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Notes on the sixteenth century Bengal trade

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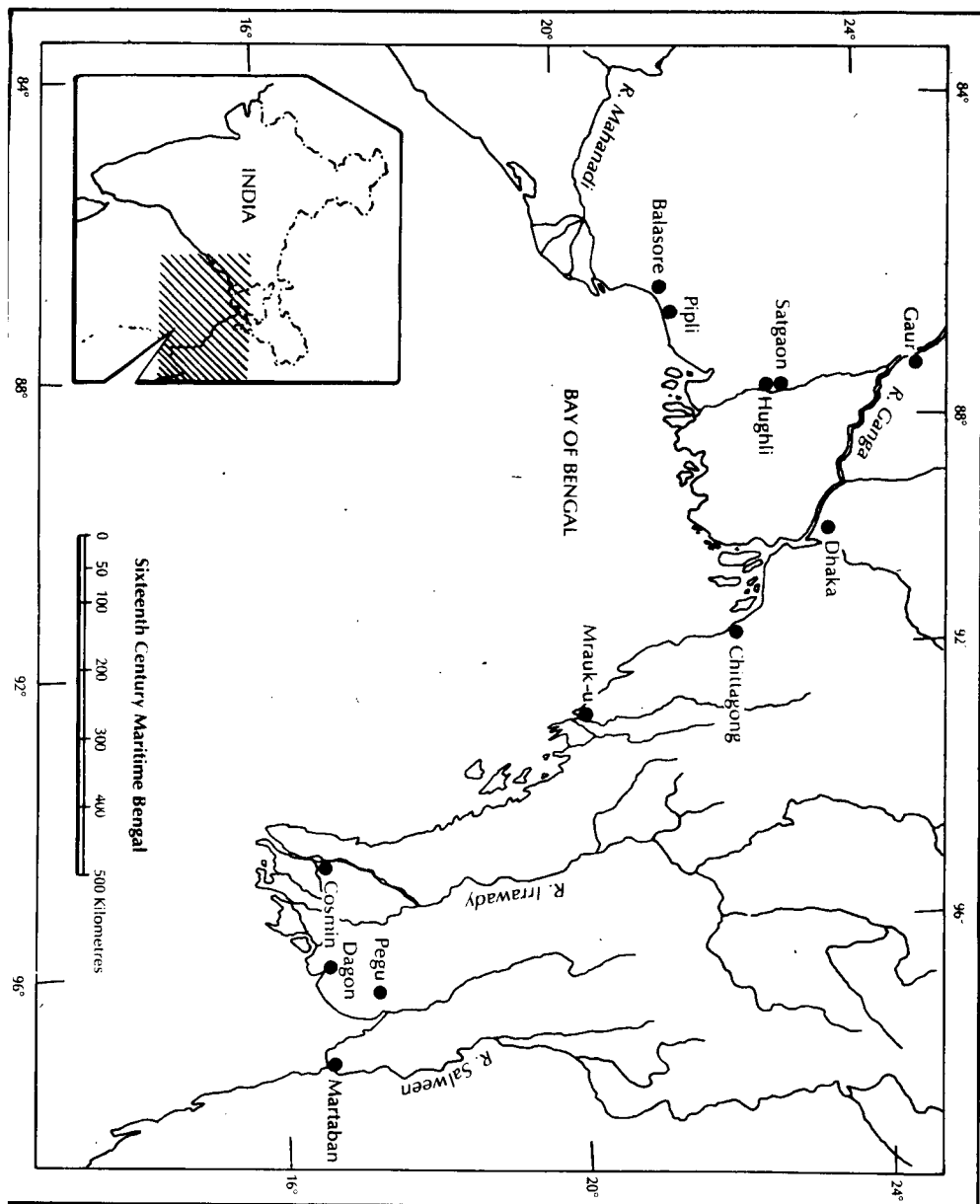
After a while there came a ship of the Franks from Goa trading to Malaka; and the Franks perceived how prosperous and well populated the port was. The people of Malaka for their part came crowding to see what the Franks looked like; and they were all astonished and said, 'These are white Bengalis.'

Sejarah Melayu, Chapter XII

The place of Bengal in sixteenth century Asian trade is a somewhat enigmatic one, as this undoubtedly puzzling quotation from a Malay chronicle—describing the first Portuguese visit to Melaka—suggests. While there has been some study of maritime Bengal in the 'Iberian century,' it has hitherto focused almost exclusively on a narration of picaresque tales regarding the Portuguese in the area, their licentious life, adventures and misadventures, and attempts at territorial conquest. A series of studies, beginning with Danvers' and Whiteway's somewhat unimaginative writings, and continuing with the books of Joaquim Campos, Tapan Raychaudhuri and more recently Susil Chaudhuri, have taken note of certain commercial aspects, to be sure.¹ The early Portuguese expeditions to Chittagong, Satgaon, and Gaur are noted, as is the later rise (from about 1580) of Hugli in the place of Satgaon as the chief port of western Bengal. All these studies are more or less unanimous in one respect: the belief that the Portuguese, on account of their superior military force, succeeded in the first forty years of the sixteenth century in effectively replacing most of Asian long-distance trade and shipping

¹ F.C. Danvers, *The Portuguese in India*, 2 Volumes, London, 1894; R.S. Whiteway, *The Rise of Portuguese Power in India, 1497-1550*, London, 1899; J.J.A. Campos, *History of the Portuguese in Bengal*, Calcutta, 1919; Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Bengal under Akbar and Jahangir*, 2nd edition, Delhi, 1966, Chapters 2 and 7; Sushil Chaudhuri, 'The Rise and Decline of Hugli—A Port in Mediaeval Bengal,' *Bengal Past and Present*, Vol. 86, No. 1, January-June 1967, pp. 33-67; S. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Commercial Organisation in Bengal, 1650-1720*, Calcutta, 1975, pp. 5-10, *passim*.

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from Bengal. Or, as Campos succinctly puts it, 'Towards the middle of the sixteenth century, a great part of the Bengal trade and shipping passed into the hands of the Portuguese.'² Similar statements can be found in any of the standard works on the area; a recent essay by George Winus goes a step further still, asserting that by the close of the sixteenth century, 'most of the trade of the *entire bay* [of Bengal] was in Portuguese hands'³ (emphasis added). The only cautious note in this general view of Portuguese domination is struck by Susil Chaudhuri, who notes that 'the Portuguese mastered the major portion of the overseas trade, albeit (*sic*) the limited activities of a few Malaya, Arab and Indian traders.'⁴

If the Portuguese did really meet with such success in Bengal, despite the fact that their presence there was very largely one comprising private individuals, we may consider it remarkable. Studies by Geneviève Bouchon, Charles Boxer, Michael Pearson, and myself (among others) have in the past been at some pains to point out how maritime Asia in the sixteenth century was the preserve neither of the *Estado da Índia*, nor of *casado* traders.⁵ The Portuguese presence in its various layers was undoubtedly an important one, but it was not achieved by wholly excluding other traders, be it in Gujarat, Malabar, Coromandel or Indonesia. The desire to gain exclusive rights—which no doubt existed often enough in sixteenth century Lusitanian hearts and minds—was difficult to translate into achievement.

In this study, we attempt to unravel the enigma of Bengal in sixteenth century Asian trade, focusing on two aspects: first, the Portuguese official and unofficial commercial role in the area, and second, the 'response' (for lack of a better word) of other traders to the Lusitanian element. What follows is consequently broadly divided in two sections. The picture that emerges contains, we shall see, significant blank areas, but seems—on the face of it—to offer some modifications to the image current in the literature on the region. Needless to add, this study is based almost exclusively on the Portuguese sources of the sixteenth century.

² Campos, *History of the Portuguese*, *ibid.*, p. 112.

³ George D. Winus, 'The "shadow-empire" of Goa in the Bay of Bengal,' *Itinerario*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 1983, p. 95.

⁴ S. Chaudhuri, 'The Rise and Decline of Hugli,' *op. cit.* Scepticism concerning the extent of Portuguese domination in sixteenth century Bengal is also expressed in M.N. Pearson, *The Portuguese in India*, Cambridge, (forthcoming).

⁵ See, for example, G. Bouchon, *Mamale de Cananor: Une adversaire de l'Inde Portugaise (1507–1528)*, Geneva 1975; C.R. Boxer, 'A Note on the Portuguese Reactions to the Revival of the Red Sea Spice trade and the rise of Atjeh, 1540–1600,' *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 1969, pp. 415–28; M.N. Pearson, *Merchants and Rulers in Gujarat: The Response to the Portuguese in the Sixteenth Century*, Berkeley, 1975, pp. 39–52, *passim*. Also see Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'The Coromandel-Melaka Trade in the Sixteenth Century: A Study of its Evolving Structure,' *Moyen Orient et Océan Indien*, Vol. 3, 1986, pp. 55–80; *idem*, 'The Portuguese Response to the Rise of Masulipatnam, 1570–1600,' *The Great Circle*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 1986, pp. 127–31. Finally, see Ashin Das Gupta, 'Indian Merchants and the Trade of the Indian Ocean,' in Tapan Raychaudhuri and Irfan Habib eds., *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, Vol. 1, Cambridge, 1982, pp. 427–30.

I

In the early years of the sixteenth century, the major part of overseas trade from Bengal passed through two ports: to the west Satgaon on the river Saraswati (upriver from modern Calcutta), and to the east Chittagong at the mouth of the river Karnaphuli.⁶ Of these two, Chittagong seems to have been the more considerable centre, being as it was closely linked with the city of Gaur, in the period the capital of a Sultanate that controlled much of Bengal. Already, by the early sixteenth century, the Bengal region was a major exporter of textiles to many regions in Asia, a distinction it shared with two other parts of India: namely, Coromandel and Gujarat. Bengal was celebrated, however, not merely for its textiles. As the Portuguese were quick to realise, the region was a considerable exporter of grain (particularly rice), as well as other comestibles, which were carried to a diversity of destinations. Bengal was also known for its production and export of sugar, another aspect highlighted in the early Portuguese writings on the region.

The coastal trade from Bengal to the eastern Bay littoral, on the one hand, and to south-eastern India, on the other, is difficult to evaluate in this early period. Indeed, the very ubiquity of the coastal traffic tended to cause contemporary observers to gloss over its existence, though their accounts do stress (in the Coromandel case) the ports of Kunjimedu and Kayal as particularly important in the Bengal trade. The aspect which receives far more attention in early sixteenth century accounts is long-distance commerce, and we may note the existence of at least three different sets of routes. The first set were the eastward routes, dominated by the trade to the great entrepôt of Melaka—supplied from Bengal with textiles, rice, sugar and conserves. The early sixteenth century picture in respect to this branch of trade has been ably summed up by M.A.P. Meilink-Roelofs, on the basis of the accounts of Tomé Pires and Duarte Barbosa. Roelofs notes that the traffic from the Bengal ports to Melaka and the north Sumatran ports of Pasai and Pidië probably added up, in the early sixteenth century, to five or six ships a year. As in the case of Coromandel, these included some relatively small vessels, as well as one or two larger ones, whose cargoes may have been worth as much as 80,000 to 90,000 *cruzados*.⁷ While the exports from Bengal largely comprised textiles and agricultural produce, imports into Bengal from Melaka included Borneo camphor, pepper, Moluccan spices, sandalwood, Chinese porcelain and silk, as well as metals. The import of the last of these would seem to have comprised the base metals—copper, tin, lead and mercury—as well as the precious ones. While Pires suggests that gold rather than silver was imported into Bengal in around 1515, there is

⁶ Das Gupta, *ibid.*, mentions a third port, Sripur. But this rarely appears in the Portuguese accounts of the early sixteenth century.

⁷ M.A.P. Meilink-Roelofs, *Asian Trade and European Influence in the Indonesian Archipelago Between 1500 and About 1630*, The Hague 1962, pp. 68–69, 90.

some reason to suspect that this was a temporary, and indeed aberrant, phenomenon. Silver dominated the Bengal currency system, and gold *tankas* were uttered by the region's mints for only a brief period in the late fifteenth century. One may also note that in the absence of copper coinage in pre-Mughal Bengal, the demand for this metal too is likely to have been more limited than, say, on Coromandel.

One may usefully contrast Bengal's trade with Melaka and the north Sumatran ports with the trade carried on to these same destinations from Coromandel. While certain clear parallels exist—the exchange in both cases being of manufactures and foodstuff, against tropical woods and spices as well as the products of the extractive industries—certain distinctions also emerge. The import of gold rather than silver was the norm on Coromandel, while the emphasis in Bengal would seem to have been reversed—Pires notwithstanding.⁸ Again, the proportion of agricultural goods in Bengal's exports to Melaka is likely to have been higher than in the Coromandel case. Finally, where the value of trade is concerned, there is some reason to believe that Coromandel's total trade to Melaka exceeded that of Bengal; thus the statement by Rui de Brito Patalim, Captain of Melaka in 1514, that 'the ships of these parts [namely, Coromandel] are the richest that there are here.'⁹

In addition to the Melaka trade, it is also possible to gather from early Portuguese sources some notion of the trade from Bengal to Burma. A particularly useful account is that of António Dinis, sometime Portuguese factor at Martaban, written in Melaka in August 1516. Dinis notes the existence of three important ports in Pegu: Martaban, Dagon, and Cosmin. Cosmin is described by him as the 'primcypall porto do Reyno de peguu'. He writes that 'there come each year four or five *naus* of Bengalla [to Cosmin], and the goods that these *naus* bring are *sinabafo* textiles and every other cloth which is consumed in the kingdom.' The Bengal ships normally arrived in March and early April, to return in the end of June, taking back with them, as 'the greater part of their investment,' silver made into rings or small hoops (*argolas*). In contrast to Cosmin, whose trade was largely directed at Bengal and Coromandel (and to a much lesser extent to Sri Lanka, the Red Sea, and Gujarat), trade from Dagon and Martaban was oriented differently. Dagon was frequented above all by shipping to Gujarat and Sumatra, Martaban (at the mouth of the river Salween) by ships bound for Siam, Melaka, Pidië, Pasai, and other Indonesian havens. Since, as Dinis testifies,

⁸ See the reference in note 10 below. Also John Deyell, 'The China Connection: Problems of Silver Supply in Medieval Bengal,' in J.F. Richards ed., *Precious Metals in the Later Medieval and Early Modern Worlds*, Durham, 1983, pp. 207–27.

⁹ Rui de Brito Patalim to the King of Portugal, letter dated 6 January, 1514, *Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo*, Lisbon, (henceforth *ANTT*), Corpo Cronológico, (henceforth *CC*), I/14/49, published in R.A. de Bulhão Pato and H. Lopes de Mendonça eds., *Cartas de Afonso de Albuquerque*, (henceforth *CAA*), 7 Volumes, Lisbon, 1884–1935, Vol. 3, p. 94.

the mines of the Pegu region produced in the period considerable quantities of silver (and lesser amounts of gold), these precious metals formed, together with lac and rice, the principal exports of the area to the rest of Asia.¹⁰

A second set of trade routes from Bengal were those to the middle Indian Ocean, which is to say Sri Lanka, Malabar, and the Maldives. To all these areas, Bengal again exported textiles and foodstuff, and the rice export to the Maldives was in fact one of the constant features of Bengal trade in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In return, Bengal imported Ceylonese cinammon and areca, Malabar pepper, and the *cauri* shells of the Maldives. In Bengal, these *cauris* served as a medium of exchange in small transactions, and were particularly important given the absence there—in the period—of coined money of less value than the silver *tanka*. It is reported that in the mid-sixteenth century, the *tanka* was worth between 3,200 and 3,840 *cauris*. Of the other imports, Bengal was a substantial consumer of pepper. In this context, trade between Calicut and Bengal seems to have been particularly of significance, and we find in the 1513 treaty between the Portuguese and the Samudri raja specific provision for the 'naos dos mouros' which normally arrived there from 'Pegu, Tanaçarym, Bengalla'.¹¹

Finally, there was the trade to the western Indian Ocean; here one can identify direct links between the Bengal ports and the Red Sea on the one hand, and the ports of Gujarat on the other. Evidence on a third destination—the Persian Gulf—is ambiguous however. Trade to the Red Sea often required vessels to put in at the Maldives, so that it is not always possible to maintain the distinctions we have made earlier, and the goods exported here included textiles, sugar, as well as Bengal long pepper. In the case of Gujarat, Pires particularly stresses the links between Bengal and the ports of Chaul and Dabhol, but it would seem that a far more significant link was to the port of Cambay itself.¹² The commodity composition of this trade remains unclear in the present state of evidence, and we may only speculate

¹⁰ Letter from António Dinis at Melaka to Francisco Pessoa and Tristão Silva, dated 15 August 1516, published in Luís Filipe F.R. Thomaz, *De Malaca a Pegu: Viagens de um feitor português (1512–1515)*, Lisbon, 1966, pp. 187–92; also see Thomaz's own discussion in pp. 23–25.

¹¹ Treaty between Albuquerque and the Samudri raja, dated 1 October 1513, *ANTT*, CC, I/13/67, in *CAA*, Vol. 2, p. 112; also a letter from Albuquerque to the King, dated 8 November 1512, *ANTT*, CC, I/12/40, in *CAA*, Vol. 1, p. 99.

¹² For references to trade between Bengal, and the Red Sea and Gujarat, see *inter alia*, a letter from Albuquerque at Cananur to the King, dated 30 November 1513, *ANTT*, CC, I/13/106, published in *CAA*, Vol. 1, p. 125; also João de Barros, *Da Ásia*, reprint Lisbon, 1974, Década III, Parte 1, p. 13. For references in other chronicles see Gaspar Correia, *Lendas da Índia*, ed. M. Lopes de Almeida, 4 Volumes, reprint Porto 1975; on the trade from Bengal to Gujarat, Vol. 1, p. 787; Vol. 2, p. 508; Vol. 3, pp. 649, 852, and on the trade from Bengal to the Red Sea, Vol. 1, p. 643, and Vol. 2, p. 537. Finally, Fernão Lopes de Castanheda, *História do descobrimento e conquista da Índia pelos Portugueses*, ed. M. Lopes de Almeida, 9 books in 2 Volumes, reprint Porto 1979, Livro II, Ch. 20, p. 258; Ch. 39, p. 298; Livro III, Ch. 132, p. 816, which contain references to trade between Gujarat and the Red Sea, and the Bengal ports.

as to whether raw cotton from Gujarat was already being imported into Bengal around 1500.

In the early years of the Portuguese presence in Asian waters, the attention of their official enterprise was directed less at the littoral of the Bay of Bengal than at the western Indian Ocean and Indonesia. As has been noted by L.F.F.R. Thomaz, however, the capture of Melaka in 1511 brought about something of a reorientation in their outlook.¹³ Using Melaka as a base, the Portuguese officially set out to explore the Far East, as well as the Bay of Bengal, in the decade 1510 to 1520. Contemporaneously, or perhaps even slightly earlier, contacts with each of these areas were made by unofficial Portuguese, at times traders or deserted soldiers, at others, mercenaries and renegades. This was what occurred in the case of Coromandel, and a similar succession of events seems to have transpired in Bengal.

The first news of the Portuguese capture of Melaka would seem to have reached Bengal through intermediaries—the *keling* traders of Melaka. Late in 1513, the *bendahara* of Melaka, Nina Chatu, sent a *jong* to Bengal on a trading voyage, and Melaka's captain Rui de Brito actively encouraged him in this project. De Brito's motives, as he later wrote to Afonso de Albuquerque, were quite clear: he wished that the merchants on the *jong* should 'give news of us in that land truthfully, so that they might come here without fear.' He also instructed Nina Chatu to send a letter aboard the ship, in which 'he should write in detail of our truth and justice, and of how we treat merchants, because our enemies will not give them true information about us.'¹⁴

It was only two years later though, in early 1516, that an official Portuguese expedition was given the task of 'discovering the Bay of Bengal'. Since this fleet, commanded by Fernão Peres de Andrade, also had before it the business of carrying an ambassador to China, de Andrade seems to have decided on a compromise. He despatched as his representative one João Coelho, whom he left at Pasai. Coelho eventually reached Chittagong on a ship owned by a Muslim merchant, Ghulam Ali (? Gromalle), described as a 'relative of the governor of Chittagong'.¹⁵ He remained in Bengal until 1518, when the first Portuguese fleet of three vessels—commanded by D. João da Silveira—actually arrived there.

It has been suggested by Armando Cortesão that this fleet inaugurated

¹³ Luis Filipe F.R. Thomaz, 'Maluco e Malaca,' in A. Teixeira da Mota ed., *A viagem de Fernão de Magalhães e a questão da Molucas*, Lisbon, 1975, pp. 35–36.

¹⁴ Rui de Brito Patalim to Afonso de Albuquerque, letter dated 6 January 1514, *ANTT*, CC, I/14/52, in CAA, Vol. 3, p. 221. A parallel exists between this incident and the case of Maluku, where Rui de Brito also sent an Asian ship with news of the Portuguese capture of Melaka; see Thomaz, *ibid.*, p. 36. Also Thomaz, 'Nina Chatu e o comércio português de Malaca,' *Memórias do Centro de Estudos de Marinha*, Vol. 5, 1976, pp. 3–27.

¹⁵ Barros, *Da Ásia*, Década III/1, Ch. 3, pp. 132–45; Castanheda, *História*, Livro IV, Chs. 37 to 39, pp. 929–37, also Livro V, Ch. 35, p. 61. Finally Campos, *Portuguese in Bengal*, *op. cit.*, pp. 27–28.

the regular *carreira de Bengala*; thus, he writes, 'After 1518, there followed almost annually the voyages of our ships to Bengal, with a varied fortune and not a few adventures, but it was only in 1536–37 (that) the Portuguese established themselves there'.¹⁶ While Cortesão's view is not based on any strong evidence, it is plausible enough, for this was the period when different *carreiras* within the Bay of Bengal (whether that of Coromandel or of Pegu) were in the process of crystallising into an annual feature. However, in contrast to the Coromandel (or more accurately Pulicat) voyages, the Bengal fleets seem to have had less of a purely commercial character. They frequently carried ambassadors to Gaur (as happened, for instance, in 1521), and in the absence of a permanently posted Portuguese factor at Bengal, the fleet's captain probably took it upon himself to issue *cartazes* as well.¹⁷

The early history of the *carreira de Bengala* is thus somewhat obscure. We are aware however of the names and activities of some of the captains who operated on this route using Crown shipping, in the 1520s and 1530s: for example, Rui Vaz Pereira commanded the *nau del-Rei* on this route in 1526, Diogo Rebello in 1535, Afonso Vaz de Brito in 1537, and Vasco Peres de Sampaio in 1538—the last taking with him a fleet of nine vessels on a military-cum-commercial mission.¹⁸ Some of these fleets—indeed the greater part—appear to have concentrated on trade to Chittagong in this period, though others did put in at Satgaon as well. The relative importance of the two ports in the eyes of the first Portuguese is neatly summed up in the names they gave them: if Satgaon was the *porto pequeno de Bengala*, Chittagong was the *porto grande*.

The route followed by these official vessels appears to have been from Goa, via Coromandel, to Bengal. In the late 1530s, however, on some occasions, the ships seem to have left from Melaka. Besides these Crown ships (and ships freighted by the Crown), it became the practice from the early 1530s to grant licenses to individual Portuguese, who then sailed to

¹⁶ See the interesting studies of Armando Cortesão, 'Os Portugueses em Bengala—Primeiras Visitas,' *Boletim da Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa*, Série 62, nos. 7 and 8, July–August 1944, pp. 433–47; and Cortesão, 'A "Cidade de Bengala" do século XVI,' *Boletim da Soc. de Geografia*, October–December 1944, pp. 585–600.

¹⁷ For instance, see the documentation surrounding the 1521 embassy of António de Brito and Diogo Pereira, ANTT, Coleção São Vicente, Vol. 11, fls. 47–88, which is to appear in a critical edition: Geneviève Bouchon and L.F. Thomaz eds., *Voyage dans les Deltas du Gange et de l'Iraouady en 1521*, Paris (forthcoming). For extracts from this document, Ronald Bishop Smith, *The First Age of Portuguese Embassies, Navigations and Peregrinations to the ancient kingdoms of Cambay and Bengal, 1500–1521*, Bethseda, 1969. Also see Geneviève Bouchon, 'Bengal and Pegu at the beginning of the Sixteenth Century according to an Anonymous Portuguese Chronicle,' in Luís de Albuquerque and Inácio Guerreiro eds., *Actas do II Seminário Internacional de História Indo-Portuguesa*, Lisbon, 1985, pp. 242–49.

¹⁸ See Campos, *Portuguese in Bengal*, pp. 33, 37–39. Also the letter from António de Fonseca to the King of Portugal, ANTT, CC, 1/30/36, dated 18 October 1523, published in Luís Filipe Thomaz, *Os Portugueses em Malaca (1511–1580)*, unpublished baccalaureate thesis, Lisbon, 1964, Vol. 2, pp. 164–67.

Bengal—at times as part of a fleet led by the Crown shipping, on other occasions independently. By the mid-1530s then, Bengal had become quite a hotbed of Portuguese activity.

This activity had several dimensions. There were, as we have noted, the private traders, renegades and mercenaries, some at Satgaon and Chittagong, and some further inland—even at Gaur itself. There was, besides, the 'official' aspect, represented by the captain of the *nau da carreira*, whose presence might be counted on in the trading season in one or the other of the major ports. Finally, there were the periodic embassies that are to be encountered at Gaur, with the mixed fortunes laconically noted by Armando Cortesão. The extensive Portuguese private presence was, we may imagine, both a support and a hindrance to Goa's own political designs and diplomatic strategies. Even more than on Coromandel, where Goa maintained a captain to oversee the Portuguese of the coast, to issue *cartazes*, and to mobilise military support for sieges on the west coast, the initiatives in Bengal came from private persons. Thus, the 'establishment' to which Cortesão refers in the late 1530s was really a personal grant given by Mahmud Shah of Gaur to two Portuguese: one, João Correa, was granted a part of customs collected at Satgaon, and the other Nuno Fernandes Freire, appointed collector of customs at Chittagong.¹⁹

The growing number of private Portuguese in Bengal seems to have contributed to an increasing awareness in the rest of Portuguese India of the potentialities of the Bengal trade. The number of licenses granted to private Portuguese to trade in their own vessels from Cochin and Goa to Bengal increases significantly in the 1540s, especially after the decision taken in the period of D. João de Castro to loosen the restraints on pepper trade within Asia.²⁰ The growth in private trade to Bengal was such that the logic of the official *carreira* was called into question. Of course, this was a problem not local to Bengal; with the shrinking amount of Crown capital invested in these voyages, they assumed the dimensions of a freight trade, and one encounters complaints of a lack of profitability in the Coromandel case as well.

However, the problem seems to have been particularly severe in Bengal. By the early 1540s, not one but two *carreiras* existed here: the one to Porto Pequeno, the other to Porto Grande. On these routes were sent vessels that were either owned or hired by the Crown, with an appointee of the Royal Chancery as captain; the captaincy carried as perquisite a proportion of the cargo space, freed from paying customs duties at Portuguese customs-houses, whether at Melaka or Goa. However, with the proliferation in the 1540s of the private trade in pepper, against textiles and rice, from Cochin to Bengal, there are numerous complaints from the captains of the Crown vessels.

¹⁹ Campos, *ibid.*, p. 39. Also see Castanheda, *História*, Vol. 2, Livro VIII, pp. 778–79.

²⁰ See the excellent study by R.O.W. Goertz, 'The Portuguese in Cochin in the Mid-Sixteenth Century,' *Indica*, Vol. 23, Nos. 1 and 2, 1986, pp. 63–78.

In 1548, D. Jerónimo de Noronha, who held the captaincy of the *nau* to Chittagong, actually claimed to have incurred a loss in the process, while a few years later Simão Botelho was quite scathing on the subject of these Crown voyages—which he saw as a waste of official shipping and capital (if invested).²¹ A letter of 1549, addressed to D. João de Castro from a certain António Martins at Chittagong, echoes the same lament. The writer declares:

I came to this land and the porto grande of Bengal . . . in this ship of Dom Diogo de Almeida, and in this port, I found myself here with many other ships and men, and I certify, Sir, in truth that the profit of those who find themselves here, it does not seem will be very much, but because Brás Varella who is about to depart from here will tell of what he found, and of the little profit, I will say no more.²²

Since the writer had arrived on a Crown *nau*, it is only realistic to expect that the private traders were somewhat better off. Enterprising *casados* sold pepper, with or without a license, shipped from Malabar or from Sunda and Sumatra, and it is even reported in 1547 that a certain Manuel Coutinho, a *casado* at Goa, had a trade in harquebuses in Bengal.²³ As is evident from the letter of António Martins cited earlier, however, the focus of such activity had begun to shift somewhat in the late 1540s. There was a distinct feeling that Chittagong was being over-supplied, and that trade there was no longer as profitable as in the past. This was for two reasons. First, Portuguese shippers were to be found there in droves—as early as 1531, eighteen Portuguese vessels were anchored there in the trading season. The second, possibly more crucial reason, was the decline in the 1540s of Gaur, with which Chittagong had been closely connected.²⁴ Thus, so far as Portuguese trade was concerned, attention shifted considerably to western Bengal and Orissa.

It has been suggested by some writers that Portuguese trade at Pipli (the major Orissa port of the second half of the sixteenth century) can be dated to as early as the decade 1510 to 1520, perhaps to 1514–15. There seems little direct or even circumstantial evidence in support of this contention; on the contrary, the testimony of Duarte Barbosa attests to the fact that in that period, Orissa had ‘but few seaports and little trade’—scarcely the place to

²¹ Letter from D. Jerónimo de Noronha to D. João de Castro, 11 April 1548, in Elaine Sanceau *et al.* ed., *Colecção de São Lourenço*, Vol. 3, Lisbon, 1983, pp. 490–91; also see the letter from Simão Botelho to the King of Portugal, published in R.J. de Lima Felner ed., *Subsídios para a História da Índia Portuguesa*, Lisbon, 1868, Letter IV, p. 28.

²² António Martins at Chittagong to D. João de Castro, 25 November 1549, in *São Lourenço*, Vol. 3, pp. 94–95.

²³ Rui Gonçalves de Caminha to D. João de Castro, 18 December 1547, *São Lourenço*, Vol. 3, pp. 555–56.

²⁴ Castanheda, *História*, Vol. 2, Livro VIII, Chs. 46–47, pp. 642–45; Correia, *Lendas da Índia*, Vol. 2, pp. 446–49; Cortesão, ‘A “Cidade de Bengala”’, *op. cit.*, n. 14, p. 593.

attract the Portuguese private trader.²⁵ Sometimes referred to by the Portuguese as Gergelim (from *sesamum* or *gingelly*), and at other times as Orixá (variants are Urixá, Urizá, and even Urriga), this area enters unambiguously into Portuguese trade networks only in around 1560. Thus, the westward shift in orientation of Portuguese trade within Bengal—from Chittagong to more occidental parts—initially took the form of more intensive trade to Satgaon. In the 1560s, the Venetian, Cesare di Fedrici, who visited Satgaon, described it as 'a remarkable faire citie [where] . . . every yeare they lade thirtie or five and thirtie ships, great and small, with rice, cloth of Bumbast of divers sorts, Lacca, great abundance of sugar . . . and many other sorts of merchandise.'²⁶ At least some fraction of this shipping was in Portuguese hands, but it would be hasty and ill-conceived to conclude that the Asian element had already been excluded.

The early and middle 1560s saw a change in the official Portuguese approach to the Bengal trade. This change was part of a more general set of modifications which occurred in respect to Portuguese Asia as a whole, and which was signalled by the rise of the concession system.²⁷ Under this system, Crown shipping to Bengal was abandoned entirely, a measure which had been suggested even as early as the 1540s. In 1552, Simão Botelho had written:

One should see to it that in the voyages to Bengal, no ships of His Highness go, and that those who have the voyages [in grant] should go as Captains-Major, and in their own ships, because even in this way they would gain a great deal, and his Highness would not have to undertake so many expenses with no profit of any sort, because this year, there went to Bengal one large galleon, and another ship which was purchased [by the Treasury] for this purpose alone²⁸

The concessions in the Bengal area were three in number, and it is not wholly clear whether all involved routes emanating from Melaka—or whether some routes began from Goa. The first concession was to Chittagong, the second to Satgaon (later Hugli), and the third to Pipli. As distinct from

²⁵ M.L. Dames ed., *The Book of Duarte Barbosa*, 2 Volumes, London, 1918/1921, Vol. 2, pp. 132–33; also see Cortesão, 'Os Portugueses em Bengala,' *op. cit.*, p. 445, who notes: 'Diz Campos que os Portugueses fundaram a povoação [Pipli] em 1514, mas esta data não pode ser admitida sem muita reserva.'

²⁶ Di Fedrici's account is reproduced in Richard Hakluyt ed., *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation*, reprint London, 1926, Vol. 3, pp. 216–54; the passage cited is also reproduced in J.N. Das Gupta, *Bengal in the Sixteenth Century*, Calcutta, 1914, pp. 106–8.

²⁷ On the concession-system, see Luís Filipe Thomaz, 'Les Portugais dans les mers de l'Archipel au XVI^e siècle,' *Archipel*, Vol. 18, 1979, especially pp. 121–24.

²⁸ Simão Botelho to the Portuguese King, letter dated 30 January 1552, in Felner ed., *Subsídios*, Letter IV, p. 28.

the concessions to Chittagong and Satgaon, which *replaced* the earlier trips made on Crown shipping, the voyage to Pipli was conceived *de novo* in the early 1560s. Several of the early concession grants have survived, and it seems worthwhile quoting at least one of these at length; this is one of the earliest grants extant, made at Lisbon on 12 January 1564, to one António Pereira, a *fidalgo* of the Royal Household.²⁹ The concession gives him the right to make

two voyages as captain and *provedor dos defuntos* of the carrack or ship, which is to go from India to the port of Uryxa, which two voyages he will make in his own carrack or ship, fitted out at his own cost and expense, and will not receive any salary at the cost of the Royal Treasury.

The text of the grant is particularly detailed, since it apparently represented a form of benefice which, in the mid-1560s, was still somewhat unusual. It continues:

And in each one of the said voyages which the said António Pereira makes, he shall be Captain-Major over any carrack or ship which goes in his company to the said port of Uryxá, and he will also be the same [viz., Captain-Major] over any ship or carrack that he encounters on the way, and over those which are found in that port . . . and through this, it is ordered that the captains, pilots and company of such carracks or ships, and whosoever [i.e., any Portuguese] is residing in the said port of Urixá, should obey the said António Pereira in everything that he orders them to do on behalf of His Highness, as their Captain-Major, under pain of incurring the penalties which are incurred by those who do not obey the orders of the King.

A similarly worded grant dated 25 January 1565 for two Pipli voyages is also to be encountered—the grantee being Jorge de Melo de Castro, also a *fidalgo* of the Royal Household—as is still another dated 30 January 1565, this time granting two voyages to Lourenço de Sousa, also described as a *fidalgo da Casa Real*.³⁰

These grants, whose monetary worth was estimated at eight to ten thousand *cruzados*, were—we are told by an anonymous writer in the early 1580s—usually made ‘to *fidalgos* of long service and much merit’.³¹ Their worth

²⁹ Reproduced in J.H. da Cunha Rivara ed., *Arquivo Portuguez-Oriental*, 6 Fascicules in 9 Parts, Goa, 1857–76, Fasciculo V (2), Doc. 478, p. 549.

³⁰ Vide Cunha Rivara, *Arquivo Portuguez-Oriental*, Fasc. V (2), Docs. 531, 532, pp. 584–85. Also see Luciano Ribeiro ed., *Registo da Casa da Índia*, 2 Volumes, Lisbon, 1955, Docs. 583, 602, 636, 646 and 732.

³¹ The anonymously authored document of the 1580s is the ‘Livro das Cidades e Fortalezas que a Coroa de Portugal tem nas partes da Índia . . .’, ed. F.P. Mendes da Luz, published in the *Boletim da Biblioteca da Universidade de Coimbra*, Vol. 21, 1953, pp. 1–144, and also reproduced in *Studia*, No. 6, 1960, between pp. 353–63. For the phrase cited, see ffs. 92v–93 of the manuscript.

derived from a curious source, for—unlike, say, the Pegu or Coromandel concessions—they were not monopolistic in nature; or, to put it in the terminology of the period, Pipli was not a ‘reserved port’ (*porto coutado*). The grant’s value stemmed instead from the fact that the Captain-Major (or concessionary) had the privilege of buying and selling first at the port of destination, and—more importantly—because, as *provedor dos defuntos*, he was in charge of collecting, assessing, and despatching to their heirs, the effects of any person under his jurisdiction who died. In return for this service, he received a legally laid down percentage, to say nothing of substantial opportunities for embezzlement. As our anonymous author from the 1580s declares in the context of the Bengal and Orissa concessions, ‘The value which I have attributed to them is with the post of *provedor dos defuntos* which they carry, for without it, they would be worth nothing’.³²

In contrast to the Pipli concessions, grants of the voyage to Satgaon (or Porto Pequeno) continued to speak of the use of Crown shipping as late as 1564. This appears to be the case, for example, in the *mercê* (or benefice) to one Agostinho Nunes in February 1564; the grantee, son of the chief physician to the King, was appointed ‘Captain and Factor of the carrack or ship that is to go from India to porto pequeno de bengala,’ with no mention of the fact that he is to use his own shipping.³³ It is probable that by the late 1560s, the transition had been made in this case too from Crown shipping to private shipping; at the point of transition, those who had received grants of the old type (as Captain and Factor of a Crown vessel) were told that they would have to make the voyage in their own shipping, with a subsidy of 3,000 *cruzados*—deductible from the customs payments they might otherwise have had to make to the Crown at Goa, Melaka or wherever.³⁴

The voyages to both Chittagong and Satgaon thus seem to have passed by the late 1560s to assume the same form as the Pipli voyages: the grantee was the Captain-Major of a fleet rather than the holder of a monopoly right over the voyage, and once again derived special benefits principally from being *provedor dos defuntos*. The value of concessions to Satgaon was estimated in about 1580 at 3,000 *cruzados*, and that to Chittagong at 2,000 *cruzados*. These concessions concerned voyages probably emanating from Goa; in addition, the captains of Melaka also held a concession *ex officio* in around 1580, enabling them to send ships from there to Bengal (in all likelihood to Porto Pequeno). These concessions were frequently sold by the captains to private parties, fetching on an average 1,000 *cruzados*. Significantly, however, we are told that by the late 1570s, the Chittagong concession was

³² *Ibid.*, fls. 93–93v.

³³ For the grant to Agostinho Nunes, see Cunha Rivara ed., *Arquivo Portuguez-Oriental*, Fascículo V (2), Doc. 498, p. 859. Also Ribeiro, *Registo da Casa da Índia*, op. cit., Docs. 400, 609, 725, 731, 856, 983 and 1155.

³⁴ ‘Livro das Cidades e Fortalezas,’ fls. 81–81v.

one which 'is scarcely ever asked for, nor can one even find persons to accept it'.³⁵

One may also note that the Pipli concessions were discontinued for a while in the 1570s, on account of difficulties between Captains-Major and the Mughals, as well as locally powerful Afghan potentates. In the early 1580s, they were occasionally given out on viceregal initiative, but are described as being destined for other Orissa ports (possibly Balasore), and besides 'of so little profit that it does not enter into consideration'. In the late 1590s, stray royal grants to Pipli crop up again in the records, though one does not know if these voyages were actually made or not.³⁶

The concessions to the Bengal and Orissa ports are significant in that they represented the official aspect of Portuguese activity with Bengal. The Captains-Major who held the concessions were the successors of the captains of the Crown vessels who had, in the half-century or so from 1518 on, represented the authority of Goa in Bengal—both to the local political structures, and to the private Portuguese there resident. Unlike on Coromandel, there seems to have been no *resident* representative of the *Estado's* authority in Bengal until very late in the sixteenth century; early in the seventeenth century, the posts of captain, and of *ouvidor* are known to have existed in both Pipli and Hughli, and for a certain time, these officials (as indeed all of the Portuguese in Bengal) were officially subordinate to the Captain-Major resident at Siriam—Felipe de Brito e Nicote. In the *venda geral* of 1613, the captaincy of Porto Pequeno was sold to Domingos de Albuquerque for 340 *xerafins*, and that of Pipli to Pero Coelho for 150 *xerafins*,³⁷ suggesting that these posts were not highly coveted. Besides, as is well-known, there were extant in Bengal unofficial structures of authority among the Portuguese residents, and these were dominated at the close of the sixteenth century by such figures as Sebastião Gonçalves Tibau, Manuel de Matos, and Domingos Carvalho. Underpinning these structures of power was a quite considerable economic activity by private Portuguese, and it is to this that we shall now turn.³⁸

There was, of course, a substantial involvement of Portuguese and *mestiço* elements in the riverine trade by the second half of the sixteenth century. Sebastião Gonçalves himself reputedly made his first fortune in the deltaic trade in salt. But this is not what principally concerns us. Instead, we may look to the relatively long-distance seaborne commerce; and here we can

³⁵ *Ibid.*, fl. 93. 'As do porto grande importão quando muito até dous mil cruzados, e escasamente se acha quem as peça, nem queira aceitar'.

³⁶ See ANTT, Manuscritos do Convento da Graça, 6-L, fl. 196, grant to Baltazar Carvalho of two voyages of Orixá, dated 29 March 1598.

³⁷ *Biblioteca Nacional de Lisboa*, Fundo Geral, Códice 1540, fls. 89–91v, 'Relação dos cargos do Estado da Índia q̃ estão vendidos por ordem de S. Magde para as despesas do Estado'.

³⁸ On the activities of these picaresque Portuguese, Campos, *Portuguese in Bengal, passim*; Raychaudhuri, *Bengal under Akbar and Jahangir*, pp. 94–96, 237–53; most recently, Winius, 'The "Shadow-Empire" of Goa,' *op. cit.*, pp. 94–96.

identify at least three important and distinct lines of trade by private Portuguese. The first was the trade to Melaka, a trade in textiles and rice, which was by the late sixteenth century dominated by private Portuguese. Certainly, the conspicuous *keling* activity on this route in the early years of the century had faded away by its close, in respect not merely of Bengal but of even Coromandel—earlier a stronghold of *keling* trade. In addition, one should not rule out the possibility of clandestine trade between Satgaon (and later Hughli) and Aceh or Banten, though these are routes likely to have been dominated by Asian merchants.³⁹

The second major route was a coastal one, and passed on the one hand—through Nagapattinam—to the ports of Sri Lanka, and on the other to Cochin and Goa. The trade from Cochin to Bengal was of overwhelming importance by the close of the sixteenth century, not only for Bengal-based Portuguese, but for the *casado* element in Cochin. François Pyrard, writing in the early years of the seventeenth century notes, 'The principal trade from Cochin is in pepper, and it is produced only by the kings of Calicut and Cochin (*sic*) . . . the most frequent trade is to Bengal, and the merchandise which they ordinarily take [besides pepper] are those small shells from the Maldiv Islands [*viz.*, *cauris*]'.⁴⁰ Some thirty years later, António Bocarro lamented the decline of this trade, which he claimed was in its late sixteenth century heyday worth some 400,000 *xerafins* annually. He noted too that the principal item exported to Bengal was pepper, 'however strongly it may be forbidden'.⁴¹ Besides pepper and *cauris*, there is evidence by the mid-sixteenth century of a flight of silver from Goa and the Portuguese settlements of south-west India to Bengal. António Nunes, writing of the Goa of the 1550s, notes that the value of the silver *tanka* there fluctuated, 'along with the sailing seasons to Bengal and Melaka'.⁴²

In return for these goods, the Portuguese private trader brought back from Bengal sugar, preserves, a ballast of rice, and—above all—textiles.

³⁹ Concerning Portuguese trade from Melaka to Bengal, see *inter alia*, *Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino*, Lisbon (henceforth *AHU*), Caixas da Índia, Caixa 4, Doc. 2. On Aceh, see Arun K. Das Gupta, 'Aceh in Seventeenth Century Asian Trade,' *Bengal Past and Present*, Vol. 81, 1962, pp. 44–45; on Sunda Kalapa and Banten, António Nunez, 'O Livro dos Pesos da Índia,' in Felner ed., *Subsídios para a história da Índia*, p. 42. Finally, see Takeshi Ito, 'A Note on Some Aspects of the Trade of Aceh in the Seventeenth Century,' *Nampo-Bunka*, No. 9, 1982, pp. 38–45.

⁴⁰ See J. H. da Cunha Rivara ed., *Viagem de Francisco Pyrard de Laval*, 2 Volumes, reprint Porto, 1944, Vol. 1, p. 326. There exists an English version of the same text, *The Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval to the East Indies, the Maldives, the Moluccas and Brazil*, 2 Vols., London, 1887–88, ed. Albert Gray et al.

⁴¹ António Bocarro, 'Livro das Plantas de todas as povoações, cidades e fortalezas do Estado da Índia Oriental,' in A. B. de Bragança Pereira ed., *Arquivo Português Oriental*, Tomo IV, Vol. 2, Parte I, Goa 1937, pp. 353–54. In about 1630, Frei Sebastião Manrique estimated the value of the cargo of a single ship, *Santo Agostinho*, from Cochin to Hugli, at 800,000 *reals*—surely an exaggeration, but an evocative one nonetheless.

⁴² António Nunez, 'O Livro dos Pesos,' in Felner ed., *Subsídios*, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

Some of these were consumed in western India itself, but a large proportion went on to the Middle East, and—in the close of the sixteenth century—increasingly to Europe, via the cape route. The regulations of the Goa customs-house, laid down in September 1567 by the Viceroy D. Antão de Noronha, explicitly take account of this latter trade in their eighth clause:

And because from Bengal and other parts there come many textiles to Cochin, that they may be sold to [those on] the ships to Portugal, and it would be inconvenient and a loss to the parties involved to bring the textiles to this customs-house . . . I order that such textiles as come for the ships to Portugal be unloaded in the said Cochin, where the factor and officials may deal with them, and they may pay the duties on account of this customs-house there itself.⁴³

This brings us, in fine, to the third distinct line of trade from Bengal which involved Portuguese private traders—the direct trade to Ormuz. As we shall see ahead, this trade—though relatively slight (no more than two ships a year)—was significant, being one of the rare links between the heart of the Bay of Bengal and the heart of the western Indian Ocean to survive to the close of the sixteenth century. One gathers that the goods exported to the Persian Gulf comprised textiles, both cotton and silk, and sugar—of which Persia was a substantial importer; imports into Bengal on the other hand would appear to have included, besides horses, carpets, dry fruits and rosewater, quantities of the bullion which, through the sixteenth century, seeped through the Levant into Persia.⁴⁴

To conclude this section then, in the eighty or so years of the sixteenth century which followed on D. João de Silveira's expedition, Portuguese trade in and from Bengal developed apace, and in different directions. By the last third of the century, the orientation of this trade is quite definite, and we may identify quite distinctly those routes where the Portuguese private trader had a special interest. In this list, the trade from Bengal to Cochin would rank very high, and trade to Melaka, and to Persia would then follow, in that order of importance. It is probable that in the latter half of the sixteenth century, trade to Melaka was dampened somewhat on account of various factors; for example, in the 1540s, Bengal goods paid more at entry

⁴³ *Biblioteca Nacional de Lisboa*, Fundo Geral, C'odice 2702, 'Regimento dalfandega de Sua Magestade desta cidade de Goa,' fl. 3v. On the carriage of Bengal textiles by private traders on the early seventeenth century *Carreira da Índia*, also see *AHU*, Caixa 3, Doc. 152; Caixa 4, Doc. 50; Caixa 4, Doc. 25, fls. 1–4v, 16–19, 'Livro das roupas e sedas' (particularly important, dated February 1616, and relates to the galleon *Santo António*). Also the interesting document, *Bibliotheek der Rijksuniversiteit*, Leiden, BPL. nr. 876, fls. 3–3v, 'Comta de Fernão de Cron,' fl. 5, *passim*.

⁴⁴ Cf. Nunez, 'O Livro dos Pesos,' *op. cit.*, pp. 25–26. For a general discussion, see Vitorino Magalhães Godinho, *Os Descobrimentos e a economia mundial*, 4 Volumes, Lisbon, 1981–84, Vol. 2, pp. 134–41; also Vol. 4, p. 117.

(ie., 8 per cent) than goods from other parts of Asia (which paid 6 per cent). Again at the close of the sixteenth century, the imposition of an exit duty at Melaka on goods to Coromandel and Bengal seems to have encouraged Portuguese private traders to prefer other ports; the beneficiaries of this reorientation are likely to have been not only Aceh and Banten, but the Malay Peninsula ports, especially Perak but also Kedah and Trang.⁴⁵

Within Bengal itself, after an early commercial focus on the eastern section of the region, the period after about 1540 sees a gradual shift of attention westward. Commercial activity moves more and more to Satgaon (and after the silting of the river channel there in the 1560s and 1570s, to Hugli) as also to Pipli. The decline of Chittagong is quite perceptible by the last third of the century, even though Fernão Guerreiro continues to describe it, *circa* 1600, as 'uma cidade e porto mui principal em Bengala'.⁴⁶ In the next section, we shall seek to examine the causes of Chittagong's diminished importance by the close of the sixteenth century, despite the continuing presence of private Portuguese at its suburb of Dianga.

In the early seventeenth century, the first Dutch and English reports quite clearly identify Portuguese private trade as concentrated in Hughli and Pipli. Some English Company factors, sent to Patna in 1620, were to write of the Portuguese: '[In] Bengalla . . . they have two porttes, the one called Gollye, the other Piepullye and therein are licenced by this kinge to inhabitt. Gollye is their cheefest porte where theye are in greate multitudes, and have yearlye shipping from Mallacka and Cochine'.⁴⁷ The day of João Coelho and D. João de Silveira, when Chittagong was to the Portuguese no less than 'O Porto de Bemgalla,' had been left far behind.

II

It is very nearly a truism to say that the Portuguese sources of the sixteenth century are more suitable for writing the history of the Portuguese in Asia, than that of Asian traders. This is largely the reason why the second section of this essay must of necessity be far more sketchy, and based on even more slender evidence, than the first. In this section, we seek to question the orthodox view that in the course of the sixteenth century, Portuguese trade from Bengal replaced almost wholly the shipping and mercantile activity of Asian traders.⁴⁸ However, the survival and response of the Asians which we shall delineate here was a far from simple phenomenon. Trade on some

⁴⁵ Letter from the King of Spain and Portugal to the viceroy at Goa, dated 27 February 1612, in R.A. de Bulhão Pato, ed., *Documentos Remetidos da Índia*, Vol. 1, Lisbon 1880, pp. 178–81.

⁴⁶ Fernão Guerreiro, *Relação Anual das Coisas que fizeram os Padres da Companhia de Jesus*, 3 Volumes, ed. Artur Viegas, Coimbra, 1930–42, Vol. 1. pp. 42–47.

⁴⁷ Letter from Hughes and Parker at Patna, published in William Foster ed., *The English Factories in India, 1618–1621*, Oxford, 1906, cited in Campos, *Portuguese in Bengal*, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

⁴⁸ This is the view of most of the authors cited in notes 1 to 3 above.

routes had to be reoriented, and on others wholly abandoned. Within Bengal itself, the major centres of seaborne trade shifted somewhat in the course of the century. If, in part, these changes can be thought of as a *response* to the Portuguese presence, it is also necessary to note how changing internal circumstances and imperatives in the area influenced such modifications as occurred.

It is evident from Portuguese sources that in the early sixteenth century Bengal's seaborne commerce was dominated by two ports, Satgaon and Chittagong. Of these, Chittagong, the main centre of early Portuguese activity, also seems to have supported a larger volume of trade *in general* than Satgaon. In part, this can be explained as part of a discernible sub-continental pattern, since Chittagong was very closely linked to Gaur, which was in the period a populous and substantial centre of consumption. To this extent, we may see Chittagong's predominance as explicable in terms parallel to the cases of Pulicat, Bhatkal or Masulipatnam in the sixteenth century.

According to Pires, the trade from Bengal in general, and Chittagong in particular, was to an extent in the hands of the 'bengalas,' who were 'merchants with great fortunes'; a great part of it was however conducted by Persians, Rumis, Turks, Arabs, merchants from Chaul, Dabhol and Goa.⁴⁹ In Barbosa's description as well, the inhabitants of Gaur and Chittagong are seen to include numerous merchants of foreign origin, including Arabs, Persians, and Abyssinians.⁵⁰ However, when one encounters references in the early Portuguese records to specific merchants of Chittagong, they are usually Persians: Ghulam Ali (? Gromalle), Khwaja Shihab-ud-din (? Coje Sabadim), and so on. It seems safe to conclude that the shipping of the Persians was particularly conspicuous on the westerly routes from Bengal—the usual context in which references to their ships occur. This embraced the routes to the Red Sea, Cambay, and the Konkan ports, as well as the Maldives and Malabar ports. On the other hand, in the Melaka trade, the presence of these traders in conspicuously low-key; it seems likely that the Bengal-Melaka route was dominated by the *kelings*, with merchants like Ghulam Ali restricting themselves to pepper procurement at Pasai and Pidie.

In considering the changes that occurred between 1510 and about 1600, we shall focus on four sets of factors. These are (i) changes in the polity of the Bengal region, (ii) the official Portuguese presence, (iii) the private trade of Portuguese and *mestiços* in Bengal, and (iv) changes in the regions with which Bengal traded. We shall consider each of these, first separately and then conjointly, in the paragraphs that follow.

Between the time when the first Portuguese arrived at Melaka, and the arrival of the north-west Europeans in Asian waters, substantial political

⁴⁹ Cf. *A Suma Oriental de Tomé Pires e o Livro de Francisco Rodrigues*, ed. Armando Cortesão, Coimbra, 1978, p. 219, fl. 134 r. of the text.

⁵⁰ *The Book of Duarte Barbosa*, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, pp. 135–37.

changes occurred in Bengal—as elsewhere in India. Early in the century, the area was dominated by a Sultanate centred around the city of Gaur (south of Malda), which was in the period around 1500 in control of much of eastern and western Bengal. Though evidently ruled by Sultans of largely Arab origin (including Alauddin Hussain Shah [1494–1519]) and Abul Muzaffar Nusrat Shah [1519–1532], all the early Portuguese sources stress the considerable influence of the Habshi element in the court and administration of Bengal at the close of the fifteenth century and the beginnings of the sixteenth century.⁵¹ The Sultanate—despite the sometimes precarious existence of its rulers as individuals—was itself quite robust and expansionist in the period. In the late fifteenth century, it seems to have exercised a dominant influence, both political and cultural, into upper Burma, and the kingdom of Arakan.⁵² The expansion in the 1530s of first Bihar-based Afghan chieftains (notably Sher Khan Sur), and subsequently the Mughals themselves, contributed to the collapse of the Sultanate. In the late 1530s, Sher Khan laid siege to Gaur and captured it, and historians usually identify the decline of the city with this event. For a time, representatives of Sher Khan governed from the city, but the capital was eventually shifted in 1566 to nearby Tanda by the Afghan Sultan Sulaiman Khan Karrani.⁵³ Later efforts under the Mughals to revive the fortunes of the city (notably by the governor Munim Khan in 1575) seem to have met with little success. Subsequent administrative capitals, in the wake of the consolidation of Mughal rule over Bengal, were first Rajmahal, later Dhaka, and finally Murshidabad.

From the 1530s on, the structure of the independent Sultanate of Bengal being in considerable disarray in the face of pressures from the west, incursions from the east—and the assertion of independence by *zamindars* (both old and new)—increased considerably.⁵⁴ A considerable westward expansion took place of the Arakanese kingdom under Minbin (1531–53), which resulted in the occupation by Arakan forces of much of eastern Bengal in the mid-1540s. For a brief period, Arakanese influence extended even as far as Dhaka and the Sundarbans, but had subsided by the last

⁵¹ Thus, see *Suma Oriental*, *op. cit.*, n. 47; also the document from 1521 cited in note 17 *supra*. The Habshi presence in Bengal is usually dated to the reign of Ruknuddin Abul Mujahid Barbak Shah (c. 1458–75). Their power reaches its zenith in the last two decades of the fifteenth century, when there were actually four successive Habshi Sultans in Bengal. See H. Blochmann, *Contributions to the Geography and History of Bengal, (Muhammedan Period)*, reprint Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1968.

⁵² *Vide* Maurice S. Collis and San Shwe Bu, 'Arakan's Place in the Civilisation of the Bay,' *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 1925, pp. 34–52; also see S.M. Ali, 'Arakan Rule in Chittagong (1550–1666 A.D.),' *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Pakistan*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 1967, pp. 333–52.

⁵³ See Blochmann, *Contributions*, *op. cit.* Also Cortesão, 'A "Cidade de Bengala" do século XVI,' *op. cit.*, p. 589.

⁵⁴ Blochmann, *ibid.*; also see Raychaudhuri, *Bengal under Akbar and Jahangir*, Ch. 1, and J.N. Sarkar, ed., *History of Bengal*, Vol. 2, Dhaka, 1948, *passim*.

quarter of the sixteenth century to an area which still included Chittagong and some of the eastern Gangetic delta. The decline of the Bengal Sultanate may have contributed to the donning by Arakan's Buddhist rulers of an Islamicised mantle; they adopted dual titles—one Burmese, the other Islamic—such as Minpalaung/Sikandar Shah, Minyazagyi/Salim Shah, and Minhkamaung/Hussain Shah, and there is some suggestion that they claimed succession to the rulers of Gaur.⁵⁵

While Chittagong, the principal port of early sixteenth century Bengal, was in the second half of the same century in Arakanese hands, both Satgaon and Pipli passed in the mid-1570s to Mughal control. Not long after the campaigns of the Mughal general Munim Khan (1575–76), one observes too the shift of most trade from Satgaon to Hugli—which was a few kilometres downriver—on account of the progressive silting of the waterway which served the former port. The shift of the Portuguese settlement to Hughli was legitimised by Akbar's 1579 *farman* to Pero Tavares, and Hugli had by the late 1580s supplanted Satgaon not only in function but in name—since the Portuguese now term Hughli *porto pequeno de Bengala*.⁵⁶

While Satgaon-Hugli, Pipli, and earlier Chittagong are treated in the historiography on the sixteenth century principally as centres of Portuguese activity, it is suggested here that Asian trade and shipping in all probability continued from each of these. Unlike on Coromandel, the principal Asian trading centres in Bengal were *not* really distinct from centres of Portuguese activity. It is only at the close of the sixteenth century, when the Portuguese were expelled from Chittagong by Arakan's rulers, that this port emerges more or less free of a Portuguese presence. But this is illusory, for very soon after, Portuguese trade from Cochin and Nagapattinam resumes to Dianga—which was in effect a suburb of Chittagong. This trade persists well into the seventeenth century—despite a further interruption in 1607.⁵⁷

It remains for us to amplify on how the four elements specified earlier, the changing local context, Portuguese official, and unofficial activity in Bengal, and changes in the partner regions contributed to the evolution of the structure of the sixteenth century Asian trade from Bengal. The conventional accounts lay stress on two factors—namely, the so-called *cartaz* system, and Portuguese piracy, as fundamentally determining the fate of Asian trade. One can find instances wherein the *cartaz* system was used by the Captains of

⁵⁵ Collis *et al.*, 'Arakan's Place in the Bay,' *op. cit.*; also see G.E. Harvey, *History of Burma*, London, 1925, pp. 140–46.

⁵⁶ See, among other references, Winius, 'The "Shadow-Empire" of Goa,' *op. cit.*, pp. 93–94.

⁵⁷ H. Terpstra, *De Vestiging van de Nederlanders aan de Kust van Koromandel*, Groningen, 1911, pp. 23–24, 57–61; António Bocarro, *Década 13 da história da Índia*, 2 Volumes, Lisbon, 1876, pp. 431–32. After a massacre of the Portuguese at Dianga in 1607, peace between Arakan and Goa was officially declared only in 1617, though (as was frequently the case) trade resumed before this. Cf. the letter from the Conde do Redondo to the King of Portugal, dated 8 February 1618, in R.A. de Bulhão Pato, ed., *Documentos Remettidos da Índia*, Vol. 4, Lisbon, 1893, pp. 251–52.

the *naus* of the *carreira de Bengala* to impede Asian trade—such as, the incident involving Diogo Rebelo at Satgaon in 1535.⁵⁸ Somewhat earlier, in March 1526, there is the case of a ship from Bengal (it is unclear whether Chittagong or Satgaon) which was captured by the Portuguese captain of the Coromandel coast, one Manuel da Gama, off Kayal. Da Gama found that this ship carried no *cartaz*, and consequently took action against it. From the ship, the Portuguese unloaded goods including 35 bales of sugar, 168 sacks of rice, 36 *faracolas* of long pepper, and 86 bales of textiles, besides diverse merchandise amongst which are mentioned six Bengal eunuchs.⁵⁹ The Portuguese captain sold all the goods on board, and not content with this, even sold the Muslim *nakhuda* and his family (who were on board) into slavery. A detailed account exists into slavery. A detailed account exists of the sale of some of the textiles in Cochin; these amounted to 52 *corge* (a unit of twenty pieces), very largely *chautars*, and were sold for a nominal price, since most had become damp and rotten.

There is, however, some doubt as to whether one can, on the basis of available evidence, conclude that the Portuguese followed a systematic policy of substituting Asian shipping by their own. We have seen that the *naus* of the *carreira de Bengala* traded at Satgaon and Chittagong together with other shipping, and that even the introduction of the concession system in the ports of Bengal in the 1560s did not really constitute (unlike in the Coromandel case) an attempt at monopolisation. It is probable though that the increase in customs-duties at Melaka, followed by the imposition of exit duties in that port late in the sixteenth century would have served as a disincentive on at least that one line of trade. Can one conclude from this that the effect of the official Portuguese presence in Asian waters on Asian trade from and to Bengal would have been more or less benign? This too seems less than certain; *cartazes* as well as licenses of other sorts were not given freely to all, and frequently proscribed (at least in theory) the carriage of certain goods, and required ships to call at Portuguese customs-houses. Again, in terms of the availability of licenses, certain groups within Portuguese India—serving officials, and their *casado* relatives—may be thought to have had superior access, as emerges clearly from the situation in respect of the Cochin-Bengal trade in the 1540s.⁶⁰ The impact of this element—the risk run by navigating without a *cartaz*—is likely to have varied with the route under

⁵⁸ For this incident, see Correia, *Lendas*, Vol. 3, 'Lenda do Governador Nuno da Cunha,' Ch. 66, p. 649. These ships are described as 'duas naos grandes de Cambaya, que avia tres dias que erão chegadas com muytas mercadarias, pera venderem e comprarem'.

⁵⁹ ANTT, Núcleo Antigo, No. 808, 'Livro da receita e despesa de Manuel da Gama, feitor e capitão da costa de Coromandel, anno de 1526,' fls. 2–6. I thank Luís Filipe Thomaz for bringing this document to my notice.

⁶⁰ Cf. Goertz, 'The Portuguese in Cochin,' *op. cit.*, n. 20. On the other hand, the Portuguese were obliged, when at peace with the Samudri raja, to give merchants resident in his territories *cartazes* for a 'customary' payment of 13 *panams*, see J.F. Judice Biker, ed., *Colecção de Tratados e Concertos de Pazés*, Vol. 14, Lisbon, 1887, pp. 28–31.

consideration. For example, the early seventeenth century account of François Pyrard suggests that the trade of Asian merchants between Bengal and the Maldives had not been substantially affected.⁶¹ Again, in the close of the sixteenth century and early seventeenth century, one encounters references to Asian-owned shipping from Chittagong to Calicut, from the ports of Bengal to Bandar Aceh, and (from the mid-sixteenth century on) from Bengal to first Sunda Kalapa and then Banten.⁶² On at least some of these routes, shippers were aware that they were contravening the rules of the game as understood from the standpoint of the *Estado da Índia*—but this was a risk they were apparently willing to run, given the weak official Portuguese presence east of Cape Comorin.

The major reorientations occur in respect of trade from Bengal to areas west of the Cape. In the early sixteenth century, several references may be encountered to shipping between Chittagong and the Red Sea ports, and between the Bengal and Gujarat ports. While the odd reference to the latter crops up even into the 1530s, mentions of direct trade on these routes disappear wholly by the mid-sixteenth century. Trade between Bengal and the western Indian Ocean (from which one excludes the Maldives and Malabar) at the close of the sixteenth century seems to consist essentially of two streams. First, the coastal trade down the Coromandel coast, to Cochin and finally Goa; one may imagine that some of the goods on this stream were redistributed from Goa to Gujarat and the Konkan by other coastal *cafilas*. The second was the limited trade from Hughli to Ormuz, carried on by *casado* elements.⁶³ There is thus some justice in C.R. De Silva's contention that 'during the sixteenth century . . . [Portuguese] dominance was much less marked in the Bay of Bengal region than in the Arabian Sea'.⁶⁴ This dual structure is particularly manifest when one examines the evolution of trading links *between* the two maritime regions. In this sense, the Lusitanian presence *did* affect Asian trade from Bengal—although private Portuguese did not always fill the vacuum left by their Asian counterparts.

As for trade within the Bay of Bengal, the major changes occur principally as a consequence, first of the rise of new ports and centres elsewhere on the littoral, and second, because changing local circumstances (local being used in the sense of within Bengal) redistributed outward bound traffic. The rise of Aceh from the mid-sixteenth century must be counted as a significant factor, for the export of textiles, rice and possibly slaves to this Sumatran port, counterbalanced by the import of Indonesian spices, copper, silver,

⁶¹ See Cunha Rivara, ed., *Viagem de Francisco Pyrard*, Vol. 1, pp. 168–69, 176–77, 222–23, *passim*.

⁶² *Viagem de Pyrard*, *ibid.*, Vol. 2, pp. 122–24; also see the references in note 37, *supra*.

⁶³ On the trade from Bengal to Ormuz, see Niels Steensgaard, *The Asian Trade Revolution of the Seventeenth Century*, Chicago, 1974, p. 197. Contrast this to the evidence on the Red Sea, *ibid.*, p. 90.

⁶⁴ C.R. De Silva, 'The Cartaz System and Monopoly Trading in the Bay of Bengal,' *Proceedings ICIOS II*, Section G, pp. 7–8 of the paper.

gold and war-animals was important not merely at the close of the sixteenth century but well into the century that followed.⁶⁵ To some extent, as in the Coromandel case, we may see the rise of trade from Bengal to Aceh as a diversion from Melaka. Where Melaka itself was concerned, Portuguese sources continue to talk of quite a considerable commercial traffic from Bengal to this port at least as late as the 1540s.⁶⁶ There is some suspicion of a decline thereafter, and this possibly contributed to the problems of rice supply faced by the Portuguese at Melaka in the last two decades of the sixteenth century.⁶⁷ To explain this decline (which one can only tentatively infer in the present state of documentation), one must turn in part to the decline of independent Asian shipowners based at Melaka by the end of the sixteenth century, as well as the somewhat short-sighted policies followed by the Portuguese, not only the captains of Melaka, but their superiors at Goa and in Europe.⁶⁸

Before concluding, it is worth commenting briefly on the see-saw process within the Bay, wherein the rise of one port could mirror the decline of another. While it has been usual to ascribe the decline of Chittagong to the shift of Portuguese attention westward—to Hughli and Pipili—and to the decay of Gaur, one may note in addition that the fading importance of this port of eastern Bengal occurs simultaneously with the rise of the Arakan port and capital of Mrauk-u. To the extent that the two ports performed very similar functions, one can argue—however guardedly—that the expansion of Mrauk-u, under first Minbin and then his successors could well have diverted capital, prestige, and eventually commerce from Chittagong.⁶⁹ This could be an additional factor to be borne in mind while analysing the re-orientation of Bengal's external trade.

III

In the second half of the seventeenth century, the detailed records of the Dutch and English East India Companies have been used to shed considerable light on the trade of Asian and Luso-Indian merchants and shippers operating

⁶⁵ Besides the sources cited in note 39 above, see Denys Lombard, *Le sultanat d'Atjéh au temps d'Iskandar Muda, 1607–1636*, Paris, 1967, pp. 109–11, 116–17, *passim*, and W. Ph. Coolhaas, ed., *Pieter van den Broecke in Azië*, Vol. 1, The Hague, 1962, pp. 174–75.

⁶⁶ Thus, see the letter from Pero Barriga at Melaka to the Portuguese King, 3 August 1527, *ANTT*, CC, III/9/94; another letter from Pero de Faria to the King, Melaka, 22 November 1540, *ANTT*, CC, I/68/86; finally a letter from a *casado* of Melaka, Cristóvão Martins to the King, dated 27 January 1552, *ANTT*, CC, I/87/72. All these may be found transcribed in Thomaz, *Os Portugueses em Malaca*, *op. cit.*, Vol. 2, Docs. 35, 122, 177.

⁶⁷ On this problem, see *inter alia*, *Biblioteca Nacional de Lisboa*, Fundo Geral, Códices 1979/1980; also *AHU*, Códice 281, fls. 113v–114, 318v–19; Códice 282, fls. 67v, 80, *passim*.

⁶⁸ On this, also see my study, 'The Coromandel-Melaka Trade in the Sixteenth Century,' *op. cit.*, n. 5.

⁶⁹ Thus, see Guerreiro, *Relação Anual*, Vol. 1, pp. 42–47; also see M.S. Collis, 'The City of Golden Mrauk-u,' *Journal of the Burma Research Society*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 1923, pp. 244–56.

from the Bengal ports of Hughli and Balasore. These merchants had succeeded by the last third of the seventeenth century in reviving some of the links that seem to have been dormant a half-century earlier—including those to Gujarat and to the Red Sea.⁷⁰ Other areas of strength for these traders included commerce with Aceh and Mergui, besides trade on the coastal routes to lower Burma and Arakan on the one hand, and Coromandel on the other. If one accepts the view that the Portuguese had wholly (or very largely) dismantled and replaced networks of Asian trade from Bengal in the period 1520 to 1630, then this rise to prominence of Asian merchants—Gujaratis, Armenians and also a substantial number of Persians—is puzzling in the extreme.⁷¹

It appears to me that the main reasons for the long-held view of Portuguese commercial monopoly in sixteenth century maritime Bengal are two. First, scholars of an earlier generation believed Portuguese domination in Asian waters as a whole to be the case in the sixteenth century, and could not justify treating Bengal as an exception. Second, the relatively late entry of the English and particularly the Dutch into Bengal was viewed as a consequence of Portuguese strength in that area. Where the first of these two is concerned, there is every reason to question the picture of extensive Portuguese control in sixteenth century Bengal, now that scholars have come to question the reality of this control in other parts of India and Asia—Aceh, western Java, Coromandel, Malabar and Gujarat. As for the second reason, this requires more careful analysis. Did the VOC in fact enter Bengal trade relatively late because of Portuguese strength in that area?

Om Prakash's analysis of early Dutch contacts with the region suggests a far more complex set of factors at work. First, Bengal textiles were not perceived by the Dutch as of paramount importance for the Indonesian market—in which they were fundamentally interested up to about 1650. The great surge of Dutch trade and interest in Bengal begins in mid-century (more precisely, after 1640), when the Japanese (and later the European) market for Bengal silks and cottons becomes the central focus of the VOC. Besides, as Dutch records from Coromandel demonstrate, given the limited extent to which the Dutch were interested in Bengal goods in the period up to 1630, they thought themselves well served at Masulipatnam itself. Marten Ysbrantsen, Dutch chief on the Coromandel, was quite emphatic in noting that trade from Pipli to Masulipatnam (largely the province of Persian

⁷⁰ The trade to the Red Sea and to Surat which one observes in the second half of the seventeenth century were, however, almost wholly in the hands of either Surat-based merchants, or Gujaratis settled in Bengal. Cf. Om Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal, 1650–1717*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Delhi, 1967, Appendix F, pp. 546–82.

⁷¹ See the somewhat curious portrayal of relations between Asians and Portuguese at Hughli in Das Gupta, 'Indian Merchants and the Indian Ocean,' *op. cit.*, n. 5, p. 429.

merchants) supplied the latter centre with Bengal goods at a perfectly tolerable price—so long as the quantities required were not excessive.⁷² Would it be an exaggeration then to conclude that what deterred the VOC from entering Bengal up to the 1630s was not Portuguese commercial dominance, but the continuing vivacity of Asian trade?

⁷² Ysbrantsen's remark is cited in Om Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal, 1630–1720*, Princeton, 1985, p. 36 ff. Also see 'Informatie van diversche landen en eylanden gelegen naer Oost-Indie . . .', in J.K.J. de Jonge ed., *De Opkomst van het Nederlandsch Gezag in Oost Indië (1595–1610)*. The Hague, 1865, Vol. 3, pp. 150–52: 'The Portuguese, I think, from what I understand, have a fort on land there [in Bengal, ie., Siriam], but there are enough other places for us to trade, [only] the clothes or cotton textiles that are made there, I mean to say, one can well procure them at Masulipatnam . . .'.