

INTRODUCTION

Portugal is the oldest territorial state in Europe; India is one of the world's newer nations. Yet ironically history is much more important, and controversial, for Portuguese than for Indians. It is true that historical writing played a role in the Indian national movement, for some of the writing of the first half of the twentieth century was designed to foster patriotism and pride. Today however Indians are commendably relaxed about their history, as can be seen in vigorous controversies over historical matters in which it seems that all possible points of view can be, and are, presented. These debates are intellectual; the validity of the Indian nation is not dependent on the outcome.

This has usually not been the case in Portugal; too often their history has had present political meanings. Robert Southey visited Portugal in 1796, and 1800–1, enjoyed himself, and spent years working on a huge, and never completed, history of Portugal. It was going to be a wonderful book:

I believe no history has ever yet been composed that presents such a continuous interest of one kind or another as this would do, if I should live to complete it. The chivalrous portion is of the very highest beauty; much of what succeeds has a deep tragic interest; and then comes the gradual destruction of a noble national character, brought on by the cancer of Romish superstition. (Quoted in Rose Maccaulay, *They Went to Portugal*, London, 1946, p. 164)

In Portugal history is indeed of interest, not only to historians but also to the general population and especially to the governing elite. A famous savant wrote in 1898 that 'Perhaps one could say that the memory of and pride in those past times of real although transitory greatness is still today one of the main bonds of our nationalism, one of the things which fortified, and still fortifies, us in those hard times which we later passed through' (Conde de Ficalho, *Viagens de Pedro da Covilham*, Lisbon, 1898, pp. vi–vii). All this was exacerbated during the Salazar–Caetano period. History joined religion as an opiate. It was blatantly used for present political purposes. Portugal tried to retain her colonies, disingenuously renamed overseas provinces. An important bolster was the claim that all were equal in Portugal, both metropolitan

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and overseas. The criterion was not race but degree of 'civilization'. In a dictatorship where control over information was given a high priority, historians were enlisted to prove this claim for the past. In a country like Portugal, small, insignificant, thanks to Dr Salazar the poorest in Europe, history was used to foster pride and unity.

Since 1974 it has been possible for Portuguese to write what they like about their past and some have availed themselves of this opportunity. Yet among all classes and political tendencies, Portugal's past is still seen as 'important', and usually still as one in which the country can take pride.

The aim of my book is, naturally, to assess the influence or impact of the Portuguese on India. This is an ambitious and difficult task; in particular, sweeping generalizations must be avoided. Rather we need, as they say, to 'disaggregate the data'. When this is done, we find Portuguese influence varying very widely, ranging from massive to minuscule according to three criteria: time, place and category (for example, social, religious, economic, political). At a particular time, in a specified place, we may find a substantial Portuguese impact on a particular category of Indian life; change one or more of these criteria (say a different time or place) and the influence may well decrease to a considerable extent.

The conclusion, if I may anticipate the central finding of this book, is that in many areas the Portuguese impact was minor; in a few it was substantial. Overall there was much more co-operation and interaction than dominance. Let this not be misunderstood. This conclusion was reached on the basis of the evidence before me, and also, I believe, reflects an emerging consensus among specialists in the field. For those like myself who think in the most general way that it is 'wrong' for one group of people to impose their values, their political control, on others, the theme of this book will correctly be seen as one which is *positive* towards the Portuguese imperial effort. True, their leaders hoped to produce major change in India; most of the time they failed, and this, even if inadvertently, made their empire much less deleterious than the later more complete achievement of the British.

Needless to say, my conclusions are in no way influenced by anti-Portuguese or anti-Catholic feeling (whatever these two terms may mean). Several English authors in the late nineteenth century wrote books which criticized the Portuguese on invalid grounds, grounds which showed their own ethnocentrism (as indeed did Robert Southey).

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There is a vast difference between racist attacks on the Portuguese, and a dispassionate investigation of their imperial career in India. This book attempts the latter.

C. R. Boxer said that his classic *Portuguese Seaborne Empire* (London, 1969) was 'the product of over forty years' reading, research, reflection and publication on and around its subject matter' (p. 392). I can only claim an interest going back twenty years. As I have tried to sum up what I have learnt in this time, I have become acutely aware of the huge gaps in our knowledge. This is the case for the whole period from the end of Spanish rule over Portugal in 1640 to the end of Portugal's Indian empire in 1961. Vast materials are available; so far they have hardly been sifted. In a book which attempts to reflect the existing state of scholarship, this will explain the brevity, and no doubt superficiality, of my coverage of this later period. Yet even for the comparatively well-researched sixteenth century there are still huge gaps. Consider only Vasco da Gama. We know almost nothing of his early career. On his fateful voyage in 1497–8, why did he (correctly) take an outward route which involved a huge loop far west into the Atlantic? Why was he so ill-informed about Indian conditions that he knew nothing of the status and power of the opulent zamorin of Calicut, and persistently mistook Hinduism for some sort of deviant Christianity? All this book can do is to attempt a synthesis of existing knowledge. Obviously I have drawn heavily on the work of others, and on my own past efforts. The gaps and errors in the book reflect in part the present feeble state of the field, in part my own ignorance.

Two guiding principles underlie this book. It is part of a series about Indian history, and by a person whose speciality is Indian history; I hope India is always to the fore in what I have written. Indeed, I have consciously tried to assess the Portuguese and their activities from an Indian angle, rather than from a European one. Thus in the central and crucial matter of evaluating the Portuguese impact on India, I have to some extent discounted large claims made then and now by Portuguese and other European authors, and been more influenced by the very silence of Indian records on the whole presence of the Portuguese. Yet I also found it necessary to include fairly detailed discussions of what may seem to be purely Portuguese matters. I did this because I strongly feel that the Portuguese in India cannot be seen in isolation: their actions, policies and prejudices were a result of a world view derived from their own European milieu. I had to make some attempt to describe this. If

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there is too much Portugal and not enough India – and I earnestly hope this is not the case – then I must fall back on blaming the sources. Portuguese sources are relatively full, and accessible; Indian sources for the topic and period are neither. There are obvious problems in using mostly sources from one side; I hope I have been able to transcend the limitations of Portuguese records for one interested in Indian history.

My second guiding principle was to be as comparative and analytical as possible. Here also I hope my book makes some contribution, for much existing writing on the Portuguese in India, and on the history of early European activities in India in general, is antiquarian in the extreme. Years of painstaking work in the archives produces only an elaboration on a political narrative, or more details about the life of some great man. I have tried to discuss such broad historical themes (related, of course, to the history of the Portuguese in India) as the nature of western ‘impacts’; the peddling trade of Asia; European contact with Asia in what Jan Kieniewicz has called the ‘pre-colonial’ period, that is the period (which he extends through most of the eighteenth century) of European expansion, but not domination (‘Contact and Transformation, the European pre-colonial expansion in the Indian Ocean world-system in the 16th–17th centuries’, *Itinerario*, VIII, 2, 1984, pp. 45–58); and even what J. H. Plumb called society ‘before the human-condition was radically changed by the growth of industry’ (‘The Underside of History’, *Guardian Weekly*, July 1982, p. 18). Even when such themes are not overtly stated, they have been in my mind.

CHAPTER 1

THE PORTUGUESE ARRIVAL IN INDIA

Vasco da Gama's arrival near Calicut on 20 May 1498 was the culmination of a continuous, though spasmodic, Portuguese thrust into the Atlantic, south to the Cape of Good Hope, and on to India. This process began in 1415 when the Moroccan city of Ceuta was conquered. The Madeira and Azores islands were settled by Portuguese in the 1420s and 1430s, and in 1434 treacherous Cape Bojador was rounded. Great strides were made in the 1480s, culminating in the rounding of the Cape of Good Hope by Bartolomeu Dias in 1488. There followed a brief and rather mysterious hiatus, until de Gama's three small ships left Lisbon in July 1497. After spending May to October 1498 off the southwest Indian coast, he returned to Portugal in August 1499; not surprisingly, he was welcomed ecstatically.

The king, D. Manuel (1495–1521), immediately undertook extensive public works in Lisbon, designed to foster trade and future expeditions. Preparations for the second expedition, commanded by Cabral, were accelerated: he left in March 1500 with a huge fleet of thirteen ships and at least 1200 men. The sense of confidence and exultation of the time can be seen in the way work was started late in 1499 on the huge monastery of the Jeronimos in the suburb of Lisbon on the Tagus River from which the fleets left for India. Even more indicative was the renaming of the area where the monastery was to be erected (it took fifty years to complete): it was to be known henceforth as Belém (Bethlehem), the place where the Portuguese empire was born.

Historians have long debated the reasons for these voyages. Why was almost a century spent on thrusting down the West African coast, and why was it the Portuguese rather than some other European power who undertook these voyages? The much-quoted answer tells us that a member of da Gama's crew, when asked in Calicut 'What brought you here?' replied 'We seek Christians and Spices.' Such a reply was actually a cliché even in the fifteenth century; Portuguese kings in their letters explained not only the discoveries but almost everything else they did as being designed to 'serve God and make a profit for ourselves'. Some later Portuguese explanations, flying even further in the face of both facts and

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probability, stress solely religious motives. Portugal's greatest poet Luis de Camoens in *The Lusiads*, Portugal's national epic, has a Portuguese reply to the question posed above: 'We have come across the mighty deep, where none has ever sailed before us, in search of the Indus. Our purpose is to spread the Christian faith' (William C. Atkinson, trans., *The Lusiads*, Penguin, 1952, p. 166). An official Portuguese publication issued in 1956, when their rule in Goa was gravely threatened, claimed that 'Commercial exploitation has never been the mainspring of Portuguese action overseas. Always religious in character, Portuguese expansion was yet not guided by a narrow proselytizing spirit, but by a spirit of gradual and tolerant assimilation.'¹

History writing always reflects prevailing needs and moods. Consequently, in the period between 1955 and 1985 the Portuguese discoveries have often been explained in almost purely economic terms. Several things do seem to be clear. In the early fifteenth century Portuguese expansion was in large part a search for food, for Portugal was always a grain importer. Hence the settlement of the Azores and Madeira, and the rapid expansion of cereal and sugar production there. Hence also large-scale grain production in the Portuguese enclaves in North Africa. The search for new fishing grounds, when successful, especially in the north Atlantic, provided not only protein but also maritime training. But political imperatives also played a part. In Portugal, as elsewhere in Europe, seigneurial revenues were falling, and one escape from the 'crisis of feudalism' was to provide alternative outlets for bastards, younger sons, and other disadvantaged nobles. Such people received land on feudal terms in the Atlantic islands, and could gain glory, even knighthoods, fighting on the North African frontier.

Once started, the expansion fed on itself. As trade developed gold was needed; from the 1450s it came back in considerable quantities from West Africa. As sugar production expanded labour was needed; West Africa turned out to be a prime source of slaves and these flooded into the islands and metropolitan Portugal after 1443. But, ironically, one product not in short supply was spices, which of course became the *leit-motif* of the sixteenth-century empire. Until the 1470s there was no quest for Asian spices, for fifteenth-century Europe was well provided

¹ *Portuguese India Today*, 2nd ed. (Lisbon, 1956), pp. 31–2.

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for by the traditional route through the Red Sea, to Alexandria and so to Venice.

The role of different social groups in Portugal in this expansion has been much debated. There is evidence, though this is a matter in dispute, that the rise of the Ottoman Turks in the eastern Mediterranean in the fifteenth century blocked some traditional Genoese investment areas. To compensate, great Genoese bankers turned to Portugal, and their investments provided some of the impetus and capital needed to finance the discoveries. The role of the peasantry is also controversial. Some historians have pointed to a population increase in the fifteenth century to compensate for the ravages of the Black Death; the expansion overseas was then necessary to provide a safety-valve. This however seems less convincing. Fifteenth-century Portugal was certainly a small and poor country, yet with a population of less than one million any surplus rural population was easily absorbed in the towns. It does seem clear that this urban migration weakened further the power of the nobles on their landed estates. The nobility in fact suffered not only from a labour shortage but also from a comparatively disadvantageous position vis-à-vis the monarchy, the House of Aviz which ruled Portugal from 1385 to 1580. This royal domination, which in part reflected changing economic and social forces in Portugal itself, was also a result of events in 1385. In this year the Portuguese king beat off a Castilian attack, so establishing his new dynasty. Most of his nobles had sided with the foreigners, and were either executed or exiled for their bad choice. The Portuguese nobility were thus facing crises both in their positions in the countryside and in their unusual subservience to the monarchy. The latter was forcefully brought home to them in 1484, when an over-mighty noble, in fact the top noble, the Duke of Bragança, was executed for treason. Expansion, new lands and new paths to glory had an obvious, even if atavistic, appeal.

The role of the crown is similarly a matter of debate and controversy. The image of Prince Henry the Navigator has long dominated. A younger son of D. João I (1385–1433), and knighted at Ceuta, he devoted his life, we are told, to the discoveries as a crusade to outflank the Muslims. In the fastnesses of Sagres, in the extreme southwest of the country, he established a school for mariners and navigators, and sent out expedition after expedition down the West African coast, following their progress with weary eyes until the Cross of Christ on their sails sank below the horizon. Recent research has modified this picture. The

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prince was not particularly learned, and the notion of his establishing a 'school' for navigators and scientists seems quite far-fetched. But he played a role nevertheless. Like other members of the royal family he had large estates and other economic interests in Portugal (among other things, he held a monopoly on soap making). While there may have been a religious or mystical element in his patronage of voyages of discovery, he also profited handsomely from the results, especially from imports of gold and slaves. Here also it seems economic man was dominant, even if not exclusively. Further, Prince Henry's activities, whatever their motives, do point to one central characteristic of the discoveries, namely the central role played by the crown. It is true that merchants, both Portuguese and foreign, often provided capital and even ships, yet the direction and much of the impetus came from the crown.

This direction was particularly important after the death of Prince Henry in 1460. It is possible to envisage the Portuguese standing pat around this time. The Atlantic islands were producing, a debased chivalry could perform its barbarous rituals in North Africa, and trade with West Africa was flourishing. The southern end of Africa seemed nowhere in sight. It was only a new royal push, this time from the future João II (1481–95), which led to further progress southwards. The way in which this was done encapsulated exactly the whole merchant–king nexus which produced the discoveries. In 1469 after some years of stalemate a merchant was given a wide-ranging concession. In return for a five-year monopoly on the trade in gold and slaves, he had to discover 100 leagues of West African coast a year. Thus were linked the merchant's search for profits, and the crown's desire, at least partly also with a view to profits, for further discoveries.

Historians have pointed to various other subsidiary elements to explain the progress and success of Portuguese discoveries. The country's location in the extreme southwest of Europe may have provided, by reason of greater contiguity, some small advantage. Portugal was at peace through nearly all the fifteenth century; energy could be channelled towards expansion. As in many other parts of Europe, the idea of discovery and foreign travel had some popular currency, fostered by Marco Polo's book and Sir John Mandeville's extremely popular, though bogus, *Travels*. Some Portuguese had behind them a tradition of seafaring, derived from the importance of fishing along the coast and indeed far out into the north Atlantic.

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But this must not lead us to see the Portuguese as a race of hardy seafarers. Most Portuguese were peasants, in no way knowledgeable about the sea, nor economically dependent on it. The state of Portuguese navigational skills at the start of the discoveries is best exemplified by the way in which the fleet sailing to take Ceuta in 1415 had great difficulty getting across the Straits of Gibraltar. Yet soon this changed; the Portuguese experimented with and perfected both ships and navigational techniques to enable them to press on south into unknown seas.

Until the middle of the fifteenth century the Portuguese used small square-rigged vessels, similar to Mediterranean merchantmen. Such ships were adequate sailing before the wind, but had trouble returning to Portugal in the teeth of contrary winds. The crucial development was the perfection of the caravel around 1440. The lateen sails on these ships were copied from Arab practice. The advantage of course was that they could tack, and sail much closer to the wind. Indeed, sometimes both off West Africa in the fifteenth century and in the sixteenth century in western India, a ship would be square-rigged for sailing with a favourable wind, and then be re-rigged to lateen or a mixture of the two to sail into contrary winds.

In navigational skills also the Portuguese made progress which enabled them to sail far out of sight of land. From 1456 they were able to use a quadrant to measure star altitude and so determine latitude. In the 1480s solar observations and relatively sophisticated tables improved further their ability to work out their latitude. (The scientific determination of longitude of course remained a mystery for some three more centuries.) It would be incorrect to overemphasize these advances: Portuguese navigation in the sixteenth century could certainly be a hit or miss affair (literally), and many crusty old pilots scorned such new-fangled devices, preferring to rely on their experience of winds, tides and the run of the water to find their way.

A summary statement on motives is difficult to provide. The economic determinists have had things pretty much their own way recently. In part this is because one can measure gold and slave imports, and cultivation on the Canaries. But how to measure, or even demonstrate at all, Prince Henry's religious faith? Was it indeed that 'Religion provided the pretext, and gold the motive', or that 'Discovery was called into being by the search for wealth. Ostensibly it was a crusade for souls; if the Portuguese had built churches instead of

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baracoons, and sought conversions instead of slaves, they might be believed. Missionary work followed half a century behind man-stealing.² Perhaps a better way to approach the matter is to remember that fifteenth-century people did not make the clear distinction between religion, economics and politics which we are used to making. To the Portuguese kings there may have been no contradiction or unconscious irony in their linking of service to God and profit for themselves. In 1565 the king, D. Sebastian, encouraged the viceroy in Goa to promote Christianity in the Indonesian island of Ambon, for this 'is an important means of making the country secure and would increase the profits to be made there' (Hubert Jacobs, ed., *Documenta Malucensia*, 2 vols., Rome, 1974–80, vol. 1, pp. 461–2). While giving primacy to economic motives, we should also try to see in the discoveries the same sort of complex intermingling of imperatives revealed in this letter: God, Caesar and Mammon altogether.

Apart from 'Christians and Spices', and Dr Johnson's later dismissive 'I do not much wish well to discoveries, for I am always afraid they will end in conquest and robbery' (John Wain, *Samuel Johnson*, London, 1974, p. 278), the other great cliché about the Portuguese discoveries is Adam Smith's famous statement that 'The discovery of America, and that of a passage to the East Indies by the Cape of Good Hope, are the two greatest and most important events recorded in the history of mankind' (D. K. Fieldhouse, *The Colonial Empires*, London, 1982, p. 3). We can pay unreserved tribute to the great navigational feats of 1487–1500. Da Gama on his voyage of 1497–9 was twice out of sight of land for ninety days continuously. Cabral in 1500 linked together four continents, for after leaving Europe he discovered Brazil, and then sailed to Africa and on to Asia. This tribute paid, what else can be said of the significance of the Portuguese voyages?

It is really incorrect to see these Portuguese voyages as completely new and unusual, for the Portuguese themselves and other Europeans had been trading, exploring and sailing long distances for centuries. When Rome was at its height its merchants traded extensively in the Arabian Sea. Later Europeans like Marco Polo travelled vast distances overland and by sea. Norsemen and Vikings settled Greenland, Iceland and even North America. Thus a case can be made that the Portuguese,

² Respectively Carlo M. Cipolla, *European Culture and Overseas Expansion* (Harmondsworth, 1970), p. 101, and Peter Padfield, *Tide of Empires*, vol. 1, '1481–1654' (London, 1979), p. 32.