CHAPTER V

BASSEIN AREA IN THE 17TH CENTURY

In 1597 another European power arrived in Indian waters. The new entrants were the Dutch who were described as “the scourge of Portuguese trade”. The Portuguese–Dutch conflict is described later.

In 1612 the Mughals besieged Daman and Bassein but were bought off. However, the Portuguese had gradually lost their power and influence due to their cruelty, bigotry, avarice and indulgence. The Portuguese tried their best to prevent the English from gaining a foothold on Indian soils and intrigued against them in the Mughal court. However, Emperor Jahangir permitted the English to trade and they built their first factory at Surat in 1612. In the same year a naval conflict took place between a Portuguese fleet and an English one under the command of Captain Best. Best defeated the Portuguese in a dramatic fashion although he had only four ships. The battle took place in full view of the local population and the Mughal governor who had assembled on the shore. In 1614 Captain Doveton of the Royal Navy defeated another Portuguese fleet. The sea face where the battle took place is shown in Map 5 on the next page.

These defeats had no direct effect on the Portuguese at Bassein. But their prestige suffered and the people and the Mughals, realised that here was another power which had arrived and that the Portuguese were, after all, not invincible. There were other reverses. The Muslims attacked Chaul and harassed the Portuguese ships. In 1611 Malik Ambar sent an army to take Bassein but the attempt was not carried on. In 1612 the Mughals besieged Bassein, Daman and Chaul but were bought off.

Map 5. Battle of Swelly

There was some lack of interest in Bassein when Spain took over Portugal. But in 1640 interest was renewed when Portugal made itself independent of Spain. At this time the General of the North had an impressive number of forts. There were captains at the forts of Bassein, Daman Chaul and Salsette. Then, between the river Vaitarna and Karanja there were fifteen fortified posts. The main forts and their importance has been covered in Chapter IX.

To maintain command of the seas was not an easy task. There were a large number of pirates off the Indian coast. The Dutch and the English had started contesting their control. Slowly the Portuguese lost their command. The English captured Ormuz in 1628 and the Dutch captured Cochin in 1663. They lost the East African forts and bases between 1624 and 1698. The claim of supremacy at sea had to be given up. The Portuguese also lost much good will on land due to their policy of religious persecution. In 1630 it was noted that the people had to flee from Portuguese territory to neighbouring
areas under British or Maratha rule. The greater part of land between Bassein and Daman remained untilled. 47

Bassein faced numerous attacks but none were successful in driving the Portuguese out of the area. Arab pirates attacked Bassein in 1674, plundered and damaged all the churches outside the fort walls. 48 Shivaji, too, had threatened Bassein. A tax called gharkhindi was paid to him 49 At about this time a French traveller was arrested by the inquisition and spent some time in Bassein jail.

In 1581 Portugal had been conquered by Spain but they regained their independence in 1640 and continued with their rule at Goa, Bassein, Daman and Diu. The forts and their importance has been dealt with in Chapter IX. Militarily they were as yet in full control and a few agitations against their rule were firmly put down.

During the entire 17th century the Bassein coast was famous for its ship building activity. More than 1550 ships built at Bassein and Agashi made voyages to Europe. In 1634 the English had two built at Bassein. 50 Local boats for coastal trade were mostly of two types. In the first the planking was joined by coir thread and in the second nails were used. For covering heavy cloth coated with bitumen and coconut and fish oil, was used. The greatest change in ship design was the introduction of the square rigged Portuguese ships. 51 Bassein was most famous for its ship building industry. The French traveller Francois Pyrard de L oval wrote “ Bassein is to the Indies what Biscay is to Spain” and described the ship building activity. Even the ships meant for the King of Spain were built at Bassein. In 1635 the English factors at Surat had four pinnaces built here. The industry flourished throughout the 17th century. The Portuguese frigate Santo Antonio de Thana, armed with 50 guns was built here in 1681.

In 1661 the island of Bombay with its dependencies, was given to King Charles II nd of England as part of the dowry of Catherine of Braganza when she married the King. In March 1662 a fleet of five men-of-war, under the command of the Earl of Marlborough sailed from England to take possession of the island. Sir Alexander Shipman and a new Portuguese viceroy were also on board. The ships arrived at Bombay during September and October 1662. The English were under the impression that “Bomaby and Its Dependencies” included Bassein and Salsette. However the local Portuguese governor refused to agree to this view. He even refused to hand over Bombay on some technical grounds in the wording of the Letters Patent. The Portuguese viceroy who had come with the English ships refused to intervene. The, then, seven islands of Bombay are shown in Map. 6 on the next page.

Due to this development Sir Alexander Shipman and 400 men first went to Suhali (Swally near Surat) and then to the island of Anjanvel near Karwar. Here the force suffered untold hardship. And in two years 300 out of the 400 men died as also Sir Alexander.
Sir Humphrey Cooke, Shipman’s successor agreed to the Portuguese terms and took over Bombay island alone in order to save the remainder of the force and the possibility of not getting anything at all. The island was handed over in February 1665 which then had only 119 Englishmen and 1000 natives. Bassein, Salsette and the coast north of Bombay thus remained in Portuguese hands.

The decision to give Bombay was also designed to forge an alliance with the English against the Dutch. However, the local Portuguese officials never liked the surrender of Bombay and the relations between the two countries remained strained. In September, 1668 King Charles bestowed the island to the East India Company on an annual quit rent of £ ten. Political power for its defence and administration were also granted to the Company.

Bombay prospered under the very able governorship of Gerald Aungier (1669-1677) In 1681 the headquarters of the East India Company shifted from Surat to Bombay. In 1695 the traveller Gomelli Careri who visited this area has given a good account of what he saw at Bassein and adjoining areas. Tarapur was described as well inhabited with monasteries of Dominicans and Franciscans. The Portuguese upper class wore silks and thin muslin with long breeches and sandals. For fifteen miles between Bassein and Agashi (Comelli calls it Cassabo) there were delightful gardens with several types of country fruit trees, figs, mangoes and abundance of sugar cane. The gentry had their pleasure houses at Agashi. Bassein, however, was threatened with plague. Salsette was peopled by the Jesuits. It was rich but not very well defended. There was a considerable degree of slavery and when the poor who tilled the land fled, they were brought back with force. The chief places on Salsette Island were Thana, Bandra and Versova. In 1695 the Italian traveller Gameli spent some time at Bassein and Salsette and has given a good account of the places he visited and the people he saw or met.

A word about the ships and shipping during the 17th century will not be out of place. The vessels used by Vasco da Gama were of about 200 tons. He size increased to 600 to 700 tons and then to 1600 to 2000 tons. This meant that trade could now be carried out from only the bigger ports which had the required depth to accommodate these bigger ships. A great advance had also been made in navigation.

Towards the end of the 17th century the Portuguese power started steadily declining. The Portuguese and the Marathas under Shivaji had strained relations. The Dutch captured their coastal forts and factories at Cochin, Cagnore and Cannanore. The Portuguese had also lost Trincomalee (1638) and Colombo (1656). Luckily for them no serious attempt was made by the Dutch or the English to conquer the Bassein area. The
inland areas were however always under the local Indian rulers, notably the Adilshahs of Bijapur.

At the end of the 17th century the situation was as follows. Bombay was with the East India Company. Janjira was with the Siddis. Chaul, Salsette, Bassein area, Daman and Diu were with the Portuguese. The Maratha Navy under Kanhoji Angre had started gaining command of the coastal waters, but their strength lay mainly south of Bombay and they did not venture near Bassein. While the British and the Marathas had flourished, the Portuguese power was fast declining. This was mainly for three reasons. One was the Portuguese religious policy and the Inquisition. Second was the corruption that had become rampant at almost all levels of Portuguese society. And the third was the rise of the British and Maratha power with whom the Portuguese were to come in conflict.