

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Title of the Work

The title of the thesis is “ History and Military Importance of Bassein and Its Surroundings”.

Scope

The period covered is from 1518 to 1818, i.e., from the time the Portuguese started taking an active interest in Bassein area till the fall of the Marathas when Bassein lost all its strategic importance.

The Bassein area, for the purposes of this thesis, covers the following:

The island of Salsette, with its forts, south of Bassein

Coast up to Tarapur, with its forts, north of Bassein,

A coastal strip approximately ten kilometres wide, east of Bassein.

The coastal waters west of Bassein, between Salsette and Tarapur.

Objectives

The objectives were :

To study the geography of Bassein and the surrounding area

To study its history during the 16th to 19th centuries.

To assess the strategic importance of the area- political and military.

Methodology and Tools

Primary and secondary documentary sources were obtained and studied. From this a picture of Bassein emerged. It was then ascertained how much of this picture depended upon the geographical location of Bassein and what part it played in the history of the area. What were the cultural and economic overtones ?

All the important places falling in the area were visited and extensive notes made. Maps were drawn and photographs taken. These supported the data collected and the conclusions drawn.

A number of people, especially at the grass root level, were interviewed to find out the traces left today of Bassein's historical and cultural past.

Arrangement of Material

Chapter II gives the geographical portrait of Bassein. Chapter III contains the history of the area prior to the 16th century. This was considered necessary to provide a proper background or perspective to the main study which starts with the 16th century and ends at 1818 AD. Thereafter, Chapters IV, V and VI and VII deal with the history of Bassein and its surrounding areas in the 16th, 17th, 18th and 19th centuries respectively. In each case the strategic and tactical importance and role is discussed. Chapter VIII has a discussion on the Political and Military Ethos of the three powers which occupied Bassein, the Portuguese, the English and the Marathas. Forts were the focal points of all political and military activities. These are described in Chapter IX. The military importance of Bassein Area is dealt with in Chapter X. Finally, Chapter XI sums up the discussion.

Maps and photographs are provided at appropriate places to support the narrative and make it clearer. Some connected topics are covered in Appendices.

Review of Literature

There are a number of books dealing with the history of the region as a whole – the West Coast of India, the Bombay Presidency, Thane District and so on where Bassein finds a place – usually a small place. For example, the three volume of Grant duff's history devotes very limited space for the Bassein campaigns and its strategic role. Moreover, most are all political histories, not military histories and hence even at the tactical level the descriptions are meagre.

There are only a very few books dealing specifically with Bassein- as for example, Gerson Dacunha's *Notes on the History and Antiquities of Bassein*. Chimaji Appa's Bassein campaign is covered in some detail in *Vasaichi Mohim*, a book in Marathi by Y.N.Kelkar But here also the wider strategic implications have not been covered.

Campbell's Gazetteers are most valuable for general history. Campbell was a British Civil Servant at Bombay and he compiled several volumes of his justly famous *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency* from 1862 onwards. The volume on Thane was published in 1882. A facsimile reproduction was brought out by the Government of Maharashtra in 2000. This gazetteer is a mine of information and covers all aspects - geography, geology, the people, economic conditions and produce, history and a description of places of interest. The descriptions of the forts in the area are of particular interest. However, I should emphasise that I visited all these forts to see what was the present condition and visualise what must have existed in medieval Bassein.

The maritime aspect of Bassein is covered in several books, as for example, Radhakumud Mookerji's *A History of Indian Shipping* and B.K.Apte's *A History of Maratha Navy and Merchant Ships*.

There are a number of books dealing with the Christians and propagation of Christianity in the area. As examples are : F.P.Coelho- *Four Centuries of Christian Education in Bassein*, Francis Correia-*Samvedi Khristi Samaj*, Rajin DiSilva – *Vasaitil Khristi Dharma va Khristi Mandire*. These are useful for this study as they show how the Portuguese created a strata of society which was indebted to them and which supported their rule.

V.G.Khobrekar in his *Konkan from the Earliest Times to 1818* gives the early history of Bassein. E.W.Baptista writes about Bassein and its early rise in the *East Indians*.

There is much useful information in Pissurlekar's writings. These have been translated by Kakodkar and assembled in *The Portuguese and the Marathas*. The military aspects of the history have been covered in Dr Naravane's book *Battles of the East India Company*. He also covers forts in his *Maritime and Coastal Forts of India*. Two primary sources in Marathi, namely, G.G.Naik's *Shashtichi Bakhar* and .K.Rajwade's *Mahikavatichi Bakhar* are useful in parts.

For the Portuguese period, i.e. mainly the 16th and 17th centuries, Danver's *Portuguese in India*, in two volumes, is absolutely indispensable.

There are many other references about Bassein, some very short and some dealing with only a restricted field – for example trade. I have made use of all. A complete list of all references personally checked by me, i.e. a Bibliography, is given at the end.

Significance of This Study

Today, Bassein(Vasai) is a small coastal town with very little political, military, industrial or cultural importance. But this was not so in the past. Medieval Bassein had an important role in all these fields. It had great strategic value for the Portuguese in maintaining their command of the seas. It had utmost strategic value for the East India Company for protecting the northern flank of Bombay. It had a massive military presence

in its fort. It was a maritime hub with extensive shipping and ship building activities. It brought Christian culture to the area, next in importance only to Goa. Its value and role in these fields rose steadily in the 16th to 18th centuries. With the fall of the Marathas in 1818 Bassein lost all its importance.

It is important that this great historical and cultural heritage is not lost to time. Hence this study, which is, as far as can be ascertained, the only one of its kind.