

Lecture Series Publication

Lecture – III

**DISAPPEARED AND INTEGRATED:
THE INDO PORTUGUESE IN NORTH EAST INDIA**

Professor David R. Syiemlieh.



Indian Council of Historical Research
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Guwahati.

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* Jean Dutoche, op. cit., see the chapters *Le Voyage en Assam* (Avril 1755-Mai 1757), *De Dibrak à la Frontière de l'Assam* (15 Juin-24 Novembre 1755), *Assam* (24 Novembre 1755-14 Mai 1756).

* John M. McCosh, *Topography of Assam*, reprint New Delhi, 1975, pp.23-24.

* C. Becker, op. cit., pp.106-107.

* Arnold Föll, "De Vasco de Gama aux Chrétiens de Marimnagar", *Orient*, Mars-Avril 1959, n. 24.

* Sambhu C. Mukherjee, *Travels in Bengal: Calcutta to Independent Tipperah*, Calcutta, 1887, pp. 232-234.

DISAPPEARED AND INTEGRATED: THE INDO - PORTUGUESE IN NORTH EAST INDIA

* Arnold Föll, op.cit., p.24.

Preface

The North-East regional Centre at Guwahati was established in 1997 with a view to promote the basic objectives of the Indian Council of Historical Research viz. the scientific research and understanding of history, encouragement of inter-disciplinary studies of history and promotion of national integration. I am happy to note that the Centre has been efficiently carrying out different academic activities in the region since its inception.

The Centre started a Lecture Series Program in 2003, and since then seventeen lectures and two special lectures have been organized at the Centre. Since there was no commonality in terms of the theme of the lectures delivered on different occasions, it was decided to publish them in the form of separate monographs: This is the first publication of the Centre under the scheme. I believe these publications will be welcomed as contribution to the historiography of this region as well as to the entire country and would extend the horizons of history writing and study in India.

I am grateful to the learned speakers who have delivered these lectures and congratulate the staff working at the North-east Regional Centre for publishing the same.

Professor D N Tripathi
Chairman
ICHR, New Delhi

Disappeared and Integrated: The Indo-Portuguese in North East India*

Introduction

My interest on the Indo-Portuguese was stimulated while researching on the Holy Cross Congregation, a Catholic organisation that arrived in East Bengal in 1853 and grew in its mission from Bengal into Tripura, Mizoram, Meghalaya and south Assam. During the course of the material collection, I had the opportunity to reside for some days in two of the villages of the Indo-Portuguese, met the residents, took notes and acquainted myself with their present situation. Realizing that so little was known of the community, I then incorporated some of their past in *They Dared to Hope: The Holy Cross Congregation In India*; wrote two articles on Mariamnagar in the *NEIHA Proceedings* and a longer article in a book in honour of a friend. This presentation to is an update of these publications.

Of several Portuguese settlements in North East India, three stood out prominently for their location, purpose, size, disappearance or continued history. These communities were located at Rangamati on the Bengal frontier of the Mughal Empire in Goalpara ; Bondashil on the river Barak in Cachar, and Mariamnagar in Agartala, Tripura. All three started out as settlements of Portuguese mercenaries.

Paper presented at ICHR, North East Regional Centre, Guwahati on March 27, 2004 on the occasion of ICHR, Foundation Day by Professor David R. Syiemlieh.

The mercantile interest of the Portuguese in India is fairly well chronicled. As the earliest of the Europeans who came to India from the late sixteenth and into the eighteenth centuries, they were in many ways different from the other Europeans that came out to the orient. They were not mere travellers and traders. Many of those who came to the east, stayed on for several years at a stretch. Some remained for a lifetime. They were among the earliest of European mercenaries, large numbers of who were employed in the service of Indian states, particularly as cannoneers. A more peaceful Europe at that period of time may have motivated these and other European mercenaries to find employment in India. Since their women rarely accompanied their men out to east, the majority of those who remained in India took Indian wives. They, along with the children, invariably took the faith of the Portuguese. The Indians referred to the offspring of the early settlers as Firingis and a Filhos de Indos by the Portuguese.¹

From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, this community either grew in number and significance, as was the case in southern and western India, or remained in small clusters as in Bengal and its hinterland. This aspect of population growth in the Portuguese expansion overseas differentiated it from the pattern of the French, British, Dutch and other European colonial societies. In course of time, the territories formerly under the Estado de India were to have a sizeable population of Portuguese descent. Despite the Portuguese political eclipse, they had a tremendous social impact although it grew up in mixed tradition.²

Rangamati

The early Portuguese who came to the southern, western and eastern parts of India had trade and commerce as their primary concern. Instead, those who came to India in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and that too in large numbers, moved further north as mercenaries, specializing themselves as cannoners. The early accounts of travelers to the Mughal frontier with Assam do not mention any Portuguese settlement. Ralph Fitch, an Englishman, who resided for some time in Cooch Behar in 1586, and Fathers Stephen Cacella and John Cabral, entering Assam in 1626 in search of a route to China, make no mention of any Christian or Portuguese communities beyond the Mughal frontier.⁴

Some years later, in 1635, mention is made of a 'Firingi' being arrested for straying into the Ahom territory and shooting a vulture.⁵ By the turn of the seventeenth century, there appear many references to a sizeable Christian community, in all probability of Portuguese origin, at Rangamati. The chronicle of 1682, of the Augustinian Friars of Bandel near Hoogly in Bengal, has an entry of a Christian community numbering some 7000 at Rangamati. N. Hosten, the noted Jesuit scholar was of the opinion that many Portuguese and Indo-Portuguese who accompanied Mir Jumla in his Assam campaign 1661-1663 settled in Rangamati (in the District of Darrang).⁶ Frey Sicardo, an Augustinian priest who travelled to this frontier to attend to the spiritual needs of the Catholics, makes references to another outpost that records refer to as Hossumpur or Ossumpur, which is described as being close to Rangamati.⁷

Catholic missions in India were under the “Padroado”, the Right of Patronage given by the Vatican to the king of Portugal in gratitude for services of its men and materials given to the church in India. The monarch had a monopoly over all the Catholic missions in India. No Bishop could be named; no dioceses could be created; no bull or brief of the Holy See could have force without going through and receiving the approval of the king of Portugal. Padroado missionaries made frequent visits to Rangamati, Hossumpur and Sylhet where the Portuguese/ Indo-Portuguese had settled in Chiroto, and to Bondashil and Mariamnagar.⁸ Occasionally a Bishop visited the Christians as in 1712-1715, when Bishop Laynes of Mylapore, accompanied by Fr. Barbier, made a visitation to the Augustinian parishes in Bengal. In the early part of 1714, the two started for Rangamati. The *Indo-Portuguese Correspondence* records the event thus:

Rangamati is a town situated on the northern border of the Mogul Empire, 26⁰ North latitude. It was then a common saying in Bengal that of two persons going to Rangamati, one at least, must die in the place. This, however, did not deter the Catholic missionaries who thought nothing better could happen to them than death, while discharging their duties. They seemed to have travelled on the Megna and Brahmaputra. On the fifth or sixth day they went ashore for twenty-four hours at Hossumpur, an exclusively Christian station where there was a church dedicated to St. Nicholas de Tolentino. The country north of this is a desert and the climate is very unhealthy. During the twenty-five days they

remained at Rangamati, the Bishop administered confirmation to more than a thousand people.⁹

Bondashil

Further to the east where Bengal abutted on Cachar, was another village of Portuguese descendants. The village of Bondashil, derived from Bond (= *close*) and Shill (= *rock*), on the south bank of the river Barak, was a mile distant from the more historic Badarpur. Just as the early history of Rangamati and Hossumpur is shrouded in mystery, so too, nothing definite is known of how and why the Christians of Bondashil came to stay and serve in Cachar. The tradition still prevalent among the people is that their ancestors had earlier served the principality of Sardhana near Meerut under the dashing German adventurer Walter Reinhardt and his charming wife Begum Sumru. Sardhana's army of 5000 men was at one time put under the disposal of the Mughal emperor. When the Mughal Empire collapsed, a group of these soldiers may have left to secure military service as mercenaries in Sylhet and with the Cachar Raja.¹⁰

Towards the close of the eighteenth century and again in the early years of the nineteenth century the Burmese entered Assam and planned a campaign to expand into Bengal via the Cachar state. Govinda Chandra its ruler appealed to the East India Company for help. Portuguese soldiers from Sylhet were sent in 1823-1824 to assist the Cachar Raja. These mercenaries entrenched themselves in

Badarpur where a fort stood, and stayed further advance of the Burmese. When the Raja was restored as ruler, he rewarded the Christians by giving them land at Baniyachong in Sylhet. Some of the Indo-Portuguese settled down at the new site; however, the larger number remained on at Bondashil and gave it its distinctive feature.¹¹

The earliest record of a priest visiting Bondashil was that of Freycinon in 1844.¹² Then for many years, this community did not have any priest to minister to them till the Holy Cross Congregation included Sylhet and Cachar within their ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Their first priest to be ordained in Dacca, Fr. Benoit Adolphe Mercier, made a number of visits to Bondashil. Travelling upstream by boat from Dacca, he would continue his pastoral mission with visits to Cherrapunji, Shillong and Gauhati. Records show that he made a journey in 1860.¹³ The next year he accompanied Bishop Dufal of East Bengal to Bondashil and Sylhet where they admitted converts to the Catholic faith.¹⁴ Fr. Mercier was again in Bondashil in 1864 when he officiated at the marriage of John Anton and Maria Filghera. The ceremony took place on 23rd July 1864.¹⁵ The French priest made the circuit once more in 1868. His confreres, Frs. Aime Marie Fourmond and Bonnet, made their round of visits in 1868 and 1869. From 1870, Fr. Fourmond took up permanent residence at Bondashil.¹⁶ The Holy Cross Congregation priests were touring the region in the hope that the Vatican would hand over Assam and the surrounding hills to the mission in extension of their efforts in East Bengal.¹⁷

Mariamnagar

Whereas there possibly could have been a connection between the Portuguese/Indo-Portuguese of Rangamati, Hossumpur, Chiroto and Bondashil, the beginnings of a Portuguese and Catholic settlement at Mariamnagar in Tripura came from other exigencies. The history of this village is fairly well documented. King Amar Manikya first employed Portuguese mercenaries of Chittagong and Noakhali in his army to ward off the Mughls of Arakan and the Chittagong hills adjoining his state. The state's capital was then at Udaipur. When the capital was shifted north to Agartala around 1760, these Indo-Portuguese, by then greatly reduced in number, settled down as cannonneers in the army and as cultivators in the rent-free land given to them. They called their village Mariamnagar. Another smaller settlement at some distance from Mariamnagar, was named Kashipur.

The first Catholic priest to attend to these Christians was Fr. Ignatius Gomes when he visited the village in 1683. He writes that "the Christians were not much good, they were little more than baptised Hindus".¹⁸ One hundred and sixty years later, Fr. Barbe, another French priest, who was pastor of Chittagong, 'discovered' this colony of Indo-Portuguese in 1843. None of the villagers had seen a priest in their lifetime; yet, "somehow they had kept their faith and baptized their children". The priest found the community "very happy, and I may say their food is better, their dress more clean and their houses more comfortable than is the case among people who lived under the British flag". He baptised 4 persons. He completed the baptism ceremonies for 78 persons who were previously baptized. He blessed

the marriage of four couples, and he regularized the marriage of fourteen others.¹⁹

Decline: Rangamati

The Christians were at Rangamati for about a century. As soldiers and camp followers, they were stationed there to buttress the Mughal campaigns into Assam. As the Mughal influence weakened by the early 18th Century, it might not have warranted the continued service of these mercenaries and soldiers. It is suggested that they may have moved elsewhere, probably towards the east. Marco Dell Tomba, writing between 1758 and 1769, mentions that, the Portuguese priest who had lived in Rangamati had gone back to Dacca.²⁰ Joseph Tieffenthaler, another priest who refers to the settlement, notes that it was “formerly a populous town with a church”.²¹ The French trader Jean-Baptiste Chevalier²² who made three visits to Assam via Rangamati between April 1755 and May 1757 gives much attention to the place for its strategic location, commercial importance and the *fauzdar* who conducted its defense and administrative functions. He wrote in his memoir of Rangamati’s “ancient reputation”, its fortress, cannon and the Portuguese soldiers. No details are mentioned because by then the place must have been in decline. That such a large community disappearing should be a matter of concern for historians. Literature of that period does not provide answers. We may surmise therefore that the community was no longer required to defend the Mughal frontier, as by then the imperial authority had waned. Another explanation for their disappearance might have been, that there could have been an inundation of the Brahmaputra, which would have affected the settlement. The settlement

was located at a bend of the river. For these and other reasons, the Indo-Portuguese numbering 7000 moved out of Rangamati and settled elsewhere in the region.

Walter Hamilton in his *Description of Hindostan* (1820), mentions a small 'Portuguese' community of 20 families in Goalpara, then a part of Rangpur. Mention is again made of this community in the account of John M'Cosh. Writing in 1837, he gives a fairly long description of a small society of native Christians of Portuguese descent at Goalpara. They numbered 50 to 60 in all. They adhered to their religion and had been visited in earlier years by Catholic priests from Dacca. M'Cosh found that in dress and habits they are not to be distinguished from the natives. Their occupation was cow feeding, or that of "Chuprasses". Feared by the people around them, they were left to themselves. Marriages were not always possible within their community because of their small numbers, and inter-marriages invariably resulted in social exclusion and a further diminishing of their numbers.²³

Bondashil

The Bondashil and Mariamnagar communities did not disappear though they just could have. The erosion of the south bank of the Barak over the last century has taken away much of the Bondashil village. Isolated as they were, it was not easy to retain their religion and social customs. There were circumstances and situations that this community could not withstand. To ward off the evil spirits, they adopted the practices of the communities around them. Their religion and social composition limited their marriage contacts to

Baniyachong, Mariamnagar and Noakhali. Distilling and the consumption of alcohol brought about their ruin. Cultivation became a secondary profession and in course of time, much of their land was sold out. The construction of the Bengal Assam Railway in the early years of the last century, with a junction at Badarpur, offered many of their men more useful and lucrative occupation.²⁴ It may be reasoned that this changed economic position and the start of a Catholic mission in 1911 close to the village, further isolated its people and it was visible in their dress, use of English at home and Bengali with their neighbours.

Mariamnagar

As the power of the Tripura Raja waned, so did the fortunes of the Mariamnagar Christians. They continued to have a position in the army and were authorized to have guns until their place was taken up by up country soldiers, Manipuris and Gurkhas. They all but lost the state's patronage and employment by the middle of this century. Only one of the Indo-Portuguese was in military service till 1947.²⁵ Sambhu C. Mukherjee who was Dewan of Tripura before the turn of the 19th century, inquired about the supply of liquor during his first tour of the native state. He learnt that the Tripuris produced it at home by fermenting boiled rice, but the 'Firingis' made by far the best drink. Mukherjee notes in his memoirs, that among the distillers, only a certain Joakim was worth conversing with. He learnt from him that the community was at the point of leaving Agartala for good to settle down at Noakhali. Their fortunes were at the lowest ebb and their numbers had been reduced by death. From what had been a thriving community, these Christians were

reduced to a few struggling families. The Dewan thought them too valuable an element of the population of the state to part with. He advised them to remain, assuring them that he would make their life more comfortable.²⁶ They did not move from Mariamnagar and Kashipur.

Unlike their counterparts in Bondashil, the Indo-Portuguese of Marimnagar had gone far ahead in cultural integration with the Bengali society. They spoke Bengali, sang Bengali songs, used musical instruments of the dominant community, dressed like them and also acquired their food habits, though with preference for pork on special occasions. A description of a marriage in September 1891 does not single it out as being distinct or different from the Bengali marriage ceremony.²⁷ The residents of Mariamnagar, however, were not completely integrated into the dominant community. They retained their religion and historical consciousness. Left on their own, they had still preserved their faith as illustrated in their recitation of the Hail Mary in “a mixture of Bengali and of Portuguese but still the Hail Mary”²⁸

Conclusion

This has been an attempt to trace the history of a small but particularly interesting community. Their histories need to be recorded and mentioned, before it becomes a thing of past and forgotten for one community of the Indo-Portuguese is lost without trace, two other remain. The families of Indo-Portuguese origin - the Lagardo, Marcher, Mendez, Rodrigues, Mendoza, Anthony, Quiah and

Fernandez - of Bondashil, now part of Badarpur and Mairamnagar are fast losing their roots due to migration in search of employment as well as marriage outside the community. The few remaining families struggle to hold on to their past, well aware that they could be the last of a proud people whose ancestry goes back many centuries.

Notes and references

In 2003 I had the privilege to make a presentation at Gauhati University on an aspect of more recent history. This paper was presented at Gauhati, on an invitation by the Regional Centre of Indian Council of Historical Research to speak on the occasion of the foundation day of the ICHR. My thanks to the ICHR-NERC for the invitation and opportunity to interact with social scientist and scholars of this University.

¹ The name *Firinghee* "as employed by the natives of India is applied to the Indian-born Portuguese or, when used more generally for Europeans, implies something of hostility or disparagement". Cf. H. Yule and A.C. Burnell (eds.). *Hobson-Jobson*, reprint, New Delhi, 1968, p 352.

² M.N. Pearson, *Coastal Western India: Studies from the Portuguese Records*, Concept, XCHR Studies No. 2, New Delhi. 1981, p.87.

³ The Portuguese had found service in the Mughal army since the time of Akbar. On their arrival at Fatehpur Sikri in 1580, the Jesuits found Portuguese residents there. There were 200 Portuguese in the army with which Shah Jahan rebelled against his father in 1624. Cf. Edward Maclagan, *The Jesuits and the Great Mogul*, London, 1932, p. 268.

⁴ N.N. Acharyya, "Assam in the Views of some European Writers" in *Benudhar Sharma Commemorative Volume*, Kamrupa Anusandhan Samiti, Guwahati. 1987, pp. 234-235; 240-241; *Travels of Frey Sebastian*

Manrique 1629-1643, A Translation of the Itenerio de Las Misiones Orientales with Introduction and Notes, by Lt. Col. C. Eckford Luard, assisted by Fr. H. Hosten, Oxford, 1927, vol. 2, pp. 391-362.

⁵ Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*. Calcutta, 1963, pp. 115-116.

⁶ Cited in T. Menampampil, *Church in Northeast India: A Study*, Gauhati, 1974, p. 17; cited in C. Becker, *Early History of Catholic Missions in Northeast India*, translated and edited by F. Leicht and S Karotemprel, Vendrame Institute, Shillong 1989, p. 93; F.S. Downs in "Rangamati: A Christian Community in Northeast India", in Milton S. Sangma and David R. Syiemlieh (eds.) *Essays On Christianity in Northeast India*, New Delhi 1994, attempts to locate Rangamati. Not having access or use of maps of that time he is not able to situate the frontier post. Map no. XVIII of James Rennel's *Memoir of a map of Hindustan or the Mughal Empire and his Bengal Atlas*, edited by B.P.Ambashthya, Patna, 1975, clearly marks Rangamati close to Goalpara. This some map is illustrated in Carte IV of Jean Deloche, *Les Aventures de Jean-Baptiste Chevalier dans l'Inde Orientale (1752-1765)*, Paris. 1984.

⁷ See F.S. Downs, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

⁸ K. George Kottuppallil, "A Historical Survey of the Catholic Church in Northeast India from 1672 to 1983", in *Centenary of the Catholic Church in Northeast India 1890-1990*, Shillong, 1990. Chapter 1.

⁹ Fr. Barbier's visit to Rangamati is reported in *The Indo-Portuguese Correspondence*. September 30, 1865, vol. 1, no. 14. p. 159. A list of the Portuguese churches at the end of the 17th century in Eastern Bengal and Assam which include Rangamati is mentioned in H.E. Stapleton, "The Origins of the Catholic Christians of Eastern", *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, vol. NS.XVVII, p. 53.

¹⁰ C. Becker, *History of the Catholic Mission in Northeast India*, translated and edited by G. Stadler and S. Karotemprel, Shillong. 1980. pp. 99-

102; Fr. Pushpa Raj, *Bondashil Indo-Portuguese Community*, Silchar, 2002, pp. 8-9.

¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 102-103. *The Assam District Gazetteers, Vol. 2, Sylhet*. Edited by B.C.Allen, Calcutta, 1905, pp. 91-92, notes that the Christians of Bondahshil were given the land in Baniyachong, "the proceeds of which enabled them to live in idleness. Quarrels broke out in the small community, their land was gradually sold to the surrounding villages and most of the people now earn their living by domestic service".

¹²Edmund Geodert, "The Garo Mission", Part III. Mimeograph. p. 57.

¹³C. Becker, op. cit.; Alfred LePailleur, "Le Diocese de Chittagong au Bengal", (Mss), p. 140.

¹⁴Bondashil Baptism Register, entries dated 10-18 October 1861.

¹⁵Bondashil Marriage Register, entry 1.

¹⁶Alfred LePailleur, op. cit., p. 140.

¹⁷George Kottupallil, *History of the Catholic Missions in Central Bengal 1855-1886*, Vendrame Institute, Shillong, 1988, pp.238-258.

¹⁸Cited in Edmund Geodert, "The Churches of Dacca", mimeograph, p. 59.

¹⁹*The Bengal Catholic Herald*, No. 1, vol. V, 1 July 1843, Barbe's report of the visit is dated 11 June 1843.

²⁰Cited in F. S. Downs, op. cit., p. 45.

²¹*Ibid.*, pp.42,45.

²² Jean Deloche, op. cit., see the chapters *Le Voyage en Assam*, (Avril 1755-Mai 1757); *De Dhaka a la Frontiere de l'assam* (14 Juin-24 Novembre 1755), Assam (24 Novembre 1755-14 Mai 1756).

²³ John M. M'Cosh, *Topography of Assam*, reprint New Delhi, 1975, pp.23-24.

²⁴ C. Becker, op. cit., pp.106-107.

²⁵ Arnold Fell, "De Vasco de Gama aux Chretiens de Mariamnagar", *Orient*, March- April 1959, p. 24;

²⁶ Sambhu C. Mukherjee, *Travels in Bengal: Calcutta to Independent Tipperah*, Calcutta, 1887, pp. 232-234.

²⁷ Letter of Fr. Michael Phillip Fallize to Bishop Louage, *Annals de Sainte Joseph*, vol.23, No. 1 March 1892, pp. 16-21. For details of this ceremony, read D. R. Syiemlieh, "Mariamnagar: Cultural Integration-Social Seclusion", *Proceedings of the North East India History Association*, Agartala, 1997, pp.166-171.

²⁸ Arnold Fell, op.cit., p.24.

Professor D. R. Syiemlieh is Professor of History at the North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, where he teaches and guides research on Modern Indian History. He was for several years the General Secretary of the North East India History Association with which he has been associated from its inception. He is the author of *British Administration in Meghalaya: Policy and Pattern* (1989); *A brief History of the Catholic Church in Nagaland* (1990); *They Dared to Hope: The Holy Cross Congregation in India* (1999); *Survey of Research in History of North East India (1970 - 1990)* published in 2000, edited several other volumes and has published numerous articles.

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