

## **Sea Piracy during the Mughal Period (1556-1707): Major Players, Disposition and Motives**

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In today's world, sea piracy stands as one of the major challenges to maritime security. Since trade is dependent on the international shipping lanes that connect global economic hubs, nations across the world have taken due cognizance of these threats and have instituted military, diplomatic and organizational measures to combat the same. Sea piracy is not a modern day phenomenon and can be observed as existing in various forms in the past. For instance, in the case of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), one of the oldest documentation on 'sea piracy' can be traced back to the mid thirteenth century (1293), in the travelogue of Marco Polo, an Italian traveller. While describing the kingdom of Gujarat, Marco Polo writes about the "numerous pirates" and their "seizing and plundering" of merchant ships.<sup>1</sup>

This essay aims to examine the existence of sea piracy as a threat in the IOR during pre-modern India, with reference to the Mughal period (1556-1707). It is divided into three sections. The first part defines the activities during the period in question, that fall within the ambit of piracy, whilst drawing out parallels with the present. The second segment lists the various entities that were engaged in sea piracy, and their specific area of operations that impacted the Mughal Empire. In the final segment, the essay examines the Portuguese pirates, their modus operandi and the dilemmas faced by the Mughal rulers.

### **Definition: ‘Piracy’ and ‘Pirate’ in ‘Mughal Parlance’**

Prior to understanding the problem of sea piracy during the Mughal period, it is important to understand the meaning of piracy in ‘Mughal parlance’. In context of this essay, the aim is to define ‘a pirate’ in Mughal period. Today’s most widely ratified treaty on maritime law, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) defines piracy as “any illegal act of violence or detention, or any act of depredation, committed for private ends by the crew or the passengers of a private ship.” This definition, argues Sebastian R. Prange, “is the product of a European legal tradition going back to Roman Law, which classes the pirate as *hostis humani generis* (enemy of mankind)”. In its explanation piracy is defined as “acts of violence done upon the ocean ... by a body of men acting independently of any politically organised society.”<sup>2</sup>

This definition of ‘piracy’ and ‘pirate’ is incongruent with the era of the pre-modern State like that of the Mughals. On many occasions, the pirates in pre-modern State were connected to a political entity. For instance, the maritime plunders of Malabar (pirates active in the Arabian Sea in the Mughal period, though outside Mughal Empire) attained socio-political legitimacy through association with the local political leadership, the Zamorins of Calicut who sanctioned their operations as a defence against the Portuguese maritime intrusions along the Malabar Coast.

Further, neither there was a clear cut distinction between merchants and pirates in a pre-modern State, nor any comprehensive maritime laws and institutions that could have enforced it. According to Pyrard de Laval, a visitor to south India in the seventeenth century, “When in the winter they (pirates) return from the sea they become good merchants, going hither and thither to sell their goods, both by land and by sea, using then merchant ships that also belong to them. They often go to Goa and Cochin to sell their merchandise, and trade with the Portuguese, obtaining Portuguese passports, though in the previous summer they may have been at war.”<sup>3</sup> Hence Malabar played a ‘double role’; they were essentially merchantmen who took to plundering whenever opportunity came.<sup>4</sup>

The above case is very much applicable to the Europeans. Beginning with the Portuguese, Prange argues that, on the one hand they desired to build a “pepper

empire”, and were reliant on peaceable business relationships; while on the other hand, they rarely missed an opportunity to exploit their comparative advantage in maritime violence.<sup>5</sup> Thus, attacking Indian ships under the garb of Portuguese *cartaz* system can be seen as a form of institutionalised plunder.

Drawing on the ideas of Frederic Lane, who juxtaposes “the robber, who renders no economic service, to the organized racketeer, who sells protection against the violence he himself threatens, and who actually supplies a sort of black market protection in return, suppressing rival gangsters”, this paper sees the ‘issuing of passes’ in the Indian Ocean Region by the Portuguese and other Europeans as an act of organized piracy.<sup>6</sup> In fact, to a very large extent, Portuguese and English were supported by their respective governments to undertake pirate attacks. The primary mission of such violence was to control the flow of goods and routes in the IOR. Towards this end, they carried out maritime violence with force. Moreover, there were ‘privateers’ who attacked Indian ships on the basis of the letters of marquee from their State. Hence these European ‘official’ plunderers and ‘privateers’ can be termed as pirates in pre-modern terminology.

### **Introduction: The Pirates and their Area of Operations**

The Mughal Empire experienced sea piracy at the hands of diverse communities of pirates. While on one hand there were local pirates like the Malabar, Sanghanians and Warals, on the other hand, there existed European naval entities belonging to the Portuguese and English. The area of operations of the various pirate groups was not well demarcated and frequently resulted in clashes with each other. The pirates of Malabar were dreaded across the western sea board, whereas the Sanghanians and the Warals belonged to the Saurashtra region, and operated in the area around the present day Gujarat sea coast. It is recorded in the *Mutakhab-ul-Lubab*, a Persian chronicle of Aurangzeb’s reign (1659-1707), that :

*“the Warals and the Sanganians only plundered small crafts trading from Bandar Abbas and Mascat, but were afraid of the large pilgrim ships”<sup>7</sup>*

The Malabarīs were more ferocious and captured ships, and sometimes even burned them. They even traded back the captured people against ransom.<sup>8</sup> William Finch, a European traveller during the reign of Jahangir (1605-28), characterised the Malabarīs as, “*good souldiers [who] carry in each frigat one hundred souldiers, and in their galiots two hundred.*”

The European pirates operated with an intention of obtaining ‘trading privileges’ in the Mughal Empire and capturing the ‘trade routes’ in the Indian Ocean region. The Portuguese — known as the *ferangis* by the Mughals— were the first to establish themselves in the Indian subcontinent. Though they began with the agenda of missionary activities, but their motto was to establish themselves as the masters of the seas. C. R. Boxer portrays the Portuguese as “*a seaborne empire cast in a military and ecclesiastical mould.*” The Portuguese were known to be ruthless at sea, and did not differentiate between the imperial and merchant ships whilst carrying out attacks. The English operated in a manner similar to the Portuguese, with the aim of gaining ‘trading privileges’ from the Mughals. It can be learned from many instances that European pirates not only looted and burned the captured ships, but went on to the extent of dishonouring women onboard. For instance, in 1695, when the English pirates brutally attacked the imperial ship *Ganj-i-Sawai* —the largest of the Mughal ships during Aurangzeb’s period—several women ended their lives by jumping into the sea or by stabbing themselves.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Problem of Portuguese (*Ferangi*) Pirates**

*I would drown the ferangis in the seas, I would remove the rust from the heart of the people of Islam; I would open out the closed door of Kaaba like Alexander, I would voyage safely on the seas.*

- Faizi (poet laureate of the court of Akbar)<sup>10</sup>

The above lines by Faizi aptly describe the general ‘feeling of aversion’ against the *ferangis* or the Portuguese pirates during Akbar’s regime. According to K. S. Mathew, when Mughal Emperor Akbar conquered Gujarat in 1572, “he not only achieved his first access to the sea, but also came to confront the problems the Portuguese presence posed to Indian trade and maritime activities”.<sup>11</sup> The conquest of Gujarat by Akbar served two purposes. The aim was to benefit from the maritime activities involving large number of ports in the region and hence reap the dividends of the Indo – Persian sea route. The secondary reason was to open up sea routes to *Hajj* via Surat (also known as *Bandar-i-Mubarak* or the Blessed Port).<sup>12</sup> *Hajj* travel was a significant part of life of any devout Muslim; and it was the Emperor’s duty to arrange for hassle free travel of his subjects for *Hajj*. The land route to *Hajj* was across Persia, inhabited by Shias, and was hostile towards the Sunni ruled Mughal Empire.<sup>13</sup> Hence, sea route was considered as a viable alternative that could cut down the travel time whilst also ensuring a secure travel.

By the time Akbar’s dominion over Gujarat was established, the Portuguese had already established themselves as the masters of the seas. Well versed with the local seas, the Portuguese were highly organized and practised piracy in a systematic manner. No ship was permitted to use the seas without their permission, and non-compliance resulted in an attack from the Portuguese *armada*. The only way to avoid the possibility of attacks was by paying the ‘*protection cost*’. The Portuguese sold ‘*cartazes*’ or passes to the ships for safe passage; and in the absence of same, claimed their right to seize and plunder the defaulting vessel.<sup>14</sup> Ships were not only debarred from carrying certain items, but also, people belonging to specific areas. For instance, in 1613, a pass was issued by the Portuguese to a ship of the King of Bijapur for a voyage from Dabhol to Jiddah. The pass laid down in detail what weapons could be carried and forbade it to transport Turks, Abyssinians, cinnamon, pepper, ginger, iron, steel, copper, lead, tin, brass, timber, etc.<sup>15</sup>

The audacious behaviour of the Portuguese and their near absolute sovereignty over the seas makes one wonder who gave these Portuguese the authority to do so? The official Portuguese chronicle justifies such a policy as follows:

*“It is true that there exist a common right to all to navigate the sea and in Europe we recognise the rights which others hold against us; but this right does not extend beyond Europe and therefore the Portuguese as Lords of the Sea are justified in confiscating the goods of those who navigate the seas without their permission.”<sup>16</sup>*

The inconvenience faced by the Mughals due to the Portuguese *cartaz* system can be understood from the example of Hajj visit of the royal ladies. Gulbadan Begam (paternal aunt to Akbar) and Salima Sultana Begam (Akbar’s first wife) had to wait for one year for Portuguese *cartaz* in Surat before she finally sailed for Hajj. The sailing began after Gulbadan Begum handed over Bulsar (present day Valsad) as a security to the Portuguese against attack during her journey to Mecca.<sup>17</sup> Abul Fazl records in the *Akbarnama*:

*“The pilgrims were so frightened of the Portuguese that they were unwilling to board the ship and that no amount of encouragement from the imperial officials could reassure them. The panic was caused by the want of a proper cartaz.”<sup>18</sup>*

Sailing with a pass issued by the Portuguese also did not give a fool-proof assurance of safety in the open seas. The commanders of the issuing company were not averse to molesting the licensed ships on account of various pretexts, such as carrying people, money, goods or jewels forbidden by the pass or on the basis of the ships alleged connection with any of their enemies in any form.<sup>19</sup>

The merchants were forced to buy *cartazes* to avoid any attack on their vessel. The noted historian M. N. Pearson shows in his work that there seemed to be no alternative, most of the time and on most routes, to taking a Portuguese *cartaz* and paying the duties.<sup>20</sup>

The situation was complicated further when Mughal ships suffered as a result of conflict of interest between the Portuguese and other European powers. In 1610, on the behest of the Portuguese, Jahangir denied full trading privileges to English East India Company. In retaliation, in 1612, the English, in retaliation, plundered many Indian ships in the Red Sea. Further, when Jahangir granted the English permissions they desired, the Portuguese resorted to capture of the passengers and looting the Surat based royal ship *Ahsani* in 1613.<sup>21</sup>

While on the western seaboard, the Portuguese pirates were structured and systematic; on the eastern coast, another group of Portuguese - mainly expatriates and renegades - carried out random pirate attacks. No system of *cartazes* existed and the pirates operated at will. They operated from Chittagong and Sandwip, where they had settled under the support of the King of Arakkan (modern Myanmar). The King used these pirates to counter the Mughal attacks against his territory; and in return, gave them full authority to undertake private attacks in the eastern waters.<sup>22</sup>

According to Bernier, the chief occupation of these *ferangis* (fugitive Portuguese and other wandering Christians) was to ravage the Mughal territory of Bengal by plundering vessels and capturing people for sale as slaves. He writes:

*“They scoured the neighbouring seas in light galleys; called galleasses, entered the numerous arms and branched of the Ganges, ravaged the islands of Lower Bengale, and, often penetrating forty or fifty leagues up to the country, surprised and carried away the entire population of villages on market days, and at times when inhabitants were assembles for the celebration of a marriage, or some other festival. The marauders made slaves of their unhappy captives and burnt whatever could not be removed.”*<sup>23</sup>

The *ferangis* treated the slaves in a cruel manner.<sup>24</sup> Thus, they not only acted as privateers against the Mughal Empire, but also routinely participated in hostile acts against the local populace.

In sum, with its sway over the eastern and western coasts of the Indian subcontinent, the Mughal Empire was subjected to the menace of pirates, both locals and Europeans. Among the Europeans, the Portuguese and the English practised piracy with and without the support of their respective governments. In the period 1556-1707, from the reign of Akbar to Aurangzeb, Portuguese (*ferangis*) were the trend setters in undertaking organized piracy. The English followed the same practise of giving “passes” for safe travel via sea or attacking the Indian ships in order to press their demands. The enhanced audacity and control over the seas by the Europeans was a pre-cursor to their invasion further towards the mainland. Each isolated incident of piracy was a small step towards colonization of the Indian subcontinent.

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<sup>2</sup> Sebastian R. Prange, ‘A Trade of No Dishonor: Piracy, Commerce and Community in the Western Indian Ocean, Twelfth to Sixteenth Century’, *American Historical Review*, Vol. 116, Issue 5, December, 2011, p. 1270.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1279.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Mundy, *The Travels of Peter Mundy in Europe and Asia 1608-1667*, Vol. II, trans. Richard Carnac Temple, The Hakluyt Society, London, p. 316.

<sup>5</sup> Prange, 'A Trade of No Dishonor', pp. 1279-80.

<sup>6</sup> Frederic C. Lane, 'The Economic Consequences of Organized Violence', *Journal of Economic History*, Vol.18, No. 4, 1958, p. 403. Lane's argument is used by Sebastian R. Prange to show intersection of trade and predation, violence and protection, markets and loot in 'A Trade of No Dishonor', pp. 1275-81.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 201-02. See Also K. M. Panikkar, *India and the Indian Ocean*, London, 1962, p. 40.

<sup>17</sup> Rathore, 'Floating Political Rhetoric', pp. 252-53.

<sup>18</sup> Abul Fazl, *Akbarnama*, trans. H Beveridge, Vol. III, Delhi, 1972, pp. 275-77.

<sup>19</sup> Anjum, 'Indian Shipping and Security', pp. 161-62. For the prevailing mistrust in *cartazes* among the Mughals, see Sherin Moosvi, *People, Taxation and Trade in Mughal India*, New Delhi, 2008, p. 253.

<sup>20</sup> Pearson, *Merchants and Rulers in Gujarat*, pp. 92-133.

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<sup>23</sup> Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, pp. 174-75.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 175-76