

SANJAY SUBRAHMANYAM

Charting a new course in history



the Transition of 1580-81." The transition to 60 years of Hapsburg rule in Portugal (1580-1640) and its implications to Western India was approached from a fresh new angle of "exploring the interaction between the wider system of international political alliances, and domestic political pressures, both in the case of the Portuguese and the Mughals to finally arrive at the conclusion that the transition must be viewed "as a moment not merely in Iberian history, but far more generally."

During a tour of Old Goa that had been organised for the delegates the 7th ISIPH the author had an opportunity to talk to Dr Subrahmanyam on some issues related to Indo-Portuguese History.

of international quality. "In Goa this year, the Province of the North got a better treatment, the Gujarat component still remains to be developed since it received a by-your-leave treatment."

As far as Indo-Portuguese history is concerned, Dr Subrahmanyam was of the opinion that in the 1980s a third position has been emerging in between the mainstream Portuguese writings of a "nationalistic" kind and the researchers of the "shock treatment" variety that had been produced in the late 1970s by international scholars like M N Pearson and T R D'Souza. These two ends of the ISIPH spectrum, so-called colonial and anti-colonial, are being increasingly given up in favour of producing state-of-the-art research dedicated to academic problems devoid of any ideological considerations.

Dr Subrahmanyam felt the need to "deghettoise" the Portuguese sources. He further opined that researches undertaken in the field should be of such a quality that even if they are taken out of the field, they should still be relevant.

One of his recently published articles which breaks new ground in the field of Indo-Portuguese historiography is entitled *The 'Kaffirs of Europe': A comment on Portugal and the historiography of European Expansion in Asia*, (*Studies in History*, 9, 1, n-2, 1993).

This article is devoted to an understanding of the role of the Portuguese in European

Portuguese Settlements in the Bay of Bengal c. 1600



between Asia and Portugal in the early modern period must relate the changing political, commercial and cultural role of Portugal in Asia to Asian processes, especially the intra-Asian elite movements which Subrahmanyam refers to in this article.

Similarly, here it may be mentioned that comparative in its treatment of the subject matter, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia* steers clear of both "the gilded legend produced by the nationalist Portuguese and the black legend produced by their detractors". It contests the generally believed notion that the Portuguese empire was structurally static after Albuquerque. This is done by highlighting the Portuguese expansion in the Bay of Bengal, South east and East Asia. It also breaks new ground by making a case for a study of the Portuguese presence in Asia as a part of the Asian history and not as something that was externally imposed on it.

In the pursuit of the third, more balanced level of Indo-Portuguese historiography that he advocates, Dr Subrahmanyam is of the opinion that Portuguese scholars must learn at least one Asian language to help them conduct research in Asia based on source material in the local languages.

Incidentally besides being fluent in Tamil, Hindi, English, Portuguese, French and Dutch, Dr Subrahmanyam can read Italian and Spanish. He is currently learning Persian.

Dr Subrahmanyam is of the firm opinion that high standards of historical research must be maintained at all costs. Asked to comment on the ongoing "celebrations" of the fifth centenary of the 'Discoveries', Dr Subrahmanyam declared that state sponsored celebrations are dangerous. They are hegemonic and potentially problematic. Part of the ongoing "commemoration exercise" in Portugal he felt, is directed to establish the Portuguese credibility in the world community. It isn't the historian's business to be hysterical and use emotionally charged language to rouse the people." He cautioned that history can serve as a powerful tool for political mobilisation and in this context spoke of the propagandist histories that the

Salazarist regime had produced and also of the recent controversy in which the Indian History Congress had been accused of "peddling a line" and the UP state government was involved in the rewriting of history text books.

The academic community, Dr Subrahmanyam opined, must write histories that are academically acceptable and of international standard and not state sponsored works.

Dr Subrahmanyam is currently engaged in biographical histories. Last year, one of his articles, "Quisling or cross-cultural broker? Notes on the life and worlds of Dom Martinho de Alemão, Prince of Arakan" was published in *Mare Liberum* (Portuguese, July 1993) as a part of a project entitled, "From Biography to History: Essays in the Social History of Portuguese Asia, 1500-1800" edited jointly by Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Kenneth Macpherson and promoted by the Portuguese National Commission for the commemoration of the Discoveries.

This biographical essay deals with a 17th century elite figure in exile. The difficult reconstruction of "the life and worlds" of this 17th century personality has been very competently effected by Dr Subrahmanyam

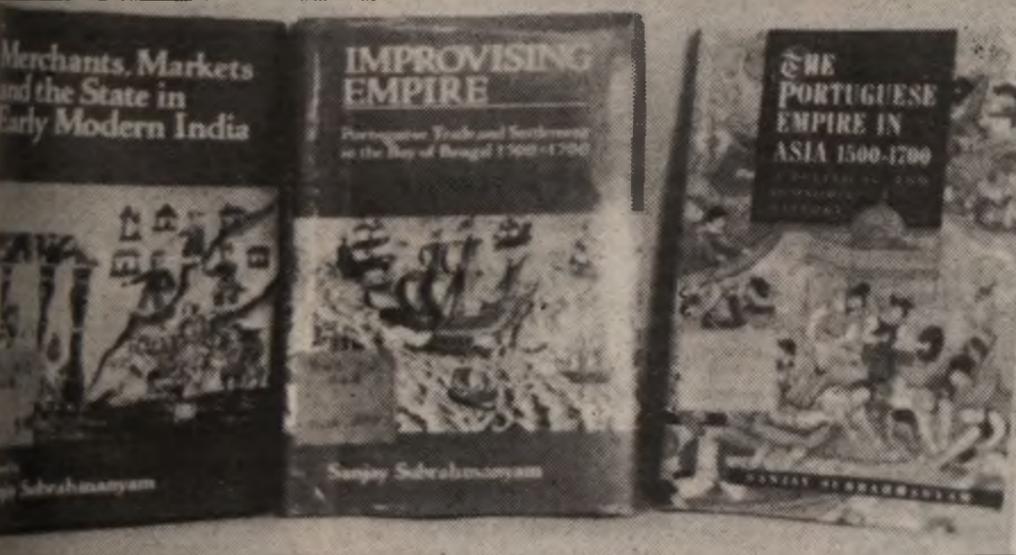
Currently, Dr Subrahmanyam is working on a biography of Vasco da Gama whom he describes as "a problematic figure" who left almost nothing by way of his own writings. "One can't hear his voice as a political actor inside Portugal". Dr Subrahmanyam further stated that one should not be terribly fixative about the year 1498. To him, Vasco da Gama's voyage was more of a preparatory venture, the real one was made later by Pedro Alvares Cabral.

Regarding new areas of research, Dr Subrahmanyam calls for further study on the Province of the North and Gujarat and also a discussion on agrarian societies during the period of European Expansion in Asia.

"Ultimately what matters is that you 'seize the moment' and push on with the business."



Subrahmanyam prefers to see himself as a historian of the modern period. It was in the political history of southern India in the 18th century that he stepped into the realm of Portuguese history, where a decade or so, he has left a mark. He has published several articles, he has written *The Political Economy of Southern India*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1992), *Imagined Empire: Trade and Settlement in the Bay of Bengal, 1500-1700* (Oxford University Press, 1992) and *The Portuguese in Asia: A Political and Social History* (London: 1993). His latest offering, is described as synthetic, interpretive of the political and history of the presence in the Pacific Oceans. It has been for the non-reader who is tracing the roots of the rise of the Portuguese as an important official and



● BOOKS, BOOKS...: A prolific writer, Dr Subrahmanyam has several books to his credit.

in the 16th century, had been followed by Goa and as far as the others in India up to the English language Subrahmanyam's book *Imagined Empire*, and *Settlement in the Bay of Bengal, 1500-1700*, is "the first in treatment of the Bay of Bengal Subrahmanyam's in the Bay of Bengal contributed to-of-the-art medieval and of India. Dr Subrahmanyam on "A Mughal world in

Invited to comment on the evolution of the ISIPH, Dr Subrahmanyam stated that at the beginning, academics was the excuse for using the organisation more for diplomatic purposes. He is of the opinion that in 1983 when he participated in the 3rd ISIPH as an observer, the proceedings were 70 per cent diplomatic and 30 per cent academic, today they have become more academic and less diplomatic. He expressed a hope that the academic component would increase further in subsequent meetings.

Regarding the 7th ISIPH, Dr Subrahmanyam was of the opinion that no new ground has been broken, rather there has been a consolidation of what has happened for the last eight years. At the last ISIPH meet at Macau, Dr Subrahmanyam felt that there had been, more papers

Expansion and its impact on the histories of Asia and Portugal. While presenting an alternative approach from those of the "so-called 'nationalists' and 'apologists,' Dr Subrahmanyam also undertakes an assessment of the recent works on this subject, written with an anti-colonialist perspective. This analysis reveals that the writings of M N Pearson, Immanuel Wallerstein and others project the Hegelian view of an unchanging Asia, the view that changes were introduced in Asia in the period from 1500 to 1750 only through the European agency.

This is according to Dr Subrahmanyam "but one step removed from the old portrayal of the fateful kiss planted by the European Prince Charming on the Asian Sleeping Beauty". Instead, any attempt to understand the relationship