

A Present-Day Portuguese Settlement in Mirpur West Bengal

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In 1498, Vasco da Gama reached Calicut on the west coast of India after sailing across the Cape of Good Hope (the Cape of Storms) from the Atlantic Ocean. They reached Bangladesh in 1517 after nearly twenty years of occupying the Konkan coast, Goa, Bombay, Daman, Nagar Haveli, Dadra, and Diu. They established themselves in *Chittagong* and *Saptagram* on the east coast in 1536–37. The Portuguese rivaled the *Maghreb* in piracy and cruelty. In this situation, the Mughals came forward to resist them. Shah Jahan ordered their expulsion from Hooghly in 1632 and then, in 1636, from *Hijli*. However, Portuguese rule remained in India even after 1947. On December 19, 1961, Goa was freed from the Portuguese regime and annexed to India due to Operation Vijay. Apart from this well-known image of the Portuguese, another image has been found. Descendants of the Portuguese still live in Mirpur village or the *Firingipara* area of *Geonkhali* in the Tamluk subdivision of Purba Medinipur district of West Bengal. This topic will be discussed in the present article.

In the 17th century, a *Samvedi Brahmin* named Janardan Upadhyay came from the western part of India and founded the *Mahishadal* dynasty. *Durjodhan*, *Ramsaran*, *Rajaram*, *Shuklal*, and *Anandalal Upadhyay* ruled here from then until the time before the Permanent Settlement. During the reign of *Anandalal's* wife, Queen *Janaki*, the Ten-Year Settlement became the Permanent Settlement. Queen *Janaki* is still a legend in *Mahishadal*. Everyone knows about the *Bargi* raids in the countryside of *Rajasthan* in the 18th century. *Mahishadal* also probably did not escape this crisis. There are hints of it in oral lyrical poetry:

*“The Marathas have looted with murder.
Queen Janaki has protected like a mother.”¹*

Although the dreaded *Bargi* invasion lost its former during queen *Janaki's* reign, perhaps the poet meant that the queen protected *Mahishadal* from the evil effects of *Bargi* aggression.

J. Campos wrote in the book *History of the Portuguese in Bengal*, “Near *Geonkhali* in Midnapore District there is a community of Luso-Indian, who in 1911 numbered 129, they call themselves descendants of some Portuguese gunners whom the Raja of *Mahishadal* brought from *Chittangang* in the latter half of the eighteenth century of protect his property against *Mahratha* raids. These soldiers settled on some rent-free lands granted by Raja and intermarried with women of the place.”²

Evidence is also available from O'Malley's 1911 census report, “The number of Christians has been steadily rising in the last 20 years... After these thanas most are found in thana *Maslandapur* (*Mahishadal*), where there is a curious colony of Christian near *Geonkhali*, they say that they are

descendants of the Portuguese artillerymen, whom the Raja of *Mahishadal* imported to protect his estates from the Maratha raids. Export that they are Christians that some have Portuguese names, they cannot be distinguished from their neighbours indeed, in the same family one man may have Portuguese name, such as Pedro, and another Hindu name, such as Gopal.”³

The village which O’Malley called a Portuguese village in his description of *Maslandpur* is today’s Mirpur or ‘**Christian Para**’. According to history, Christian missionaries also used to come to *Geonkhali*. In 1888, William Carey, a priest of the Howrah Baptist Missionary, came to preach and mentioned *Geonkhali* as a town. In ‘A Missionary Tour in the Hughli and Howrah District’ he wrote, “...The town is a closed packed assemblage of native huts...the streets, which are narrow and dirty, wind about the edges of malarious tanks: along the side of a disused canal. The whole place densely crowded, has had unhealthy smell...”⁴ Along with this, their religion is identified in the book of J. J. A. Campose, “...most of them are Roman Catholics but some of them were converted to Protestantism by Rev. J. Bower, of the S. P. G. Mission, who visited them 1838 and described them as nominal Christians with scarcely any sign of Christianity except a few images of the virgin Mary and saints, no sacraments.”⁵ At present, however, they have churches and graveyards.

Hijli is considered an old colony of the Portuguese in Bengal. The Portuguese settled in Pipli, Odisha in 1514. Then they came north and settled in Hijli. In 1577, *Chandimangal Kavya* mentions Hijli or a nearby place. The poet and his friends crossed this place by boat all day and night to avoid the attack of the fearsome ‘Firingis’.⁶ This suggests that the Portuguese-occupied coast of Hijli was very extensive. The poet mentions another ‘*Firingi*’ country on the coast of Odisha on the way to visit the Jagannath temple at Puri. William Hedges writes that the Portuguese were driven out of *Hijli* by the Mughals in 1636. In 1724, Valentina mentioned *Hjli* as a former colony, “*Hijgeli* was formerly one of our (Dutch) chief settlements and the Portuguese also had here quarters and a church.”⁷

Tamluk was another colony of the Portuguese on the bank of the *Rupnarayan* river in the Medinipur district. It survived even after the expulsion of the Portuguese from Hijli. Although the Portuguese were gradually expelled from other places, many Portuguese families still remain at Mirpur in *Geonkhali*. An English weekly (*The Sunday India*, January 8, 2012) reports that there are 140 Christian families in this Mirpur village, of which 90 are Catholics, the rest are Protestants. Campose’s *Journal of Biological Science*, Calcutta 12;227.234 (A demographical study of 15714 Mirpur: A Village in Coastal Midnapore District, West Bengal)⁸ book published in 1919 and republished in 1980 gives the Christian/Portuguese population of Mirpur as 320. How they are today or how much they interact with the culture of the region is a matter of debate. O’Malley in his census report divided them into two groups: Eurasians and Anglo-Indians. The first is divided into two groups - the ‘Pure Indians’,⁹ who received the surnames through baptism, and the Portuguese’s direct descendants, called ‘**Luso-Indians**’.¹⁰ Luso Indians speak a Portuguese dialect. Although ‘Pure-Indians’ try to learn Portuguese language, they still live follow old Indian customs, like wearing dhoti. They are known as ‘**Kala Firingi**’.¹¹ Another group is the Anglo-Indians, whose history is equally interesting. They are direct descendants of the Portuguese. They were born to the Portuguese and the English and changed their surnames upon baptism. This is discussed in detail in Mariana Candida CAIXERO’s article (‘True Christian or True Portuguese’): “We find Correia transformed into Currie, Leal into Lea, Silva into Silver, Sousa into Sauseman, Rocha into Rotha, Teixeira into Tesra. Some of them changed their surnames into a completely different one: Pereira into Johnson and Gomes in Fitzpatrick.”¹²

Now the question is how far the inhabitants of Mirpur are Christian and Portuguese, and how far have they managed to maintain that culture? Mariana Candia shows in her article that the inhabitants of Goa called themselves 'Pure Christians' and also adopted Portuguese surnames and manners. O'Malley calls the inhabitants of Mirpur 'Pure Christians' because they have been living in the European tradition for four hundred years. On the other hand, Rev. J. Bower of the S. P. G. Mission, who visited the region in 1838, called them Nominal Christians.¹³ Another Protestant Christian, Peter Torman, called them 'untouchables'.¹⁴ Today, many of their families have adopted Portuguese surnames, while many have converted from Hinduism to Christianity. The Catholics here claim they are the real Portuguese because Portugal is a Catholic country. Today many Catholics marry Christian converts who have converted from Hinduism to Christianity. But here both communities live side by side, both have their own churches.

To know more about this, the residents of the region were interviewed. Talking to them, it is understood that they are very knowledgeable about their Portuguese ancestors. They are quite proud of their Portuguese ancestry. After the job was done, the *Mahishadal* royal family almost drove their ancestors out, so they are quite angry. There are some signs of Portuguese blood flowing in their bodies. For example, Mr. Vincent, his father-in-law, the Mitra family, and the Rotha family, all worked or still work on ships. Even Edwin, the seventh generation of the Rotha family here, wants to study oceanography. Mr. Vincent was also interviewed. In front of the Christian cemetery at Mirpur is a tombstone of his father-in-law commemorating a ship. In fact, to still have Portuguese blood in the body, the desire to cross the stormy sea may peek out from time to time.

The story of the first Portuguese arrival varies in different written sources. The present generation of Mirpur is quite interested in this matter. Edward Nabin Rotha, Shobha Tesra, Malay Tesra, Mili Tesra (all of them of Portuguese descent), Vincent Biswas and others narrated a story. According to this story, they have been living here for the sixth/seventh generation. Initially, the royal family of *Mahishadal* brought their forefathers to stop the piracy of the Haldi river and to resist the Maratha Bargi raiders. At first, there were twelve male artillerymen. First, they were allowed to live in the royal palace, later in *Geonkhali* and finally in Mirpur (about 100 bighas of land). The point to note is, all the Portuguese who arrived here were all men, and therefore blood or racial mixing occurred from the beginning. At first, there was no division between Catholics and Protestants. Population increases with propagation. Then Catholic and Protestant missionaries came here and the inhabitants chose the religion of their choice. All still live in harmony, as evidenced by the two communities sharing the same cemetery. Residents of Mirpur were asked how the cultural exchange took place. The biggest example of this is 'language'. Everyone is fluent enough to speak, read and write Bengali clearly (in this context, Edward Nabin Rotha gave the example of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar). Vincent Biswas said that girls here use conch and vermilion, and there is also a custom of changing garlands during marriage. According to him, these customs came from the neighboring Hindu society. On the other hand, Christians have also influenced the society here. Their religion spread through descents and conversions from twelve men. Now more than one hundred and thirty Christian families live here. Bengalis also started following Christian dresses and other practices. Many men now wear pants instead of dhotis. But one thing is very clear. The residents here are devout Christians and their houses have carefully installed images of Mother Mary. Also, there are Hindu village *Betkundu* and Muslim village *Shuklanpur*. But no history of mutual disputes is available. People of other religions join the Christmas festival in Mirpur.

But two other things come up in the context of Mirpur. Firstly the communication system in the region is very underdeveloped. There is no major paved road. Residents have to go to distant places (*Geonkhali, Mahishadal, Haldia*) for any need. According to Malay Tesra, they have Portuguese blood in them, but for various reasons they are economically backward. There is no other way of livelihood in the village except agriculture. Shobha Tesra, a teacher of Portuguese origin laments that no educated person wants to live in this village due to poor communication systems. They seek the government's help in this matter. Another problem is that some people come to this village for research or to collect news, most of them publish the news without collecting the correct information or verifying the truth of the information. As a result, wrong information is going to the readers, and the village is discredited. Hospitable Mirpur is eager to tell history to everyone, but care must be taken in this matter, otherwise, history will be distorted.

To return from Mirpur you have to go through *Geonkhali*. Residents here show the old *Geonkhali* port. This name is because here there was a trade in rural goods or there was a Geon tree. Thinking of this port on the banks of the *Rupnarayan* river and the Portuguese settlement nearby brings to mind the olden days. It was through this port that the Portuguese artillerymen might have entered to resist the Maratha invasion. We generally know the Portuguese as pirates, who were called '**Bombetes**', '**Firingis**', etc. But it can be seen in the history of Mirpur, there a king of Bengal sought the help of the Portuguese to protect his kingdom. Since then, for about two hundred and twenty/thirty years, these Portuguese have become a part of Bengali society.

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