PORTUGUESE SHIPWRECKS ON THE GOA COAST

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The coastline of Goa consists of a narrow ship of sandy plains and beaches. This sandy shore is interrupted by estuaries and at other places by laterite plateaus of the central sector which jut-out to form headlands. The promontories of Bardez and Sashi created estuaries of the Mandovi and Zuri which give a fine natural harbour and two anchorages, in south. We have Mormugao and Aguada in the north. Mormugao is sheltered even during the S.W. monsoon and serves as an all-weather port. Aguada has a one time fuel and water supply point which is currently not being used as a harbour. The seasonal port of Panaji where Goa-Bombay steamers, fishing trollers, ferries and country craft dock, which require a continuous dredging as a natural sand bar makes it untenable. Also the ports of Betul, Talpona, Chapora and Tiracol are seasonal. Goa is also gifted with islands such as Chorao, Tiswadi, Kumbharjua, Anjediva. The islands are of two types i) alluvial ii) rocky, the latter are protrusions of drowned topography separated from the mainland by faulting. The basic geology of the area is schistose and gressone rocks of the Dharwar supergroup. However, two thirds of the territory is covered with laterite.

The hydrographic survey map shows reefs at Aguada head around Reis Magos, Cabo, Sunchi reefs and Ameec shoals, Odshel and Kankara, all in shallow waters (0.9m-3.4m). The reefs are dying out probably due to global warming or siltation from the dredging in the surrounding areas.

The Ameec shoal reef extends in a N-S direction across the entrance of the bay and separates the bay from the Arabian Sea. There is worse sediment extending from the N-W end of the bay due to inflow and outflow of currents the fine material is not allowed to settle here. It is in the Central Bay (low energy area). The coarse material predominantly silt and clay along with the calcareous sand does not favour preservation of archaeological material because such an environment is highly susceptible to biofouling.

A wreck has been reported in 2m of water on the west side of the shoal, however our unit has been unable to locate it. It must have been destroyed by wood-borers. The hydrographic survey map suggests several wrecks - the co-ordination of which are listed below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Lat. Long.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wreck with hull intact</td>
<td>15° 29' 30&quot;, 73° 47' 07&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wreck with hull intact</td>
<td>15° 29' 16&quot;, 73° 47' 32&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wreck over which exact depth is not known but is thought to be 30m or less and dangerous for surface navigation</td>
<td>15° 26' 08&quot;, 73° 46' 50&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15° 26' 02&quot;, 73° 46' 50&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15° 25' 42&quot;, 73° 46' 54&quot;</td>
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Besides the wrecks in the Ameec shoal area a few wrecks listed by P. Gudigar on the basis of the information available in the Marine Records are worth noting.

It is said that twelve Portuguese ships which were to go to Calcutta sank owing to a severe storm near Aguada, and seven smaller
ships sank at Nerul river, the loss being estimated at one million xerofins. The date of the disaster is put at 24th April, 1648. (Ref. "Subsídos para a história Militar Marítima da India" by Botelho da Sousa)

Five Portuguese wooden sail vessels namely St. Helena, S. Joao, Evangelista, St. Francisco, St. Thome set sail from Portugal to Goa. Only two managed to approach the Goa coastline and they were also wrecked in a storm.

The S. Cristovao and Santo Andre both being Portuguese wooden sail vessels were lost due to natural calamities. The latter was sailing from Lisbon to Goa. (Ref: Annes da Mannha Portuguesa. I Parte Quarta Memoria)

The large number of shipwrecks on the coast makes us wonder at the kind of maritime technology that the Portuguese possessed. A lot of these shipwrecks are due to old ships sailing on long voyages. The greed for profiting by building cheap vessels and overloading of ships, buying of posts in the Portuguese Armada, lack of spare sails and not enough provisions and spares are perhaps some of the reasons for so many disasters. Overcrowding, overloading of heavy goods on top for easy off loading was also a dangerous practice. A lot of the teakwood was immature and unseasoned and it would shrink and split. The dampness of the water on the outside and the heat of the pepper inside made the timber rot. The lack of repairs such as refitting of timbers and nailing and stitching of sails was never finished properly only to result in concealed defects showing up on a voyage.

The Portuguese relied on sea power and trade and ceased internal expansion as it would not yield any additional economic profits. The desire to acquire products from the African coast and crush the Arab power and trade, to discover the extent of the Muslim territory and spread Christianity were also some of the driving motives besides their love for adventure. The commercial motives were that exotic spices and aromatic goods spices, pepper, cardamom, indigo, saffron, pearls, ivory, silk, muslin, alum, carpets fetched good revenue.

The Portuguese profited from parasitic activity; they skimmed off money without providing reciprocal advantages on engaging in trade themselves. The profits derived from customs duties were sent to Goa for general state needs. Therefore Goa can be viewed as the centre of Portugal's sea borne empire getting revenue not from its own economic activity so much as its dominance (political, military) in Asian waters.

The coast of Goa is supposedly dotted with a lot of these exciting wrecks. Most of them would be wooden vessels of least 400-500 years old. Their preservation is a big question mark but we do have a rich heritage for marine archaeologists who have a never ending task of bridging the gap between yesterday and today.

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References:
Study of shipwrecks in Goa waters.