INTRODUCTION

In January 1599 a Portuguese Jesuit priest, Father Francis Fernandez, serving in the Bengal mission wrote to Rome about the material bounties that would attract people to the lesser known eastern regions of India.

"Let those who will read this consider whether this mission should be made light of; let them consider that, if merchants seek riches, gold and pearls and precious stones, and for that alone dig to the bowels of the earth and travel round the globe, all these things are to be found abundantly in this kingdom, and that, if religious yearn with all their heart for their neighbour's salvation, here the harvest is white, the crop ripe. Let them come, let them hasten, let them come flying, to reap fruit unto external life."[1]

In the course of the 16th century Bengal and Pegu came to represent lands of boundless opportunity to the variegated Portuguese elements present in Asia. Yet, in 1498, when the Portuguese ships sailed into the harbour at Calicut after nearly a century of groping along the African coastline, Bengal had hardly been heard of by them. By the time Father Francis Fernandez was making his assessment the Portuguese settlement established at Hugli had evolved into a commercial hub at the head of the Bay of Bengal. When the English and Dutch traders arrived in Bengal in the early 17th century, Hugli had set the tone as a commercial nucleus that they could easily model themselves on. Thus, as they sailed up the Gangetic delta they chose to locate their trading outposts within a stone's throw of Portuguese Hugli. It was estimated by Thomas

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Bowrey by 1676 that there were over 20,000 Europeans settled in Bengal of which over half were living along Hugli river.²

From very tentative and almost desperate beginnings the Portuguese settlers gradually became a power to reckon with in the region. In the first half of the 16th century, successive viceroys of the Portuguese Asian empire headquartered at Goa found it difficult to even open trading and diplomatic relations with the Bengal and Arakan kingdoms.³ By the early 17th century the Portuguese had built up a formidable reputation as a militia men. In fact a band of 400 Portuguese freebooters defeated the Mughal flotilla in the Gangetic delta commanded by Raja Man Singh himself. Their leader, Domingos Carvalho, was one among several such Portuguese adventurers inhabiting the region. He was widely regarded as “the terror of all those kingdoms of Bengala. To dream of him was enough to make the enemies run away.”⁴

This thesis attempts to examine the transition of the Portuguese from freebooters to small potentates, and from rags to riches. It is a saga of a complex, multidimensional and multifaceted presence.

Bengal did not fall in the direct line of Portuguese state interest in its initial years in Asia. In the first fifteen years of the 16th century the Portuguese Crown literally hammered into place its overseas empire in the western and southern Indian

³ See Chapter II, especially section II.
⁴ Relação Annual das coisas que fizeram Padres da Companhia de Jesus nas suas missões...nos anos de 1600 a 1609, pelo Padre Fernão Guerreiro, tr. By Fr. H. Hosten, Hosten Collection, Vidyajyoti Library, Delhi, cardboard box titled ‘Bengal XVI, XVII’, ms.9, Bk. III, Chap. III.
Ocean, building fortresses to capture the key areas of spice trade in Asia. It evolved into a unique thalassocratic empire whose territories were dispersed along the India Ocean littoral. These fortified settlements were then strung together by a dominating fleet of armed cargo vessels and men-of-war to create the Portuguese *Estado da India*. Headquartered at ‘Golden Goa’, this formed the official presence of the Portuguese in Asia. Alongside these developments Portuguese individuals were constantly discovering ways to make their own fortunes in Asia. They began to desert the *Estado da India* and found their way to the long stretches of coastline that lay between *Estado* outposts and were outside its direct control.

The Bay of Bengal soon came to represent a land of opportunity and independent refuge in the mindset of the Portuguese who came to the east. In the 1540’s it was estimated by the officials of the Crown themselves that over a quarter of the Portuguese personnel who arrived in Asia soon settled in areas such as Pegu, Bengal and the Choromandel coast, where the influence of the *Estado* was very weak and indirect. In fact, in official circles on the west coast of India the complaint “fui a Bengala” was oft-repeated with reference to all manpower, equipment and artillery of His Majesty, the King of Portugal, found missing from strongholds of the *Estado* like Cochin and Goa.

For the Portuguese who were sent out to Asia, the Bay of Bengal came to represent the very antithesis of the official structure of the *Estado da India*. Individually

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they left the outposts of the *Estado* for a variety of reasons - to escape judicial action for crimes committed,⁷ to evade the religious persecution spearheaded by the growing power of the Inquisition,⁸ or simply to make more money than that offered by the unreliably-paid salary of the *Estado.*⁹ Yet mostly they left because they perceived that after leaving their homeland and the *Estado* they did not wish to live constrained by rules and regulations once again. As the officials of the *Estado* complained in 1544, "the fidalgoes that had passed the Cape of Good Hope...are like Lucifer as they ignore any master and they say and do all that comes to their mind...."¹⁰ Most of these personnel found that in Asia they would much rather "live with the liberty of Bengal."¹¹ Bengal, thus, became the haven of the Portuguese freebooters.

Once the main pillars of its Asian empire were in place, the Portuguese Crown inevitably set about investigating the usefulness and economic potential of other regions around the Indian Ocean. It was during this exploration of hitherto unvisited coasts that the first official contacts were made with Bengal, Arakan and Pegu. The Crown and *Estado* rapidly discovered that the region and its environs offered products

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¹¹ Letter of Fr. Andrew de Nabais, S.J., to Fr. Sebastian Gonsalvez, S.J, of the Professed House, Goa, Porto Pequeno or Hugli, 25.1.1602, in the Hosten Collection, Vidyajyoti Library, Delhi, Cardboard box titled Bengal XVI, XVII.
and services that could prove advantageous to its Asian enterprise. Bengal and Pegu produced cotton textiles, precious stones and silver that could be effectively utilised in trade within Asia to procure pepper and spices for export to Europe. Bengal was also prosperous in foodstuffs beyond imagination, providing the answer to one of the Estado’s most serious concerns. This was the search for a reliable supply of food for its most important fortresses in the Indian Ocean - Goa, Malacca, Hormuz - that were wholly dependent on overseas supplies for their very existence.

Pegu also provided excellent shipbuilding materials and facilities that could prove very useful to the Portuguese establishment in Asia. As soon as it was discovered that “the country abounds in timber… nowhere too can better ropes be found for every kind of ship-tackle.....and.....there is plenty of pitch and bitumen for tarring the ships”,12 the Estado da Índia came to evince a steady interest in the region. The additional dimension of the Padroado Real and the furtherance of the interest of the church in its overseas dominions further came into play as the Portuguese crown discovered that these areas comprised more gentile than Moorish populations.

Ironically, in a way the establishment of official contacts with Bengal, Arakan and Pegu stimulated further private Portuguese interaction with these regions. The official status of voyages to these areas was always ambiguous. The very first state envoys to these kingdoms were sent aboard the vessels of Asian merchants or in ships that were jointly owned and manned by the Portuguese Estado and local partners.13


During the governorship of Lopo Soares de Albegaria (1515-18), privatisation of trade within Asia began. The officials of the Estado began to sanction private ventures to areas and in goods that had hitherto been a closely-guarded Crown monopoly. These ‘official’ envoys often served their own private ambitions more faithfully, even placing under threat the promotion of the king’s interests in the region. Several of them seized the opportunity to turn renegade in these distant and opportune waters. Thus, we find Rafael Perestrelo, the official envoy to Bengal in 1521, succumbing to this temptation. Within a few months of waiting at the eastern port of the Chittagong for his delegation to return from the court of the Bengal Sultan at Gaur, he had decided to defect. By the time his countrymen returned he had joined the Turk, Ali Agha, in capturing the Portuguese king’s ships and men in the harbour and town.14

The truth of the matter was that once the Portuguese fidalgoes, had sailed away into distant and unregulated waters, there was no law or authority that could check them, other than their own inclinations. João de Figueiredo, the captain of the crown voyage commissioned to search for the legendary Ilha de Ouro in the east in 1544, was especially candid in explaining the situation to his crew. Scoffing at the authority of the king of Portugal he openly proclaimed that “he would do and undo the law, being God up above and he down below.”15

Given this tendency towards freebooting the promotion of the Portuguese crown’s interests in the region of Bengal-Arakan-Pegu did not make much headway,

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15 Notes sent to the King regarding the arrival in India in Martim Afonso de Sousa and of his government, 1544, As Gavetas de Torre do Tombo, Tomo III, Doc. 2675, pp. 218-234, p. 232.
while the presence of variegated Portuguese elements in the region continued to grow. As early as 1521 there were Portuguese elements settled in Bengal who had metamorphosed and completely blended into the local society and were power-brokers at the court of the Bengal Sultan. Yet as late as 1536, the only concrete achievement that the Estado da India could claim in the region was the setting up of two alfandegas (customshouses) at Chittagong and Satgaon. Contact with and control over these, however, remained very tenuous. By the 1530's the command of Crown ships along with the right to pocket all the profits of trade with these regions was being officially granted to fidalgoes as a reward for services rendered to the Estado.

In the context of these developments the phenomenon of desertion became one of the problems that the Portuguese state had to contend with in Asia. In a situation where there was little manpower thinly spread over the outposts of a far-flung empire, Portuguese personnel represented a resource that it could ill-afford to lose. Through the 16th and the 17th centuries the Crown and its viceroy addressed the problem repeatedly and tried to attract these homiziados (literally, refugees/fugitives) back to the official fold. Thus, they did not lose their interest in the region entirely, even after it was largely

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16 One such person was Martim de Lucena, whom the Portuguese embassy to the court at Gaur encountered in 1521. They failed to recognise him initially as he was "dressed more like Mohammad than the mummy of him." Much to their surprise he seemed to wield enough power to block or to grant them an audience with the Sultan himself, Voyage, op. cit., para. 32.

17 There is much documentation referring to these efforts by the turn of the century. See, for example, Alvara of the Viceroy, Goa, 1593, in J.H. Cunha-Rivara (ed), Archivo Portuguez-Oriental, New Delhi, 1992 (reprint), Fasciculo 3, Doc. 133, p. 408-9; Letter of the King to the Viceroy, Lisbon, 15.2.1597, in ibid. Doc. 239, pp. 668-679; Letter of the King to the Viceroy, 17.1.1918, Fasciculo 6, Doc. 440, p. 1131; Fasciculo 6, Supplements 1 & 2, Doc. 893, dated 17.6.1597, pp. 720-22; Letter of the King to the Viceroy, 12.2.1603, Goa Archives, Livros das Monções de Reino, Vol. 7, folios 164-164v; Letter of the King to the Viceroy, 6.1.1602, M.R.8, folios 47-51.
agreed upon in official circles that the Portuguese crown would not make any more direct investments there.

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In Chapter I of this dissertation a brief attempt has been made to contextualize the geographical setting of the region of Bengal in the 16th century, when the Portuguese arrived in Asia. In Chapters II and III the interaction on an official plane between the kingdoms of Bengal, Arakan and Pegu and the Portuguese Crown and its Estado da India has been examined. It was, however, the Portuguese adventurers and freebooters who made up the bulk of their presence in the region. It is to their activities, settlements, ambitions, and involvements that Chapters I-VII are devoted. Chapter VIII forms a bridge between the others by bringing in the Catholic Church which was an inseparable part of the Portuguese overseas enterprise. As per the grant of the Padroado Real by the Pope to the Portuguese crown, the King of Portugal was placed by the head of Christendom in the monopoly position of 'Lord of the conquest, navigation and commerce of Ethiopia, India, Arabia and Persia'. Alongside he was entrusted with the responsibility of promoting the interests of the Church and spreading the Christian faith in this half of the world. In this unique entwining of religion and empire, where the padre had entered the service of God but found his salary paid by the king, he was widely regarded as much as a representative of His Majesty as of the Church in the overseas dominions. The Church was thus an important arm of the Portuguese state, especially in regions like Bengal where more direct forms of state involvement had been tried and rejected by the crown. The padre thus formed a vital bridge between the Estado da India
and the Portuguese personnel who had been driven from its shores, both of whom, however, continued to eye each other in attempts to renew contact from time to time.

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The Portuguese who came to settle in Bengal, Arakan and Pegu appeared in various incarnations as traders, raiders and soldiers. Initially they approached the region to participate in the thriving coastal and overseas trade that the ports of Bengal commanded in the trading world of the Indian Ocean. As skilful sailors and experienced merchants the Portuguese easily entered the existing trading networks centred around Chittagong and Satgaon. They soon labelled them the ‘great’ and ‘little’ ports of Bengal (o porto grande e o porto pequeno) and participated in this trade as itinerant merchants who “made and unmade a village” in the course of the trading season every year. These temporary shelters made of straw and thatch “which standeth as long as the ships ride there”, formed the backdrop of the Portuguese presence in Bengal through most of the 16th century.\(^\text{18}\)

Gradually some of these seasonal settlements metamorphosed into more permanent trading outposts. From these the Portuguese built up a trade that spanned across many regions in the Indian Ocean zone. They imported expensive luxury goods including heavy silks, porcelain, curios and pearls from China, sandalwood from Timor, and cloves, nutmeg, mace, cinnamon and pepper from the Moluccas, Ceylon and Malabar. They exported Bengal cotton and silk goods, foodstuffs, saltpetre and wax all around the Indian Ocean, including Gujarat, Malabar, Choromandel, Indonesia and

Southeast Asia. Of these the trade in foodstuffs was especially important as while it was generally acknowledged that Bengal did not lie within its direct control, in many ways it sustained the Estado da India. Successive viceroys regularly contracted with Portuguese merchants of Bengal to supply mantimentos to Malacca as “Malacca... is the gate of the whole South” and “without the south there is no [Estado da] India!”19

A large part of the Portuguese trade from Bengal also included the re-export of spices and pepper imports to the ports of the Red Sea, neatly circumventing the blockade of direct trade between Western India and the Arabian coast. They also operated a very profitable coastal trade in salt which kept “more than 200 ships busy” at Sandwip island20 and on which they paid annual customs duties of 100,000 tankas to the Mughal empire.21

By the end of the 16th century the Portuguese had built several settlements which dotted the lower reaches of the eastern delta. These included smaller ones like Sripur and Chandecan, larger ones on Sandwip island, at Chittagong and its suburb at Dianga, at Syriam further south on the Pegu coast, and their premier settlement at Hugli. Several of the Portuguese based out of these settlements as well as those roaming the surrounding countryside made a living out of mercenary service in the local armies. The political situation in Bengal was complex, fragmented and rapidly fluctuating in the 16th

19 Carta a que a cidade de Goa escrevo a Su Masonade, o anno de 1603, in APO, Fasciculo 1, Parte 2, Document 9, pp. 110-125.


century, particularly prior to the Mughal conquest of the province. In such a scenario, good fighting skills became especially relevant and sought-after.

At the time the Portuguese reached Bengal it was under the rule of the Husain Shahi dynasty based at Gaur. It was conquered by Sher Shah in 1535 and remained under him and his son, Islam Shah, till 1553. Thereafter, Bengal was fragmented under the last few rulers of the Sur dynasty till 1564, when it was replaced by the new Karrani dynasty. Munim Khan defeated the last ruler of this dynasty and conquered Bengal for Akbar in 1575. This, however, merely marked the de jure annexation of Bengal to the Mughal Empire. Most of the province continued to remain under the dispossessed Afghan nobility and soldiers and several independent zamindars and chieftains, referred to as the twelve bhuiyas of Bengal. The ruler of the Arakan, with a constant lust for Chittagong, was another destabilizing factor on the scene. So were Bengal’s other neighbours, Tippera in the east, and kingdom of Orissa with its capital at Cuttack in the west.

Much was achieved towards extending de facto Mughal control over Bengal in the region of Jahangir, when the great Mughal general, Islam Khan, conquered most of the region in a series of campaigns between 1607-1613. Nevertheless, the pacification of the eastern frontier of the empire continued to remain a major preoccupation of the Mughal Emperors, Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb.22

The political history of this whole period reads as a very confusing account of innumerable quarrels and skirmishes between the several contenders for

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power in the region. The power politics of Bengal in this period was operating on more than one plane. At one level, there were powers with an ambition to establish themselves as rulers of the whole region - powers of the like of the Husain Shahs and the Karranis. At a level above them there were powers desiring to establish their mastery over the whole region with the aim of linking it up with their larger, imperial presence - powers of the like of the Surs and the Mughals. And at the lowest level there were the innumerable local powers - the zamindars, chieftains, and rajas - operating in their own small, and not so small, areas of influence. They struggled for dominance over each other, resisting alongside the lust for their little kingdoms of the more powerful and ambitious 'regional' and 'imperial' contestants on the scene.

In such a situation of incessant political struggle, the local and regional powers habitually employed mercenary soldiers from faraway places. While Muslims from the Choromandel and Malabar coasts and Iranian soldiers were common enough, in 1607 the king of Prê in the Arakan peninsula had a hundred black African oarsmen in his fleet who received special mention. Not surprisingly, the Portuguese freebooters with widely acknowledged maritime skills, many of whom came equipped with a gun, became a valuable resource in the region. Both Barros and Castanheda testify that from their very first encounters "the artillery of the Portuguese commanded the seas, not withstanding the

superiority of the Bengalis in point of numbers in men and guns."²⁴ Portuguese guns and skilled gunners were, in these circumstances, naturally coveted by the Asian states.

In garrison towns on the west coast of India, such as Cochin, in the 1540s Portuguese interred for criminal acts escaped from prison and sailed off on Bengal-bound vessels by the dozen. Contemporary accounts indicate that in this they were often helped by the officialdom and were equipped with guns taken from the official stores. At the same time many such strongholds of the Estado da India complained that they were missing much of their artillery stocks that were finding their way into the hands of neighbouring rajas on the Konkan and Malabar Coasts, also sold to them by corrupt Portuguese officials. In 1546 the new factor at Cochin complained to the governor at Goa that

".....among these [neighbouring] kings it is possible to trace a large number of artillery of the king, our Lord, with his coat of arms.....the king of Pepper has eighty berços and two falcões and the King of Diamper has twenty-five and the King of Cranganor sixteen and the King of Tequancate fifteen.... And besides, gunpowder and pylouros are sold to them and in this warehouse [at Cochin] there are not more than ten berços and ten falcões and some [of these] berços are mine!"²⁵

Such callous disposal of the artillery of the Crown seems to have

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continued throughout the century. In 1591 the King complained to the viceroy about "artillery founded outside my fortress and fleet." In 1605 he was appalled at the shortage of weapons and ammunition in the storehouses of the fortresses "and particularly in the city of Goa itself." Accordingly he advised the viceroy to administer the severest punishments to the captains of these fortresses who used this artillery in their own ships. 27

Consequently well-equipped Portuguese adventurers were readily available for hire in Bengal and Arakan. They were found serving in the armies of almost all the local and regional political powers, ranging from Raja Pratapaditya, the bhuiya of Jessore to the king of Arakan and the Mughal emperor himself. Their firepower could decisively turn the direction of a battle, as even the Mughal forces found when they reached Bengal. A band of Portuguese mercenaries based at Hugli were on the imperial payroll in Jahangir's reign and were used effectively in the campaign against the rebel Prince Khurram in Bengal. In Aurangzeb's reign the Mughal subahdar, Shaista Khan, went out of his way to win the Portuguese of Chittagong over to his side before attempting to capture the port-town from the king of Arakan. It was gratefully acknowledged in the Mughal records that their victory at Chittagong in 1665 was largely due to the support of the Portuguese, for which they were suitably rewarded and their services retained. 29

26 APO, Fasciculo 3, I, document 76, pp. 242-274.

27 Royal letter to the Viceroy of India, Martim Afonso de Castro, Lisbon, 6.3.1605, in Goa Archives. Livros das Monções do Reino, Vol. 6-B, Document 33

28 'The Fall of Hugli', p. 400.

The Portuguese mercenaries built up a reputation for themselves as a valuable military asset in the power politics of the region. While they fought on behalf of - and against - almost all the political powers there, most of all they fought for themselves, using such military service to cull political favour that served as a launching pad to make their own fortunes, several of these Portuguese acquired great fame through their own independent actions. In this they even came to pose a political and military challenge to their former masters and mentors. Manoel de Matos and Domingos Carvalho of Chittagong, Sebastião Gonsaives Tibau of Sandwip island, and Filipe de Brito e Nicote of Syriam were the best known amongst those who enjoyed the success and fame for which they had risked abandoning the security of the Estado and sailing out so far into an unknown land. It is details of their careers that filter through to us and provide an insight into the functioning of the Portuguese homiziados in Bengal.

The most notorious dimension, by far, of all the activities of the Portuguese settlers in the region was the piracy and slave trade that they were involved in. Operating from a position of unusual military and naval strength they joined the ruler of Arakan in sailing up the riverine tract and raiding and capturing whole villages. These unfortunate captives were then sold into slavery at Portuguese-controlled ports which developed into regular slave markets in the 17th century. These included Chittagong, Hugli, Pipli and Balasore from where Dutch and Achehnese ships carried them to the pepper and spice plantations and tin mines of the Indonesian archipelago. It was reported
that the Portuguese captured over 18,000 slaves in 5 years (1629-34), and slave trade became co terminus with their presence in Bengal.

This slave trade was probably the most profitable part of the Portuguese operations in Bengal. This is indicated by the export duties that they seem to have paid. At a time when taxes on overseas trade varied between 5% and 16.5% on different commodities and in different ports of the Indian Ocean, the Portuguese paid the king of Arakan duty to the tune of 25% per slave.

The Portuguese slave raiders became so well-known and ubiquitous that early in the 17th century their jalia boat sailing stealthily up the Ganges had become the subject of riddles amongst the populace. These Portuguese pirates effectively controlled the eastern delta, openly defying the Mughal administration. Thus, "when the mutasaddis of Bengal did not wish to really pay any man whose salary was due, they gave him an assignment on the revenue of Chatgaon!"

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The Portuguese form a little-known but separate chapter in the history of Bengal and Arakan in the 16th and early 17th centuries. For a specific moment in time

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32 See Chapter V, section I.

they certainly had their place in the sun. They were involved in a whole range of legitimate and clandestine activities and came to represent an ally to be sought after and an adversary to be respected and feared. Endowed with natural maritime skills and equipped with superior firearms, they were from the outset well poised to make a success of the adventure that they were seeking. They chose to fan out in the lower reaches of the delta where they built their own settlements that came to represent the first proto-colonial port-cities in the region.

For at least 60 years (1580-1640) the name of the Portuguese inspired respect, renown and dread in the Gangetic delta. They built up a widespread and profitable trade; they were often the strongest military arm of the local polities that they chose to serve; they used their position of strength to develop a very lucrative traffic in human beings, making themselves a most fearful presence along the coastal and deltaic tracts. For this unmistakable presence that they built up in the region, for being a power that had to be reckoned with and could not be ignored, the Portuguese of Bengal certainly deserve to be the subject of a whole story. It is the attempt to write their story that follows in these pages.

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