Chapter VIII

THE POLITICAL AND MILITARY ETHOS OF THE
PORTUGUESE, THE ENGLISH AND THE MARATHAS

For a proper understanding of the military importance of Bassein and its surroundings, it will be necessary to first understand the evolution of the political and military ethos of the Portuguese, the English and the Marathas who occupied the Bassein area at some point of history.

The Portuguese

The character of the Portuguese empire in Asia was primarily commercial. This interest flowed directly from the King. *Estado da India* was a royal enterprise, supported and guided by the crown. The political aim was “trade and Christians” as Vasco da Gama put it. Religion played an important role in shaping the political and military ethos. A Papal Bull charged them to spread Christianity, by using force if necessary. Let us see how these commercial and religious aims were met by political and military means.

Let us consider trade first. One can visualise how the process of trading must have developed. A Portuguese ship would sail into an Indian port and anchor in the roadstead. Small native boats laden with merchandise would sail up to the ship. Exchange of goods would take place and the ship would sail away. This procedure was, obviously, not satisfactory. The Portuguese had to buy (or not buy) what was offered and at a price dictated by the natives.

In the next stage a Portuguese ship would come alongside a jetty or wharf and spend a few days in port scouting for goods and negotiating prices. Although much better than the first, it was still not entirely satisfactory. What was needed was not always available, especially out of season. Choice for picking and choosing was limited.

The next step followed logically. A “factory” would be set up ashore. With the permission, and under the protection of, the local ruler. A factory was basically a warehouse where goods could be stored till the next ship arrived. Spices could be bought cheaply, even from inland places, and during season, and stored. By going inland a much wider market to choose from was available.
The next step was obvious. Given the turbulent times, and the hostility of the native traders, and the small Portuguese party manning the factory, it was obvious that protection was needed. Factories were fortified and in time grew into regular forts. Raising a military force to man and defend the fort followed.

Even with fortifications, a factory was, nevertheless, in a “foreign” land. It existed at the ‘pleasure of the native ruler’. The Portuguese, therefore, had no choice but to ‘own’ the land where their political will could not be challenged, and could be completely enforced by military means. This was the process of establishing colonies. Goa was the first one in 1509-1510. To protect it and give it some defence in depth, adjoining areas, Salsette and Bardesh, were also occupied. In 1533-1534 the whole coast between Bombay and Daman passed into Portuguese hands by treaty with the Sultan of Gujarat. By 1570s the Portuguese had a firm hold, and strong forts, at Goa, Diu, Daman and Bassein. They already held Bombay and had a strong presence at Chaul.

It is to be noted that although the Portuguese showed no inclination of further increasing their colonies by going inland, they had succeeded in creating a sizeable Christian population, many time by force. They realised that notwithstanding the Papal Bull, it was not possible to Christianise the entire land. The Muslims had tried to spread Islam but had not succeeded. Even with a kingdom extending from the Kandhara to the Kistna, they were still a minority in Hindu India.

How successful the Portuguese were can be gauged from the fact that they ruled at Goa for 451 years (1510 to 1961), at Diu and Daman for 426 years (1535 to 1961) and at Bassein for 204 years (1535 to 1739) and at Bombay for 130 years (1535 to 1665).

The means for enforcing political will was the army. At a time when the whole country was in turmoil and warfare was a daily occurrence, and there was no police force as such, the only way to enforce rule, law and order was the armed forces. All military forces, however, need a base from which to operate. Place where provisions can be stored and the sick tended. Such a base, in medieval India, was a fort. They had a most important military as well as civil role to play.

In the case of the Portuguese, in addition to the army, superior weapons and superior discipline, it was their navy, which played a predominant role in creating and maintaining the string of colonies along the Indian coast. It was their sea power, better ships, with better ordnance and men and better seamanship, that sustained them and it is not surprising to find that all their major forts were maritime in nature. Before dealing with the English and the Marathas, a word must be said about their success.

The Portuguese succeeded because the Indians allowed them to succeed.

Time and again the Indian rulers refused to take the Portuguese threat seriously enough, meet it and eliminate it. The Portuguese ships had been beaten off Chaul but subsequently no major victory was gained. Once at Diu when the Portuguese were reduced to dire straights and on the point of surrender, the Persian fleet, assisting Bahadur
Shah of Gujarat, sailed a way on hearing a RUMOUR that a Portuguese fleet was approaching.

In 1509, the Adilshahi general had occupied Goa and the Portuguese had to flee. But next year Albuquerque returned and re-occupied Goa. There was no resistance and no further attempt by Adilshah to drive the intruders away and protect the territorial integrity of his kingdom.

Akbar had conquered Gujarat. Why did he stop short of Diu? He had captured Ahmadnagar, why not Bassein? And he preferred to buy Portuguese passes —cartaz— for his ships sailing to Mecca, rather than build a Navy for protecting his ships.

Both Shivaji and Sambhaji had attacked the Portuguese. Sambhaji had even occupied Bardesh and Salsette when a Mughal threat in the north drew him away. But the attempt was not repeated. They captured Bassein in 1739 but why not Daman?

No explanations are forthcoming. And it is hard to accept that the Indian rulers had very limited political vision. No one visualised India as a political and geographical entity. Goa was a foreign country, just as for the Emperor at Delhi, Bijapur was a foreign power.

The English

The East India Company was a purely commercial establishment. True, it paid vast sums to the King, and others in power, to keep them “happy” and have its charter renewed, it was, basically, to keep its shareholders satisfied. This it could do by earning more and more profits and doling out more and more dividends.

The goods that the Company mostly traded in, came from and-cotton, indigo, saltpetre, spices. Therefore, it had to control land and the producers who tilled the land. Acquisition of land was also important for the revenue it brought in.

The genesis of the Empire lay in this fact, and not in any accident of history. As early as 1687 the Directors in England wrote to Madras …” to establish such a politic of civil and military power, and collect and secure such a large revenue, …as may be the foundation of a large, well grounded, secure dominion in India for all times to come…” Unlike the Portuguese, the English were committed from the first to acquire land, hold territory. This was done by various means, - by conquest, by annexation and by political subterfuge, the Subsidiary Alliance System.

It should also be noted that during the formative years the Company, in Bengal, was a servant of the Mughal Emperor, accepting the Diwanee of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. In
Madras they were the tenets of the Nawab of Arcot and once they even appealed to him to discipline their other tenant, the French.

In Bombay, on the other hand, the situation was quite different. They owned Bombay, were sovereign in the island and did not owe any allegiance, technical or factual, to any Indian ruler. The protection of this British territory was a paramount concern in their political and military ethos. It was for this reason that they always coveted the possession of Salsette and Bassein.

There was another string to their bow. They did not resort, like the Portuguese, to religious persecution. In a country in a state of almost perpetual warfare, with armies marching and counter marching, destroying everything in their paths, the English offered peace and security. “Come to us” they said, “we will not burn your home, loot your crops or rape your women.” The common man was thus drawn into their net. The people often appealed to them for help and the native soldiers in the Company’s armies did wonderfully well. Indeed, it was on the strength of Indian bayonets that an empire was won.

The English, like the Portuguese, succeeded because of Indian lethargy and inaptitude. In 1681 Aurangjeb could have eliminated the English at Bombay once and for all. The Siidis at Dongri hill had bombarded the English Bombay castle and the English were in very dire straits indeed. They prostrated themselves before the Emperor, and Aurangjeb allowed them to exist. The Marathas, too, had in their power to eliminate the English, but never did so.

So, in their ethos the aim was to obtain political control by any and every means possible, the armed forces being given the primary role. While the Royal Navy secured the lines of communication between India and England, and gradually wrested command of the seas from Portuguese, and later from the French,. the army took over control on land.

The importance of Salsette and Bassein lay in their geographical position and which gave them strategic importance.

The Marathas

The Maratha interest in the sea was first kindled by Shivaji. He laid the foundation of the Maratha Navy. In time, under Kanhoji Angre, it became the strongest coastal navy of the period. Its bases and main areas of operations were south of Bombay. The main Maratha thrust in the 18th century was towards the north. It has often been said that if the Marathas had first concentrated in bringing the whole of South India under their direct rule their thrust in the north would have been more successful. As it stood at that time,
The Peshwa Baji Rao’s thrust north was to establish a Maratha empire, and fulfil the
dream of the great Shivaji to establish in India a *Hindavi Swarajya*. But this aim was
soon forgotten. The greatest harm done to the Maratha cause was by his successor,
Peshwa Nanasaheb. The revenue from the home country was never enough to meet the
growing needs of the Marathas, hence the Peshwa’s main aim became the enforcing of
chauth and

sardeshmukhi, and garnering of tribute. This had the most unfortunate results. Firstly,
war, to sustain war, is never a good policy. Secondly the Peshwa’s interference in Rajput
affairs, aiming to squeeze as much money as possible for Maratha help, ultimately led to
the permanent alienation of the Rajputs and drove them into British arms. Nanasaheb was
also guilty of seeking English help from Bombay to eliminate his own admiral, Tulaji
Angre. Tulaji was no doubt eliminated at the Battle of Vijaydurg in 1556 but one result
was that command of the coastal waters passed permanently into English hands. Maratha
politics was now tribute oriented and did not take any concrete steps to ensure political
stability in the areas conquered by them the zamindars were squeezed to give tribute. The
zamindars, in turn, squeezed the peasantry. There was a popular saying in the north;

*Hindustan me teen kasai*

*Khatmal, pisva aur Daccanibhai*

There are three butchers (blood suckers) in India

The bed bug, the flea and our deccani brothers (Mrathas) 85

With this background it is not difficult to trace the Maratha interest in Bassein. To say
that they wanted a port north of Bombay to support their growing interest in Gujarat
would not be entirely correct. Firstly they never had the means to undertake any large
scale foreign trade and merely having a port was not enough. In any case if the intention
was to support Gujarat a better choice would have been Diu of Daman. In any case, once
it was captured, Bassein was never used extensively for maritime activities.

So the main reason for Maratha intervention in 1737-1739 was on religious grounds.
Portuguese intolerance and religious persecution had led many Maratha families to leave
their ancestral homes in the area and seek redress at the hands of the Peshwa. The
Bassein campaign has been described in a previous chapter.

Thus, the Maratha political ethos was not directed towards building a stable empire.
Dr Naravane has discussed in one of his books 86 that it would not be correct to call the
Maratha power as an empire. It was more of a confederacy. But even here the Maratha
chiefs who had become independent and owed only a nominal loyalty to the Peshwa, and
even less so to the Chhatrapati, often fought amongst themselves. So at times it was not
even a confederacy.
The Maratha military ethos centred around enforcing political gains, especially the collection of chat and sardeshmukhi. Military expeditions were almost invariably launched to enforce collection of tribute. Another change worth a serious note, that took place, was the military organisation. Till Peshwa Baji Rao Iст, the Maratha operations revolved around the cavalry, the chief asset of the force being mobility. This astounding mobility was seen during the Palkhed campaign of Baji Rao. From the time of Nanasaheb, and with the emergence of the four powerful chiefs, Shinde, Holkar and Gaikwad and Bhonsales of Nagpur, the infantry started to take precedence. Mahadji Shinde, particularly raised infantry battalions trained in the European fashion. He was greatly assisted in his task by Count De Boigne. In fact the battalions trained and led by De Boigne and his foreign officers became almost invincible. But De Boigne was an exceptional officer. After him came worthless officers like Perron, ever ready to defect. And when European officers left, mainly influenced by Governor General’s proclamations, there was no Maratha officer to take charge effectively. The result was that these infantry battalions lost all their efficiency.

There was also an inherent flaw. No Indian officers were trained to lead and take over the command of these battalions. This was a serious omission. At Assaye, for example, the European officers were seduced away by the English. There was no Maratha officer trained to replace them. These battalions lost all their teeth.