CHAPTER VII

BASSEIN AREA IN THE 19TH CENTURY

Bassein was again in the thick of political events in 1802. It was here that the Peshwa Baji Rao IIInd signed away Maratha independence. It happened this way.

At the death (or suicide) of the Peshwa Sawai Madhav Rao on 27th October, 1795, there was considerable confusion at Poona about who should be the next Peshwa. The powerful minister, Nana Phadnis, was against Baji Rao, son of the infamous Raghunath Rao. He tried his best to prevent Baji Rao from becoming he Peshwa. He went to Mahad, raised forces and appealed to various sirdars and even to the Nizam. He even sought aid from the English at Bombay vide a letter that he sent on 27th June, 1798. He, however, could not prevent Baji Rao from assuming the Peshwaship, which he assumed on 5th December, 1798.

Baji Rao was as adept at intrigue as his father. But he did not have the courage and war like skills of Raghunath Rao. He soon alienated Yeshwantrao Holkar who attacked Poona and defeated the combined forces of the Peshwa and Shinde at the Battle of Hadapsar in 1802 AD. Baji Rao fled Poona and went to Suvarnadurg via Mahad. (See Map 11) It must be noted that Yeshwantrao, although victorious did no harm, and meant no harm, to the Peshwa or his family. In fact, when he finally left Poona, he prostrated himself at the feet of two Brahmin ladies, the mother and wife of Baji Rao.

The Peshwa left Poona and crossed the ghats on 12th October, 1902. He had with him Balaji Kunjar and spent nearly a month at Birwadi, negotiating with the English. In a letter written to Governor Duncan he expressed his fears and pleaded that his person should on no account be handed over to Holkar. He then went to Suvarnadurg. He wrote “My servants Holkar and his party are carrying on intrigues and wrongs against me…… I have decided to seek an alliance with your honour…” The letter was sent with Naro Govind Avaty. The Governor at Bombay discussed the letter in council and obtained the written advice of John Malcolm, which was followed.

Baji Rao first reached Raigad from where he sent a large part of his party back to Poona. He then went to Mahad and on to Suvarnadurg. Here he asked for help from the English at Bombay, seeking a ship to take him to Bassein. HCS Hercules commanded by Captain Kennedy was placed at his disposal. He embarked on 28th November, 1802 and arrived at Bassein on 16th December. The English pampered Baji Rao and his vanity. For example, when on his way to Bombay he was given a gun salute by all the English ships he passed. He was also given Rs. 2 lakhs to meet his personal needs. A detachment of the
Company’s troops were sent to Bassein to provide protection to Baji Rao. A stockade was also put up at Sopara. After stopping at Revdanda for two days he arrived at Bassein on 16th December 1902. Here, at last, he was on ground of his own jurisdiction but totally dependent upon British support.

Amrut Rao had sent a force under Panse to Bassein to capture the place and take Baji Rao prisoner but it was met and turned back. 77 Khanderao Raste met the Peshwa and advised caution. Sirdars Panse, Purandare, and some others, tried their level best to persuade Baji Rao to return to Poona. They assured him that differences would be sorted out, reconciliation with Holkar arranged and a fresh plan worked out. But all to no avail. Every time Baji Rao hesitated and was inclined to accept the offer, Baloji Kunjar was ever at his side to advice him to go under British protection. Later Holkar sent overtures and offered to come to Bassein and meet Baji Rao and sort out their differences. 78 All the Maratha powers, except Gaikwad who had already gone totally under British protection, were keen to ensure that the British were kept out of Maratha internal problems.

Amrut Rao’s brother even said “If we are destined to ass our lives in confinement some where, why we may not refer our own brother AmrutRao rather than foreigners…” But Baji Rao refused to see Holkar and thus a last chance of forming an anti-English alliance was lost.

Holkar had, in the mean time sent a force to Suvarnadurg, had captured it and placed Baji Rao’s family under royal confinement. Amrut Rao had sought the help of the Nizam also, and promised him certain advantages if the Nizam accepted his Peshwaship. These moves were exploited by the English to fan Baji Rao’s anxiety and fears and force him into an alliance. The English also wrote to Holkar urging him to leave Poona. Colonel Close wrote “Baji Rao, by solemn agreement, has accepted our armed protection, and we are bound in duty to uphold it. In doing so the Governor General is intensely anxious to affect reconciliation between Baji Rao and you. You have often expressed your readiness to remain loyal to Baji Rao. Now is the time to prove your bonafides by at once leaving Poona with your forces and going back to your jurisdiction. If you do so, the Governor General will get all your grievances redressed by Baji Rao. You have all along been friendly to the British power. Do preserve that sentiment by quitting Poona. If you don’t do so, there is every chance of our relations being disturbed.” This had the desired effect Holkar also realised the futility of his lone fight and left Poona.

A word must now be said to the credit of Holkar. True he had captured Poona but his ire was more against Shinde than against the Peshwa. When Baji Rao fled, Holkar sent him baskets of food to tide him over during the journey. He scrupulously avoided any violence towards Baji Rao or his family. At Poona he only formed a Council of Administration till Baji Rao finally made up his mind. Amrut Rao’s son, Vinayak Bapu was given to Yashodabai in adoption and robes of Peshwaship obtained from the Chhatrapati at Satara. At last it was clear that Baji Rao was bent to go under British protection. A Shinde–Holkar rivalry had led to a Maratha–British alliance.
At this time the position of the East India Company had vastly improved. Tipu had been vanquished in 1799. The Carnatic, Avadh and Bengal were safely in their hands. Maratha leaders who could have opposed the British, like Mahadji and Nana Phadnis had died. The Marathas were now the only obstacle in heir way of building an empire. They now dealt Baji Rao a cruel blow. In preparation they had collected detailed information about Maratha forts, terrain, means of communications and other intelligence.  

When Baji Rao asked for, and was given, support to get back to Poona, he must have realised that he would have to pay a stiff price. But even he was aghast at the terms now demanded from him. But “friends” like Kunjar, and Balwantrao Nagathe and Janardan Chinapattan were there to soothe his fears and push him towards the British. These were useless fellows. The only qualification of Janardan was that he knew English. All were very suitably rewarded by the Company! He was particularly concerned at the English demand that territory in Gujarat should be ceded. He demurred. But Close, the resident at Poona arrived. Governor Duncan and Malcolm, his secretary, were close at hand to put pressure on Baji Rao. Close first pampered him with various “types” of presents. And, finally, Baji Rao was told that if he did not sign the proposed treaty the English would negotiate with Holkar and place Amrut Rao (half brother of Baji Rao) on the masnad of the Peshwaship. This threat really clinched the issue. Baji Rao hated Amrit Rao’s guts. Also he was “advised” by two of his ministers Baloji Kunjar and Nimbaji Bhaskar. What prompted these ministers to advise that the treaty be signed, can only be surmised but it is certain that they must have been amply rewarded.

Baji Rao was thus forced to sign the most infamous Treaty of Bassein on the 31st December, 1802. The main terms of the treaty were: Quote:

1. The two contracting parties agree that the friends and enemies of the one should be treated as friends and enemies of the other.

2. The British should protect Baji Rao’s territory as their own.

3. For this purpose a Subsidiary Force of not less than 6000 regular infantry should be permanently stationed in Baji Rao’s territory. with the usual proportion of field artillery,

4. for the maintenance of this force, Baji Rao should cede to the British districts yielding 26 lakhs or rupees a year.

5. The Peshwa was not to entertain in his service any European hostile to the English.

6. In case of a dispute arising with the Nizam, Baji Rao should accept British mediation.

7. Baji Rao should also respect the treaty of friendship recently contracted by the Gaikwad with the English and accept British arbitration in case of a dispute.
8. The British and Baji Ro should give military help to each other whenever necessary.

9. Te Peshwa binds himself to engage in no hostilities with other states without a previous consultation with the British Government.

This news reached Poona the very next day, the New Years day, 1803. There was alarm and sadness. Daulatrao started from Gwalior for Poona and reached Burhanpur but stopped there. Fears of a hostile Holkar were fanned by “interested” parties. With this all hopes of a Shinde-Holkar reconciliation, and a united fight against the British vanished.

Colonel Wellesley left Harihar with his force and advanced to Poona. He issued a proclamation “The Peshwa Baji Rao has sought the friendship and protection of the Company’s government. It is at his invitation that we are entering Maratha country as friends. We have no desire to harm or hate anybody. We call upon the Mamlatdars and all officials to join us cordially. We are stationing our guards to see that no damage is done to any peaceful member of society. Whatever grain and other articles are needed by us will be strictly paid for according to current rates. “ This is diplomacy at its best. It prevented any disturbance and allowed Wellesley to enter Poona un-opposed and peacefully.

Baji Rao stayed at Bassein till 27th April, 1803. Then, escorted by a force of 2200 men, and some artillery, he moved to Kalyan. After staying for a week at Kalyan he was escorted to Poona via the Bor Pass. He stayed at Chinchwad for a week and then entered Poona on the 13th. He was installed on the gaddi on 14th June, 1803. His title, as given by Wellesley, was “His Highness, Baji Rao, Pandit, Pradhan Bahadur”. The word “Peshwa” was not used. The event was announced all over India by gun salutes. Wellesley also sidelined Amrut Rao. He offered him protection against Baji Rao or any one else and, on his own authority, granted to him a pension of seven lakhs per year.

Baji Rao bartered away Maratha independence for the sake of the Peshwaship. Yet one must also consider what else he could have done. By refusing to sign he would have paved the way for Amrut Rao to become the Peshwa. Any hope of driving the English out of Maratha country and politics would have ended.

Baji Rao was forced to sign another treaty, the Treaty of Poona, in 1817. This took away whatever powers of independent action that he may have had after the 1802 treaty. He tried very hard to break away. Even while signing the Treaty of Bassein he had sent his vakils to the other Chiefs, especially Bhonsales of Nagpur. He wanted the British to be kept away from the other Chiefs. His last attempt to regain the lost position was to fight the last Anglo-Maratha war. If he had submitted and accepted British overlordship he might have remained a prince ruling over a small state, like the Gaikwads or Shindes or Holkars. Yet he chose to fight. The Maratha spirit had woken up, alas, too late.

This treaty sounded the death knell of the Maratha Power which finally collapsed in 1818 when Baji Rao surrendered to Malcolm at Dhulkot. Salsette was already in
possession of the Company. Now Bassein too came under their protection. On the surrender of Baji Rao all his territory was taken over by the Company and thus Salsette and Bassein and its surroundings, right up to Daman, became British territory. With this the medieval period of Bassein’s life may be considered as having come to an end.

Bassein does not figure in any event after the Treaty of Bassein. There was famine in 1803–1804 in north Konkan but Bassein was comparatively less affected. The ports in this area during the first decade of the 19th century, as given by Milburn were Bassein, Tarapur, Daman, Dahanu, Shirgaon, Agashi, Elephants, Versova, Bombay, Karanja, Colaba, and Chaul. 83

These ports, however, lost their international character. Increasingly trade with the west was being carried on from Bombay. The ship building industry of Bassein and Agashi also declined and gradually came to an end. The industry had permanently shifted to Bombay, especially under the great ship building skills of the Wadias.

The strategic importance of Bassein as a guardian of Bombay’s north flank, also came to an end. What was left was its agricultural produce, its famous bananas, its ruins., and the memory of its once great stature.