

**THE PORTUGUESE, INDIAN OCEAN
AND EUROPEAN BRIDGEHEADS 1500-1800:**

Festschrift in Honour of Prof. K.S. Mathew

Edited by:

**Pius Malekandathil
Jamal Mohammed**

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DECLINE OF THE PORTUGUESE NAVAL POWER : A STUDY BASED ON PORTUGUESE DOCUMENTS

K. M. Mathew

Portugal was the spearhead of European expansion. It was the Portuguese who inaugurated the age of renaissance-discovery and thus initiated the maritime era of world history. There is hardly any period in world history as romantic in its appeal as this ' Age of Discovery ' and hence it is of perennial interest. The Portuguese achievement in that age is a success story which has few parallels. That they achieved what they set forth - "possessing the sources of the spice-trade and its diversion to European markets" -is a great feat for a country of her size, population and resources. If the Portuguese had not evolved the great '*nau*' which could withstand the buffeting of the mysterious Atlantic tides and carry materials for the long, unknown and perilous voyages , Columbus' historic voyage might have been a mere dream.

The discovery of the sea-route in 1498 was one of the greatest events for a small but enterprising nation. Vasco da Gama's voyage was the longest on the high-seas to that date. The total distance from Lisbon to Calicut and back was approximately 22000 miles. His voyage was the climax of a century of determined navigation and exploration by Portugal, masterminded by one of the greatest seafarers and statesman of the sea , Prince Henry , appropriately surnamed as Navigator. Da Gama's feat of navigation with his hostile crew sailing at the

mercy of winds and storms, fired the imagination of the Portuguese poet Luis de Camoens who wove the tale of the Lusitanian seafarers in the narrative of a historic voyage. Da Gamas's arrival at Kappat near Calicut in May 1498 marks a unique watershed and opening of a new chapter in Indian history. It became the harbinger of modern organised naval power in Indian waters and da Gama became the first discoverer of the true means of utilizing sea - power as the foundation of colonial power.

From the point of view of the results that followed, this voyage had far-reaching consequences. It inaugurated what Sardar K.M. Panikkar called the 'Vasco da Gama epoch of Asian History', which down to the emergence of America and Japan as major naval powers at the end of the 19th century, was an age of maritime power, of authority, based on the control of the seas by the nations of Western Europe. The discovery made radical changes in the economic balance of the world and placed Portugal in a unique position. Portugal became the mistress of the Eastern Sea-route and they looked upon the sea as their own. Lisbon became the emporium of world-trade with the East.

The Portuguese were the first to have understood the concept of sea-power and evolved a naval strategy for the effective control of the Indian sea. Their aim was to break the monopoly of Muslim trade and to reach the source of the lucrative spices. However, the Portuguese hold on the Indian mainland was confined to coastal areas, within the range of the guns of their ships and their fortresses. Strangely enough, they held the smallest areas in India. Viewed from this angle, there is a peculiar interest to the story of the Portuguese in India. The mastery of the Indian sea passed to them in 1504, when they gained a decisive victory of great importance over the Zamorin of Calicut. Since then, their naval supremacy enabled them to dominate the high-seas and to deny free navigation to others by their own concept of sovereignty of the sea. They forced others to purchase their security passports- '*Cartazes*'. Though their political control remained restricted to scattered coastal areas, it did

attempt, if not necessarily achieve, some political and maritime unity, which had a very significant consequence.

Afonso de Albuquerque consolidated the Portuguese rule in the early 16th century and selected Goa in 1510 as the main base on the Western coast. Since then the Portuguese dominated the coast. However it is surprising that this domination did not continue beyond 1570, by which time they began declining.

If the 16th century had made the Portuguese the wealthiest, the same century also saw the Portuguese sink into an insignificant power. In fact the seeds of this decline were sown much earlier. The position of Portugal deteriorated under King John III when he introduced the ill-famous Inquisition and from the mid-16th century there began a period of quick and profound decline¹. King Sebastian tried to save the situation by undertaking an expedition to Africa, but his death in the battlefield was a great blow, out of which the Portuguese never recovered. In view of this tragic event, we notice a weak naval activity since 1578². The Portuguese met opposition from all sides, found their trade return on the decrease and thus they were not able to maintain a naval establishment in the East. By the beginning of the 17th century, the Portuguese power began to show definite signs of decline and their navy, once superb and splendid, became the glory of the past. A number of factors seems to have contributed to the decline of the Portuguese power in the East. An attempt is made in this paper to critically study the source materials available in the Archives of Goa, Portugal and France etc. An analysis of the factors reveals the many-sided degeneration of the Portuguese domination in the Indian waters.

Union of Portugal with Spain(1580-1640) and its Echo in the distant Indian Waters.

The amalgamation of Portugal under the Spanish domination had its echo and serious repercussions in the Indian waters. What happened in 1580 was that the fate of the Portuguese was tied with the Spaniards. When the Spanish ruler prohibited the protestant merchants of Amsterdam (Holland) and England from purchasing Asiatic goods at Lisbon, the latter

were naturally resented and turned to India not only to punish the Spanish King, but also to collect the Eastern commodities now under the Spanish protection. "The capture of India seemed to Holland a continuation of the just revolt against Portugal"³. The Dutch also wanted to try their hand and propagate a new religion. They collected a good deal of nautical information and charts and even got published the Portuguese '*roteiros*' on navigation. In 1595, when three Dutch ships also rounded the Cape of Good Hope and broke forth into the Indian waters, the Portuguese, whose power depended on the absence of a rival naval power, were unable to check the new-comers and were destined to collapse. The Spanish ruler Philip II was pre-occupied with domestic problems and could not help in the maintenance of Portuguese power in India. He could not even send enough men to India to defend the Portuguese possessions against the increasing attack of their enemies. The Portuguese were neither strong nor numerous enough and therefore they had to yield. The *Estado da India* suffered from indecision and delay. During the 60 years of the Portuguese union with Spain, the Portuguese power received a hard blow from the enemies of Spain and it left a scar which had never been fully healed⁴. The destruction of the Spanish Armada at the hands of the English meant a great setback to the Spanish naval supremacy, under which the Portuguese were now only a part. Many of the Portuguese fleets were also destroyed in the action.

The arrival of the Dutch in Indian waters in 1596 was followed by a long struggle between them and the Portuguese and altogether the Portuguese lost 1429 men, 155 ships and property worth 7500,000 *xerafins*⁵. In 1603, the Dutch blocked Goa and even though abortive, it marked the beginning of a struggle which in the next 70 years shattered the Portuguese power in India⁶. The Portuguese began to loose their possessions one after another to the Dutch. "The take over of Cranganore by the Dutch was the beginning of the end of the Portuguese power in Malabar, if not of their Eastern empire itself"⁷. During 1611 and 1615, the Portuguese suffered defeats of Cambay and Surat. Ormuz was lost in 1622 and Emperor Shah Jahan took

Hughli in 1629. Malacca and Jafnapatanam (Sri Lanka) were lost in 1640 and 1658 respectively. In 1656 Cannanore was taken by the Dutch and that was followed by Nagapatanam, Kayamkulam and Quilon in 1661. Bombay had to be ceded to the English in 1661 as part of the dowry of Catherine of Bragança. In fact, it was a face-saving measure and by it the Portuguese were purchasing safety from the English at a high price. In 1670, the Arabs plundered the Portuguese Diu which had earlier resisted the greatest onslaught of the Muslim forces in 1538 and 1546 by Governor João de Castro. The Marathas took back Bassein in 1739 and even stormed the very wall of Goa. All what remained after these conquest were captured by the rulers of Ikkeri in South Kanara who captured the Portuguese forts of Mangalore, Bhatkal and Honawar and thus effectively cut off the supply line of rice to Goa⁸.

Weak Rulers and Reversal of Policies.

The successors of King Manuel I were men of mediocre talent and they selected Viceroys/Governors of the same type who being not good diplomats contributed only to the ruin of the Portuguese in the East. "Truely the Portuguese have bred heroes in place of diplomats and poets in place of capitalists⁹". The wise policy of Afonso de Albuquerque visualized a vast Portuguese empire in the East based on imperial notions. But his successors were only inferiors and they set aside the policy as impracticable and changed the role of the Portuguese as traders and took up a career of conquest not backed by enough resources. This proved fatal in the long run¹⁰. João de Castro was really the last great Portuguese Governor in India and with his death in 1548, the Portuguese naval power declined definitely in the Eastern Seas. Finding it impossible to hold the Indian Ocean-supremacy the Portuguese had turned their attention to Brazil, which was nearer to Portugal¹¹. It was difficult to find the heroism of the Portuguese of the times of Afonso de Albuquerque. But they still survived with their remaining pockets of Goa, Daman and Diu. Professor Plumb has rightly said that, "the Portuguese were the first to come and the last to go"¹².

The Role of the Native Rulers.

Tired of the Portuguese yoke and anxious to shake off their rule in India, the native rulers of the Indian coast sought support and alliances of the enemies of Spain and therefore of the Portuguese. They further weakened the Portuguese by sea and land¹³. The native troops also participated and added only confusion to the Portuguese. These troops who were earlier trained for the war by the Portuguese became masters of the situation. Mutiny and revolt became common.

Poor Resources.

The costly naval wars fought during 1580-1640 against the various powers had crippled the Portuguese economy completely and the ever decreasing and meagre revenues of India were fully absorbed in the continental wars of Europe fought by the Spanish rulers. The Portuguese who had become rich suddenly due to outside resources had nothing to fall back in the economic race which was won by her rivals with greater resources than her own.¹⁴ The fall of Vijayanagara in 1565 was a death-blow to the Portuguese commerce because since then the lucrative horse-trade between Goa and Vijayanagara declined¹⁵. Some amount of this trade continued with other native states like Bijapur and Ahmednagar and this helped the Portuguese economy to a certain extent.

Corruption, Negligence and Piracy.

Corruption, embezzlement and dishonesty prevailed everywhere. In one particular year, the officials of the *Casa da India* showed 17,000 names on the pay-roll when actually 4000 men were only sent to India¹⁶. The officials in India got poor salary, if at all they got regularly and hence they began to organise their own private expedition and trade. Everyone desired to make fast fortune by all means. The sudden acquisition of wealth dazzled and blinded the Portuguese and prevented them from seeing the real problems and they became slaves of their own glory. Vanity was the cause of her ruin. A letter from Goa to the King of Portugal dated 25/11/1552 said that "each one

considered only himself in India.... and there is no justice. The object is getting together of money by all means. Help us Senhor, help us Senhor, for we are sinking"¹⁷ The Viceroys, Governors and Captains of forts were traders and not rulers and they came to India to amass wealth. They neglected the *armadas* in India for which they had no money. It was not surprising that a Viceroy could collect 1 million *Cruzados* in his three-years term when his salary was hardly 30,000 *Cruzados*!¹⁸ Piracy was practised in the Eastern seas. One of the main assignments of the Portuguese fleets in India was to chase the Muslim pilgrim-ships in the Red Sea on their way back from Mecca. This not only led to a moral decline but was disastrous to the royal trade leading to great political weakness¹⁹.

Insufficiency of Manpower

Afonso de Albuquerque encouraged the policy of mixed marriage-the Portuguese men to marry native women so that the forts in India could be manned by honest men in India itself. He created a race of half-caste Portuguese by encouraging the Portuguese to marry the wives of Muslims who had been killed in the conquest of Goa. He also encouraged the Portuguese artisans like shipbuilders, rope-makers, gunners and other workers in the arsenal and dockyard to marry from Goa. His basic aim was to form a population who should be at once loyal to Portugal and would remain in India for life²⁰. This colonizing policy was carried out by Albuquerque for moral and political reasons²¹. It was one of his favourite schemes and was well suited to the inclinations of Portuguese people. But the success of this system depended on several factors. However this policy was ignored by his successors²². Year after year, Portugal sent fleets to India consisting of 3000 to 4000 men of which a few only returned to Portugal. Many perished in battles, shipwrecks and in bad weather²³. Thus Portugal had been drained of men and she had neither enough men nor resources to protect her Eastern possessions and naturally the Portuguese Eastern empire entered into degeneration and decadence. Their forts and factories deteriorated for want of men to guard them from the attack of their enemies.

Lack of Artillery and Ammunitions

The Portuguese naval forts on the coast were ill-equipped for want of money and neglect by their Captains. There was not enough artillery and the existing ones were insufficient. The gun powder and ammunitions were of inferior quality. The Captains of the forts pilfered artillery from the forts and supplied to private traders. In 1587 the Portuguese King tried to check these abuses by issuing necessary regulations which were often repeated, but of no avail²⁴. In 1596, when the new Viceroy D Francisco da Gama reached India and found that the artillery was in extreme short supply, he soon acquired some copper and ordered the manufacture of some artillery. In that year itself, the King had asked him to stop issuing of artillery to private persons as it was reported that a good quantity of artillery was stolen and even sold to the Muslims. No wonder that in 1596, when the Dutch entered the Indian waters with 11 ships, they could easily seize some Portuguese ships. Again in 1603, when the Dutch had blockaded Goa, the forts of Bardez and Gaspar Dias were unable to face them due to lack of weapons, even though the King had been advising the authorities in Goa to manufacture artillery in sufficient quantity.

Increasing Cost of Construction and Repair of Ships

By the end of the 16th century, the cost of shipbuilding and repair work in Goa rose sharply. One reason for this was that the Captains of the fortresses whose perquisites included falling and selling of local timber, always charged exorbitant prices. The Captains of Bassein and Daman sold the timber to the shipyard at 40 Xerafins per khandi, even though it cost them only 5 Xerafins²⁵. A letter from Goa in 1629 to the Portuguese East Indian Company reported that "there was no longer (in Goa) contractors who used to repair and refit Carracks. Nowadays, it is clear contrary, because they all went bankrupt and have no capital." By the beginning of the 17th century, the cost of repairing, caulking and careening of ships at Goa shipyard had almost doubled!

Shipwrecks and Lack of Ships

There was lack of ships of big tonnage and there were not enough ships to be sent to the help of a threatened spot. In fact, Portugal did not possess more than 300 ships at the height of her maritime glory (around 1536) and this was insufficient for supporting a far-flung sea-borne and trading empire with world-wide ramifications²⁶. As early as 1534 (15.11.1534) Admiral Martim Afonso de Souza wrote to the King of Portugal a confidential letter in which he discounted the affairs of the Portuguese navy in India in the 16th century. He felt that the Portuguese navy was not in a position to maintain warfare, "even for three years as no person wished to serve in the *armada*." He gave a graphic account of overall decline and suggested immediate remedial measures. He advised that if the ships were laid up and repaired, "they would last ten thousand years."²⁷ Again Governor Castro wrote to King John III on 16.12.1546 giving a detailed report about the conditions of the Portuguese fleets in India. It throws light on the miserable state of the decline of the navy in India. The ruin was so much that the Governor had "no words to describe". "The ships were all rotten and eaten by a variety of worms (*buzano*)". He was sure that unless repair work was commenced very soon, "within three months, the entire fleet would perish". He felt that "since our fleet constituted the wall of our India, timely repair work was required".²⁸

By the end of the 16th century, the size of the annual fleets, which in the early days was 12 to 14 sails, was now reduced to five to six and sometimes even three. A large number of "abortive" voyages and maritime mishaps had reduced the Portuguese navy to the barest minimum. One of the causes for the loss of so many ships was the system of contract construction and repair of ships adopted by King Sebastian and Philip II. The Contractors used inferior materials for shipbuilding and the whole work was not at all done carefully and perfectly. The result was that during 1585-1597, ie during the first two contract periods, out of the 66 ships that sailed for India, only 34 returned safely²⁹. Ambitious naval construction made 'floating castles'

with excessive and improper size. This ruined the construction of ships. Most of these ships could not withstand the long voyages and wrecked on the way. "Not one Portuguese ship out of three returns safe from the voyage". The cup of Portuguese maritime disasters was full.

At the end of the 16th century, a *nau* of India-voyage could hardly make two voyages while the old *naus* had done ten to twelve round-voyages. To remedy this evil, it was ordered in 1570 that *naus* of India-voyages were not to exceed 450 tonnes, but the effect of this order was nullified by increasing the number of storeys of the ships as the capacity of the hold was not allowed to be increased³¹. When the Dutch and the English came to India to dispute the Portuguese naval supremacy, the Portuguese vessels were about a century behind in shipbuilding, naval equipments and tactics. The Portuguese ships were rotten and broken and this shook the very confidence of their navigation in India. On 3.11.1571 orders were issued for convoying of ships and election of Captains of the fleets; but all these belated measures could not arrest the progressive dismantlement of the Portuguese in the East.

On the basis of India House records, it was computed that during 1497-1612 (115 years) out of 806 ships that left for India, 620 ships (ie 75 ships per year) were during the initial period, 1497-1597. During the next period (1580-1612), 186 ships (ie 58 ships per year) came to India. During the period 1500-1579 (80 years) 31 ships were wrecked, but during the next 30 years, 35 ships were wrecked³². The total loss of ships during one century (1550-1650) was 130. During 1580-1592, ship-wreck was alarmingly high. Within a period of 12 years 1585-1597, out of 60 ships which left Portugal, 18 were wrecked, i.e 27.4% against 7.7% of the earlier period³³. During 1590-1592, out of 7 the ships that left Lisbon for Goa only 2 ships returned safely. By 1650, shipwrecks reached an alarmingly disastrous level³⁴. The loss of so many ships must have been a great strain on the Portuguese economy. During 1521-1551 itself, 31 *naus* were wrecked which cost about 33,52,150 *Cruzados*³⁵.

The particulars of movements of ships and shipwrecks etc, for the period 1585-1597 (hardly 12 years under Spanish domination) show that 22 ships (18 wrecked or lost and 4 burnt) were wrecked, 2 ships were seized by the enemies as against 66 wrecked, 6 burnt and 4 seized during the whole period. Thus it can be clearly seen that the cause of the decline and ruin of the Portuguese naval supremacy in India was internal and not completely external.

The main reasons for the loss of so many home-bound ships on the return voyage were the use of old ships for long voyages, willful, reckless and ambitious overloading, superficial and inadequate careening of ships, careless caulking work at Goa, greed of profiting and easy money by building cheap and unsafe vessels, abuse of overcrowding and untimely departure of ships. Among the other factors were the structural crankiness of the ships, shortage of trained and experienced sea-men, late leaving of the fleet (which were forced to abort the voyage and winter at Mocambique) and the stubborn behaviour of the Captains of the ship³⁶.

There were all kinds of allegations of inefficiency in the fitting of *armadas*. An enquiry held in Goa in 1630 revealed that the pilots and gunners were incompetent and they had in fact purchased their positions rather than secure them on merit and expertise. This fact was admitted by the King himself earlier in 1597³⁷. Lack of discipline on board the ships led to disagreement between the Captain and crew. The behavioural attitudes of the Captains also added to the problems. There were occasions when the pilot was not speaking with his colleagues! Hence the Royal Orders prescribed that they were to be punished seriously if they failed to consult each other amicably³⁸. There were all kinds of allegations which included that the ships were not properly equipped for war during the voyage and because of which they were the victims of plunder and enemy attack. There were not enough provisions of all types for long voyages and sometimes there were not even a spare set of sails³⁹. The rigging and tackles of ships were deficient and rotten.

It was the decadence in the art of shipbuilding and the art of navigation that caused the Portuguese decline in the East. Historian Oliveira Martin had very appropriately commented that "the Portuguese navy was lost even before the loss of national independence (1580), because the ships construction was bad, navigation was worse and because the ships were overloaded and the ignorants arrogated themselves as pilots. It was the sea which devoured the Portuguese ships and not the Dutch and the English"⁴⁰.

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