**Association of Eastern States of South Asia (Part II)**

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Shipping and maritime travel around the Bay of Bengal has a long history. While the Portuguese had first conquered parts of the western coast of the subcontinent in 1498, the capture of Melaka in 1511 essentially started Portuguese activity on the east of the Cape of Comorin. Clearly, Bengal was the initiative of Portuguese privateers for numerous reasons: (1) to escape judicial action for crimes committed; (2) to evade religious persecution spearheaded by the growing power of the Inquisition and (3) simply to make more money than that offered by the unreliably paid salary of the state. However, their prime reason was the increasing commercial vitality of the region during that period, particularly with the growing importance of intra-Asian trade.

The Portuguese in the region came to be centred, not only around Hooghly (now Kolkata Port) and Chittagong but also the smaller deltaic ports of Bakla, Sripur, Loricul, Dianga and Sandwip. These served as operational bases. They reached Chittagong, the most important port of Bengal, in the early 16th century. By 1535, they had acquired the right to establish a customs house there.

By the early 17th century, the Portuguese in the south-eastern delta had two kinds of settlements. The larger and the relatively long-lasting ones, like Chittagong, Dianga, Chandecan, Sripur, Sandwip and Syriam, and then the seasonal and functional settlements, like Chargin and Anga. In 1632, the Portuguese rule of Hugly came to an end after the sacking of the port by Shah Jahan’s forces. The Dutch, and then the English, began exerting their influence over the region from the early 18th century.

The second “business” of the Portuguese (and the Dutch and English after them) was piracy. The south-eastern delta region of early modern Bengal became home to a significant population of Portuguese privateers, adventurers and renegades, who were seeking opportunities outside the control of the Portuguese state. Though they wreaked havoc on coastal Bengal through slave raids, these privateers significantly contributed to the economic and political life of the region, and, even if, for short periods, individual Portuguese men commanded territorial units and significant power in the region. The region was ideal for pirates—rich and busy trade routes inadequately protected by strong states and navies, a maze of islands crisscrossed by narrow straits that created commercial bottlenecks, and coasts lined with dense mangrove swamps that provided safe havens for outlaws. The heyday of piracy occurred between 1750 and 1860.

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Various factors led to the rise of the slave raids in Bengal. Despots understood that foreign slaves were preferable to an enslaved indigenous population if the economics was attractive enough. Moreover, semi-skilled/skilled slaves were also required in the newly acquired uncivilised lands. The budding Dutch Empire’s spice plantations and mines demanded countless slaves. The Aceh Sultanate of Sumatra also required many slaves to expand its plantations and toil in its tin mines. With her millions of civilised citizens, Bengal could meet such growing demand. Indian slaves were also prized for skills in crafts and textiles and were dispatched even to new African colonies.

The port city of Chittagong became the nerve centre for Portuguese operations in the region, critical for supporting their new colonies in South East Asia, especially after Shah Jahan expelled them from Hooghly for wanton cruelty. However, within a century, the Dutch eclipsed Portuguese power. The Portuguese consequently supplicated to the Rakhine kingdom (in today’s Myanmar), despite clashes in the past. Sandwiched between the Mughal Empire and the Burmese kingdom, the Maghs believed in the offence being the best defence. The Portuguese navy would be a critical component of this strategy. Moreover, the raids and slave trade would also be a good source of income. The raids commenced around the 1610s: many armadas disgorged Portuguese and Magh marauders into Bengal. Their savagery was terrible and the term Hamard (from “Armada”) entered the lexicon as a word for a loathsome criminal. The Maghs were also skilled seafarers and operated fast war-boats called Jelias that could sail up the Delta. Many towns and villages were deserted in fear or depopulated by the raids by these river pirates. The initial Mughal responses were largely ineffective: their navy was weaker in comparison, and the Rakhine terrain was conducive to predatory raids.

In 1663, the Bengal province was in trouble. The recent succession wars had disrupted the whole Mughal empire and the raids were inflicting great damage. The previous governor, Mir Jumla, had died following a disastrous war with the Ahoms (an ethnic group from the Indian states of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.) The new governor, Shaista Khan, was Emperor Aurangzeb’s uncle. His commendable record had been wrecked by Shivaji, the enraged Emperor who had banished his kinsman to tottering Bengal. Nevertheless, Shaista Khan set out to work immediately; ending the threat from the seas was of paramount importance. There was the matter of revenge too: Prince Shuja and his family had sought asylum with the Rakhines after he was defeated by his brother Aurangzeb in the succession wars. Accounts speak of the Rakhine king treacherously murdering Shuja and his sons and violating Shuja’s daughter, who later committed suicide. Shaista Khan was tasked with settling the blood debt and recovering any surviving members of Shuja’s family.

Shaista Khan quickly beefed up the imperial infrastructure: forts and public works were commissioned, and armies and naval squadrons were raised. He also secured Dutch support. In 1665, the Mughals captured the strategic island of Sandwip from the Rakhines. Annexing Chittagong was a key objective, Shaista Khan utilised a brewing dispute between the Portuguese and the Rakhines. He convinced the Portuguese to ditch their capricious masters: the Portuguese would be truly appreciated by the more composed and business-like Mughals. Apparently, a large bribe also helped. The Portuguese defected and moved en-masse to Dacca. The Rakhine forces quickly consolidated themselves in Chittagong but Shaista Khan sent an army overland, marching parallel to a combined Mughal-Portuguese navy headed for Chittagong. The combined assault destroyed the Rakhine forces.

This victory did not eradicate piracy in the Bay of Bengal and adjacent rivers, incidentally even today, sea and river pirates prey on Rohingya boats and Bangladeshi fishermen. However, the loss of Chittagong and Portuguese support was a mortal blow. The Maghs did not possess the know-how to build and operate large warships, and they had suffered great losses in the war. Moreover, Shaista Khan had built up a very potent navy. The Rakhines could not prey as they did before. The rump kingdom shambled on, wracked by internal strife and dominated by mercenaries, till it was annexed by the Burmese in 1784. Bengal, however, rebounded under Shaista Khan’s long and able stewardship.

From the 18th century onward, the diverse Portuguese population, their descendants and the mixed-race descendants of the Portuguese and other European adventurers in Bengal, gradually got subsumed by the expanding British Empire in the region. A close look at both West Bengal and Bangladesh’s culture and memory even today reveals remnants of their legacy, though in a much-muted form.

***(To be continued)***

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