CONCLUSION

At the end of our long engagement with the Portuguese in Bengal, Arakan and Pegu over 150 years we are left with questions of what remained of this presence after the eclipsing of their glorious days in the sun. If we glance at the balance sheet of their years spent in the region, we are struck immediately by the unusual advantages that they enjoyed. The naval prowess of the Portuguese sailors showed up particularly in a regional setting characterized by the marshy wetlands of one of the largest deltas in the world. In addition these people encountered tremendous military opportunities in a politically disturbed region as they were well equipped with and adept at wielding firearms. Such factors opened up several avenues for the Portuguese adventures in Bengal. These provided them with ready employment as soldiers as well as the means to open up a flourishing maritime trade across the Bay of Bengal. On the reverse they also did wreak havoc in the region as pirates and slave raiders and reaped larger margins of profit than any legitimate trade that they indulged in ever could have yielded. From the very beginning, thus, the Portuguese freebooters who arrived in Bengal were well on their way on the road to riches and fame. Their success had a suction effect in attracting more numbers of Portuguese personnel out of the outposts of the Estado da India.

Despite these natural advantages that the Portuguese enjoyed in this region, we are left with an unmistakable impression of the precariousness and tenuousness of their position there. In the first place they did not have the strength of numbers. They may have constituted a large rag-tag community of settlers for the officials of the Estado da India to have worried about the phenomenon of desertion. The fact remains, however, that they were so dispersed along a lengthy coastline that their presence was diffused and limited in impact. Neither did
they have the strength of the arms of the Portuguese Crown, which they mostly shunned and deliberately fled from. The Portuguese homiziados gained as much political mileage as they could by invoking the name of this distant European monarch in their interaction with the local powers. The fact remained that they were no match for any of the powerful Asian rulers if matters came to a head, though they had the ability to tilt the scales in a contest between two powerful potentates. They could be a powerful support cast but not the principal dramatist personae in the theatre of military expansion.

No one was more acutely aware of the precariousness of their position than these Portuguese adventures themselves. The situation was summed up in a remarkably astute, if wry, comment by the Jesuit priest Father Andrew Boves. He wrote from Chittagong to Rome in November 1599-

“Finally, all the things of this country are more changeable than the moon, and we live under a sword hanging from a hair, so that everyday we are with one foot on land and the other in a boat, ready to take flight.”

If the situation of the Portuguese was so uncertain at Chittagong, which formed the largest concentration of Portuguese elements in the eastern delta, the position of those sprinkled over the other bandels could be imagined. They found themselves unceremoniously swept off the map of riverine Bengal as their ambitions and pretensions to power began to irk the local rulers from the king of Arakan to the Mughal emperor. The Portuguese ultimately lost most of their settlements to these attacks – Chittagong in 1602, Syriam in 1613, Sandwip in 1615 and Hugli in 1632 – bringing down the curtain on the most glorious chapter in the history of their presence in the region.

1 “Letter of Fr. Andrew Boves, S.J., to the General of the Society of Jesus in Rome, Chittagong, 25.11.1599, tr. by Fr. Hosten, Hosten Collection, Vidyjyoti Library, Delhi, Cardboard box titled Bengal XVI, XVII.
It was, perhaps, the very nature of the Portuguese presence in Bengal, Arakan and Pegu that acted as a double-edged sword. It was essentially a non-statist presence of communities of settlers who was generally unscrupulous and uncontrolled. It provided the space for individual enterprise and success but also led them on a roller-coaster ride characterized by dash and sparkle followed by a descent towards relative insignificance. Towards the last days of each of their major settlements under attack variously by the kings of Arakan and Ava and the Mughal Emperor, the Portuguese homiziados turned, inevitably, to the Estado da India. At that point perhaps, they felt the absence of the shelter of the power of the Portuguese Crown, a sentiment that had been voiced first by the Christian missionaries.

One can gather... how impossible it is to plant securely [ourselves]... and build up the foundations [of a presence]... in these lands and Kingdoms of Bengal, as long as they are not conquered and we have not in them our fortresses, where with to overawe and keep in subjection these Kings and tyrants.  

The Portuguese adventurers in Bengal lacked the more conventional forms of support but they, inevitably, found it in other places and often from within the region itself. The population profile of a typical Portuguese settlement reveals that in terms of sheer numbers it was as Indian as it was Portuguese in character. The Portuguese enclaves in Bengal encompassed local populations of substantial numbers who were provided opportunities for employment and thus flocked to these settlements. Hugli, for example, in 1632, in a most liberal estimate could not have had a white population of more than a thousand people. The number of local residents was several times that number as indicated by the 4000 Christian prisoners taken by the Mughal forces to Agra in 1633. Along with the integrated core community of mesticos or the Indo-Portuguese the cumulative figure was of about 10,000 to 12,000 persons.

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2 Relacao Annual das coisas que fizeram os Padres da compagnia de Jesus nas suas missoes..... nos anos de 1600, pelo padre Fernao Guerreiro, tr. Fr. H. Hosten, S.J., Hosten Collection, ms. 9, Bk. III, Chap. III.

3 See Chap. VII
The native resident community included “their black women, their clever cooks, their dancing girls, their confectioners, their seamstresses and so on”, as well as “12 or 13 native [merchants] in possession of large capital”.4 They all had a large stake in the continuing prosperity of the settlement and attracted notice as they fought shoulder to shoulder with the white Portuguese in defense of a town that they had built together.5

The adventure that the Portuguese freebooters set upon in the coastal folds of riverine Bengal ended up as a joint venture as they took Indians on board. In all their chief forms of enterprise they had local partners, whether in the form of military employers, trading allies, or partners in crime and slave trade. The nature of their joint operations was captured in the running of a hospital by the Jesuit priests at Hugli in 1598. After collecting funds and building and equipping the hospital, “two persons, a Portuguese and an Indian, were appointed with equal powers to manage that establishment, and they were to be changed every month by persons of equal quality.... and they hoped that thus, with the help of God, the work would go on for a longer time.”6

It was the development of such local ties that enabled the Portuguese to stay on in Bengal long after they fell from political favour. It was their friends in the larger trading community that prevailed on Shah Jahan to stall the execution of the prisoners at Agra and finally enabled their escape and return to Bengal. They were, however, not able to regain their position of dominance in the Hugli region. In 1679 the English summed up the position of the Portuguese who were still in Bengal-


5 Ibid.

The Portuguez, though numerous in Hugly, yett are reduced to a very low and meane Condition, their trade not worth mentioning, their Subsistance being to be entertained in the Mogulls pay as Souldiers.

They knit Stockins of Silke and Cotton; they bake bread for the English and Dutch Factories and particularly dwellinge houses, and for their Ships and Vessels; they make many Sorts of Sweetmeats, vizt. Mangoe, Orange, Lemon, Ginger, Mirabolins, Ringo Roots [dringo roots] & c. Several Sorts of Achar, as Mangoe, Bamboo, Lemon, & c. very good and Cheape. Many of the men use the Sea in English or Moors ships and Vessels, Soe that these people live very happily, better then in most places in Asia, all Sorts of provisions beinge here very Cheape.... this Kingdome is soe well inhabited Expecially by Foraigners, which maketh Bernyer's [Bernier's] Opinion of it to the purpose- That the Kingdome of Bengal hath many dores into it, and but one out of it, which is very true.7

What lingered on of the Portuguese in Bengal was this whole Indo-Portuguese community that settled in the region. In fact the growth of the new mercantilist power houses in the form of English Calcutta, Dutch Chinsura and French Chandernagore owed a lot to the Portuguese personnel and settlers who peopled these new towns. More tangibly, there stands Bandel Convent, which, being one common meeting point for the King, the fidalgo, and the arrenegado, epitomized the curious mix of elements that constituted the Portuguese presence in Bengal (as in Asia, as a whole). Portugal's claim to a place in Asian history rests ultimately on its role in “transfer[ring] the ways of the West to the East.”8 And conversely, being the first carriers of information and impressions of the East to the West, which were available for a long period of time, in the early modern world, in the Portuguese language.
