CHAPTER IV

LAND OF OPPORTUNITY: THE ESTABLISHMENT OF PORTUGUESE SETTLEMENTS IN BENGAL, A.D. 1580-1640

Men on the Move: greener pastures, new horizons

In 1548, one of the officers serving in the Estado da India wrote from Goa to the King of Portugal, D. João III, that in “...Pegu and Bengal and the whole coast of Coromandel...are settled a quarter of the people that come (to Asia) from the Kingdom [of Portugal]...” Of the Portuguese in Asia, those living in Bengal, thus, seem to have been a substantial category, and it is these settlers that form the subject of interest of this chapter.

These people went to these regions for a variety of reasons and in a number of ways. Very early in the history of the Portuguese in Asia we have mention of the corruption of the king’s officers and of the ill-paid and neglected state of the soldiers and lower officials in the Estado da India, forcing them to desert in large numbers. This complaint was echoed through the century and came to be recognized in all quarters as a real problem facing the Portuguese establishment. In the 1540s the pay of Portuguese captains, officials and soldiers

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was often in arrears. In 1557, a Dominican father at Goa wrote urgently to the King of Portugal about the corruption of the Crown officials in Asia so that His Majesty was losing not only 400,000 to 500,000 cruzadoes every year but also 2000 to 3000 Portuguese personnel, who were deserting and going to settle in China, Pegu, Bengal etc. In 1565, this complaint was repeated by Martim Afonso de Melo, the governor of the Estado da India, and in 1588 the king himself wrote to his viceroy about this malady which afflicted his oceanic empire in Asia.

The Portuguese on the west coast of India at an early stage discovered that there were many opportunities afforded in these regions. Not everyone who went there was fleeing under pain of starvation, but was often testing those waters for money-making prospects. Thus it was reported in 1548 that "...prisoners [at Cochin] are known to escape at high noon and....find illegal accommodation on an outlawed Bengal, pepper haul, which is everybody’s ambition anyway." The accusation "foy a Bengal a sem licenca" is endlessly repeated in the letters of the 1540s, with the implicit understanding that the captain

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and other officials at Cochin received handsome payoffs and protected the thieves. The Bay of Bengal soon acquired the reputation of being a region of much opportunity, so that even senior fidalgoes were tempted to make a brief sojourn in the area to try their hand at making some money on the side. To take just one such example, Salvador Ribeyro de Souza, who “had served the king for seven years in India in highly honourable enterprises....” finally departed from his last posting in Ceylon for Goa, to return to Portugal. “The adversity of the season obliged him to put into the Gulf of the Ganges in June of the year 1600, and to make the port of Syriam on the principal river of Pegu.” How, en route from Ceylon to Goa, bad weather made him land up at Syriam is anybody’s guess, but it seems most likely that he went to try to make a last minute fortune, especially since he was due to return to Portugal.

Most of these deserters from the Estado da India left, burning their bridges behind them, to seek better fortunes. They attempted to settle in the regions of their choice and to establish good relations with the local polities. As early as 1521 we have settlers like Martim de Lucena at Gaur, so well blended into the local society and culture, speaking fluent Persian, adopting the attire, in the employ of and on excellent terms with the Sultan, wielding enough influence so that he could single-handedly make or break the governor of Goa’s embassy to the court at

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8 Ibid.

Gaur. And he was not a stray example, there were already several Portuguese settled in Bengal by this time. As the anonymous interpreter accompanying this embassy testified, “with regard to Goa, I know that in Bengal there are many people from that country....”. We find many other such Portuguese individuals well-settled in these kingdoms and courting favour with their rulers. In 1550 the Governor of the *Estado da India*, Jorge Cabral, in a letter to the king wrote of a Diogo Soarez settled in Pegu and close to the king (of Pegu). He had saved the fidalgo Jam Roiz de Carvalho from the wrath of the king of Pegu when he had stopped there on his way back from China; Carvalho had “been submitted to a larger number of insults” by the king of Pegu and had it not been for Diogo Soarez, “much more would he have suffered.”

Not all of these deserters were able to strike a fortune in the eastern regions. Many of them, however, discovered that they could find fruitful employment as mercenaries in the armies of the local rulers. In the accounts of the early Portuguese naval battles with local Bengali, Arakanese & Peguan authorities, the infrequent use of any artillery by these powers and description of their traditional weapons (stones, bows and arrows, burning rafts etc.) stand out. The

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11 *Ibid*, para 75.


13 See, for example the accounts of these first military encounters in the 1510’s & 1520’s reproduced in translation in R.B.Smith, *The First Age of the Portuguese Embassies, Navigations and Peregrinations to the Kingdoms and Islands of South east Asia, (1509-1521)*, Maryland, 1968, especially the chapters titled Pegu, Bengal & Arakan.
Portuguese state, on the other hand, was well-equipped with guns, cannon and all sorts of heavy and light artillery, which, it has been argued was one of the main reasons for their outstanding success in all their naval encounters with Asian powers in the early 16th century.

Most of the Portuguese mercenaries offering their services to local rulers in Bengal and Arakan also carried their own artillery. At least one account of their activities in the 17th century preferred to count the strength of these warring bands of Portuguese roaming the coastal and deltaic belt, not in terms of numbers of persons but in number of carbines. In 1608, it was reported that in Bengal "are to be found.... in very large numbers the best and most courageous gunners that there are in India...." So eagerly sought after and so greatly valued among the rulers of these kingdoms were gunners and skilled workers to cast artillery that this was one of the first things that the king of Siam sent an ambassador to ask for from the Dutch in 1608.

The states which were located on the Bengal-Arakan seaboard were, during this phase, in a constant state of war with each other, and seem to have made

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16 Ibid, also see Relacao Annual das coisas que fizeram Padres da Companhia de Jesus nas suas missoes——nos anos de 1600 a 1609, pelo Padre Fernão Guerreiro, translated by Fr. H. Hosten, S.J., Catholic Herald of India, Jan. 8, 1919, p 36.
a regular practice of employing mercenaries in their armed forces.\textsuperscript{17} Thus, we have mention of the king of Prê having a 100 negro oarsmen in his fleet in 1607, that also included Pathans, Parsis (Persians) and Muslims from Malabar and Masulipatnam.\textsuperscript{18} In these circumstances, the carbine-wielding Portuguese, in search of employment, were thus an asset that most of these rulers were eager to snap up. The reputation of their naval prowess also long preceded them in this region. As early as 1521, the Sultan of Gaur was advised by his ministers\textquoteright; \ldots\ that the Portuguese are powerful here and nothing stands in their way. It would need only for the smallest of their ships to position itself at the harbour bar of Chittagong or Satgaon and no other ship would be able to leave or enter.\textsuperscript{19} It would seem that they maintained this formidable reputation, for even 80 years later it was reported that \ldots there is no power at sea to match that of the Portuguese\ldots [their] fleets are able to go through all those rivers and creeks, of which there are many in those Kingdoms, and to steer right up to the fortresses and towns along the banks, and no one there can prevent it.\textsuperscript{20}

In this deltaic and coastal terrain such naval skills offered enormous advantages. Contemporary accounts mentioned the names of dozens of Portuguese

\begin{footnotes}
\item[a]\textsuperscript{17} Breve Discusso—, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 108.
\item[b]\textsuperscript{18} 'Relacion del sitio que e Tey de Arracan, y el de Tangu, pusieron por mar y tierra sobre la fortaleza de Serion en la India de Portugal el ano de 1607', in A. da Silva Rego, \textit{Documentacao Ultramarina Portuguesa}, Lisbon, 1962, Vol. II, Document 39, pp. 233-241.
\item[c]\textsuperscript{19} Voyage dans—, \textit{op.cit.}, para 80.
\item[d]\textsuperscript{20} Relacao Annual — pelo Padre Fern\~{a}o Guerreiro, \textit{op. cit.}, Catholic Herald of India, Nov. 27, 1918, p. 923.
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free-booters, leading their own small bands of Portuguese mercenaries, equipped
with their own boats and guns, offering their services to any of the local warlords in
their quest for power, in this war-torn zone.²¹

Moreover, given the political climate of the region at the time, they
became extremely relevant and important at this juncture. For example, the position
of the king of Arakan in 1602 clearly indicates the circumstances that favoured the
growth of the Portuguese militias. As Father Guerreiro noted in 1602 —

".....he had never stood in such need of the Portuguese as then. In Bengal,
close to his doors, the Mogores [Mughals] were carrying everything before
them. Their general Manasingua [Man Singh] had promised to the Achebar
[Akbar], the Great Moger that the white elephant then in the King of
Arracão’s possession would be his."²²

The Portuguese mercenaries became a sizeable and valuable asset
among the armed forces of Arakan in the first half of the 17ᵗʰ century. In the
correspondence between the king of Arakan, Thirithudhamma, and the Mughal
governor of Bengal, Islam Khan, the king challenged the Mughals to try and
conquer Chittagong, in particular, and Arakan, in general, oozing confidence on the
basis of his Telingana (Golconda) and Portuguese mercenary soldiers— ".....who can
dare face such conditions and think of the crown and throne [of Arakan] by
challenging the forces of Telang and Firang...."²³

²¹ Breve Discurso—, op.cit., pp. 124-125.
²² Fr. Fernao Guerreiro’s Annual Relation for 1602-03, C’Hi, Dec. 25, 1918, p. 1007.
²³ Ashraf al-Musawa vidats of Ghulam Shanfuddin Qadiri Rashidi of Mehdawan, quoted in
‘Quisling or Cross-cultural Broker? Notes on the Life & Worlds of Dom Martinho Alemão, Prince
of Arakan, Mare Liberum, No. 5, July 1993, pp. 77-91.
At the same time, the Portuguese mercenaries also became so omnipresent and deeply-entrenched in these kingdoms that in 1602 the king of Arakan realized that "plucking [them] out... root and branch, was no longer feasible. They were lords of the seas; let fifty of them be killed, a thousand would come to replace them..."  

Many of the adventures who, thus, came seeking their fortunes in these far-flung lands made it big serving in the armies of the local rulers. Perhaps the best known example of such a successful individual is Filippe de Brito e Nicote. In 1599, the king of Arakan conquered and sacked Pegu with the help of Portuguese mercenaries, notably, Filippe de Brito, and took the title, 'Emperor of Arakan and legitimate heir to the Pegu and Brama Empire.'

"The Captain of many Portuguese who followed his fortunes, he had rendered signal services to the King of Aracão. On two occasions he had reinstated him in his possessions, his subjects having revolted against him and deprived him of his kingdom. Throughout the war which he had waged, Filippe de Brito had been his chief Captain, the one who had best assisted him all through. In return for all his services, the King appointed him Governor and Lord of the Kingdom of Pegu, such as it was. Central along the coast of that Kingdom, is the town of Syriam...the king allowed Filippe de Brito to erect there a palisade and fort from where he might make a stand against all enemies..." 

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26 Guerreiro, op. cit, CHI, December 25, 1918. p. 1007.
**Sundry Settlements**

We do not usually get so many details about the circumstances and precise period of the founding of Portuguese settlements in this region. It is well documented that there was much Portuguese trading activity in the region by the middle of the 16th century.27 Most of this was centered around Chittagong, in the east, and Satgaon in western Bengal, both well-known and busy trading ports, referred to as the *Porto Grande* and *Porto Pequeno* in the Portuguese sources. Yet, there is no mention of any permanent settlement of Portuguese merchants in the region; their trade seems to have been conducted through temporary structures put up every season. “Every yeere...they make and unmake a village, with houses and shoppes made of strawe, and with all things necessarie to their uses, and this village standeth as long as the ships ride there, and till they depart from the Indies, and when they are departed, every man goeth to his plot of houses and there setteth fire on them......”28

By the second half of the 16th century the Portuguese trade conducted in this manner had grown significantly, prompting the petty rulers in coastal Bengal to invite the Portuguese to their own kingdoms. In fact, Sultan

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Mahmud Shah of Bengal allowed the Portuguese to construct customs houses at Satgaon and Chittagong in 1536. In 1559, the ruler of Bakla, Parmanand Rai, entered into a treaty with Dom Constantino de Braganza, the viceroy at Goa, to attract much of this trade to his own kingdom. By its terms, the Portuguese were given permission to trade at the port of Bakla, where they were to pay fixed customs duties and were to be extended all trading facilities, especially a regular supply of all the products of the region. The raja also promised to pay them an annual tribute of a fixed quantity of rice, butter, oil, sugar, tea, and fine textiles. In return the Portuguese undertook to give to the raja cartazes for 4 ships to sail to Goa and one each to Hormuz and Malacca every year. They also agreed, on pain of confiscation of their goods, not to take their trade to Chittagong.

It is uncertain to what extent this treaty affected the fortunes of Chittagong; but it certainly succeeded in attracting the Portuguese merchants to Bakla. By the end of the 16th century we begin to hear of the first Portuguese settlements in the area that were not “unmade” or dismantled every year. In 1599, Sripur, in the kingdom of Bakla, was described as the “chief bandel of the Portuguese”. Most of these settlements were small coastal enclaves, about whom limited information emerges in this period. Our most important source in this context are the letters of the Christian missionaries who frequently visited and


traveled in this region. The Bengal mission was granted in *padroado* or as patronage to the Augustinian order by the Portuguese king in 1599. Prior to this secular missionaries and Jesuit priests had preceded them in the region for a considerable period. These *bandeiros* (singular *bandel*) or port sites of the Portuguese traders may have come up prior to the turn of the century.

The picture that emerges from these letters is of more concentrated trading activity and settlement in eastern Bengal, particularly around Chittagong, than in the west. This was likely because the riverine terrain of this huge delta was most suited to their naval strength and, thus, coastal inclination. One Jesuit father captured most succinctly the ideal situation for the Portuguese while deciding to settle down at a location—"It is excellently situated: the enemies can not reach it from the land, and there is no power at sea to match that of the Portuguese." The eastern delta was, thus, dotted with several little Portuguese enclaves, while first, Satgāon, and then Hugli, were practically the only settlements located on the western side.

These settlements can be classified into two types. First, there were

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32 Letter of Fr. Julian Pereira to the Archbishop of Goa, Fatehpur Sikri, 5.7.1579, Hosten Collection, Bengal XVI, XVII; *ibid*, in which the priest refers to his being summoned to the Mughal court by Akbar while he "was in his bandel of Satgāon"

33 Since they do not yet figure in the official correspondence, we first get to about hear these settlements only after the Christian missionaries arrived in the region. These men travelled to each of these settlements and lived with the settlers. They write in considerable detail in their correspondence with each other and in reports to their superiors which become an important source of information about them.

34 Guerreiro, *CHI*, Nov. 27, 1918, p. 923.
the larger and relatively longer lasting ones, like Chittagong, Dianga, Chandecan, Sripur, Sandwip, Syriam, which had their own churches and residences for Jesuit fathers, but whose status and existence itself fluctuated every few years. And there were still seasonal ones, like Chargin and Anga (near Dianga), essentially functional settlements for the trading ships coming in from other ports in the *Estado da India* with the annual winds, which the church fathers serviced from nearby residences. Thus, the existence of a church and residence seems to be one of the indicators to gauge the size and status of a Portuguese settlement in this region. Thus, Sripur is described as an important settlement, home of a very rich and influential Portuguese by the name of Diego Nunez de Villalobos, which had more than one church\(^{35}\) and a Jesuit residence.\(^{36}\) By 1600, the residence had been closed due to the lack of funds to maintain it, and the fathers came regularly from their residence at Chittagong to preach here.\(^{37}\)

Another such small Portuguese settlement was located in the kingdom of Chandecan. According to the Jesuit Father Guerreiro this was the first of the Portuguese establishments in the region. The settlers were on good terms with the king, Raja Pratapditya, who apparently contributed largely towards the building of a Jesuit church and residence there in the year 1600. In return the Portuguese served as mercenaries in the army and fleet of the king, who particularly

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35 At least two churches, it seems from Guerreiro, *op.cit.*, *Relation of 1600-1601 on Bengal & Pegu*, translated by Fr. H Hosten, S.J., *Hosten Collection*, ms. 3, Chapter XIX.


37 Guerreiro, *Relation of 1600 and 1601*, *Hosten Collection*, ms. 3, Chapter XIX.
needed them against the attacking Arakanese fleet in 1603.\textsuperscript{38}

Such coastal enclaves as Sripur and Chandecan represent the typical Portuguese \textit{bandel} in the Bengal delta at the end of the 16\textsuperscript{th} century. This was a generic term, probably originating from the Persian \textit{bandar} (port) that was used in the Portuguese sources for all centres of convergence of Portuguese personnel on a regular basis. Somewhat nondescript and often nameless, these settlements usually had humble origins. Many continued their quiet existence and simply faded away in the course of time. Others grew into large conglomerates and became power centres to be reckoned with. It is through their activities and based in such settlements that the Portuguese scattered in the region were able to register their presence in Bengal-Arakan-Pegu in the 16\textsuperscript{th} and 17\textsuperscript{th} centuries.

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\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Ibid}, Chapter XVIII; 'Letter of Fr. Andrew Boves, S.J. to the General of the Society of Jesus in Rome. Piple, Orissa, 28.1.1604', in the Hosten Collection, 'Bengal XVI, XVII'.

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