

# Rhythms of the Portuguese presence in the Bay of Bengal

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In the physical seascape of the Indian Ocean, the Bay of Bengal is an enclosed region nestled between the ports of Nagapattinam and Aceh, historically lacking good harbours and anchoring spots. The hydrospace of the Bay includes and connects different bodies of water, such as Coranga and Combermere Bay, Andaman Sea, Gulf of Martaban, straits such as Cheduba, deltas of the Krishna, Godavari, Ganga-Brahmaputra and Irrawaddy rivers, and freshwater lakes like Pulicat and Chilka. Its long coastline is interrupted, among others, by mangrove forests in the north, and the Mergui archipelago and other islands to the east. Tropical cyclones periodically destroy its coastal habitats, yet various littoral communities resist, re-build and carry on with their socio-economic activities. Such aspects of continuity in the history of the Bay are well marked in observations and imageries of various travellers who moved across it. Between the 16th and 18th centuries, such narrations were often observed in the writings of Tomé Pires, Duarte Barbosa, Varthema, Nicholas Pimenta, Linschoten, Peter Floris, Thomas Bowrey and others. With its restrictive natural conditions for sailing and harbouring, the Bay established itself as a distinct region throughout history.



View of Fort St. George by Thomas and William Daniell painted in 1797. Source: British Library, Online gallery, Open access

## “Shadow empire” of Goa

The imagery of the Bay of Bengal and its nomenclatures are considerably present in the Portuguese descriptions of the 16th century. In 1572, Luis Vaz de Camões lyrically described the region from Mylapore (in present-day Chennai and known to the Portuguese as São Tomé de Meliapore) to Singapore, as one of exchanges and connections.<sup>1</sup> His epic poem was a precursor to chronicler João de Barros’s depiction of *Enseada de Bengal* [Bay of Bengal] published posthumously in 1615.<sup>2</sup> Yet another important Crown-sanctioned Portuguese work, António Bocarro’s *Livro das Plantas de Todas as Fortalezas Cidades e Povoações de Estado da Índia Oriental* (1635),<sup>3</sup> described the fortresses, cities and settlements of *Estado Português da Índia* [the Portuguese State of India]. Of all the regions of the Indian Ocean, it was only in the Bay of Bengal that the Portuguese Estado did not have a fortress. Except for Bocarro’s description of the settlement of Nagapattinam

and of the city of Mylapore (also known to the Portuguese as *São Tomé de Méliapor*), there is no description of the Bay or any of its ports in this official document. However, a Portuguese diaspora thrived and was part of commercial, ecclesiastical and local political networks on the coast and sometimes in the hinterland too. Earlier, G.D. Winius had observed that the Bay was a “shadow empire” of Goa, with Mylapore as its capital, and had credited it with being part of the Portuguese “informal” presence.<sup>4</sup> Sanjay Subrahmanyam understood the Bay as a frontier zone of the Estado.<sup>5</sup> Studying the region further, different transitions can be noticed between the 16th and 19th century, which give it a distinct appearance in the context of people, commerce and traditions.

A noticeable transition is the increasing movement of people around the Bay due to internal and external political exigencies of the Estado in the 16th and 17th centuries. The runaway functionaries and soldiers of the Estado chose niches, like Hooghly, as their new homes in the 16th century; places

far away from Goa or Malacca and difficult to access. From the second decade of the 17th century, the shorter ‘Brouwer route’ from South Africa to Java via the southern Indian Ocean was often preferred when travelling to Southeast Asia, thereby bypassing the Bay of Bengal. This factor also contributed to the relative segregation of the Bay. The contest for hegemony between the Estado and the Dutch Company took place due to the importance of the textile-spice trade and led to subsequent political retreat of the Portuguese in the 1660s. This led to the relocation of the Portuguese population from settlements like Nagapattinam and Mylapore to safe havens like Fort St. George of the English East India Company in Madras.

## The Portuguese of the Bay

These historical sources can also help us to observe the changing character of the Portuguese demography around the Bay. It was not only composed of run-away functionaries and soldiers who had moved

from Europe, but also increasingly comprised of the mixed ‘Eurasian’ population [*mestiços*] as well as the newly converted indigenous Christian population of the Bay. Religious and quasi-religious institutions like Bishopricks and *Santa Casa da Misericórdia*,<sup>6</sup> which had helped the Estado to connect with the Portuguese of the Bay, as well as different missionaries, also played an important role in furthering indirect Portuguese interests in the world of the Bay. They became the guiding light of the emerging Catholic community around the region. It is in this context that Mylapore, a place related with the martyrdom of St. Thomas, assumed importance and became the radial nerve of the Bay.

The small town of Mylapore<sup>7</sup> was also known for textiles, but had no harbour. Yet, it controlled the Bay in the 16th century and beyond, as far as political, commercial as well as religious aspects were concerned. The shrine of St. Thomas bonded the region’s Catholic Christians. It inspired devotion and prayers of the believers who sought protection from the furious winds and rough waters of the Bay.<sup>8</sup> The testimonies of Linschoten and Nicholas Pimenta record the same. Mylapore continued to enjoy the same aura even after it had reeled under Dutch and later French control. As late as the 19th century, Mylapore continued to be the cultural capital of Catholics in the Bay. In virtually every area where the Portuguese diaspora moved and settled, they carried their traditions and their reverence for St. Thomas, and eagerness to visit his shrine never died off. Despite the Portuguese transitions, continuities in terms of religious practices carried on. Ever since the 16th century, the Portuguese of the Bay had been treated differently by Goa when compared to those in the formal settlements of the Estado. However, they maintained a strong affiliation with Goa. It was a question of identity for the ones who were located in the Bay. Associating with Goa provided the feeling of a community and the sense of being ‘Portuguese’. The Portuguese presence in the Bay of Bengal underwent transitions and changes which were externally conditioned, while at the same time, they maintained age-old practices which can be noticed through the ever-growing importance of Mylapore, itself a place of deeply felt transformations since at least the 16th century.

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## Notes

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- de Barros, J. 1973. *Da Ásia*. Década Quarta, Parte Segunda, Livraria Sam Carlos, Lisboa, pp.450-474.
- de Bragança Pereira, A.B. 1937. *Arquivo Português Oriental*, Tomo IV, História Administrativa, Vol. II, 1600-1699, Parte I, Tipografia Rangel, Bastora.
- Winius, G.D. & Vink, M.P.M. 1991. *The Merchant-Warrior Pacified*, Oxford University Press, Newitt, M. 2005. *A History of Portuguese Overseas Expansion, 1400-1668*, Routledge.
- Subrahmanyam, S. 1990. *Improvising Empire: Portuguese Trade and Settlement in the Bay of Bengal, 1500-1700*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
- A document of 20th February 1614 reflects the connection between *Misericórdia* of Mylapore, Goa and Portugal. See de Bulhão Pato, R.A. 1880. *Documentos Remetidos da Índia ou Livros Das Monções*, Tomo III. Lisboa: Academia real das sciencias, p.66.
- João de Barros qualified Mylapore in the following manner: “Here many of them, tired of the spoils of war, settled down, not only because the country was very rich and afforded great traffic, but chiefly to renew the memory of the Apostle St. Thomas ...”. Barros, *Da Ásia*, Década Primera, Parte Primera, Livraria Sam Carlos, Lisboa, 1973, p. 303.
- In a letter of 27/5/1846, while enumerating the area and functions of the Bengal Mission, it was noted that “Araccan which geographically speaking belongs to Ava and Pegu has till lately been a part of the Bengal Vicariate”, and the latter was under Mylapore. Hosten Collection, Bengal IX-X, Vidyaajyoti Institute of Theology, Delhi.