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THE PORTUGUESE ADMINISTRATION IN MALACCA, 1511-1641

by

D.R. Sar Desai
Department of History
University of California
Los Angeles
California 10024
U.S.A.

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With the exception of Alfonso de Albuquerque in the 16th century, Marquis de Pombal in the 18th and Oliveira Salazar in the 20th, Portugal can hardly boast of any special genius for administration, whether of the colonies or of the mother-country. This lack of administrative acumen is matched by lack of interest in administrative matters among Portuguese chroniclers and historians. While the secular historians concentrated on the heroic deeds of a rather limited era, their Jesuit counterparts concerned themselves with exaggerating the scanty exploits in their evangelical enterprise. The administration was not elaborate and, therefore, the records were scanty. Portugal did not have a budgetary system; no systematic accounts were maintained neither for Portugal nor for the colonies, specially in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Consequently, one might with justification lament with Professor Charles R. Boxer upon the paucity of material for an administrative history of the Portuguese colonial possessions. Even so, one might study the Portuguese colonial administration in the larger context of interests, policies, and prejudices.

The old notion that the Portuguese colonial empire was motivated by three G's -- God, Gold and Glory -- must now be discarded.


Secular and clerical accounts, actual numbers of converts to Christianity and the proportion of time spent by the Portuguese 16th century officials in attempting to save their own souls, let alone those of the heathens in Asia and Africa, would not enthuse someone looking for soldiers in the service of God. This was more true for the 16th century and even more for Malacca where the Portuguese, according to St. Francis Xavier, excelled in the conjugations of the word "rapo" meaning "rape." The saint loathed even the Malaccan soil; before leaving Malacca for Japan, he took care to brush the dust off his shoes, resolving never to visit the ungodly Portuguese colony again.

How significant was the religious factor in the Portuguese conquests and administration in the Orient? As with the Crusades in the earlier centuries, service to Mammon early took precedence over service to God. The Portuguese activity in the Orient was marked by the same combination, that motivated Venice, for example, to finance a crusade and simultaneously despatch emissaries to Egypt's Saladin for negotiating a trade treaty. In answer to a question as to what had impelled the Portuguese to go to the East, Vasco-da-Gama is alleged to have replied: "Christians and Spices." One encounters echoes of this in Albuquerque's oft-quoted exhortation to his man after the conquest of Malacca in 1511. Further, the Portuguese Crown, unlike its English counterpart, combined commercial and religious interest. Thus, the Portuguese monarchs reserved for themselves monopoly of the colonial trade; the "Padroado Real" gave the Crown immense powers in the field of religion. Since 1551, the Crown had served as Grand-master of the Order of Christ, which held large estates in Portugal and was awarded by the Popes in the 16th century the superintendence of all the overseas missions in the Portuguese
Empire. Even so, an examination of early Portuguese contacts with Muslim potentates in Africa and South and Southeast Asia would bear out a generalization that the Portuguese sought alliances among indigenous rulers, irrespective of their religious persuasion. Thus, Diogo Lopes de Sequeira, who was sent by the Portuguese King to Malacca, was specifically instructed to make the establishment of mutual trust with the native rulers, so as to ensure a profitable and reciprocal trade, the "mainspring of all your actions." As C.R. Boxer rightly points out, this peaceful approach was to include Malacca and other Muslim states and was not confined to Hindu rulers. To the Portuguese, spices and riches were more important than Christians and souls.

A recent analysis of the 19th century British imperial policy by two Cambridge dons, Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher, would be applicable in this context to the Portuguese colonial policy in the 16th century. Robinson and Gallagher argue fairly convincingly


that British statesmanship in the 19th century promoted expansion only when it was necessary to buttress the national interest of trade. Even in doing so, Britain preferred an informal empire to a formal one; indirect influence through treaties to direct extension of administrative authority through use of force. Melinde in East Africa and Cochin in South India belong to the category of Portuguese informal empire; Malacca and Goa to the formal one. Wherever there was resistance on the part of an indigenous power to cooperate with the Portuguese in establishment of a monopoly over the spice trade, the Portuguese used force. In most cases, barring exceptions like the Zamorin of Calicut, such bloody encounters took place in relation with Muslim potentates, who were at the center of political and commercial activity in most of the maritime region of South and Southeast Asia in the 16th century. The religious factor would be brought in conveniently to strengthen the commercial one; a military victory would be followed by a general massacre of innocent dependents of the vanquished "infidels" as in Malacca. It would serve an Assyrian lesson in psychological warfare to the other Muslim states resisting Portuguese overtures for alliances. 6

Since the commercial aspect of the Portuguese overseas activity predominated over the political and religious ones, one would expect that the system of government in the directly-administered colonies like Malacca would be conducive to prosperous trade. It is my contention that the Portuguese adopted with only minor modifications the administrative apparatus prevailing prior to their conquest of Malacca. At least two reasons may be adduced to explain

the Portuguese policy in this regard. First, the Portuguese were aware of Malacca's importance as an entrepot port, holding the gates to one of the most strategic maritime highways of the time.\(^7\) This fact had been appreciated by the Portuguese even before Albuquerque included it in his grand strategy of a commercial empire based on forts and ports.\(^8\) Most contemporary accounts allude to Malacca as the richest city in the world.\(^9\) This may be wrong;\(^10\) but it was undoubtedly the most convenient meeting place for traders from Arabia, Persia, India, Pegu, Java and China. Since the founding of the Kingdom of Malacca in 1403 the Malaccan rulers had striven to maintain the cosmopolitan character of Malacca's trade and population. The Portuguese recognized the success and sophistication of the port administration under the sultans.\(^11\) In their desire to continue Malacca's commercial importance, the former retained the essential


8. In 1505, the King, Dom Manuel, resolved to seize Ormuz, Aden and Malacca. In 1509, he sent Diogo Lopes de Sequeira directly from Portugal as Chief Captain of four ships to discover Malacca. F.C. Danvers, *The Portuguese in India* (London, 1894), I, pp. 143, 179.


11. At the height of the trading season, Malacca would have a population of a million. The administration of such a metropolis must have been a formidable task. See R.S. Whiteway, *The Rise of Portuguese Power in India, 1497-1550* (Westminster, 1899) p. 5.
features of the predecessor Muslim administration.

The second reason for bowing down to the "heathen" practices and adopting them in the field of administration was more simple. Portugal was a backward European state, with very little of commercial tradition. Consequently, she lacked a sophisticated, well-developed administrative system. The Portuguese government of the time was largely a personal monarchy, with a very limited central government and with the power and purtenances being shared by a few "fidalgoes," whose title to their lands and position depended upon their shifting military strength and the monarch's sweet will. Portugal was, comparatively speaking, a new state where the crusading spirit of the recently established Christianity had paralleled the gradual elimination of the Jewish and Muslim mercantile communities. Portugal did not witness the rise of a new commercial class comparable to that of Britain, the Flanders, Central France and Northern Italy. No amount of military ardor, religious zeal, or navigational acumen could substitute the business know-how and administrative ability which contributed to the success, for example, of the early English or Dutch colonial enterprise. What the Portuguese did not have, they obviously could not give to their colonies. It was for the same reason that despite repeated royal edicts against employment of Muslims and Hindus, the Portuguese were compelled to hire in


13. Grants of land to the nobility were terminable at the King's pleasure and required confirmation from each new monarch. See William Atkinson, op. cit., p. 88; H.V. Livermore, A New History of Portugal (Cambridge, 1966), p. 110.
their colonies non-Christians as tax-farmers and collectors "in much the same way as Jews had filled the parallel posts in Europe, and for the same basic reason— their superior financial acumen and abilities." 14 In Goa, for instance, even the old designations of revenue and judicial offices were retained. 15 In Malacca, use was made of the services of Hindu merchants, as factors in Portuguese employ. 16 One might, therefore, safely assert that it was not out of regard for indigenous practices but a lack of administrative resourcefulness that dictated the Portuguese acceptance of existing practices in their newly-conquered territories. 17

A key position in the Muslim Malaccan administration was that of the Shahbandars (a Persian term for harbor-masters) usually held by foreigners. 18 While most ports of the time had one Shahbandar, Malacca had four, indicative of the large volume of trade there. The Shahbandars were in overall charge of allotment of harborage and warehouse facilities as well as supervision of loading and unloading of merchandise. The sultans selected the Shahbandars from the four

17. In Goa, the village "communidades" system was retained under a special charter in 1526. In Ceylon too, the land tenure system was continued. See A.E. d'Almeida Azevedo, As Communidades de Goa, Historia das Instituicoes antigas (Lisboa, 1890); Whiteway, op. cit., pp. 215-220; and Danvers, op. cit., I, pp. 391-393.
principal foreign trading communities. Thus, one Shahbandar handled ships coming from the East: China, Liuchiu Islands, Champa, Eastern Borneo and Thailand; another controlled the shipping from the south; Java, Palembang and other Indonesian Islands; a third looked after the ships from North Sumatran ports, Bengal, Malabar and Coromandel coasts of India while a fourth supervised exclusively the ships from Gujarat in Western India, which provided for the largest commercial community in Malacca.\textsuperscript{19} The various communities were represented to the Sultan by the Shahbandars, who, in practice, exercised administrative authority of a governor in the respective quarters of the city, where these communities resided.\textsuperscript{20}

Since the maritime commerce provided the principal source of revenue, the Shahbandars occupied an important place in the administrative set-up of Malacca. They presented the arriving merchants to the Bendahara, the prime minister who, in turn, presented the wealthiest among them to the Sultan himself. The Shahbandars also presided over the collection of anchorage fees and customs duties, which were "paid" in the form of dues and presents. Thus all merchandise from the West, except provisions, was subject to a levy of 6 percent \textit{ad valorem}; provisions were given as presents. The traders from the East paid no dues, they gave presents. The system of presents obviously fostered corruption among port officials and provided for the vast patronage and wealth enhancing the Shahbandar's position and power.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{19} Tome Pires, \textit{Suma Oriental} (London, 1944), II, p. 244; Birch, \textit{op. cit.}, III, pp. 87-88.

\textsuperscript{20} The Shahbandars had tremendous influence in the cultural sphere too. According to Shrieke, they introduced new court manners and etiquette and served as the principal agency for the spread of Islam in the archipelago. B. Shrieke, \textit{Indonesian Sociological Studies}, Part II (The Hague, 1957), p. 238.