

## The struggle for the Bay: The life and times of Sandwip, an almost unknown Portuguese port in the Bay of Bengal in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

### A B S T R A C T

*This article places Sandwip, a lesser known salt trading island and port in the Bay of Bengal within the nexus of global trade and politics in the seventeenth century. Sandwip is now a part of Bangladesh but at the time under review it was successively part of the medieval kingdoms of Bengal, Tripura and Arakan. Sandwip was, briefly, held by the Portuguese and is referred to in Portuguese annals as a 'minor' settlement, part of their 'informal empire' in the Bay. The article argues that we should not read such settlements of the Portuguese in Southasia as 'formal' or 'informal', 'minor' or 'major', and make thereby artificial distinctions between categories. We need to, instead, refocus and study Portuguese expansion as a multi pronged enterprise in which local exigencies and imperial vision were braided all over the Bay of Bengal.*

### Introduction

George Winius, in his analysis of the Estado da Índia, made a distinction between the formal Portuguese administration over overseas possessions emanating from Goa and the 'informal empire' that the Portuguese established in the Bay of Bengal<sup>2</sup>. This latter, he claimed, was a unique experiment carried out by merchant adventurers, missionaries, sailors and pirates with little formal sanction from Goa and Portugal. The general perception of this 'informal empire' is that it was formed of renegades. But Sanjay Subrahmanyam claimed that this informal empire, what Winius called the 'shadow empire', was surprisingly successful in extending trade from the Bay of Bengal to Malacca, Macau and beyond<sup>3</sup>.

Many of the 'minor' settlements from the 'informal' empire were commercially dynamic. The careers of the Portuguese Domingos Carvalho, Manuel de Mattos, Filipe de Brito de Nicote and Sebastiao Gonçalves y Tibau at Sandwip (and Syriam) show that these 'minor' settlements were a mix of these categories and therefore something in between 'formal' and 'informal', 'major' and 'minor'.

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<sup>2</sup> WINIUS, 1983.

<sup>3</sup> SUBRAHMANYAM, 1990.

The Bay of Bengal, on the Indian side, has two coastal areas significant for trade: one is the Coromandel, roughly the strip running from the south of present Orissa state on the eastern seaboard to Madras (present Chennai in India), this is the area studied by Subrahmanyam. This was the area that had millennia old links with Southeast Asia and China.

The other is Bengal, the area where the Portuguese first sent missions in the beginning of the sixteenth century<sup>4</sup>. As early as 1509, ships following Vasco da Gama had heard of the wealth of the chief eastern port of Bengal: Chhattagrama<sup>5</sup>. This was the emblematic outlet of the kingdom of Bengal, which the Portuguese later christened Porto Grande.

We should keep in mind that the Bengal ports traded more with the Burmese coast and less with Southeast Asia, as compared to the Coromandel ports, because the northern Bay was subject to cyclones. Sailing here was more of a coastal nature than the transoceanic kind that emanated from the Coromandel ports. The other difference from the Coromandel coast is that the major part of the Bengal coast is an unstable delta stretching from Sagor near present Calcutta up to Sandwip near Chhattagrama, for this is a coast carved by rivers, forming many islands and sandbanks (called *chars*) along their route. The fluvial network of Bengal resembles a high tension spider's web<sup>6</sup>. This distinctive coast, patterned by creeks and inlets through which the rivers flow into the Bay, impacted significantly on the nature of Portuguese expansion in the north Bay of Bengal. Then 'empire' here was based on small islands, *chars* (sandbanks), and the marshy delta, with river channels providing the chief means of communication. Hence ports held by the Portuguese here were riverine rather than ports on the open sea, and this peculiar location dictated a robust, effective and durable relation with the hinterland—both economically and politically. Portuguese historians and writers, cartographers and travellers kept this distinctive seascape in mind when commenting on the Bengal coast<sup>7</sup>.

There are three main arguments in this essay. One is that medieval Sandwip should be seen as part of the Arakan commercial system rather than as part of the trading system of Bengal. Sandwip's position as an autonomous Portuguese held island in the Bay of Bengal is therefore somewhat distinctive and sheds a new light on Portuguese 'informal' expansion in the Bay.

The second argument is that we need to add another dimension to the standard typology of the Portuguese settlements in India as formal/informal and major/minor. Our survey of Sandwip shows that it straddles both categories in its multiple roles: as gateway, as commercial depot, as port, as offensive launch pad, as defensive site and as strategic node.

Finally, this essay highlights the pivotal role played by lesser ports at a time when the map of the world was not drawn in favour of nation states and their more famous maritime gateways; and when small coastal kingdoms challenged the expansive ambitions of interior empires. Thus fairly insignificant ports played a role in determining the fortunes of both Asian and European commercial powers.

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<sup>4</sup> BOUCHON and THOMAZ, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> THOMAZ, 1995.

<sup>6</sup> MUKHERJEE, 2006a : 208.

<sup>7</sup> CAMPOS, 1919; BOUCHON and THOMAZ, 1998; CAMÕES, 2004; BARROS, 1552-1616.

## I. Introducing Sandwip

Sandwip is an island in present Chattagrama district in Bangladesh. It is located to the south of Chattagrama town. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries this region comprised the southeastern part of the province of Bengal. The southeastern part of Bengal is the delta, known as *bhati* or lowlands, and local rulers, known as the delta *rajās*, ruled the delta from the ports of the kingdom of Chandecan (Sagor, south of present Kolkata), Sripur (near Dhaka), Bakla (Bakergunge, also near Dhaka) and sometimes Sandwip. Chattagrama, to the far east of the delta, was sometimes also held by Tripura, a powerful medieval state, sometimes by Bengal and sometimes by Arakan, yet another important state to the east of Bengal. Chattagrama's history, therefore, is truly multi cultural.

Until the end of the sixteenth century, Bengal was an independent regional state ruled by the Husain Shahi sultans. In 1538 the Husain Shahis were defeated by the Afghans under Sher Shah, and Sher Shah himself was defeated by the Mughals in 1576. At the turn of the seventeenth century southeastern Bengal was conquered, the delta *rajās* defeated, and the whole state made a province of the Mughal empire. The sixteenth century, therefore, saw many powers in this area and in the period under review, Bengal's eastern borders remained very fluid.

Medieval Sandwip, called 'Sundiva', lay to the extreme east of the Bengal delta, in the area contiguous to the powerful medieval state of Arakan. It was not under the control of either the Husain Shahis or the Mughals, on the contrary it was held by the kings (*rajās*) of the delta and frequently by Arakan. Independent during the period under study, Arakan itself was absorbed into Burma (present Myanmar) in 1785. Lying in the shadowy frontier area between the states of Bengal and Arakan, Sandwip was therefore a contested area for local kings (delta *rajās*), the sultans of Bengal, the Afghans and the Mughals, on the one hand, and the Portuguese, the Arakanese and the Burmese kings on the other hand. Because it so often changed hands, and because it lies beyond national frames, the history of Sandwip is difficult to recover.

Travellers have left behind accounts of Sandwip, which lay on the route from Bengal to Pegu in Lower Burma. Nicolo di Conti passed this way in 1421-22 but since he does not mention Sandwip we assume that its importance postdates his visit<sup>8</sup>. The area is also not mentioned in one of the first Portuguese accounts of Bengal, dated 1521<sup>9</sup>.

Sandwip appears on the historical stage between 1521 and 1569. In 1569, Frederici sojourned here for forty days on his way back from Pegu and found it a very pleasant place, well run by a Muslim governor<sup>10</sup>. Ralph Fitch too travelled this way in 1586<sup>11</sup>. Soon after, Alexander Hamilton noted that a rupee spent at Sandwip yielded 580 lbs. of rice or eight geese or sixty poultry<sup>12</sup>. Sandwip possessed a diverse economy: it not only served as a refitting station for

<sup>8</sup> DE' CONTI, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> BOUCHON and THOMAZ op.cit.

<sup>10</sup> FREDERICI, 2004: 154.

<sup>11</sup> FITCH, 2004.

<sup>12</sup> HAMILTON, 1744, II: 23.

riverine traffic, but was also a source of many trade goods, such as rice, grain and cottons. Also, Sandwip was the major source of salt for much of the Bay of Bengal, exporting two hundred boatloads of salt each year<sup>13</sup>.

Cartography, too, gives us a clue to the importance of Sandwip. It is marked in de Barros' Map of Bengal in *Quarta Decadas da Asia* (Lavanha edition of 1615) and shown but not named in both Gastaldi's 1561 *Map of Asia* and Linschoten's map of 1596. Moreover, Dutch and French cartographers continued to represent it on their maps until 1747: Johann and Cornelius Blaeu in 1638 and Johannes Jansson in 1639 as well as in subsequent editions throughout the 1640s and 1650s, Nicholas Visscher in 1660, 1670, Nicholas Defer around 1685, Sanson *fls* (Nicholas Sanson d'Abbeville) in 1705/1720, and Bellin in 1747 marked 'Sundiva'<sup>14</sup>. This is clearly indicative of the importance of Sandwip to Europeans.

Portuguese literature mentions this area as well. In *Os Lusíadas* (1572, Tenth Canto, Stanza 1), Luis Vaz de Camões writes<sup>15</sup>:

121

GANGES, in which his Borderers dye lav'd;  
 Holding it as a certain principle  
 That (be they ne're such Sinners) they are sav'd,  
 Bath'd in those streams that flow from *Sacred Well*.  
 The City CATHIGAN would not be wav'd,  
 The fairest of BENGALA: who can tell  
 The plenty of this *Province?* but *it's post*  
 (Thou seest) is *Eastern*, turning the *South-Coast*.

122

The *Realm* of ARRACAN, *That* of PEGU  
 Behold, with *Monsters* first inhabited!

## II. Sandwip's Historical Moment

The received history of Bengal emphasizes Pipli, Balasore, Hugli, Chattagrama and Dianga as Portuguese dominated ports on the Orissa-Bengal-Arakan coast. Not surprisingly, many of the above have been labelled 'pirate ports' and slave marts, as Portuguese activity on the eastern coast was not under the control of the Estado da India. As with other 'minor' settlements Sandwip is hardly ever mentioned, neither in histories of Bengal, nor in the annals of Portuguese expansion in Asia.

<sup>13</sup> CAMPOS, op.cit: 67. See too, TEIXEIRA and SINCLAIR (trans.) 1902, "Nevertheless some ships, and specially those from Cochin, take it in as ballast, and carry it to Bengal, where scarcity gives it a value. For in all the lands thereabouts is no salt made, but in the Isle of Sundiva alone": 164-169.

<sup>14</sup> BLAEU, 1638; JANSSON, 1639; VISSCHER, 1670; DE FER, c. 1685, SANSON, c. 1705; BELLIN, 1747-61.

<sup>15</sup> CAMÕES, op.cit: 163-164.

Sandwip's career was somewhat different from Pipli, a notorious slave port, partly due to its location but mostly by way of political factors. Sandwip was a defensive port under the delta *rajās*, the Mughals and the Arakanese that later became a slave raiding island and port under a combination of Arakanese-Portuguese raiders known as *magh*. It was also a salt producing island. Trade in salt was very important in the Bay and the Portuguese in Bengal were not slow to seize this advantage.

The importance of this area dates at least from the sixteenth century. The Portuguese travel account of 1521 notes that it was a very urbanized zone, with market towns succeeding each other at small intervals: Aluia, Jugdia, Gacala, Meamgar and Noamaluco<sup>16</sup>. But Sandwip is not mentioned in this account, as we have already noted. The Portuguese account also notes that despite being a fertile region, producing rice and sugar cane, despite being a highly urbanized zone, experiencing great riverine and maritime traffic and producing black and white fabric that was sold in the numerous shops of the area, it was also an area of startling contrasts, swampy one moment and full of clear lakes the next<sup>17</sup>. It was also heavily infested with pirates and some of the islands were completely uninhabited<sup>18</sup>. Was Sandwip one such?

We are therefore not very certain to which power Sandwip belonged at the start of the sixteenth century; it is likely that it was held by the medieval state of Tripura, for we know that in 1516 Husain Shah conquered Chattagrama from Tripura. The first half of the century was turbulent for this region. From the 1540s Bengal politics was in disarray and its trade greatly diminished in the 1570s when the province passed into the hands of the Mughals. In the absence of a central authority, 'trade coins' minted at Chattagrama passed as legal tender<sup>19</sup>. This fall off of trade benefitted Arakan. At the beginning of the sixteenth century the flowering of Arakanese trade was hampered by Bengali domination of the trade of the north Bay, now this obstacle was removed.

Michael Charney writes<sup>20</sup>:

"The Portuguese replaced Bengalese control of trade with the Portuguese pass system, in which any ship trading in the Bay of Bengal had to buy a Portuguese pass or face destruction at sea; by 1537, the Portuguese "commanded the whole sea-board from Orissa to Chittagong." Rather, the Portuguese trading system should be seen as a new system rather than a free system. That is, the Bengalese wanted to maintain their ports as the sole sources of trade goods at the expense of Arakanese exports and thus Bengalese control of Bay of Bengal trade meant to Arakan, the suppression of indigenous commodity exports. The Portuguese, however, wanted competition of sources of trade goods, to lower the prices at which Portuguese traders bought goods, while providing Portuguese traders with increased numbers of markets at which they could sell their own trade goods (which increased both demand and profit). The Portuguese system, then, encouraged Arakanese exports as opposed to the Bengalese 'system' which suppressed Arakanese exports with which Bengalese exports competed. This must have revolutionized the Arakanese trading system".

<sup>16</sup> BOUCHON and THOMAZ, 1998: 310-311.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. : 309, 316.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. : 311.

<sup>19</sup> MUKHERJEE, 2006 b: 137.

<sup>20</sup> CHARNEY, 2005/1993: 1011.

Portuguese Sandwip's life starts in 1590. In that year the Portuguese at Chattagrama fought the Arakanese under their new governor, Min Nala, and captured the fortress of Chattagrama. Antonio de Souza Godinho, who led the attack, soon forced the island of Sandwip to be tributary to the Portuguese trading establishment at Chattagrama.

But the island remained a virtual non-man's land, with Portuguese authority in force in some places, but with Mughal as well as local (delta kings) control there. The Mughal fort remained. Kedar Rai, the delta *raja* at Sripur who held Sandwip and who had been dispossessed of it by the Mughals also still maintained his overlordship of Sandwip. Moreover, Kedar Rai still claimed the island's income. This ambiguous status was to haunt Sandwip's career as port and settlement. In 1602, the Mughals were defeated and Sandwip was brought under complete Portuguese control by Domingos Carvalho, one of Kedar Rai's Portuguese employees. Kedar Rai claimed to have 'liberated' Sandwip from the Mughals<sup>21</sup>.

The people of Sandwip now rebelled against the Portuguese soon after and were besieged in the former Mughal fortress. Carvalho was forced to ask the Portuguese at Chattagrama and Dianga for help. Manuel de Matos, the leader of the Portuguese at Dianga, led four hundred men in support of Carvalho. Since Carvalho and Matos had together defeated Sandwip, they each took half of the island to govern, and it is likely that Kedar Rai still maintained authority over Sandwip.

Angry at the Portuguese, and fearful of being stuck between different Portuguese strongholds in Chattagrama, Dianga and now Sandwip, Min Yazagyi, king of Arakan who claimed Sandwip, now sent to the island a force of 150 *jalias* 'in which there some catures and other great ships, with many *falcões* and *cameletes*'.<sup>22</sup> Further, Kedar Rai made an alliance with Min Yazagyi and sent 100 *coses*, (light boats suitable for fighting on the rivers and not at sea) against Sandwip as well. This supports our view that Kedar Rai still retained some control over Sandwip. The Portuguese won this battle in 1602.

In response the Arakan king harassed Portuguese Jesuit and Dominican missionaries. Francisco Fernandes of the Company of Jesus was stripped, blinded, shackled, and then thrown into prison where he died on November 14, 1602<sup>23</sup>. The four fathers of the Jesuit mission on Sandwip, led by Father Brasio Nunes, left their church on Sandwip and moved to Bengal. In 1603 Arakan attacked Sandwip once again, but lost. Soon after, another *raja* of the delta, Pratapaditya of Chandecan and Sagor, the most powerful delta *raja*, and one who had expansionist ambitions over the delta, beheaded Carvalho and sent his head to the Arakan capital at Mrauk-U. This ended the Carvalho period of Sandwip and the first Portuguese phase of its life.

Carvalho had written to the Portuguese government offering Sandwip as a new Portuguese possession. The viceroy had accepted hoping, no doubt, that Carvalho and Matos would at least try to bring the large number of scattered and autonomous Portuguese in Bengal back into the service of the *Estado da India*. The Portuguese king, as reward, presented to Carvalho and Matos

<sup>21</sup> MUKHERJEE, 2006a: 334.

<sup>22</sup> GUERREIRO, 1930, I: 286, in CHARNEY 2005/1993: 1051.

<sup>23</sup> CHARNEY, 2005/1993: 1052.

the Order of Christ as well as making them *Fidalgos da Casa Real*. This indicates that the 1602 conquest of Sandwip was regarded as official and that the Portuguese crown accepted it as a crown possession.

Meanwhile, de Brito's star was rising at the Arakan court under Min-razagri, and he planned to take over the whole coast stretching from Sandwip to Syriam. We will turn to de Brito later, let us now see the peculiar environmental factors creating Sandwip's its strategic location and also its isolated position.

### III. The Coastal Dynamic

Sandwip lies in the maximum cyclone prone area of Bangladesh. It is located in the southernmost part of the country and is open to the Bay of Bengal. As island, Sandwip is at the center of Bangladesh's Meghna estuary. The Meghna network links up with the Brahmaputra and thereby gains access through India's north east into Tibet on the west and northern Burma and China (Yunnan) on the east. It was therefore a significant communication route from early times and some scholars speculate that the fabled early medieval port of Samandar that Arab mariners and merchants spoke of lay on this route. Others have speculated that Sandwip itself is Samandar<sup>24</sup>. In fact, Sandwip may have an even earlier lineage: Bhattasali located the Chryse of then *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* at Sandwip<sup>25</sup>.

Sandwip lies between 22°16' and 22°43' north latitude and 91°23' and 91°40' east longitude. To its north lies mainland Bangladesh, to its south the Bay of Bengal, to its east the Sandwip Channel, and to its west the Hatia Channel. Bangladesh's location and its hydro morphological process have influenced the formation of this funnel-shaped coastal area, which is vulnerable to tropical cyclones and storm surges. The country's climate is mainly controlled by the funnel-shaped coast in the south and the Himalayas in the north and it has been estimated that the Noakhali-Chattagrama coast, where Sandwip is located, has a 40% plus frequency of cyclones as compared to other parts of the coast (ranging from 16% to 27%)<sup>26</sup>.

Cesare Frederici, who underwent a cyclone on the Bengal coast in 1569 writes of his experience thus<sup>27</sup>:

"I went a boord of the ship of Bengala, at which time it was the yeere of oftentimes, there are not stormes as in other Countries; but every ten or twelve yeeres there are such tempests and stormes, that it is a thing incredible, but to those that have seene it, neither doe they know certainly what yeere they will come.

Unfortunate are they that are at Sea in that yeere and time of the Touffon (*touffan-word denoting cyclone, author*), because few there are that escape that danger. In this yeere it was our chance to bee at Sea with the like storme, but it happened well unto us, for that our ship was newly over-plancked, and had not any thing in her save victuall and balasts, Silver and Gold, which from Pegu they carrie

<sup>24</sup> MOHAR ALI, 1985, 1A: 32-3.

<sup>25</sup> BHATTASALI, 1946: 250-52; CASSON, 1989.

<sup>26</sup> PAUL and RAHMAN, 2006, 199 – 215: 201; GLANIUS, 1682.

<sup>27</sup> FREDERICI: 152-3.

to Bengala, and no other kind of Merchandize. This Touffon or cruel storme endured three dayes and three nights: in which time it carried, away our sayles, yards, and rudder; and because the ship laboured in the Sea, wee cut our Mast over-board: which when we had done, shee laboured a great deale more then before, in such wise, that she was almost full with water that came over the highest part of her and so went downe: and for the space of three dayes and three nights, sixtie men did nothing but hale water out of her in this wise, twentie men in one place, and twentie men in another place, and twentie in a third place: and for all this storme, the ship was so good, that she tooke not one jot of water below through her sides, but all ranne downe through the hatches, so that those sixtie men did nothing but cast the Sea into the Sea. And thus driving too and fro as the wind and Sea would, wee were in a darke night about foure of the clocke cast on a shold: yet when it was day, we could neither see Land on one side nor other, and knew not where we were. And as it pleased the Divine power, there came a great wave of the Sea, which drave us beyond the shold. And when wee felt the ship afloat, we rose up as men revived, because the Sea was calme and smooth water...”.

This is what Frederici says of Sandwip, when he made landfall on the island after the cyclone<sup>28</sup>:

“This Touffon being ended, wee discovered an I[s]land not farre from us, and we went from the ship on the sands to see what I[s]land it was: and wee found it a place inhabited, and, to my judgement the fertilest I[s]land in all the world, the which is divided into two parts by a channell which passeth betweene it, and with great trouble wee brought our ship into the same channell, which parteth the I[s]land at flowing water, and there we determined to stay fortie dayes to refresh us. And when the people of the I[s]land saw the ship, and that we were comming a land: presently they made a place of Bazar or Market, with Shops right over against the ship with all manner of provision of victuals to eate, which they brought downe in great abundance, and sold it so good cheape, that wee were amazed at the cheapnesse thereof. I bought many salted Kine there, for the provision of the ship, for halfe a Larine a piece, which Larine may be twelve shillings sixe pence, being very good and fatte; and foure wilde Hogges ready dressed for a Larine; great fat Hennes for a Bizza a piece, which is at the most a Penie: and the people told us that we were deceived the haife of our money, because we bought things so deare. Also a sacke of fine Rice for a thing of nothing, and consequently all other things for humane sustenance were there in such abundance, that it is a thing incredible but to them that have seene it. This I[s]land is called Sondiva belonging to the Kingdome of Bengala, distant one hundred and twentie miles from Chitigan, to which place we were bound”.

Of a similar storm on the Burmese coast in 1566-7, he mentions<sup>29</sup>:

“Wherefore in this Shippe we departed in the night, without making any provision of our water: and wee were in that Shippe fowr [four] hundreth and odde men: wee Departed from thence with Intention to goe to an I[s]land to take in water, but the windes were so contrary, that they woulde not suffer us to fetch it, so that by this meanes wee were two and forty Dayes in the Sea as it were lost, and we were driven too and fro – For wee had overshot the harbour and left it behinde us, in such wise that wee had loste the lande enhabited with the Ship, and we twentie eight men had no manner of victuall with us in the boate, – we were nine dayes rowing alongst the coast, without

<sup>28</sup> FREDERICI: 153-4.

<sup>29</sup> FREDERICI: 135-6.



finding any thing but Countries uninhabited, and deserts I[s]land, where if we had found but grasse it would have seemed Sugar unto us, but wee could not finde any, yet wee founde a fewe leaves of a tree, and they were so hard that we could not chew them, we had Water and Wood sufficient”.

A century later, in 1666, Glanius, shipwrecked on the southeastern Bengal coast by a cyclone, writes that this coast was inhospitable<sup>30</sup>. Yet another century later, in 1795, Symes writes<sup>31</sup>:

“The entrance into the river of Bengal, presents as intricate and dangerous a channel, as any that is known; and during three months of the year, a ship, in leaving the Ganges, incurs considerable hazard from being obliged to beat against a foul wind, in shoal water, among surrounding sands”.

Sandwip’s environment has been, historically, highly vulnerable. Like the rest of the Bangladesh coast, the Meghna estuary is famous for its funnel shape, which predisposes the estuary mouth to violent cyclones. Sandwip is located in a tear drop shape just below this coast and as noted, the Meghna estuary is subject to cyclones and tidal surges from both the Sandwip and Hatia Channels, mentioned by Frederici. About 41 percent of cyclones travel through this funnel-shaped region each year presently, most hitting Sandwip. This environmental factor, coupled with the fact that rivers in Bengal are notorious for changing course almost overnight, ensured that historically few attempted control over this hostile land. It was only the expanding trade of the Bay from the sixteenth century that made Sandwip an attractive transshipment point for all powers in the Bay. The hostile environment also ensures that there are few vestiges left of the Portuguese presence in Sandwip.

#### **IV. Politics: Sandwip 1603-1607, Pivot between Lisbon, Mrauk-U, Delhi and Bengal**

The career of Filipe de Brito e Nicote illustrates that the Portuguese Crown, under Philip II (actually Philip III of Spain) was seriously thinking of putting an end to the ‘informal empire’ in the Bay. At the end of the sixteenth century Sandwip emerged as commercially more important to the Portuguese than Chattagrama. Indeed, Charney argues that it was precisely the commercial and strategic location of Sandwip that delayed Chattagrama’s efflorescence as port at this time<sup>32</sup>. Guerreiro estimated that, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, Sandwip contained 60 Portuguese trading ships as compared to 30 for Mrauk-U, the capital of Arakan, and 10 for Chattagrama<sup>33</sup>.

De Brito, master of Syriam and ruler of Pegu, carved out a state for himself in the area stretching from the east of Chattagrama, through a portion of Arakan, into Syriam, Martaban and lower Pegu between 1602 and 1613. In 1602 Brito was, by appointment of Viceroy Saldanha, commander of Syriam and general of the conquest of Pegu. He was given jurisdiction over

<sup>30</sup> GLANIUS op.cit.

<sup>31</sup> SYMES, 2006: 59-208. See p. 205.

<sup>32</sup> CHARNEY, 1998a:17.

<sup>33</sup> In CHARNEY, 1998a:17

Bengal in return for his promise to bring the Portuguese renegades living there back into the service of the *Estado da India* as well as the Viceroy's niece's hand in marriage. Brito now received the crown of Pegu 'in the name of the King of Spain and Portugal'. Brito became busy not only defending the new Portuguese possession against the neighboring princes with force and diplomacy, but also in planning the further expansion of the Portuguese empire in the area of the Bay of Bengal. His project contemplated making Syriam the most important port of call on the coast of Burma. He insisted to the king of Portugal that Syriam be well fortified and provided with men and ships with which he could force all navigation between India and Malacca to stop at Syriam and pass through the Custom House there, which would bring enormous benefits to the Portuguese treasury as well as to his own. To this effect he wrote to the king asking the monarch to issue the necessary orders to the Portuguese merchants making them call at Syriam; the rest of the ships he would force with the fleet at his disposal. He also patrolled the Bay to stop smuggling and enrich his (and the Portuguese state's) treasury<sup>34</sup>.

To Brito, the possession of a Portuguese enclave on the east coast of the Bay of Bengal was a necessity in connection with the *Estado da India*, not only because the monsoon system made it very convenient for shipping but also because such a position was full of commercial advantages. The monsoon system refers to the wind system prevailing in the Indian Ocean, which imposed the practice of sailing from West to East across the Bay of Bengal before the southwest monsoon winds, finding safe harbor on the east coast until the winds and rains subsided in September-October to permit the return voyage. The name comes from the Arabic 'mausim,' meaning 'season' or 'weather'.

But these plans were not so easy to implement and in 1605, de Brito had to face a joint Arakan-Toungoo (Burmese) campaign to recapture Syriam. This failed and de Brito was successful but the wars against Arakan were taking their toll and he doubted if he could bring southeastern Bengal under his control. In 1607 Min-razagri of Arakan again attacked Syriam; this siege was inconclusive but left de Brito in control of Syriam.

De Brito, in a letter to the king of Portugal, had suggested that he should seize control of the region and make a fortress at Chattagrama which would allow him to bring the Portuguese desperados in Bengal back under Goa's control, albeit indirect. In Philip's orders to de Brito that was written on January 23 1607, the importance of Sandwip to the Portuguese was clearly defined: "And because the conquest of Pegu and the island of Sundiva [Sandwip] has the importance that you know, I charge you dearly with doing for them everything in your power..."<sup>35</sup>.

Why the importance of Sandwip at this moment to the Portuguese? In the seventeenth century Portuguese expansion along the Bay was flagging. In 1607 the Portuguese were chased out from Dianga and in 1613 de Brito was killed by the Burmese at Syriam<sup>36</sup>. Soon after they would be chased from Ceylon in 1630, from Hugli in 1632, and from Malacca in 1641. The fall of Aceh to the Dutch in 1636 effectively ended any dreams of Portuguese domination in

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<sup>34</sup> CHARNEY, 2005/1993: 1081.

<sup>35</sup> SOCARRAS, 1966: 3-24. See p. 15, fn 33.

<sup>36</sup> GUEDES, 1998.

Southeast Asia and the fall of Hormuz in 1644 affected Portuguese hegemony in the Western Indian Ocean.

Portuguese settlements along the North Bay were in decline. The most important Portuguese settlement after Chhattagrama, Dianga, had become notorious as a slave port<sup>37</sup>. Moreover, perhaps to stem the decline, Philip II wanted to bring an end to the informal nature of the Portuguese settlements along the Bay. In a letter dated March 26, 1608, the king very clearly states his purpose on this question when he says: ‘como houve por bem conceder jurisdição a Filippe de Brito, capitao d’ella, para reduzir a meu servigo os portuguezes que andam em Bengala.’<sup>38</sup> Also, the king needed treasure and he deemed that Chhattagrama’s treasure was well worth taking. In the letter of February 20, 1610 he clearly refers to the treasures of both Chhattagrama and Pegu<sup>39</sup>.

Pegu’s treasures were considerable. As late as 1755-1760, at a time when this area was being torn apart through internal wars and external invasions, the English East India Company noted that the area possessed numerous gold and silver mines as well as diamonds, rubies, sapphires, emeralds, topaz, amber, iron, lead and elephants<sup>40</sup>. Moreover, Pegu was a rich timber region, providing quality shipbuilding timber at a cheap cost. Pegu and Bengal could also serve as a base from which arms and supplies could be sent in any season to Portuguese possessions in the archipelago<sup>41</sup>.

Finally, Syriam (and Pegu) provided a fertile ground for Jesuit activities. In March 1600 the Jesuit monk Boves accompanied de Brito to Pegu. Boves writes, at the time just before Pegu was controlled by de Brito<sup>42</sup>:

“I went thither with Philip Brito, and in fiteene dayes arrived at Sirian, the chiefe Port in Pegu. It is a lamentable spectacle to see the banks of the Rivers set with infinite fruit-bearing trees, now overwhelmed with ruines of gilded Temples, and noble edifices; the wayes and fields full of skulls and bones of wretched Peguans, killed or famished and cast into the River, in such numbers that the multitude of carcasses prohibiteh the way and passage of any ship”.

Brito never got the support of Lisbon during his lifetime. Strangely enough, orders were sent by the king of Portugal on 15 March 1613, for all Portuguese ships trading in the Bay of Bengal to stop at Syriam and pay taxes. The orders probably did not reach Goa before Brito was killed<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> SOCARRAS, 1966: 17-18: “There were certain Portuguese settlements in the coast of the Bay of Bengal that were entirely outside the control of Goa, which had always made efforts to reduce them to the jurisdiction of the crown, as they were virtually pirates’ nests and very often their conduct became a source of embarrassment to the Portuguese authorities. Dianga, in Arakanese territory, was perhaps the most notorious of these settlements”.

<sup>38</sup> SOCARRAS, 1966: 18 “...and how I considered it convenient to grant jurisdiction to Filippe de Brito, its captain [of Syriam], to reduce to my obedience the Portuguese that are in Bengal.”

<sup>39</sup> SOCARRAS, 1966: 21.

<sup>40</sup> DALRYMPLE, 1808, 2005. See letters 7 and 8, both dated 1760: 87-98, see pp. 93-96.

<sup>41</sup> CHARNEY, 2005/1993: 1075.

<sup>42</sup> COLLECTION, 2004: 180-187, see p. 183.

<sup>43</sup> CHARNEY, 2005/1993: 1117, Document 352, 15 March 1613, letter from the king of Portugal to the viceroy of India, Dom Jerónimo de Azevedo, in *Documentos Remetidos*, II: 391-5.

## V. Hiatus

Brito's grand schemes failed. In 1607 the Portuguese at Dianga advised the Arakan king against handing over Sandwip to de Brito<sup>44</sup>. Although the Dianga Portuguese were chased out by the Arakan state that year itself, this complicated plans for the acquisition of the island of Sandwip by the Estado. The Portuguese king did not support Brito's plans for the takeover of Sandwip, and neither did the Viceroy at Goa. Brito therefore never ruled at Sandwip.

Matos died at Dianga in 1607 when Arakan attacked the settlement. Fateh Khan, an officer of Pero Gomes to whom Matos had placed Sandwip in his, Matos', absence, now decided to make himself ruler of Sandwip<sup>45</sup>. Fateh Khan felt that he had a mission and displayed it prominently as inscription on his flag: "Fateh Khan, by the grace of God, Lord of Sandwip, shedder of Christian blood and destroyer of the Portuguese nation"<sup>46</sup>.

In the same year Min-razagri made a pact with the Dutch to hand over Sandwip to them<sup>47</sup>. Affairs at Sandwip were now in chaos.

## VI. Sandwip as Rogue Port: 1607-1617

Sandwip became now the site for the career of an extraordinary adventurer, with much less talent than Brito. Sebastião Gonçalves Tibau was a salt trader who had settled on Sandwip at the start of the seventeenth century. When Min-razagri attacked the Portuguese in Dianga in 1607, some of the Portuguese escaped into the woods, and nine or ten ships were able to make for sea. One of the Portuguese who escaped was Sebastião Gonçalves, who arrived at Dianga from the Meghna river with salt for trade just before the Arakanese slaughter. Gonçalves defeated Fateh Khan's forces in alliance with the king of Bacala (Bakla)<sup>48</sup>. He then took possession of the island shortly after and held it as its independent lord until 1617, when the Arakan king Min-kamaun attacked and defeated him. Gonçalves and the rest of the survivors became pirates, robbing Arakanese traders and selling the booty in the ports of the king of Bakla, who was friendly to them<sup>49</sup>. Instead of giving the king of Bakla, Pratapaditya, the promised half of the island's revenues, Gonçalves attacked him, seized the island of Dakhin Shahabpur and won. Sandwip

<sup>44</sup> SOCARRAS, 1966: 19.

<sup>45</sup> CHARNEY, 2005/1993: 1101.

<sup>46</sup> CHARNEY, 2005/1993: 1101-2.

<sup>47</sup> CHARNEY, 2005/1993: 1100.

<sup>48</sup> It is not certain whether this is Bakla or Bacala. While historical evidence points to Bakla in Bakergunj in Barisal district, Bangladesh, Blau's map shows an Island of Bacala further down the coast on the extreme southeastern tip of the Arakan coast, near the present island of Cheduba. Kerr uses the name Bacala, see KERR, *A General History and Collection of Voyages and Travels*, 18 vols. Volume VI, Part 10. Available online through Project Gutenberg. Accessed online at [www.gutenberg.org/etexts/0n/18-04-08](http://www.gutenberg.org/etexts/0n/18-04-08). Present geography yields a clue. Barisal is southeast of Dhaka division and in between Khulna and Chattagrama divisions in present Bangladesh. The fact that Kerr mentions that after challenging the King of Bakla, Goncalves took 'Xavaspur and Patelabanga' or (Dakhin) Shahabazpur and Patuakhali (vol. VI), suggests that Bakla in Barisal is meant. There is an area called Patuakhali in present Barisal district. Charney 1993, too, uses Bacala, this should be Bakla.

<sup>49</sup> CHARNEY, 2005/1993: 1100, 1102-3.

was thus once again enmeshed in murky delta politics, but it also became, under Gonçalves, the key to the southeastern delta from the sea.

Gonçalves' actions introduced a new volatility into the politics of the delta. The treachery against Bakla changed the amicable relations between Bakla and the Portuguese. On April 30, 1559 a treaty had been signed at Goa between the then king of Bakla, Paramananda Rai and Viceroy Constantino de Braganza, whereby Bakla would be thrown open to Portuguese ships with fixed and very low customs duties if the Portuguese discontinued their visits to Chattagrama (then under Arakan). In return Bakla was granted licence for four ships to trade with Goa, Hormuz and Malacca<sup>50</sup>. Around 1600, when Pratapaditya of Chandecan (the same who beheaded Carvalho) held court at Bakla, after taking over the defunct kingdom of the dead Kandarpanaraian Rai of Bakla, the Jesuit Father Fonseca was given the right to erect churches and carry out conversions<sup>51</sup>.

In 1615 a joint Dutch-Arakan force defeated Gonçalves and then in 1617 Min-kamaun, successor to Min-razagri, attacked Sandwip and defeated Gonçalves. Sripur relinquished all claims to Sandwip; from then on Sandwip remained an Arakanese possession.

Gonçalves Tibau's notion of Portuguese expansion in the Bay was different from that of Brito's. His plans did not include wider Portuguese control over the Bay. Gonçalves never cooperated with Goa, always ignoring the viceroy's plans and becoming involved in continuous wars with the mainland princes and in rivalry with Brito, who possibly tried to bring him under the jurisdiction of the Estado da India. Thus, with the loss of Sandwip, the Portuguese Crown's strategic plans for the Bay failed miserably. They were revived once again between 1629 and 1643 when Fray Sebastião Manrique dreamt of reviving the defunct Portuguese 'informal' empire in the Bay with the help of Arakan. A central axis of this project was to drive out the Mughals from Bengal with Arakan's help; unfortunately this too came to naught.

The career of Brito illustrates the different functions that Dianga and Sandwip played in the Portuguese scheme in the Bay: Dianga was a slave and pirate port, while Sandwip under Brito was to be part of a grand scheme of the Estado expansion in the Bay with Sandwip and Syriam as pivots. Unfortunately, the Portuguese freebooters under Sebastião Gonçalves y Tibao in 1609 retook the island of Sandwip from Fateh Khan's relative, and with their vessels began to raid the Arakanese coast. The ensuing Sandwip based Portuguese blockade of maritime commerce along the Arakanese coast restricted Arakanese access to maritime revenues. Gonçalves' forces blocked off the Arakanese coast, including both Chattagrama and Mrauk-U, twice attacking the royal city and destroying trading vessels found there. Gonçalves' policy was to force all of the ship captains in the area to submit to his control and thus force all merchant shipping to go to Sandwip island. In this, his scheme was remarkably similar to Brito's.

Gonçalves seems to have succeeded, for, in one Portuguese royal document he is said to have 'subjected all the coast of Bengala [including Arakan]' and with "these fortresses he controls the commerce from those parts"<sup>52</sup>. His blockade prompted the *myd-za*, or governor, of

<sup>50</sup> SARKAR, 1973, reprint: 358-9.

<sup>51</sup> SARKAR, 1973, reprint: 359-60.

<sup>52</sup> BULHAO PATO, 1884, II: 393, in SOCARRAS, 1966; On Gonçalves, see SOUSA, 1945, V: 284-292; VI: 80-86 quoted in CHARNEY, 1998b: 197.

Chattagrama to seek an alliance with him to end the blockade. Gonçalves' blockade probably ended the Arakan-Ava trade as well. In any case, supplies of firearms, mercenaries, and, above all, maritime commerce were halted until 1617.

### VII. Fragmentation of Power and the Rise of Small States in the Wake of Commercial Decline

Should we assess both Brito's and Gonçalves' careers against the seventeenth century resource crunch and commercial decline along the Bay, as Reid suggests, for Southeast Asia?<sup>53</sup> The verdict is still out on the applicability of the seventeenth century crisis to the whole of the Bay; nevertheless, as commercial resources declined, we do see that fringe areas in most kingdoms sought to break away. Aided by the Sandwip-based Portuguese freebooters, the governor-known as the *myd-za*-of Chattagrama rebelled against Arakanese royal authority in 1609. Although this revolt was suppressed by Min-razagri, Arakan resources were so low that it required assistance from the Portuguese freebooters on Sandwip island in a campaign against the Mughals in 1611. The campaign failed after the Portuguese seized the Arakanese naval contingent, killed the commanders, and sold the crews into slavery at East Indian ports; while on land, without support from his ships, Min-razagri, the Arakan king, was soundly defeated.<sup>54</sup>

The Portuguese became bolder and after raiding the Arakanese coast, the Sandwip-based Portuguese and a Portuguese fleet from Goa sailed up the Lemro river and raided Mrauk-U in 1615<sup>55</sup>. But Mrauk-U was still left in command of good agricultural and demographic resources with which to dominate the littoral until maritime commerce returned. Any decline in commercial resources could also be offset in part by a resumption of war-booty raids into neighboring kingdoms, which provided a direct source of goods and valuables available for redistribution by the Mrauk-U king. Later Mrauk-U kings continued and intensified raids on Bengal and Lower Burma for booty.

To offset Portuguese hegemony the Dutch were courted and they established a permanent factory at Mrauk-U in the early 1620s. To meet the Dutch need for labour and foodstuffs to feed their slave-laborers, the Mrauk-U court developed an interconnected rice and slave trade for the next half century. Mrauk-U effected some degree of success in bringing back limited Muslim and other Asian trade, at least into the 1630s, as Manrique noted the presence in Mrauk-U of traders from around the Bay: from 'Bengala, Masulipatam, Tenasserim, Martaban, Aceh, and Jakarta'<sup>56</sup>. Visits to Arakan by new European traders during the 1630s included Germans, traders from the Spanish Netherlands, and Danish merchants.

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<sup>53</sup> REID, 1988, 1993.

<sup>54</sup> CHARNEY, 1998b: 197.

<sup>55</sup> CHARNEY, 1998b: 197.

<sup>56</sup> MANRIQUE, 1927.

### VIII. The Impact of Portuguese Expansion on Delta States. The Case of Chandecan

The flux created by Portuguese expansion in the delta actually helped accelerate the process of state formation within some delta areas. But it is not as yet certain whether it was commercial vitality or mercantile decline that aided the emergence of new state forms in the Bengal delta. Chandecan under Pratapaditya, during the period 1598 to 1607, certainly expanded within the delta at this time, and by the early seventeenth century Pratapaditya controlled the ports of Sagor and Bakla. He also attempted to wrest control of Sandwip from the Portuguese in alliance with Arakan (by beheading Carvalho in 1602), and then again by supporting the Portuguese (Gonçalves) at Sandwip against both the Mughals and Kedar Rai. The extent of the kingdom of Chandecan with its port at Sagor, and now with its port at Bakla, after the alliance with Chandradwip's king Kandarpanarain Rai, brought the eastern limits of Chandecan close to Sandwip. As it expanded eastward, Chandecan faced Arakan.

Gonçalves defeated Fateh Khan's forces in alliance with Pratapaditya, and used his ports for commerce. Pratapaditya's claim for helping Gonçalves was half of Sandwip's revenues, but we saw that Gonçalves attacked him instead and seized the island of Dakhin Shabazpur in Pratapaditya's domains. Gonçalves therefore destroyed the previous amicable relations of the Portuguese with Chandecan, indeed with the whole of the delta.

Chandecan's importance in the delta in the early seventeenth century is attested to by contemporary cartography: Bertius' 1602 map of Bengal marks the delta as *Isola do Chandocam* and on Dudley's 1646 hydrographic map of the Bengal coast the delta is signified as *Regno di Chandican*<sup>57</sup>. We see here a transition from island to kingdom, indicative of the political fortunes of Chandecan.

### Conclusion

This essay shows how small states and even lesser ports and 'minor' settlements could play a definitive role in the expansion or regression of empire. The strange history of Sandwip shows that the Mughal empire was not interested in holding on to it, while smaller states did. Why was this so? It was thus because Sandwip was vital to a maritime economy, which the delta *rajās* and Arakan handled, and in which the Mughals took little or no interest. When the Portuguese arrived in the Bay, they too realized the importance of Sandwip. While, as Charney pointed out that the Portuguese frequently exaggerated their enemy's strength in order to drive home their technological superiority, and that indigenous accounts did the same to drive home their own manpower strength, there is little doubt that marginal states on the Bay could very often harness large numbers into their armies<sup>58</sup>.

After 1617, when Min-kamaun destroyed the Portuguese position on Sandwip, he was given it as *jagir* (own revenue domain) by the Mughals. This indicates that Pratapaditya's dreams

<sup>57</sup> BERTIUS, 1602; DUDLEY, 1646.

<sup>58</sup> CHARNEY, 2003: 208-211.

of expansion here were over. Kedar Rai, too, had no more control over Sandwip. The delta was now calm. The Portuguese were no longer a factor. Only two powers were left: the Mughals and the Arakanese.

According to Charney<sup>59</sup> Min-kamaun resettled the Portuguese near Chattagrama, not as traders involved in the *entrepot* trade, but as servicemen devoted to raiding Lower Bengal for loot and slaves. The Portuguese captives were either forced into Arakanese military groups, or were commanded to operate their war *jalias* (also called galleasses, an oared warboat in Bengal and Arakan) under royal supervision. While their service-group was referred to as *Harmad* (corruption of *armada*) and the 'headman' of their group was known as the *capithomor* (*capitão-mor*), the Portuguese servicemen were no longer autonomous and were under the supervision of the *myd-za* of Chattagrama, to whom they gave half of their booty. Also, the Portuguese organization in the Bay was stripped of its political autonomy, commercial activities, and independent overall command structure which they had previously enjoyed. The Portuguese were given stipends from the central court, but they largely drew their income from their relationship with the *myd-za* of Chattagrama. The Portuguese *capithos* (*capitães*) were granted *bilatas* ('revenue-producing lands'), in return for which they maintained their individual crews on their own lands with a portion of their income. The Arakanese practice of forcing the Portuguese to keep their women and children in Arakanese territory also helped to ensure Portuguese loyalty (or at least dependence). As royal servicemen to the rulers of Arakan, the role of the Portuguese in northern Arakan as commercial competitors to Muslim traders was now largely reduced.

Using Portuguese who had been captured on Sandwip island in 1617, and Arakanese slave-raiders, the Arakanese continually raided Lower Bengal as far as Hugli and Jessore for slaves and labor over the next few decades. Sandwip became a centre of this slave trade which shipped slaves all the way down the Coromandel coast and westwards into Goa for sale and transshipment into Africa and Europe. It also became a nodal point for the slave trade further east, through Arakan, into Southeast Asia<sup>60</sup>. Chattagrama now became the sole commercial port in the area, largely due to its proximity to the rich Meghna river trade.

The tragic career of Sandwip highlights how, due to lacklustre policy making in Lisbon and Goa, the Estado missed the chance to put their empire in the Bay on an official footing. Therefore, at least in the initial stage, Sandwip was not an 'informal' settlement.

Then Portuguese did stay on, but not as traders, and Sandwip may have lapsed into an 'informal' settlement with the result that the historical perception of the Portuguese in this area, from both the Indian and the Portuguese perspectives, remains confined to their role as looters, raiders and pirates. Bengali folk tales and songs are replete with instances of 'magh' raids, as the combined Portuguese-Arakanese slave raids are known to this day.

But Sandwip's turbulent history also offers us a glimpse into how the Bay coast responded to European expansion at a time when local polities were facing a legitimacy crisis. The location

<sup>59</sup> CHARNEY, 2005/1993.

<sup>60</sup> BOWREY, 1905.



of Sandwip, and its environmental distinctiveness, may have been both boon and disaster. It was a boon because it commanded the Bay from both the Bengal and Arakan coasts, yet was difficult to reach because of environmental conditions. As an island Sandwip had a peculiar autonomy that was attractive to strangers, but this autonomy was also a disaster because its independent situation- between two expanding states, Bengal and Arakan-made it impossible to govern.

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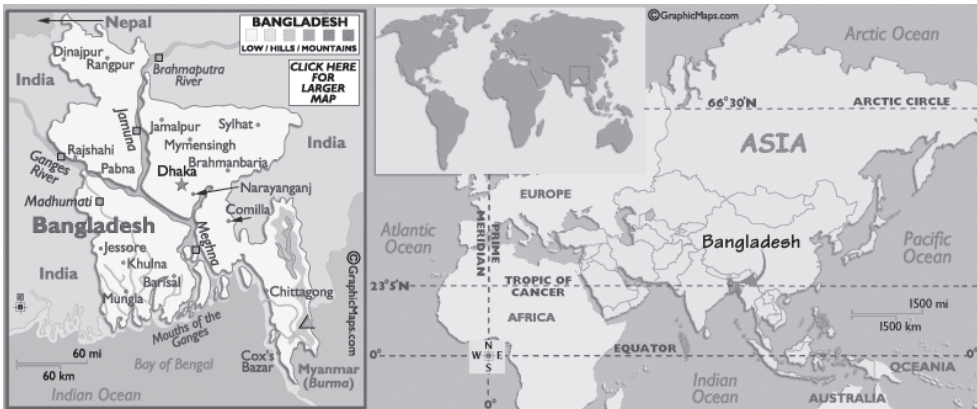
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### Map 1

#### Situating the Region in a Wider World



Source: <http://www.worldatlas.com/webimage/countrys/asia/bd.htm>, accessed 25-04-08

Map 2

'Sundiva' in Johann and Cornelius Blaeu, 1638 AD, 'Magni Mogolis Imperium'  
Size 52 x 41.5 cm.

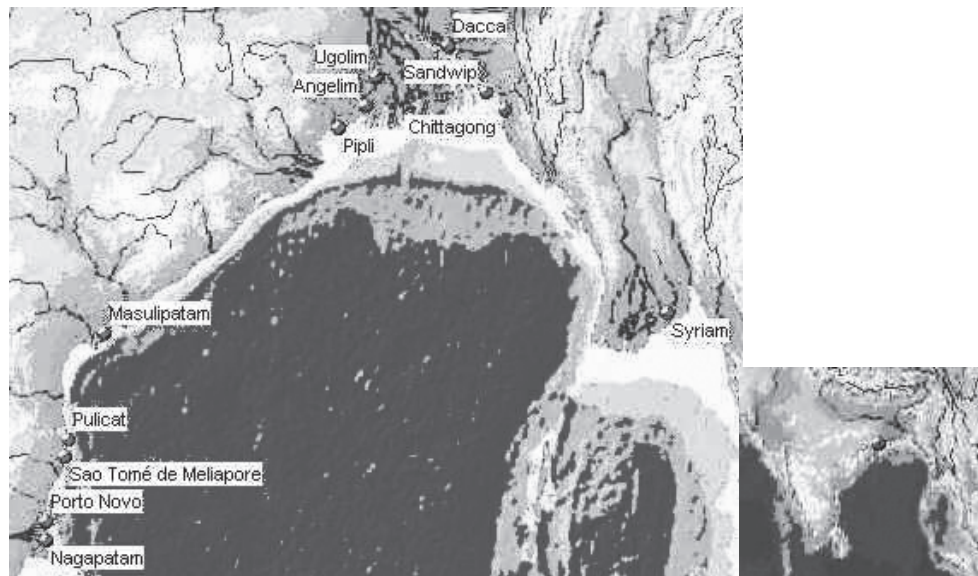


Map 3

'Sundiva' in Jacques Nicholas Bellin, 1747 AD, 'Nouvelle Carte du Royaume de Bengale'.



**Map 4**  
Portuguese Settlements in the Bay



Source: <http://www.colonialvoyage.com/bengal.html> accessed on 25-0408