly after the company was dissolved in 1798 – at which point the British took over control of the settlement. Today, the sleepy town still bears testament to its colonial roots; the old fort still stands, and there is a Dutch cemetery that has been there for hundreds of years and bears remembrance of the important role that Bheemili played in Global trade.

METHODS

In order to answer the research question, the methodology in this study includes three elements: (1) a literature review, (2) a case study, and (3) a comparative analysis of data. This methodology is designed to investigate how architectural influences are exchanged across cultures, using Dutch cemeteries in India as an example (Bheemunipatnam in particular) and considering both time and place as variables.

An extensive review of academic and historical literature related to the topic has been conducted. Sources included books, peer-reviewed journals, archival materials, traveller's accounts, and digital repositories to help create a better understanding of how the Dutch interacted with and influenced the cultural, architectural, and funerary practices during their colonial period in India.

This review identified gaps in previous research on the placement of burial practices within regional adaptations of funerary architecture and examined the methodological approaches of prior studies of colonial and cross-cultural architecture.

The literature review served two main functions in developing the present study:

1. To build a historical and cultural context for the place and practices of Dutch settlements and burial/commemoration sites throughout India; and
2. To identify the major themes, controversies and frameworks (for example, cultural exchange, the concept of hybridity, adaptation) used in developing this case study research.

Case Study: Bheemunipatnam was investigated through a detailed study so that the study could provide context-specific, in-depth research of that area. The case study application enables a close examination of the architectural characteristics, culture, and spatial characteristics within their historical and environmental context of Bheemunipatnam.

Data Analysis: The data collection consisted of conducting site visits, taking photographs, measuring the various elements of the site, as well as looking at the spatial organization of all of the various structures that were identified and measured in this study. There were a number of structures where there was limited access to buildings or the building had deteriorated; therefore, other sources of information (such as historical maps, archival photographs, survey reports, and published information) were consulted to supply information that was not able to be supplied by field observation; therefore, providing a more complete understanding of the study area.

The data from literature reviews and the case study were examined through the use of a comparative analysis framework. The theoretical concepts previously identified through the literature (such as cultural appropriation, hybridization, and cosmopolitan exchange) have been used to help understand the architectural characteristics that were documented at Bheemunipatnam.

The analysis included both the tangible and intangible aspects. Tangible aspects included form, construction techniques, materials, ornamentation, and spatial layout. Intangible aspects included symbolic meaning, cultural references, and expressions of identity that are reflected in memorial inscriptions and memorial typologies. The analysis also included a comparison between different Dutch cemeteries located throughout India and Bheemunipatnam to determine any recurring themes or regional variations.

The study is limited by how much archival data is available, and by how well that data has been preserved at the actual site. Some of the inscribed and constructed elements that were examined during

this study have deteriorated over time, and therefore were very difficult to analyze directly. In order to address these limitations, multiple sources of data were used in combination, and triangulated with one another, to improve upon the overall reliability and validity of this study's findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Dutch cemetery at Bheemunipatnam (Bheemili) is one of the earliest examples of an existing European cemetery on the East Coast of India; and therefore it is a major landmark contributing to the historical graveyards of the East Coast of India, as well as creating a significant funerary landscape influenced by the maritime trade and settlement of European nations during colonial periods. The cemetery is located near the beach, and is close to the original location of the town's historic lighthouse. The cemetery has over fifty graves, as well as several gravestones, which illustrate how the cemetery evolved during successive phases of direct rule from both the Dutch and later British governments. As a result, the cemetery serves as both a graveyard, as well as a spatial record of major colonies that changed during the period between Coromandel Coast settlements and present day.



Figure 1 & 2:



Source: Author

The internal layout of the cemetery tells a layered historical account. The entrance area of the cemetery holds interments associated with later British presence while the main enclosure features mainly earlier Dutch graves. This architectural placement shows a subtle differentiation of political

succession during the site's history through the built form itself. The graves within the cemetery have compactly defined, geometric shapes, with many being pyramid or obelisk-shaped. A large percentage of the graves are pyramidal structures with shallow slopes or truncating pillars that extend directly from the plinth and not ornate, covered mausolea. The preference for such structures suggests a shift in the way that European commemorative design has adapted to local building traditions and environmental constraints.

Epigraphical elements play an important role in the cemetery's architectural expression. Many of the headstones have been carefully inscribed with Dutch language inscriptions, with some providing biographical information about the deceased, as well as in some cases the cause of death. As such, this physical record of the death of individuals provides an important historical resource to help us understand trends in patterns of disease, risks at sea, and the demographic make-up of the colonial population. Several graves have stone caps with engravings on them in Dutch that have remained there even after many years of exposure to salt-laden winds and monsoonal weathering. One of the earliest or most quoted monuments is the pyramidal grave.

The pyramid-shaped tomb of Frederick Kesslerus (d. 1661) is one of the earliest examples of European funerary architecture surviving in the region; it is among the earliest monuments cited as being created when the Dutch started to settle at the site. The monumental tombs of the Bheemunipatnam cemetery contrast sharply with the ornate monuments that fill many contemporary cemeteries in Europe, as they reflect the more reserved and austere nineteenth-century Dutch architectural style. The number of ornamental details is limited, with an emphasis on clean lines and geometric shapes, mass and verticality. The pyramidal forms of the tombs also resemble truncated obelisks and mastaba shapes, and the design prioritizes strength and stability over artistic expression. This restraint may be attributed to the practicality of the Dutch merchant class and their awareness of the need to counteract both erosion from coastal conditions and climatic decay of construction materials.

Certain tombs within the cemetery contain specific motifs or emblematic sculptures which symbolise death and maritime dangers, including skull and crossbones motifs; these represent the graves of individuals who belonged to a trading community whose success was determined by sea trade and the associated dangers of this form of commerce.

"The Dutch Cemetery at Bheemunipatnam, when taken in its totality, possesses an architectural language that is straightforward, materially grounded and layered historically. The geometric shapes, number of inscriptions and coastal location, represent both individual memory and a collective colonial identity. This cemetery, has withstood, and even though it is now partially destroyed and weathered over time, will continue to serve as one of the most valuable records that demonstrate how the congregations of European merchant communities in India used funerary architecture to inscribe onto the land (or create a record) of their presence within the geographical environment of Coromandel."

In the broader sense of the historical and architectural context for Dutch cemeteries in India, the Dutch Cemetery at Bheemunipatnam can be viewed as an outshot of the more extensive funerary culture in the country as well as a single cemetery. The differences in the way the built form evolved in Bheemunipatnam and in the many similarities to other Dutch Cemeteries is the influence of regional, climatic, and historical context on the architecture of the various cemeteries.

To put it another way, with regard to the development of Dutch funerary practices in India, the European merchant communities who used the cemetery Bheemunipatnam were among the first to

practice mortuary rituals in an eastern context. While the Dutch established cemeteries in places such as Pulicat during the early 1600's, the early 1700's saw increasingly elaborate mausoleum-type tombs and obelisks built in other Dutch communities, such as Surat, Chinsurah and Fort Kochi. In contrast, the formality of Bheemunipatnam is even further restricted when looking at the pyramidal and/or obelisk-like grave markers, which tend to be quite compact and geometrically balanced when compared to other large scale funerary constructions.

The second aspect of Bheemunipatnam's spatial organization demonstrates both conformity to and variation from Dutch colonial norms. Like other Dutch cemeteries within the VOC's territorial holdings, it is situated on the edge of the historical settlement, next to a waterway, which reinforces the maritime identity of the Dutch East India Company. However, the internal distinction between Dutch burials and later British burials provides the site with a distinctive layered colonial narrative, which is not as apparent in some of the earlier cemeteries in VOC India. Rather than reading as a one-phase enclosure, Bheemunipatnam acts; therefore, as palimpsest of political transition, with its spatial fabric encoding the decline of Dutch authority and the rise of British control.

With respect to type, the Dutch cemeteries in India are composed of several different types of burial monuments including table tombs, barrel vaults, pedestal stones, obelisks, and occasionally vaulted crypts for men of high rank. Although all of these burial monuments can be found within Bheemunipatnam's cemetery, the pyramidal and truncated forms of these monuments are particularly noteworthy, as they represent a different aspect of commemorative geometry from the predominance of barrel vaults present at some of the other settlements. In addition, the relatively few large crypt structures or highly articulated domed mausolea further indicate either the nature of social hierarchy, economic capital, or the level of development of Bheemunipatnam compared to other major administrative centres such as Cochin or Chinsurah.

In terms of ornamentation, Dutch cemeteries across India generally reflect Protestant restraint, with inscriptions in Dutch, Latin, or occasionally English. Bheemunipatnam conforms to this tradition through its engraved epitaphs and VOC insignia, yet its decorative program remains notably minimal. Unlike certain Bengal examples where stylistic influence from local funerary traditions becomes more visible in enclosure forms or headstones, Bheemunipatnam's monuments rely primarily on geometric mass rather than surface embellishment. Symbolic carvings such as skull-and-crossbones appear selectively, reinforcing themes of maritime mortality, but do not develop into elaborate iconographic schemes.

Most significantly, when compared with funerary practices in the Netherlands—where 17th-century burials were typically modest churchyard or indoor interments—the cemetery at Bheemunipatnam represents a colonial departure. The emergence of freestanding, monumental tombs in an open coastal landscape signals a transformation in commemorative culture. In the absence of established ecclesiastical infrastructure, and within a foreign mercantile environment, funerary architecture became a visible assertion of identity, permanence, and corporate presence.

Thus, the Dutch Cemetery at Bheemunipatnam is different not because it abandons Dutch funerary conventions, but because it adapts them with particular intensity to its regional and maritime context. Its granite materiality, compact pyramidal typologies, restrained ornamentation, and layered colonial occupation distinguish it from other Dutch cemeteries in India. It stands as a localized interpretation of a broader Indo-Dutch funerary tradition, less monumental than Surat, less ornamentally

hybrid than parts of Bengal, and less institutionally grand than Cochin, yet architecturally cohesive and deeply rooted in its Coromandel setting.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Dutch cemeteries in India are more than just burial grounds; they are important reminders of the Dutch presence during the period of the Dutch East India Company. Built alongside trading posts and forts, these cemeteries reflected the lives of merchants, soldiers, and officials who lived and died far from their homeland. Over time, the design of these burial spaces changed from simple early graves to larger and more structured tombs showing how the Dutch community became more settled and established in different parts of India.

Across regions such as Surat, Bengal, the Coromandel Coast, and the Malabar Coast, Dutch cemeteries adapted to local conditions. They used locally available materials like laterite, sandstone, brick, lime plaster, and granite. While the overall burial tradition remained Protestant and relatively restrained in decoration, local craftsmanship and climate influenced the final form of the tombs. As a result, these cemeteries became examples of cultural blending rather than exact copies of European models.

Within this wider picture, the Dutch Cemetery at Bheemunipatnam stands out for its strong, geometric forms and granite construction. Compared to more elaborate cemeteries in other regions, Bheemunipatnam appears simpler and more compact, yet architecturally powerful. Its pyramidal and truncated tombs, Dutch inscriptions, and location close to the sea reflect the maritime character of the settlement. The presence of later British burials within the same enclosure also shows how the site records a transition of colonial power.

In conclusion, the Dutch Cemetery at Bheemunipatnam highlights how colonial architecture in India developed through adaptation rather than direct imitation. These cemeteries combine European burial ideas with Indian materials, skills, and environmental responses. Even today, despite weathering and neglect, they remain meaningful historical landscapes that help us understand trade, identity, and cultural exchange along India's coasts.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed equally to the conceptualization and development of this research. The first author was responsible for conceptualization, literature review, and manuscript writing. The second author contributed to methodology, data collection, and field documentation of cemetery sites across India. The third author handled data analysis, interpretation of architectural influences, and manuscript review and editing. All authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to submission.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest, such as financial, professional, institutional, or personal, related to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

DECLARATION ON AI USE

The authors declare that AI-based tools were utilized during the preparation of this manuscript, specifically for language editing and writing assistance. All content, interpretations, arguments, and conclusions presented in the manuscript remain the sole intellectual responsibility of the authors. The AI tools used do not qualify as authors and are not listed as such. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the final manuscript.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data supporting the findings of this study are primarily derived from historical records, archival documents, and field observations conducted at Dutch cemetery sites across India. These materials are available through respective national and regional archives in India and the Netherlands. Data collected during fieldwork, including photographic documentation and observational notes, are available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author, subject to applicable ethical and institutional guidelines.

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