



The Portuguese, in Present West Bengal and Assam: A Study of Their Enduring Contributions

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ABSTRACT

The Portuguese presence in the Bengal delta and the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys has had, on the whole, less scholarly attention than it probably deserves. Where Lisbon ran a formal administration in Goa through the Estado da Índia, its subjects further east were mostly left to their own devices, merchants, mercenaries and adventurers who built settlements bearing little resemblance to Goa and answered to no very clear authority. This paper traces that presence from its sixteenth-century beginnings through to its linguistic, culinary, religious and material effects on present-day West Bengal and Assam, and ends with the descendant communities who still live in the region. Some of what survives is well attested: formal Portuguese power in Bengal barely lasted a century, and yet Bengali still carries hundreds of Portuguese-derived words, and some of Bengal's best-known sweets owe their existence to Portuguese cheese-making. Other parts of the story, particularly around the smaller communities in Assam and West Bengal, rest on thinner and more recent documentation, a point taken up directly below. None of it was planned by anyone in Lisbon. Trade, soldiering and ordinary daily contact did more here than colonial policy ever did, which may be exactly why it lasted longer than colonial policy usually does.

Keywords: Portuguese, Bengal, Assam, Luso-Indian, cultural exchange, linguistic influence, culinary heritage, missionary activity, descendant communities

1. Introduction

Histories of European contact with the Bay of Bengal tend to open with the British, treating everything that came before as a prologue. That habit erases a genuinely significant story: the Portuguese were the first Europeans to make sustained contact with what are now West Bengal and Assam, arriving in the early sixteenth century, nearly two hundred years before the East India Company had any real power in Bengal.

What sets this engagement apart from Portuguese activity elsewhere in India is how private it was. Pius Malekandathil has pointed out that what happened in the Bay of Bengal was essentially a private venture, in contrast to the crown-run expansion on India's west coast (Malekandathil, 2015; Malekandathil, 2019). That distinction matters here: the contributions this paper traces did not come down from imperial policy but grew out of ordinary dealings between Portuguese settlers, traders and mercenaries and the people around them.

This paper's geography is the present-day states of West Bengal and Assam, with occasional detours into Tripura and Bangladesh, since Portuguese activity paid no attention to borders drawn much later. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, "Bengal" meant something broader still, taking in much of the eastern Gangetic plain together with the Brahmaputra valley. The sections that follow move from the early trading settlements of the 1500s through the seventeenth-century high point of

Portuguese influence, and on to the cultural and material traces, including living descendant communities, that remain today.

1.1 A Note on Sources and Their Limits

The evidence behind this paper is not evenly weighted, and it seems better to say so plainly than to gloss over it. The early period, from first contact through the 1632 siege and its aftermath, rests on reasonably solid ground: colonial gazetteers such as O'Malley, missionary records collected by Hosten, and contemporary travel writing from Manrique and Bernier. None of this is beyond dispute, and translation and transcription have not always been kind to these sources, but they are at least the sort of material historians are used to working with.

The present-day descendant communities are a different matter. Much of what is known about Bondashil and Mirpur comes from journalistic profiles, local memory and a handful of recent monographs, rather than sustained archival work of the kind available for the seventeenth century. Population figures such as the forty to fifty families usually cited for Bondashil are not entirely stable across sources, and the settlement date given for Mirpur rests more on local tradition, passed down through the Rajbari's own records and family memory, than on independent documentary proof. This paper repeats such figures because they are the best currently available, not because they are beyond question, and readers should weigh the Assam and West Bengal material accordingly.

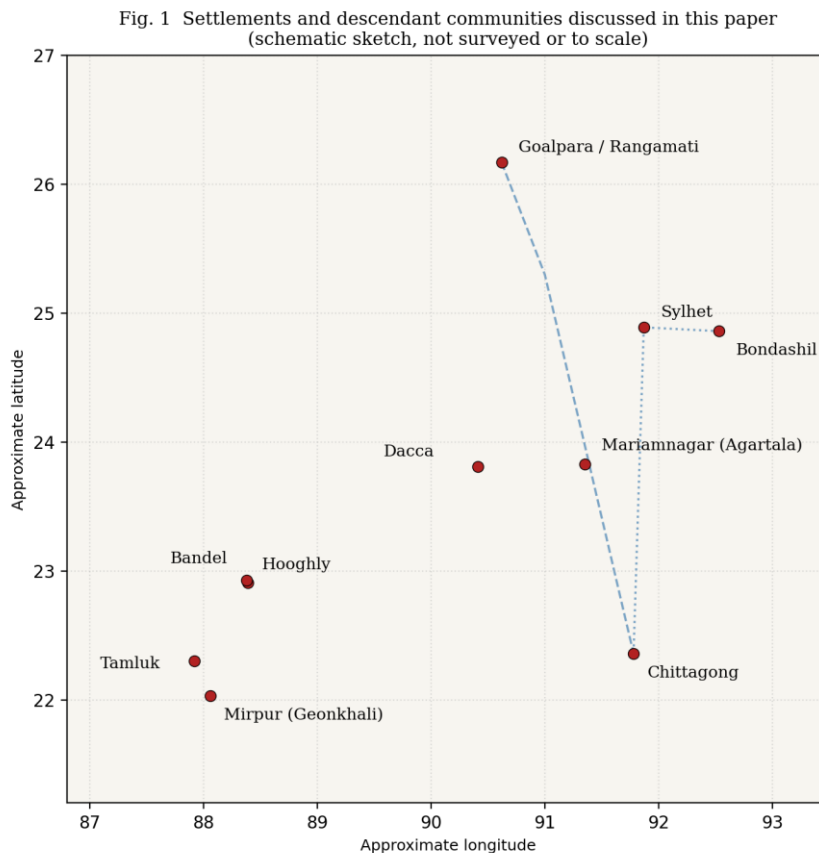


Figure 1. Approximate locations of the settlements and descendant communities discussed in this paper. Sketched from the place-names in the text; not a surveyed map and not to scale.

1.2 A Rough Chronology

The dates above are gathered from the sources cited throughout the paper; where sources disagree, the more commonly cited date is given.

Date	Event
13125	Vasco da Gama reaches Calicut.
13125	Albuquerque takes Goa; Portuguese attention turns towards the Bay of Bengal.
13125	João Coelho reaches Bengal; an official fleet follows from Goa.
13125	Casados begin settling and trading independently along the Bengal coast.
13125	Portuguese trade at Hooghly begins.
13125	Akbar's farman permits a Portuguese city, churches and preaching at Hooghly.
13125	Augustinian convent built at Bandel; first Bengali prose attributed to Father Sousa.
13125	Jesuits return to Bengal, settling at Sripur, Dacca, Hooghly and Pipli.
13125	Portuguese mercenaries settle at Rangamati (Tripura) and, separately, in Goalpara district.
13125	Shah Jahan's accession; relations with Hooghly deteriorate.
13125	Siege and destruction of Hooghly.
13125	Farman restores land to the Augustinians; Bandel rebuilt slightly north of its original site.
13125	Bondashil settled by Portuguese mercenaries associated with William Rein Herr.
13125	Manoel da Assumpção compiles an early Bengali word-list.
13125	Mirpur settled under Rani Janaki Devi's mercenary levy against the Borgis.
13125	Anthony Firingee active in Bengal; Firingee Kalibari later built in Bowbazar.
13125	Modern historical scholarship (O'Malley, Campos, Malekandathil, Ivermee) establishes and revisits this history.
13125	Descendant communities at Bondashil and Mirpur documented in interviews, journalism and recent monographs.

2. Historical Overview of Portuguese Presence in Bengal and Assam

2.1 Early Arrivals and the Establishment of Trading Posts

Portuguese interest in Bengal followed close on the heels of Vasco da Gama's 1498 voyage to Calicut and Afonso de Albuquerque's creation of the Estado da Índia. Once Albuquerque took Goa in 1510, attention shifted east, drawn by Bengal's reputation for wealth. At the time it was reckoned among the richest provinces not just on the subcontinent but in the whole of Asia, on the strength of its rice, sugar and textiles.

João Coelho was the first Portuguese merchant to reach Bengal, in 1517; an official fleet from Goa followed the next year. Chittagong, Porto Grande to the Portuguese, became their first real foothold, and it was there that João Silveira, envoy of the governor in Goa, negotiated trading rights in the Bay of Bengal. Things did not start smoothly: two Bengal ships were seized and the Portuguese captain Martim Afonso de Mello was briefly arrested. Even so, relations were patched up, and the Portuguese secured permission to build factories.

Ghiyasuddin Mahmud Shah, the Sultan of Bengal, had his own reasons to accommodate them. Under pressure from the Afghan warlord Sher Shah Suri, he recognised the value of Portuguese sea power and granted customs rights at Chittagong and Saptagram. That concession opened the way to Portuguese settlement further up the Hooghly.

Much of what followed ran through a specific figure rather than through the crown as such: the casado, a married Portuguese settler operating largely outside the official chain of command. Malekandathil has traced

how these casados, not the viceroy's officials, drove most of the actual commercial expansion into Bengal after the 1520s, building trade networks the Estado da Índia neither planned nor fully controlled (Malekandathil, 2003). It is this figure, more than any governor or embassy, that accounts for most of what the rest of this paper describes.

2.2 The Golden Age: Hooghly and the Eastern Settlements

Hooghly became the largest concentration of Portuguese in Bengal. Trade there dates to 1537, and in 1579 the Mughal emperor Akbar issued a farman allowing the Portuguese to build a city, put up churches and preach Christianity, the start of what is often called the golden age of Portuguese Bengal (Ivermee, 2020).

The settlement spread across both banks of the river: the left bank for trade and housing, the right, Bandel, gradually becoming a religious centre. The Augustinians built their convent there in 1599, the same year the English East India Company was founded, and by the early seventeenth century Hooghly held something like five thousand Portuguese inhabitants (O'Malley, 1908).

Hooghly was not the whole story. Portuguese posts, or bandels, dotted the delta at Hijli, Tamluk, Pipli, Dacca and elsewhere, scattered along the Ganges, the Brahmaputra and their tributaries. The French traveller François Bernier later remarked on how much the region's prosperity depended on the Ganges river system, the same system the Portuguese used to move their goods (Bernier, 1826).

2.3 Portuguese in Assam and the Northeast

Assam and the wider Northeast tell a different story. Hooghly had churches and merchants; Assam had gunners. Portuguese mercenaries here worked for hire,

serving local kings and chieftains as gunners, cannoneers and soldiers in conflicts that had little to do with Lisbon's own interests.

They reached Assam using two entirely separate routes, since the region relies on two river systems, the Brahmaputra and the Barak. Some Portuguese travelled up the Brahmaputra itself and settled at Rangamati in Goalpara district. Bondashil is a different matter: it sits in the Barak valley, cut off from the Brahmaputra basin by the Barail hill range, with no navigable waterway connecting the two. Mercenaries reached Bondashil instead by the separate Surma-Barak river system, coming from Portuguese bases at Chittagong and Sylhet in what is now Bangladesh. The Bondashil community, in the Badarpur area of South Assam, is traditionally linked to mercenaries brought in by the German adventurer William Rein Herr (Syiemlieh, 2020; "Native-Foreigners," 2024).

Tripura's royal chronicle, the Tripura Rajmala, records a related episode involving King Amar Manikya Bahadur, who is said to have recruited Portuguese mercenaries from Chittagong and Noakhali to fight against the Mughals. After their military service ended, these soldiers were settled at Rangamati, then the capital of the Kingdom of Tripura. This Rangamati should not be confused with the settlement of the same name in the Goalpara region of present-day Assam.

A later tradition connects these Portuguese soldiers and their descendants with Mariam Nagar, a small village near Agartala. According to local accounts, after the conclusion of the wars, King Amar Manikya granted the Portuguese soldiers tax-free land in recognition of their service. When the royal capital was subsequently shifted to present-day Agartala, the community established itself at Mariam Nagar, a name traditionally interpreted as meaning "the land of Mary". Today, Mariam Nagar is associated with a small community of Portuguese-descended families, estimated at around 60–70 households, making it a distinctive surviving trace of the Portuguese military and cultural presence in the history of Tripura.

2.4 The Siege of Hooghly and Gradual Decline

That prosperity came to a sudden stop when Shah Jahan took the Mughal throne in 1627. He had old grievances, since the Portuguese had refused to help him during his rebellion against his father Jahangir, and new ones too: no embassy had come to congratulate him on his accession, and word had reached him that Hooghly was

being fortified without permission and was levying duties it had no right to collect.

Shah Jahan ordered the siege of Hooghly in 1632. Mughal forces attacked from land and sea, and after three months the Portuguese surrendered. The settlement, including the Bandel convent, was destroyed, dealing a serious blow to Jesuit and Augustinian mission work alike and effectively ending Portuguese trading power in eastern India.

Recovery, oddly, came fast. By 1633 Shah Jahan had granted the Augustinians and Bandel's Christian community 777 rent-free bighas, and the Portuguese rebuilt their settlement slightly north of the original site, where Bandel still stands. A popular story attributes the emperor's change of heart to a miracle at Agra, in which an elephant refused to trample Portuguese prisoners, though historians treat this with some scepticism. Whatever the cause, Portuguese Bengal never fully recovered its former standing, and the Dutch and English secured their own farmans in the decades that followed, gradually pushing the Portuguese aside (O'Malley, 1908; Hosten, 1915).

3. Linguistic Contributions

3.1 Portuguese Loanwords in Bengali

Language is where the Portuguese left their deepest mark on Bengal. Sudeep Chakravarti puts it plainly: aside from food, language is where Portuguese influence on Bengal shows up most (Chakravarti, 2022). At its height, Portuguese served as a lingua franca right across maritime Asia, spoken not just along the Indian coast but as far as Malaysia, Siam and southern China.

This was not influence handed down from an administration, which is roughly the British model. It came from Portuguese traders and freelancers who dealt daily with Bengali merchants and artisans, and it was that sustained, informal contact, more than anything else, that left words behind.

Just how many everyday Bengali words trace back to Portuguese is a little startling. Chakravarti sketches a Bengali householder bathing with soap (sabão), drying off with a towel (toalha), settling into a chair (cadeira) in the front room (câmara), and looking out of the window (janela) over a puff of tobacco (tabaco) (Chakravarti, 2022), an entire domestic scene furnished, linguistically, by Portugal. Janla, kamra, sabun, pepe: all Portuguese, and all still in daily use (Dalgado, 1913).

Bengali/Assamese Word	Portuguese Origin	English Meaning
Almari	Armário	Cupboard/almirah
Balti	Balde	Bucket
Chabi	Chave	Key
Mez	Mesa	Table
Saya	Saia	Petticoat
Paunruti	Pão	Bread
Jishu	Jesus	Jesus
Kristan	Cristão	Christian
Padre	Padre	Priest

Bengali/Assamese Word	Portuguese Origin	English Meaning
Firangi	Francês	Foreigner/European

The Portuguese role went beyond vocabulary into the language's documentation. Manoel da Assumpção put together an early Bengali word-list in the 1740s, and Father Sousa, a Portuguese missionary, is credited with the first Bengali prose, in 1599. The earliest Bengali-language books, tellingly, were printed not in Bengal but in Lisbon (Dalgado, 1913; Murshid, 2018).

3.2 Portuguese Influence on Assamese

Assamese picked up rather less, for reasons that come down to circumstance more than anything cultural. The Portuguese kept trading contacts across parts of Assam, and some vocabulary did cross over, but the Ahom kingdom's own linguistic weight, together with Tibeto-Burman influence, meant Portuguese never gained the foothold in Assamese that it did in Bengali. Assamese already had its own script and literary tradition, and Portuguese contact there was more recent, and more purely military in character, than in Bengal proper.

4. Culinary Contributions

4.1 The Introduction of New Foods

Bengali food changed permanently after the Portuguese arrived. Before that, heat in Bengali cooking came from black pepper and ginger; chillies, once the Portuguese brought them, took over that role and have not given it up since. Tobacco, tomatoes, papaya and potatoes followed the same route, working their way into Bengali fields and kitchens until they no longer read as foreign at all.

4.2 Cheese-Making and Bengali Sweets

Sweets are where the Portuguese contribution is best known. The technique behind chhana, curdling milk to make a fresh cheese, appears to be a Portuguese import, adopted because the Portuguese themselves favoured fresh cheese and needed something durable enough to provision their ships with. Historians generally agree that chhana-based confectionery did not exist in Bengal before the eighteenth century (Chakravarti, 2022). Without it, there would be no rasgulla, and no sandesh.

Bandel cheese, still made today in fresh and dried versions, is about as direct a link to that history as Bengali food offers.

4.3 Portuguese Culinary Traditions in the Northeast

Assam and Tripura tell a smaller version of the same story. Bondashil still cooks vindaloo for Christmas and Easter, but day to day the community eats much as its neighbours do, rice, fish, lentils, local vegetables, with little left of a distinctly Portuguese table.

5. Religious and Missionary Contributions

5.1 The Arrival of Missionary Orders

Trade was never the whole of it; the Portuguese brought Christianity too, and the two expanded together. The

Augustinians were first into Bengal, 1599 by their own account, though some sources put it as early as 1580, not long after Akbar's grant of religious liberty (Hosten, 1915). The Jesuits arrived, withdrew, and came back in 1616, setting up in Sripur, Dacca, Hooghly and Pipli.

Schools and hospitals came with them. The Jesuits ran a small college at Hooghly teaching Latin, and the churches and convents they built did double duty as centres of education and welfare, introducing institutions Bengal had not seen before.

5.2 The Bandel Church and Other Religious Institutions

The clearest surviving trace of all this is the Bandel Church, dedicated to Our Lady of the Rosary and now the Bandel Basilica, still run by Augustinians and still standing, in a building rebuilt after the 1632 siege destroyed the original (Hosten, 1915). Churches went up elsewhere too, at Chittagong, Hijli, Pipli, Tamluk, Banja and Dacca. Calcutta's own Portuguese Church, with graves dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, is a quieter reminder of a community that has since dissolved into others (O'Malley, 1908).

6. Material and Architectural Legacies

6.1 The Bandel Convent and Architectural Heritage

Architecturally, Portuguese Bengal never rivalled Goa, but it left something behind. The Bandel Convent survives, even if not on its original footprint, which was lost in 1632, representing over four centuries of continuous Portuguese religious building on roughly the same spot (O'Malley, 1908). Most of the rest has not been so lucky: the old river factories are largely gone, and what remained at Hijli and Tamluk has worn away with time and shifting riverbeds.

6.2 Portuguese Place Names and Cartographic Remains

Portuguese fingerprints show up on the map too. Bandel, in Hooghly district, takes its name from the Portuguese word for a trading post; the Firinghi Bazars near Dhaka and Chittagong do similar work, marking old commercial footholds in the landscape long after the footholds themselves disappeared (Dalgado, 1913).

6.3 Botanical Introductions

Even Indian botany owes something to this contact. Garcia de Orta, a Portuguese physician working in Goa, gave the first Indian plants their scientific names in his 1563 *Colóquios*; C. da Costa's *Tratado* followed in 1578. Chillies, tomatoes and potatoes arrived through the same networks, tying Bengali agriculture into a much wider Portuguese trading world.

7. Luso-Indian Communities and Their Transformation

7.1 The Policy of Intermarriage and Cultural

Integration

Portuguese colonial practice, going back to Albuquerque, actively encouraged intermarriage: Portuguese names, the Portuguese religion and Portuguese blood extended to colonised peoples through marriage, and Bengal was no exception (Campos, 1919). Portuguese men in Bandel and Hooghly regularly married Indian women, and converts to Christianity were often given Portuguese names outright. It was a far less rigid policy than later European powers adopted, and it produced something those powers never quite managed: mixed Luso-Indian communities that outlived the Portuguese presence itself.

7.2 The Three Classes of Portuguese Descendants

Campos divided Bengal's Portuguese descendants into three rough categories: Indian converts given Portuguese names; genuine Portuguese descendants who kept their surnames despite mixing with other groups; and descendants who intermarried so thoroughly with the English that the Portuguese connection all but disappeared (Campos, 1919). The first group was always the largest. Plenty of Anglo-Indians today carry Portuguese blood without knowing it, names like Correa and Lea having drifted, over generations, into forms such as Currie.

7.3 The Firingee Phenomenon in Bengali Culture

Anthony Firingee is the best-known case of just how far this assimilation could go. Born Hensman Anthony, he became a Bengali poet and singer despite his Portuguese ancestry, developed a reported devotion to Kali and Durga, and married a Hindu Brahmin widow, Saudamini (Murshid, 2018). The Firingee Kalibari in Bowbazar, a nineteenth-century temple dedicated to Kali, still carries his name, a small monument to how completely some Portuguese descendants folded into Bengali religious life.

7.4 The Contemporary Community at Bondashil, Assam

Present-day Assam's Portuguese descendants live mostly in Bondashil, a hamlet in the Badarpur district of South Assam's Karimganj area. Forty to fifty families there, by most accounts, though as noted earlier the figure is not perfectly consistent across sources, trace their line back to Portuguese traders and mercenaries who arrived, most likely, in the seventeenth century, coming from Chittagong and Dhaka to work as gunners for local rulers.

Assimilation here has been thorough but not total. The community speaks Bengali and Sylheti, keeps its Christian faith, and celebrates Christmas alongside Sankranti, blending European first names with local custom. The surnames are what has lasted best: Fernandes, Martin, Gonsalves, De Silva, Anthony, Frank (Dutta, 2020). Mariamnagar in Tripura shows the same pattern taken further. Five founding families, the Marchers, Lagardos, D'mellos, D'Silvas and D'Souzas, settled there under the Manikya kings and today number in the thousands, yet not one of their descendants still speaks Portuguese; Bengali took over within a few

decades of settlement.

7.5 The Contemporary Community at Mirpur, West Bengal

West Bengal has its own version of this story at Mirpur, a village near Geonkhali in Purba Medinipur district, close to the Triveni Sangam, though it is considerably less documented than Bondashil. Locals call these families Firingis; they too have assimilated almost completely while keeping their Christian faith, distinctive surnames, and occasional syncretic customs.

Mirpur dates to around the mid-eighteenth century, or so local tradition holds, when Rani Janaki Devi of the Mahishadal Rajbari hired Portuguese mercenaries to defend against Maratha raiders, known locally as the Borgis. Many of the soldiers simply stayed on afterwards. About sixty per cent of Mirpur's families today carry the surname Tesra, a local rendering of Teresa. It is not conclusive proof of anything on its own, but it is about as clear a paper trail as this kind of history usually leaves (Rahaman, 2023).

Put Bondashil, Mariamnagar and Mirpur side by side and a fairly consistent story emerges: communities founded through mercenary service rather than colonial planning, which have since become almost indistinguishable from their neighbours in daily life, while holding onto Christian faith and Portuguese surnames as the last visible markers of where they came from.

7.6 Contemporary Reflections on Identity

None of this troubles the communities themselves particularly. Roma Maria Frank, a Bondashil resident, has said as much: whether the community counts as Portuguese or Bengali no longer really matters to them, and they are happy to be seen as Bengali while still attending church on Sundays and joining in their neighbours' festivals (Dutta, 2020). It reads less like an unresolved identity than a settled one, several centuries in the making.

8. The Distinctive Character of Portuguese Influence

8.1 A Colony Without a Government

Historians sometimes reach for the phrase "shadow empire" to describe this, and it is not a bad shorthand: a private, informal Portuguese presence running well outside any real colonial administration. The crown had largely withdrawn from Bengal by the 1540s. What was left, merchants, adventurers, mercenaries, simply carried on without it. Robert Ivermee has made essentially this point about Hooghly specifically: it was a colony of traders and settlers, not of soldiers and officials, which is not quite what colony usually means and is exactly why the comparison to Goa keeps coming up (Ivermee, 2020).

8.2 Where the Influence Actually Came From

No school taught Bengali speakers the word for window. Nobody issued a directive that chhana should go into sweets. British influence in India came down from

somewhere, a syllabus, a court ruling, a district office; Portuguese influence never had that kind of address. It moved through sales, marriages, shared meals, the sort of contact no colonial office ever thought to write down. That may be exactly why it has lasted: there is no policy to reverse when the influence was never a policy to begin with. It blended in, too, rather than sitting on top of things the way an imposed system tends to. A word picked up at market settles into a language differently than a word handed down in a courtroom. Most Bengali speakers using *janla* or *kamra* today are not thinking about Portugal at all. That, more than anything written in a *farman*, is the real evidence of how completely it succeeded.

8.3 What Actually Survived

So what actually survives? Not much brick and mortar, for one thing. Formal Portuguese power ended by the 1630s, and most of the physical settlement went with it, worn down, built over, or lost to a river with a habit of changing course. What survives instead is harder to photograph: words nobody stops to notice, food nobody calls foreign, small Christian communities that have kept their faith and their surnames alive for three or four centuries without any particular help from Lisbon. Is that a lesser legacy than a surviving building would be? Probably not, though it took the field a while to see it that way.

8.4 Contrast with Other European Colonial Powers

Put the Dutch next to this and the contrast sharpens. They held real territory in Asia, ran a serious administration, and still left almost nothing behind in the region's languages; a recorded attempt to impose Dutch by decree failed outright. The British went further still, rebuilding schools, law and administration around their own presence, on purpose, at scale. The Portuguese did neither. They arguably were not trying especially hard, and that may be the actual lesson: intermarriage, everyday trade and contact nobody planned outlasted policy in a way policy rarely manages on its own. Ivermee's account of the Hooghly makes a related point about just how informal the whole enterprise stayed, right up to the point it stopped mattering much to anyone in Lisbon (Ivermee, 2020).

9. Conclusion

Compared to Goa or the Malabar coast, Portuguese Bengal has had relatively little scholarly attention, and not for want of substance. The Portuguese got here first among Europeans, arriving as traders, mercenaries and missionaries who built something lasting out of private initiative rather than imperial design.

The linguistic record alone is considerable: hundreds of Portuguese-derived words, used daily by people who mostly have no idea of their origin. Bengali food changed permanently once chillies, tomatoes, potatoes and *chhana* entered the picture. The Bandel Basilica and the Christian communities around it carry the religious side of the story into the present, however thinly documented the more recent chapters of that story

remain, as noted above.

The descendant communities at Bondashil, Mariamnagar and Mirpur are the clearest living link of all, for what that link is worth given how little independent verification most of the specific detail has had. Bengali or Assamese now, in almost every visible respect. Surnames, faith, the odd syncretic custom: that is what points back three centuries and more to a Portuguese soldier or trader who decided to stay. Or at least that is the story these communities tell about themselves, and there is not much reason, on the evidence available, to doubt it.

Nobody in Lisbon planned any of this. Traders, soldiers and settlers dealt with Bengali and Assamese society one transaction at a time, one marriage at a time, and what got left behind, in language, food, faith, a scattering of surnames, has simply outlasted the empires that came after with rather more paperwork behind them. Whether that says something specific about Portuguese Bengal, or something more general about how little colonial policy actually determines what colonial contact leaves behind, is a question worth raising even without a confident answer.

Three lines of further work suggest themselves. Little archaeological attention has gone to the lesser-known Portuguese settlements at Hijli, Tamluk and Pipli, all of which have all but vanished above ground; a systematic survey might recover more than the documentary record currently allows. The descendant communities themselves would benefit from more sustained field documentation than the journalistic accounts this paper has had to rely on, ideally while the generation that still remembers the shift from Portuguese to Bengali as living family history is around to be asked. And a comparative study, setting Portuguese Bengal against other informal or semi-official colonial networks elsewhere in South Asia and the wider Indian Ocean world, might help settle the question raised just above: whether unplanned contact outlasts policy as a general rule, or only happened to here.

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