CHAPTER I
THE GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING; COASTAL BENGALA

In the spirit of the great voyages of discovery and in keeping with the nature and scale of their overseas activities, the Portuguese in the 15th and 16th centuries possessed a sharpened curiosity about geography. Equipped with the most hardy seafaring vessels of the time, armed with the best nautical instruments and maps of the period, and manned by a cadre of sailors possessing advanced maritime skills and an undaunted spirit of adventure, the Portuguese fleets arrived in Asia in AD 1498. Preoccupied with their search for “Christians and spices” as they were, they displayed a heightened sense of the importance of knowledge of geography, particularly coastal geography. Thus, they acquired much advance information about the still unexplored coasts from the Arab and Gujarati maritime merchants of the Indian Ocean zone.

The importance accorded to knowledge of geography by the Portuguese is visible in the earliest maps of Asia that were drawn, as well as in the initial descriptive accounts that were written for the king of Portugal. This is seen as early as 1502, in the anonymous world chart known as the Cantino planisphere, that is one of the earliest specimens of Portuguese cartography extant. They already had information that was remarkably detailed for this early a date, about a region such as Bengal which was quite unknown to the early Portuguese expeditions. The outline of the Bay of Bengal is clearly indicated though much distorted; at the head of the bay are marked the ports called Çatigão and Çarigão.\(^1\) It is clear from the accompanying commentary that the two main

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ports of the region, Satgaon and Chittagong, were being indicated - "At the western end of the Bay of Bengal: Satgaon.... There is very fine silk and cotton cloth and rice and sugar and wax and many... other kinds of merchandise; at the eastern end: Chittagong.... There is very fine silk and cotton and sugar and rice."2 Barely four years after their arrival in Asia, the Portuguese had remarkably accurate information about the region, its important ports and the goods and manufacturers found there.

Similar information, in greater detail, is given by Tome Pires and Duarte Barbosa, both writing from Asia between A.D. 1512 and 1516. By the second decade of the 16th century, the king of Portugal thus knew much about the commodities and trade of Bengal.3 Though the region remained outside the core zone of official Portuguese operations in Asia, ten years later the king was also well informed about the topography of the region, through the official history of his Asian empire by João de Barros.4 By the 1530s, detailed and accurate maps were available in Lisbon, depicting the Bay of Bengal in a well-drawn outline, with the numerous indentations of the coastline and extensive toponymy. They also showed "the true positions, bearings and heights of the coast of.... Bengal, Arakan, Pegu.... with the depth, sounding, entrance and outlets of the.....ports."5

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2 Ibid, p. 12.


4 João de Barros, Da Ásia, Lisbon, 1974 (reprint), Decada IV, Livro IX, Capítulo I.

A Treacherous Coastline

The Portuguese approached Bengal from the sea and thus tended to view it from the coast towards the interior. To them it principally signified the coastal and deltaic tracts of the province. The coastline of the Bay of Bengal swept in a great arc covering a large segment of the eastern part of the Indian Ocean. At the head of the bay was Bengal which was located between ‘this cape [Segógora], which our folk call Palmeiras, where we come to the end of the kingdom of Orixa’ and ‘the other boundary of the Kingdom of Bengal which is the city of Chatigão’.” Barros estimated that it measured about a hundred leagues (approximately 600 miles). The Portuguese perception of the borders and boundaries of the region itself underlined their fundamental preoccupation and orientation towards the concern of coastal Bengal. Thus, they tended to mark boundaries by the mouth of a river, or by a particular point on the coast, or by a port town.

This was well-expressed by Barros, while situating Bengal for the understanding of the king of Portugal.

“The situation of the kingdom of Bengal, of course, is in that part where the Ganges river discharges her waters by two principal arms into the eastern ocean, and moreover, where the land retreating from its waves makes a great bay which Geographers call Gangetica, and which we now call Bengala.”

All travellers to Bengal were aware of the difficulties of navigating the coast “on account of the great number of sand-banks and shallows…….These sand banks

6 Barros, *op. cit.*

7 Barros, extracts translated by R.B. Smith, *The First Age of the Portuguese Embassies, Navigations and Peregrinations to the Ancient Kingdoms of Cambay and Bengal, 1500-1521*, Bethesda, Maryland, 1969, Chap. XVI, p. 126.
advance into the sea even after one loses sight of the land, and cause great trouble to those who run upon them.”\(^8\) The problem of navigation was further compounded by the fact that this coastal stretch was unpredictably uneven making it a sailor’s nightmare.

Manrique, who spent a long tenure in deltaic Bengal, complained in graphic detail about this phenomenon. He pointed out that “The most dangerous [spot] of all [is]......the Braces of Bengal.....The name of Braces has been given to these waters, because the ships which pass are incessantly casting the lead, so as to make a channel of a constant depth of six or seven fathoms. They go on sounding and if they strike a bottom of eight or more fathoms deep, they know that they are off the course and will presently be in four or three fathoms only.”\(^9\)

Bengal’s topography was strongly determined by the fact that it lay at the end of two huge river systems, the Gangetic and the Brahmaputra. Consequently the deltaic region was characterized by the formation of innumerable islands as well as a low-lying seabed in several places. Barros noted:

“This whole distance from Cape Segógora to Chatigão can be better depicted than described in writing by reason that all that land is cut into islands and shallows, which form at the mouths of the Ganges through the abundance of its water.”\(^10\)

It was a treacherous coastline, constantly shifting depending on the vagaries of the ocean. Thus, speaking of the great many islands and sandbars, these were “as much under the water as above it. Some of these places were formerly populated, but

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\(^9\) Ibid.

as a result of powerful hurricanes and strong currents most of them...... [had] been drowned.

This would explain why many of the islands named by Barros do not find mention in later sources. The Augustinian friar Manrique, who journeyed along the coast from Orissa to Arakan more than once between 1628 and 1637, mentions only the islands of Sundiva [Sandwip], Xavaspur (Shahbazpur) and the famous isle of Sogoldiva [Sagardwipa], which was so highly estimated as the richest of all (emphasis in original).

In spite of the vagaries of nature which manifested itself in furiously destructive cyclones, these islands along the coast were very fertile, abounding in agricultural produce. In 1565, Caeser Frederike described Sandwip as “to my judgement the fertilest lland in all the world.” He noted during his visit to the island:

“...And when the people of the lland saw the ship, and that we were camming a lland : presently they made a place of Bazar or Market, with shops right over against the ship with all manner of provision of victuals to eate, which they brought down in great abundance, and sold it so good cheape, that wee were amazed at the cheapnesse thereof......and the people told us that we were deceived the half of our money, because we bought things so deare......This lland is called Sondiva belonging to the kingdom of Bengala, distant about one hundred and twentie miles from Chatigam....”

Given their very high productivity, easy availability of goods, the low cost of living, and being situated along the navigable tract, these islands constituted the very heart of Portuguese Bengal. They also served as an ideal base for the piratical

\[\text{\small 11 G Bouchon & L. F. Thomaz (ed),} \hspace{1em} \text{ Voyages dans les delais du Gange et de l'Irrawaddy, Relation Portugais Anonyme (1521), Paris 1988, para. 3, p. 310.}\]


\[\text{\small 13 Samuel Purchas,} \hspace{1em} \text{ Extracts of Master Caeser Frederike his eighteen years Indian Observations” in Hakluytas Posthumus or Purchas His Pilgrims, 20 Vols., Glasgow, 1905, Vol. X, pp. 136-137.}\]
activities of the Portuguese freebooters. In the early 16th century they were the scene of incessant war between the Mughals and the Arakanese and Portuguese pirates.

**'Waterworld': The deltaic and the riverine tracts**

Moving inland from the coast any visitor to Bengal was struck by its huge river system that dominated the interior and defined its geographical and character. They found that by tracing the main rivers upwards from their mouths they could virtually draw the boundaries of the kingdom. As Barros explained to the king of Portugal -

"At the mouths of the two arms of the Ganges, two notable rivers empty, one on the Eastern side, and the other on the Western, both being boundaries of this Kingdom; our people call one of these the [River of] Chatigam, as it enters the Eastern mouth of the Ganges at a City of this name, which is the richest and most celebrated [City] of that Kingdom, by reason of its port".

On both the main branches of the rivers were situated large ports commanding a prosperous trade.

"The other river enters the Western arm of the Ganges below another city called Satigam, likewise great and noble, but less frequented that Chatigam, since its port is less commodious for the entrance and departure of naos."

For the Portuguese, with their pronounced maritime inclinations, this formed an ideal terrain to operate in. Their preliminary investigations revealed a long stretch of coastline backed by a huge navigable tract dotted with flourishing port towns. Summing up the

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14 *Voyage, op. cit.,* para. 7, p. 311.


16 *Barros, op. cit.*, p. 126.

potential core area of their activity, Barros wrote - "In this manner, the kingdom of Bengal lies in its maritime parts [emphasis mine], that is, to the south between the two rivers....and the two arms of the Ganges in which they flow, forming the figure of the Greek letter Delta, as do all the great rivers which enter the sea in mouths."\(^{18}\)

The riverine system of deltaic Bengal was very intricate, of which Abul Fazl gives a detailed description –

"Its rivers are countless and the first of them in the province is the Ganges...... near Qazihattah in the sarkar of Barbakabad, it divides into two streams. One of these, flowing eastwards, falls into the sea at the port of Chittagong......It is divided into three streams......The third stream after spreading into a thousand channels, joins the sea at Satgaon. The Sarsuti and the Jamna unite with it. Another river is the Brahmaputra......"\(^{19}\)

The rivers also often spread into such a complicated network of streams and canals that they proved to be a virtual maze in the lower reaches of the delta. The Mughal subahdar Ibrahim Khan who served during Jahangir’s region found to his chagrin when he went to chastize the Mughal sardar of the district of Jessore in southern Bengal that, “as there were many streams and nallahs on the way, few men......were familiar with that route.” Thus, the governor himself “for a period of five days wandered from one stream to another and from one nallah to another by losing his way and suffered a great trouble.”\(^{20}\) Even in the small stretch of land from Chittgaong to the Feni river, Talish mentioned that, there were ‘ninety-nine nallahs, which contain water even in


seasons other than the monsoons."²¹

Most of the riverine tract consisted of very wide channels that were navigable for a fairly long distance inland. The estuary of the Hugli river was so broad that Manrique felt it deserved the label of the sea.²² One hundred and thirty seven leagues, which is about 400 miles, upstream, the Ganges was still three-fourths of a league, which is equal to two miles wide.²³ At Sripur, near Dacca, the river was “so broad that a boat can perform only one trip across and back in the whole day.”²⁴

Another significant hallmark about the topography and ecology of deltaic Bengal was that it was covered by very thick forests. The riverine network gave the region its major means of communication. The terrain, especially of lower Bengal, was thickly forested, making land travel practically impossible in several areas. The difficult impenetrable nature of the forest was graphically stated by Mirza Nathan when describing Ibrahim Khan’s march through the jungle route. Thus, the Mughal subahdar, being guided through the lower reaches of the delta towards Arakan “proceeded through a jungly route which was impassable even for an ant. Throughout the way not only the others but even the Khan himself cleared the jungles with his own hands.” In such terrain, “the horses could not be taken further. The elephants [too] proceeded with great difficulty.”²⁵


²² Manrique, I, p. 25.


²⁴ Shihabuddin Talish, p. 420.
In fact, elephants acquired great significance in facilitating travel in deltaic Bengal. The king of Arakan fell back upon them while fleeing the pursuing Mughal forces. His advantage over them was clear: “as we are riding on elephants with our brothers and the chiefs of the army, we shall cross this ‘jalal’ [a large sheet of continuous water formed by heavy rains] with ease. As the imperial soldiers are on horseback, they will not be able to follow us.”

Most often, however, the most practical way to travel was by boat, particularly in the rainy season. In 1620, the Mughal commander sent by the governor of Bengal to suppress a rebellion in the Kuch country commented on the indispensability of travel by boats in the interior. He noted, “Owing to the heavy rains of the season, it was not possible for men and beasts to traverse the way except by boats.” As the state could not provide enough boats to transport the whole imperial army, it then took him several weeks to “procure these boats from Beparis [traders]...on hire or purchase or by force.”

The waterways of deltaic Bengal, thus, formed the highways of the region. It was along these that merchants and travelers traversed the whole area, and these by which ruling powers patrolled their kingdoms. Yet, all travellers testified about the perils of sailing in the Bengal coastal and deltaic region. This riverine network was “full of

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banks and shallows” and needed considerable expertise to navigate.29 The slightest error of judgement would lead to disaster. Thus, sailing upriver from Chittagong, headed for the capital of the Bengal sultanate at Gaur in 1521, the Portuguese found that

"as the tide was coming in and ......the current was so strong......with oars working at full stretch our well equipped boats were stranded on a sandbank......It was then already under four or five fathoms of water in certain places but in others the boats touched it. As a result, three of them ran aground and then sank as the current took the sand from under them. One hundred and thirty five people perished and the boats were torn to pieces."30

In fact, in 1607, Pyrard de Laval was convinced that the trade of Bengal would have been much more had it not been for these hazards of navigation.31

**Boats of many kinds**

In such a watery terrain, boats on the rivers formed a ubiquitous sight. They were used for practically everything, from transporting cargo to carrying passengers to moving armies and fighting battles. As the Mughals learned very rapidly, “the foremost thing necessary for [any]......expedition [in the]......accursed [region]......is the fleet.”32 Consequently, the post of *Mir Bahr* or Admiral of the Bengal Fleet was created by Jahangir, to which senior and favoured nobles were appointed on the recommendation of the *subahdar* of Bengal, thereby underlining its importance.33

30 *Voyage*, para. 4, p. 310.
All travellers to Bengal in the 16th and 17th centuries noticed that the riverine tracts were dotted with crafts of all shapes and sizes. A cursory survey of some of these travel accounts makes mention of more than fifteen different types of boats and ships that sailed the Ganges. Some were cargo vessels, others were essentially fighting boats used in naval fleets. Yet others were large, ocean-going ships, while most ubiquitously were found everywhere the riverine and coastal crafts or the smallest boats of many diverse kinds. The Italian traveller, Varthema, one of the earliest European visitors to Bengal in A.D 1505, gives a vivid description of a variety of boats.

"these people make use of very large ships and of various kinds, some of which are made flat bottomed, because such can enter into places where there is not much water. Another kind are made with prows before and behind, and they carry two masts, and are uncovered. There is also another kind of large ship which is called Giunchi, and each of these is of the tonnage of one thousands butts, on which they carry some little vessels to a city called Melacha." ³⁴

The Portuguese embassy to the sultan of Bengal which sailed from Chittagong to Gaur in 1521, found a similar variety of crafts on the river. The visitors themselves were taken in "seven well equipped boats...... rowing boats similar to brigantines" ³⁵, but they saw much larger cargo vessels on the Ganges, which they described –

"Large ships sail here. They have round stems like ours, and prows resembling those of the latin caravels. They have no masts and are all covered to protect them from the rain. Their helms also resemble those of the latin caravels. They are very

³³ ibid, I, p. 5
large at the bottom and can handle shallow water. They carry rice in bulk and some are big enough to transport a thousand candils."

These vessels were probably the *champanas* and *bateis* (singular *bate*!) that the Portuguese constantly encountered in the Bay of Bengal, loaded with rice and other merchandise, headed for different destinations on the Choromandel coast and in southeast Asia. The Portuguese sources are sprinkled with the tales of the capture of many such vessels by the Portuguese freebooters and pirates and their diversion to their own fortresses such as Malacca."

An interesting aspect of riverine navigation in Bengal was that the smaller row boats moved up and down the rivers, using the force of the tide. This is graphically narrated by Caesar Frederike in his travels around Bengal in A.D. 1565:

".....from the mouth of this river [Ganges], to a City called Satgan......are an hundred miles, which they rowe in eightene hours with the increase of the water: in which river it floweth and ebbeth as it doth in the Thames, and when the ebbing water is come, they are not able to Rowe against it, by reason of the swiftness of the water, yet their barkes be light and armed with Oares, like to Foistes, yet they can not prevaile against that Streame, but for refuge must make them fast to the banke of the River untill the next flowing water, and they call these Barkes Bazars and Patuas : they rowe as well as a Galliot, or as well as ever I have scene any."

The sailing men and mariners displayed considerable navigational skills in the riverine stretches. The larger ships negotiated the shallow and narrow channels of the

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37 See, for example, R.B. Smith, *The First Age of the Portuguese Embassies, Navigations and Peregrinations to the Kingdoms & Islands of Southeast Asia, 1509-1521*, Bethesda, Maryland, 1968, esp. pp. 21-28, and R.B. Smith, *The First Age-------Ancient Kingdoms of Cambay and Bengal, op. cit.*, esp. pp. 68-80.

river, lined with treacherous sandbanks in an expert manner:

"They are towed in the following manner: Linking the ship to the land is a cable across boats which branches off into as many cords as there are men needed to do the towing. Each man pulls one cord. Seven or eight men are employed to lift these cords over any obstacles encountered or to guide those connected to the prow."39

The Portuguese marvelled at the expertise of the Bengali sailors who manoeuvred ships that were unwieldy and often multi-storeyed with agility.

"As with our carracks, these boats have decks and a superstructure from which seven or eight men equipped with bamboo sticks six or seven fathoms long, attempt to control the boat when it veers towards land. The bamboo sticks are turned in slots as the water flow is too strong for them to be held in the hand alone. When these boats run aground they shatter as their float boards are very fragile and have no links to hold them together."40

There were, in addition to these cargo and passenger boats, numerous kinds of fighting vessels of different sizes and capacities, used by the regional powers. These included the calahuz, which were large vessels carrying up to 500 archers, and the lanchara, which were smaller boats with a capacity of up to sixty men.41 There were the still smaller and lighter paraos, which were used by everyone, from mighty kings to crafty robbers. The king of Pegu sent 400 paraos against the Portuguese envoy Henrique Leme in 1516, to rescue the ship of some Muslim merchants of Pegu that had been captured by him.42 They were also used by coastal pirates, whom the Portuguese

39 *Voyage*, para. 26, p. 317.
embassy ran into in 1521, resting on one of the uninhabited islands of the delta with “four paraos…….full of [fire] scorched bamboo canes which had been trimmed as lances.”

The more powerful monarchs maintained sizeable armadas equipped with an even wider range of military vessels. The king of Arakan, for example, who was undoubtedly the foremost naval power in the region, had a fleet which included khâlu and dhûm, boats that were larger than the ghurah and “so strongly made of timber with a hard core that the balls of……small cannons can not pierce them.” Among the various kinds of crafts of this king that the Mughal forces gleefully captured in their naval victory at Chittagong in 1666, were also listed jangi, kosa, balam and jaias.

The jalia was probably amongst the cheapest, smallest, fastest, most agile and, therefore, most commonly used boats in the Gangetic delta. They were described as “smaller than galliots and very light, with fifteen oars on each side.” It could sail hundreds of miles upstream and became most famous as the chosen craft of the notorious Portuguese slave-traders in the 17th century. While it was used by everybody and its numbers swelled the armadas of the kings of Arakan and the Mughals alike, it came to be identified with these Portuguese adventurers of the lower delta. A popular tale pertaining to these riverine vessels among the Jesuit priests in Bengal at the time captures this situation rather well. At Sripur, in the year 1600 or thereabouts, as the Jesuit

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42 Castenheda, Livro IV, Capitolo V.

43 Voyage, para. 8, p. 311.

44 Shihabuddin Talish, p. 420.

“Father Francisco Fernandez was going to the Church early in the morning, he found at the door a riddle.....he stopped a while to examine it; and as it said in the verses that it had made more Christians than all the Fathers of St. Paul [the Jesuits], he guessed at once that it was a Jalia, a kind of boat with which the corsairs of those parts continually make their depredations.......”

These humble boats rubbed their prows and hulls with the royal pleasure ships of the Bengal sultans and nobles, on which they too leisurely cruised the river. This gilded fleet dazzled the Portuguese embassy to the court at Gaur in 1521.

“.....we arrived at Gaur at sunset. We saw many paraos of varied shapes on the river. Amongst them I saw one hundred and thirty with gilt stitching, and when I asked who owned these paraos I was told that they belonged to the Sultan for his private use.

We saw there a ship brought by the Governor of Sonargaon for the service of the Sultan. The stern was round and had cabins embroidered in gold. In the centre was a pinnacle which had a thousand gilt and blue figures carved into it. the entire ship was adorned with gilt galleries; and below there were mouldings which resembled that of a galleon and above which two hundred oars were in motion. With its stem post the prow looked like that of a caravel. Any part of the bodywork that was not gilded was painted in various colours.”

**Bengal, the nursing mother**

The climate of Bengal was generally described by most travellers in the region as “healthy”, and the water of the Ganges and other rivers as “excellent”. The weather was generally found to be “temperate” and the winter season was described as short. The longest season was the rainy season which began in May and continued for

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46 ‘Fr. Fernão Guerreiro’s Annual Relation of 1600 & 1601 on Bengal and Pegu’, (tr.) Fr. H. Hosten, Hosten Collection, Vidyajyoti Library, Delhi, Bengal XVI, XVII, ms. 3.

47 *Voyage*, para. 28, 29, p. 318.

48 Manrique, I, p. 54; Pyrard de Laval, I, Chap. XXI, p. 326-30.
more than six months. The rains were usually very heavy and often threw life out of gear, "the plains being under water and the mounds alone visible."\textsuperscript{50}

During the rainy season, storms at sea were a common occurrence and threatened the movement of ships. Merchants and travellers sometimes ended up at a different destination from the one that they had set out for, if caught in a tempest at sea.\textsuperscript{51} The risk of shipwreck was a constant reality and a common occurrence.\textsuperscript{52} During the period of heavy rains, travel along the rivers too became hazardous, especially when those were in full spate or in flood.\textsuperscript{53} Trading activity, military campaigns and travel, in general, had to take into account these factors and the disruptive potential of the forces of nature.

All visitors to Bengal in the 16\textsuperscript{th} and 17\textsuperscript{th} centuries have been unanimous in describing it as one of the most fertile and productive region in all of Asia. They marveled at the great variety of foodstuffs, their plentiful availability and the low cost of living, praising Bengal as "the very nursing mother" of much of south and southeast Asia. A French traveller in Asia, François Pyrard de Laval, wrote about the region in 1607 –

"The country is healthy and temperate, and so wondrous fertile that one lives there for almost nothing, and there is such a quantity of rice, that, besides supplying the whole country, it is exported to all parts of India, as well as to Goa

\textsuperscript{49} Laval, \textit{ibid.}, 	extit{Ain-I Akbari}, II, p. 132.

\textsuperscript{50} 	extit{Ain-I Akbar}, \textit{ibid.} I

\textsuperscript{51} This was the experience, for instance, of Caesar Frederike, see Purchas, \textit{op. cit.}, Vol. X, pp. 135-136.

\textsuperscript{52} Manrique himself suffered two shipwrecks in Bengal, Vol. I, pp. 8-12, Vol. II, p. 90.

\textsuperscript{53} Manrique, I, pp. 104-106, \textit{Bahartistan}, I, p. 408.
and Malabar, as to Sumatra, to all of which lands Bengal is a very nursing mother, who supplies them with their entire subsistence and food".\textsuperscript{54}

To most European travellers Bengal literally flowed with milk and honey, presenting itself as a tropical paradise.

"The country is well supplied with animals, such as oxen, cows and sheep; flesh is accordingly very cheap, let alone milk-foods and butter, whereof they have such an abundance that they supply the rest of India......There are many good fruits......plenty of citrons, lemons, oranges, pomegranates, cajus, pineapples etc., ginger, long pepper......The country abounds with sugar-cane, which they eat green, or else make into excellent sugar, for a cargo to their ships....."\textsuperscript{55}

Bengal also produced such a great quantity of cotton textiles that it never ceased to be the wonder of all European travellers. In the 1530’s João de Barros reported to the king of Portugal that in Bengal

"they pick so much cotton, and the land has so many Artisans, that they weave very fine cloths, so that they might dress the whole of Europe with them......throughout all of India upon whose coast, in all the places they make an infinite number of cotton clothes......whoever wishes to dress with fine clothes is obliged to have those of Bengal".\textsuperscript{56}

They marvelled at the fine quality and workmanship of these textiles for which there was no match in Europe.

"In the things of workmanship of [the] needle, the differences of patterns, among all those people that Bengalis carry the advantage, as one may observe in the fancy needlework of the very rich bed spreads and of other things which come from that place."\textsuperscript{57}


\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{56} Barros, Decada IV, Livro IX, Capitulo I.
The Dutchman, John Linschoten, who was in the service of the Portuguese in the later part of the 16th century admired these embroideries and admitted that they were “so finely done…..that it cannot be mended throughout Europe.”

Bengal silk and linen fabric was also highly valued and exported all over Asia. Pyrard de Laval noted: “Likewise is there plenty of silk, as well that of the silkworm as of the (silk) herb…..of this they make many stuffs of diverse colours and export them to all parts…..” Linschoten was greatly impressed with the linen cloth and manufacturers of raw silk which he mistook to be a kind of linen. He noted “They have likewise other linnen excellently wrought of a herbe, which they spinne like yearne…..where with they do most cunningly stitch their coverlits, pavilions, pillowes, carpets.”

Other manufacturers of the region included furniture and vessels, delicate red and black pottery, bamboo and cane items. As Pyrard de Laval commented, summing up his account of Bengal — “In short, I find no country in all the East Indies more abundantly supplied with all things needful for food, with the riches of nature and art…..”

Town and commercial centres

The plentiful availability of cheap foodstuffs, natural products and fine manufacturers made Bengal a hub of commercial activity in the intra-Asian trading system particularly in the eastern part of the Indian Ocean. It commanded a

57 Ibid.
58 Linschoten, op. cit.
59 Pyrard de Laval, op. cit.
flourishing trade and its port-towns were amongst the largest and most frequented in 16th century Asia. The most important commercial towns were Satgaon and Chittagong.

Satgaon was located a hundred miles upstream on the Saraswati, which branched off from the main course of the river Ganges and then rejoined it. It was the main port in the western delta in the 16th century and was referred to as Porto Pequeno by the Portuguese. Its harbour was crowded "every yeere... [with] thirtie or five and thirtie ships, great and small"\textsuperscript{60}, and it was estimated to have a population of about ten thousand inhabitants at the beginning of the 16th century\textsuperscript{61}.

The main harbour of Satgaon began to silt up in the first half of the 16th century,\textsuperscript{62} but it continued to be an important commercial centre almost to the end of the century. It was prominently marked on the Portuguese maps even in the beginning of the 17th century,\textsuperscript{63} long after their own settlement at Hugli had taken over the mantle of Satgaon and had far surpassed it. The long survival of Satgaon was probably due to its infrastructural strength to annually set up temporary marts and weekly fairs for several miles along the riverfront. Caesar Frederike describes this process which he participated in while he was at Satgaon in 1563.

\textsuperscript{60} Caesar Frederike, p. 114.

\textsuperscript{61} Tome Pires, I, p. 91.

\textsuperscript{62} Barros refers to this in the 1530s itself, see Barros, \textit{op. cit.}

\textsuperscript{63} Satgaon continued to be prominently marked on the maps of the best Portuguese cartographers of the 17th century, including Manuel Godinho de Erédia and João Baptista Lavanha. See \textit{PMC}, \textit{op. cit.}, Vol. IV, Plates 415A & 415B – Atlas Miscellany of c. 1615-c. 1622, Manuel Godinho de Erédia; and Plate 424D, \textit{Engraved Chart of the Kingdom of Bengala, 1615}, of João Baptista de Lavanha.
"The citie of Satagon is a reasonable faire Citie for a Citie of the Moors.... I was in this Kingdome foure moneths, whereas many Merchants did buy or fraught boates for their benefits, and with these Barkes they goe up and downe the River of Ganges to Faires, buying their commoditie with a great advantage, because that every day in the weeke they have a Faire, now in one place, and now in another and I also hired a Barke and went up and downe the River and did my businesse...."64

Thus, while merchants sailed up and down the river looking for the best bargains, many also built temporary settlements at Buttor, "a good Tide's rowing before you come to Satagon", as "from thence upwards the Ships doe not goe." Frederike also noted that -

"Every yeere at Buttor they make and unmake a Village, with Houses and Shops made of straw, and with all things necessarie to their uses, and this Village standeth as long as the Ships ride there, and till they depart for the Indies, and when they depart everie man goeth to his plot of Houses, and there setteth fire of them, which thing made me marvaile......The small Ships goe to Satagan and there they lade."65

It was this extraordinary capacity of the port towns to create an elaborate seasonal merchandizing centre that made Bengal unique as a commercial zone.

The most important port in eastern Bengal was Chittagong. It was situated at the eastern end of the delta, on the mouth of the Karnaphuli river. Unlike Satgaon, it was not encumbered by the narrowing of its harbour. On the contrary, "Chittagong is a city well served by water.....for every road there flows a canal....and the canals are covered by bridges which serve the roads."66 The houses were described as low-lying, built right on the waterfront. In fact, this was typical of many towns in deltaic Bengal.

64 Caesar Frederike, op. cit., p. 114.
65 Ibid.
66 Castenheda, Livro IV, Capitolo XXXVIII, extracts translated by R.B. Smith, op. cit., p. 70.
The Portuguese embassy that travelled from Chittagong to Gaur by the riverine route, found that in many small towns “there are houses whose doors open onto the water.”

Chittagong was, undoubtedly, the largest and most flourishing port of Bengal in the 16th century. To the Portuguese it was *o porto de Bengala* (the port of Bengal), also referred to as *Porto Grande* (the Great Port). Early in the century it was estimated to have at least 40,000 inhabitants. Its trade was so highly valued by all the regional powers that they continuously fought each other for control over it in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Chittagong formed part of the independent Husain Shahi Sultanate of Bengal from A.D. 1498 till 1535. In this period it was wrested at least twice from the Bengal sultan, by the Raja of Tipperah in 1513 and by the ruler of Arakan in 1516. It was reconquered by Sultan Nusrat Hussain Shah in 1519 and renamed Fathabad to commemorate the conquest.

By the last quarter of the 16th century, however, Chittagong was firmly under the control of the king of Arakan. He used it as a base to promote piracy and slave raids into Mugal dominions enabling it to emerge as a very profitable and major centre of slave trade. The Mughal emperors, from Jahangir to Aurangzeb, made strenuous attempts to conquer Chittagong throughout the 17th century. The king of Arakan finally lost...

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67 *Voyage*, para 20, p. 316.
Chittagong in A.D. 1666, when Shaista Khan conquered the port and annexed it to the Mughal empire.  

The city of Dacca was also a great commercial centre of the time and was made the capital of Bengal by Jahangir. It was situated “upon the banck of the Ganges” and “stretches out near a League and a half in length, along the side of that river.” The city was “a very large and spacious one”, which “standeth upon low marshy Swampy ground.” The “River that runneth close by the walls thereof, [was] navigable for ships of five or six hundred turns burthen……” Manrique made a comprehensive appraisal of the mercantile activities centred on Dacca in the first part of the 17th century -

“Many strange nations resort to this City on account of its vast trade and commerce in a great variety of commodities, which are produced in profusion in the rich and fertile lands of this region. They have raised the City to an eminence of wealth which is actually stupefying especially when one sees and considers the actual quantities of money which lie principally in the houses of the Cataris [Khatris] in such quantity that, being difficult to count, it used commonly to be weighed. I was informed also that the indigenous population of this Gangetic emporium and its suburbs exceeded two hundred thousand, irrespective of visitors who come in great numbers from all parts.”

Among the other important cities in the vicinity, we hear of “Serrepore [Sripur] which standeth upon the river of Ganges…… Sonargaon is a town six leagues

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70 Baharistan, passim, Shihabuddin Talish, op. cit.


72 Tavernier, quoted in Bowrey, op. cit., pp. 149-150, f.n.

73 Ibid.

74 Manrique, I, pp. 44-45.
from Serrepore", both of which are in the vicinity of Dacca. From Siripur, both of which are in the vicinity of Dacca. Siripur is described as "a much frequented harbour." The other such busy ports located near Sripur were "Norocul" (Lurical), and Tamboli, on the Rupnarayan river.

It was not a coincidence that the region of Bengal that the Portuguese rapidly became familiar with corresponded to this coastal and riverine belt. It was in this area, traversed by numerous streams and rivers, that they were able to establish themselves and carry on their commercial and other activities. Because of the pronounced maritime background and orientation of the Portuguese, the topography and terrain of this region suited them very well. Being masters of navigation, they were able to make a strongly visible and effective presence in the region which served them very advantageously. This was Bengal's rich, fertile belt, this was its busy commercial region that the Portuguese merchants were seeking. It was a well populated region in which the slave traders and pirates could seek their prey and disappear into the intricate network of streams and rivulets and escape from being obstructed or captivated.

During the 16th and 17th centuries the Portuguese succeeded in making their presence felt in the coastal reaches of Bengal. This was in no small measure because during much of this period the region had little political stability. Throughout the second half of the 16th and the early 17th centuries it was the area of operation of the Barah

Bhuyas and numerous other small chieftains, besides greater powers like the Arakan king and the great Mughal, struggling against each other for supremacy. It was in this geographical and political context that the Portuguese emerged as an important maritime-military power group in the region.

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