

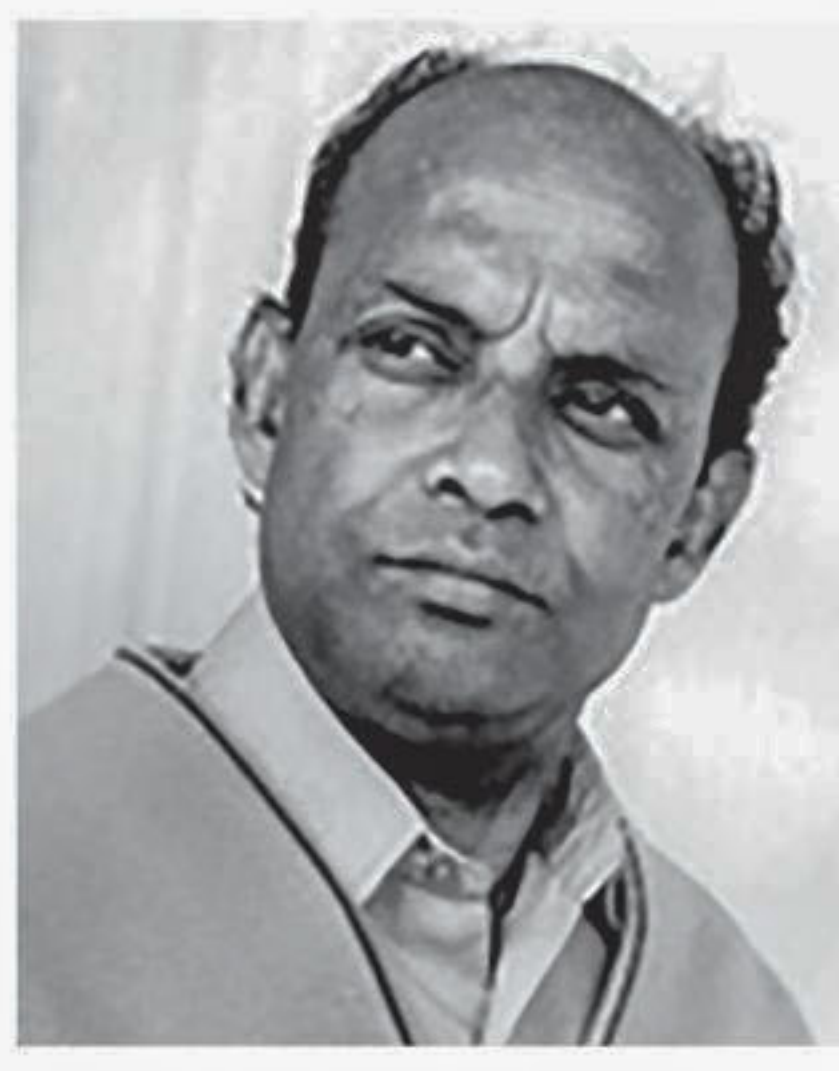
# Bengal 500 years ago

## Bengal economy viewed in the light of Tome Pires' observation

MOMTAZUR RAHMAN TARAFDAR

Medieval Bengali poems and foreign travellers' accounts give us the impression that in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Bengal was prosperous—her seaborne trade and a diverse mix of her industrial products added to her prosperity. But the hypothesis has never been examined in depth. We shall examine in this paper aspects of Bengal economy, particularly Bengal's trade and commerce, in the light of Tome Pires' *Suma Oriental*. We get in this work the first comprehensive account of Asian trade, as it was, at the beginning of the sixteenth century.

Tome Pires completed the *Suma Oriental* in Malacca between 1512 and 1515, when the Portuguese had laid the foundations of their maritime empire stretching from the east African coast to the Chinese seas. As a writer and



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Bengal included twenty varieties of cotton fabrics—four of which have been mentioned by the specific names such as *sinabajos*, *chautares*, *beatilhas* and *bierames*. These have been duly identified by Professor Irfan Habib with certain varieties of maslins. Sericulture or rearing of the mulberry silk-worm was practised in Bengal and we are told by Barbosa that the Gujarati silk-weaving industry was largely dependent on raw silk supplied from Bengal. Pires includes neither this item nor rice in the list of the commodities exported from Bengal. He has incidentally mentioned the latter in connection with Aden's imports. Bengal had long distance trade in sugar about which Pires is silent. Moreover, he does not speak about the technical devices which used to expedite the production of handicrafts.

These deficiencies are largely compensated by the account of coinage and weighing balance that we come across in the *Suma Oriental*. The system of counting cowries mentioned by Pires gives us the rate at which the Bengal silver coin and the Malaccan *calaim* were equated with those sea-shells.

Of the ports and towns facilitating the seaborne trade of Bengal the city of Bengal and Satgaon find special mention in the *Suma Oriental*. The former, probably identical with Gaur and situated on the Ganges, had the king's residence and forty thousand people and "lay two day's journey up the river..." Satgaon functioning as a good, navigable port, had ten thousand inhabitants and many merchants. "These are the chief trading cities in Bengal. There are others inland, but they are strongly fortified garrison towns, of no [commercial] importance, and there is constant war in the interior." Pires was probably projecting his ideas about the north Indian and Central Asian cities which possessed fortifications clearly demarcating them from the adjoining

Naturally one may ask if the expansion of the maritime trade and the process of commodity production connected with it could bring about any significant change in the socio-economic life of Bengal. Before we try to find answers to questions like this, it is necessary to find out what position the Bengali merchants used to hold in international trade in relation to the other merchants. The *Suma Oriental* contains significant material about the respective positions of the merchants of several countries in the sphere of Asian trade. About this time, shipping and trade in the western half of the Indian Ocean were controlled by Arabs and Gujaratis, while the maritime traffic between Gujarat and Malacca "was almost exclusively in Gujarati hands". Because of Gujarati importance in this international trade, the Gujarati merchants in Malacca had a *shah-i-bandar* to look after their commercial affairs. Commenting on the importance of these merchants in Asian trade, Pearson writes, "...the most important merchants on all these 'international' routes, with only two exceptions, were Gujaratis carrying not only their own cloths, indigo, and opium, but also the goods of others, especially spices." If capital, shipping and commodities including varieties of textile goods are taken into consideration, the position of the Coromandel merchants was very strong in this trade system. But the Bengali merchants, when compared with their Gujarati and Coromandel counterparts, seem to have held a very precarious position.

Tome Pires holds, "The Bengalees are great merchants and very independent, brought up to trade. They are domestic. All the merchants are false...When they want to insult a man they call him a Bengalee. They are very treacherous, they are sharp-witted."

We are told by the same authority

depicted by Barbosa, were probably identical with the West Indian, Arab, Persian and Turkish merchants living in Bengal in connection with trade. The "false" merchants, noticed by Pires, were probably a body of speculators and peddlers that grew in the course of the international trade.

Domestic industry, which formed a sector of considerable importance, was probably controlled by merchant capital and had hardly any scope for independent growth. The professional classes of artisans and craftsmen were placed very low in the social hierarchy as found in the *Brihadhharma* and *Brahmavaivarta* puranas. Their positions in the society indicate that they lived at the level of bare subsistence. Placed within the limits of the Varna system and tied by caste regulations, small groups of the merchants and artisans, who could feed only the local market, were going through a process of professional stagnation. At least they were not expected to have an impact on the seaborne trade.

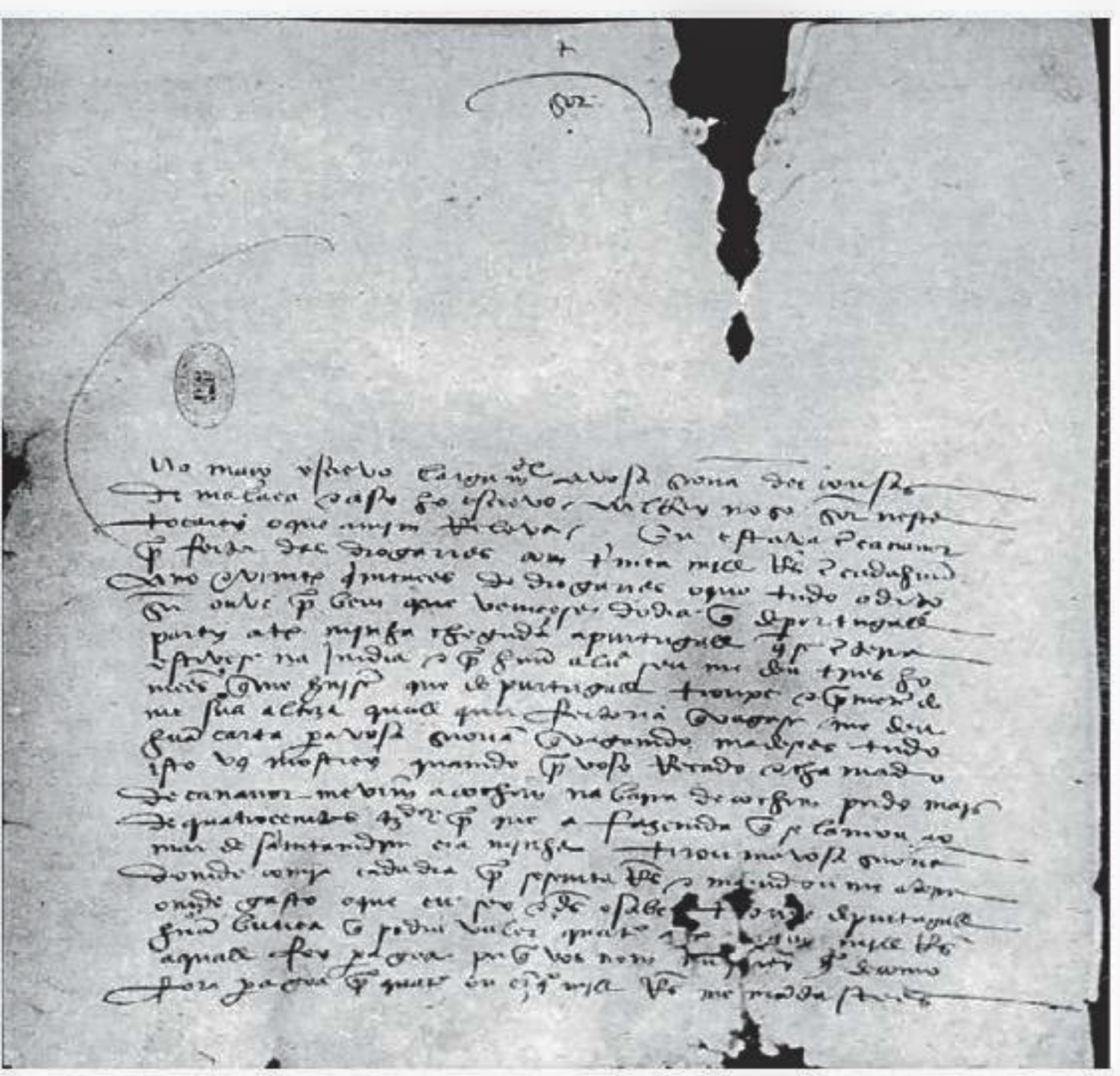
The working of the administrative system, which was based on the agricultural surplus, seems to have checked the process of capital formation as well as the growth of a stable mercantile class which was inseparably connected with that process. As we know, control over land was quite crucial for the administrative structure that obtained in the medieval Indian states. Through the mechanism of the *iqta* or *jagir* system, which provided for maximum centralisation giving the rulers almost absolute power over society, Muslim administrators could appropriate to themselves a great share of the agrarian surplus on which the ruling hierarchy was based. As the whole ethos of the political system was inseparably linked with land, it could hardly find much justification in seeking its nourishment from maritime trade and commerce. The agriculture-oriented economy and the spirit of land-bound inwardness it had generated among the rulers are probably the factors which can satisfactorily explain their alertness to the working of the land system and their comparative lack of interest in what was happening on the sea. The Sultans of Delhi and their successors, the great Mughals, did not have any provision in their legal system for control of the sea, nor could they evolve a total economic policy to regulate uniformly the activities of the peasant and the merchant. The dichotomy that grew out of the differing moods of the medieval Indian polity, thoroughly based on the agricultural surplus, and the mercantile economy, must have significantly affected the process of capital formation. This dichotomy probably found expression through the Bengal Sultan's attitude to merchants. Tome Pires was told by the Bengali merchants that Sultan Hussain Shah was "not benevolent to the merchants" so that many of them were going to other countries. The prevailing method of collection of taxes and customs dues probably corresponded to this attitude.

Tom Pires writes, "They say that ten or twelve people collect the dues, each one his own, and they are the officials for this and that when they take their title they wrong the merchants and tyrannies over them openly." In addition to this extortionate method of tax collection, there was also the excessive rate of more than 36 percent of dues imposed on each item of import.

In summing up the above discussion we may note the following: the weak position of the Bengali merchants in maritime trade, the control exercised by the west Asian, Gujarati and Coromandel merchants on commercial organisations and other means of production and the unfavourable disposition towards commercial activities as demonstrated by the medieval Muslim polity thoroughly based on the land system of the time, seem to have worked as deterrents to the process of capital formation. The predominantly agrarian pattern of economy, that formed the basis of the medieval Indian polity, probably continued to dominate life in Bengal.

Momtazur Rahman Tarafdar was a leading historian of Bangladesh.

This is an excerpt of the paper presented by Momtazur Rahman Tarafdar in the Conference on Foreign Travellers in India, held in Calcutta in December 1989. This paper was later included in his book titled Trade, Technology and Society in Medieval Bengal (ICBS: 1995).



First page of Tome Pires' original letter from Malacca to Governor of Portuguese India, Afonso de Albuquerque, 10 January, 1513.

accountant of the Portuguese factory in Malacca, Tome Pires had access to the valuable Portuguese reports necessary for preparing an account of commercial activities in Asia in addition to his "direct touch with the cosmopolitan world of oriental travellers, ships' captains and merchants..." Like many other countries, Bengal occupies a peripheral position in his account, the central one being reserved for Malacca, then the most important centre of trade and commerce in South-East Asia. But the account of Bengal that we come across in the *Suma Oriental*, gives us the most vivid impression about her position on this east-west trade line extending from Indonesia to western Asia.

Tome Pires came to Asia with his experience of Western, late medieval economy and society. In his account of Bengal, he has mentioned the peculiarities of the institution of kingship highlighting the position of the Abyssinian nobles. Looked upon as "knights" these nobles constituted a political elite group that enjoyed a very influential position in the society. Although Pires does not give further details about the Abyssinian nobility we think that he had in his mind the west European feudal system. The nobles used to enjoy territorial assignments according to their respective positions in the administrative hierarchy. As we shall see later, this form of agrarian economy and administration nourishing the polity of the time were working as a damper on commercial enterprise. But neither this agrarian economy nor the polity based on it were the immediate concerns of Pires. He was, in fact, looking at Asian things and Asian situations as representative of a rising mercantile community having keen interest in commodities and whatever was of relevance for trade and commerce.

Consequently, one could find in Bengal various foreigners such as Arabs, Parsees, Turks and Abyssinians and also merchants from Chaul-Dabhol and Goa. Trading voyages were conducted in several stages. Those merchants had organised themselves into companies in Calicut on the Malabar coast and they did the same in Bengal. Every year four or five ships left for Malacca and Pasai. These ships were of two kinds, viz. dhows or fast and light vessels similar to those found at the west Indian or Arabian coast and the heavier type of large ships or junks. At least one or two big ships came every year to Malacca carrying commodities worth 80,000 to 90,000 cruzados [an old monetary unit of Portugal in the 17th and 18th

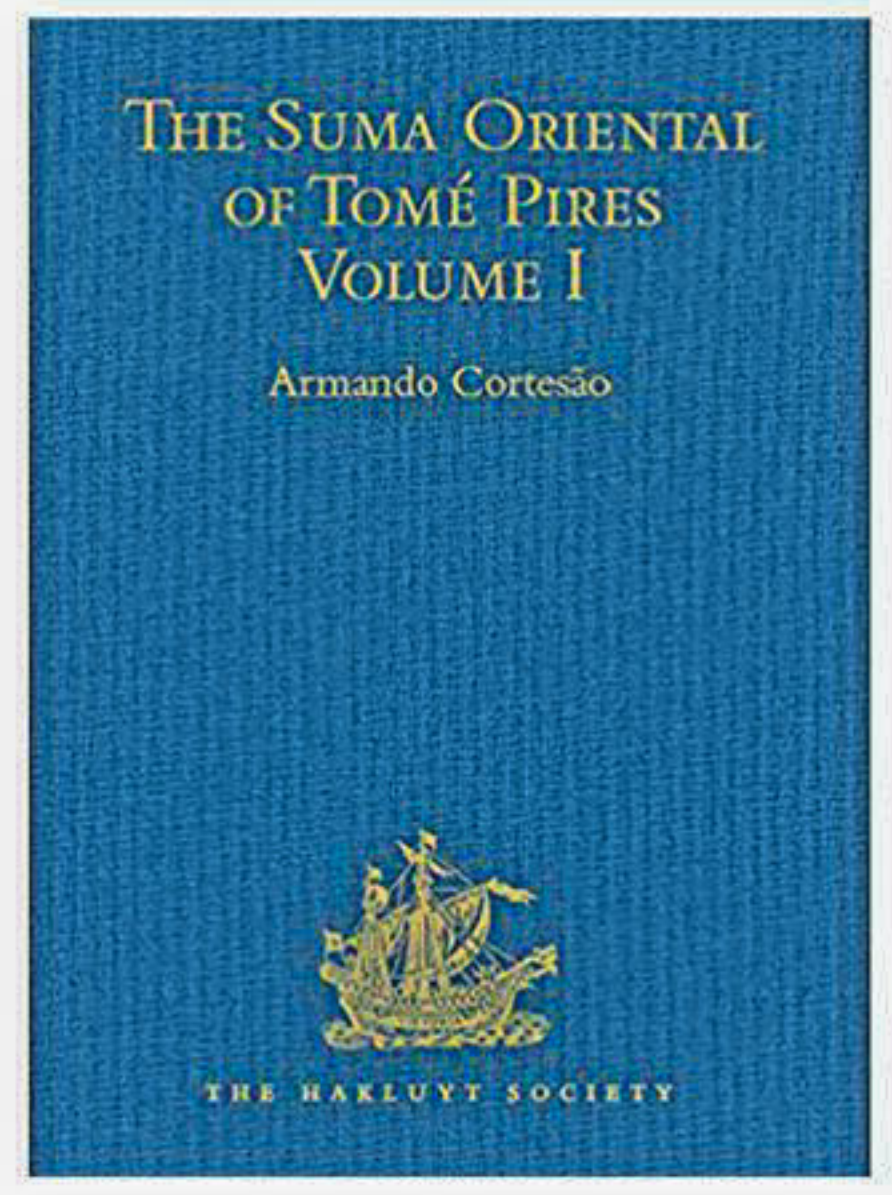
centuries]. We are told that merchants from Bengal used to take with them twenty varieties of cotton cloth, steel, very rich bed canopies with beautiful cut cloth-work in different colours, wall furnishings like tapestry and fruit preserves of various kinds including myrobalans, ginger, oranges, cucumbers, carrots, grapes, lemons, quinces, figs, pumpkins, Indian gourds, and many other fruits, some of them kept in vinegar. The exports included strongly scented clay vases in dark colour which the people of Malacca valued highly. Tome Pires noticed that Bengal cloth was in very great demand all over South-East Asia so that it used to sell at a high price in Malacca. Countries like Burma, Borneo, Java and the Liu Kiu Islands needed this cloth. The commodities which were brought from Malacca included Borneo camphor, pepper, cloves, mace, nutmeg, sandal wood, silk, seed-pearls, porcelain, copper, tin, lead, quicksilver, white and green damasks, enrolados from China, caps of scarlet-in-grain, carpets and krisses and swords from Java. The list of the exports and imports show that the things brought to Bengal were mostly luxury goods and that exports included food and other necessities, some of them having, of course, an element of luxury.

Besides Malacca Bengal had trade relations with Arakan, Pegu, Siam and Pasai and Pedir in north Sumatra, Banda, Papua, Aru and the Liu Kiu islands. In the west, Bengal traded with Ceylon, Cambay, Maldives, Ormuz and Aden. Ships fitted out from Bengal in February took thirty days to reach Malacca. Starting from Malacca in the beginning of August, ships could come to Bengal within a similar period of time. Trade between Bengal and Malacca was very profitable. Merchants could earn a profit of 250 percent to 300 percent on each item after paying import duties of about 36 percent in Bengal and an export tax of 6 percent in Malacca. It was possible to earn a good profit out of the difference between the price of gold and silver that obtained in Malacca and Bengal. In Bengal gold was priced 1/6th more than in Malacca and silver was worth 1/5th or 1/4th less than in Malacca. Bengali merchants used their own currency in Malacca and brought back foreign currency out of which they made a good profit. By importing cowries, which served as a medium of exchange, they could make a profit. We have seen that the exports of

rural settlements. But the inland towns of Bengal did not have fortifications. They possessed mints and also residences of governors and receivers of customs and revenues. Communicating as they did along river routes with some of the important ports and towns, they had at least a subsidiary role in the commercial life of the country. Thus, we have a very detailed and somewhat illuminating account of Bengal's seaborne trade, as it was at the beginning of the sixteenth century. It was quite for some time that the circulation of gold and silver coins and cowries had led to the growth of a money economy in the country. The cash nexus, which had perhaps linked up different professional groups, could function somewhat effectively. For it was sustained by a favourable balance of trade caused by a variety of marketable commodities and facilitating the import of the precious metals. The *Suma Oriental* is very much informative as to how gold, silver and cowries were coming to this country. Cowries used to come from the Maldive Islands in exchange of Bengal rice. Gold and silver were imported from China and some countries of South-East Asia with which Bengal had trade relations. We are also told that some amount of silver reached Bengal from Siam through Pegu. The metallic currency of this country, which had the function to facilitate exchange at commercial levels, was completely dependent on the precious metals and cowries brought from abroad. But the money economy in question was also based on foreign trade fed by exports including cotton textiles of considerable varieties.



The Portuguese India Armadas (Armadas da Índia) were the fleets of ships, organised by the crown of the Kingdom of Portugal and dispatched on an annual basis from Portugal to India, principally Goa. These armadas undertook the *Carreira da Índia* ("India Run"), following the sea route around the Cape of Good Hope first opened up by Vasco da Gama in 1497-1499.



Cover of the *Suma Oriental* of Tomé Pires: Volume I (Hakluyt Society, 1944)



A Portrait of Tome Pires (1465-1540)