Chapter IX

FORTS OF BASSEIN AREA

It is now essential to study the forts which were the instruments of the strategic plan.

Bassein Fort

It is located at 19.20’ north, latitude and 72.54’ east longitude. Bassein was the popular name given to this place during the Portuguese and British period and was derived from the Portuguese Bacaim. The etymology of the name Vasai or Wasadi has been given in Chapter I. Historically Bassein came into prominence when the ancient harbour of Sopara (see map. 2) became stilted and unfit for ships of any significant tonnage and draft.

Sultan Bahadurshah of Gujarat built a fort at Bassein on an earlier Hindu structure, attributed to Nathrao Bhandari in 1394. The Portuguese destroyed it in 1531. When Bassein and its surrounding areas came under Portuguese control by treaty with Bahadurshah, in 1533, they built a small fort, called the Citadel, on the site of the previous Muslim fort. It thus had half round bastions unlike the other bastions of the fort which have the typical Portuguese shape. See Photographs Numbers 6 and 7. The layout of the fort is at Diagram Number 4. The wall of the citadel carries an inscription, cut in stone and set on the wall. This reads, translated

“The first Captain, Garcia de Sa built this fortress in 1536 by command of the Governor Nuno da Cunha”

This is the oldest inscription in Bassein fort. The entrance to the citadel is very imposing. (See photograph no. 13) At the centre of the arch there is a Royal Coat of Arms. The crown of the King of Portugal is upheld by it. The shield has two symbols, on the left a cross and on the right two arrows and a sphere. Right on top there was, probably, a statue of St. Sebastian. Inside, to the left one can see the remains of the inner gate. Novel feature of it was that it was opened by lifting it upwards. Just inside this part of the wall of the original Muslim fort, which has been incorporated.

The citadel is an irregular decagon with a tower to the left of the main gate there are three half round bastions. The two important buildings close to the citadel were the residence of the governor and a church called Nossa Senhora da Vida – Our Lady of Life. This merits special mention. The gate is again very imposing with fluted columns.
supporting the carved frieze. Above one can read two letters engraved in the stone _A and M. They stand for Ave Maria- the greeting of angel Gabriel to Mary.

The main entrance measures 16 feet by 10 feet. It also had an entrance from the citadel side so that members could easily enter. At first Franciscan friars officiated here but later a secular clergy took over. The sanctuary is a well-designed chancel, which is almost intact today. Windows surround it. Inside however, nothing remains of the golden alter, the frescoes, the huge panels and the statues of Jesus and the Madona.

Father Correa records that during the British days the church was turned into a sugar factory. The floor was dug up to receive machinery. It is said that while digging many human bones, as well as bones of a horse were found.

In front of the church are the remains of what was once a large hospital, called Casa de Misericordia, constructed in 1540. The hospital looked after wounded soldiers and other sick persons. It is about 132 feet long. The patients of the hospital visited the Church of Our Lady of Good Life. Therefore the church was also referred to sometimes as Church of the Misericordia.

The next important ruin is that of the Town hall or camera. Portuguese colonies had a body of officials, a governing body, a kind of modern municipality. This was known as camera and the building came to be known after it. The ruins of the hall show a porch supported on five arches and six square columns_. The first floor had similar design. On the wall above the doorway is the Royal Coat of Arms. On the right of the shield is a sphere and on the left is the Cross of the Order of Christ. Below the Coat of Arms the date of its construction – 1606 – is inscribed.

There are ruins of a small Customs House. It is one of the earliest buildings to be erected – in 1534. Although small, it had an important role to play. The treaty with Bahadur Shah stipulated that all Gujarat ships sailing out for trade first had to touch Bassein and take a Portuguese pass or cartaz. The Customs House issued these passes.

Between the Church and the ramparts, near the present municipal road is an open space (much larger than what one sees today) which was known as the Great Square or Praca. It was used for parades, games and sport. During the Portuguese period there were wells and gardens here. A large L-shaped tank still exists. great square is totally obscured today.

On one side there are two temples, one of Goddess Vajreshwari and one of Lord Shiva. These were built by the Peshwa to thanks the Gods for his success in the Bassein campaign of 1739. The temple was extensively renovated in 1970. The Vajreshwari temple is smaller but in the same area. A lion, the vahana of the Goddess is next to her. The Goddess is known locally as Vajrabai.
The Dominican church dedicated to Bl. Gonsalvo was constructed in 1583. It was the largest of the seven churches situated within the fort. The Dominican Order is of preachers and was started in Rome by St. Dominic de Guzman in 1216 AD. The motto of the monks is Laudare, Benedicare, Predicare which means To Praise, To Bless and To Preach. The entrance is wide and high, about 20 feet. It faces west. In side the main hall or nave is now roofless. There is a side door which has an interesting inscription on its outer surface. In the centre is a cross in a shield. Below are scrolls. On the sides are two stars at the end of two rods. On either side of the shield there is a dog holding a lighted torch in its mouth. This is the Coat of Arms of the Dominican Order. The belfry is a marvel to look at. The steeple and spires have collapsed long time ago but the tower still stands proudly, 120 feet high. The strength of the construction can be gauged from the fact that not all the bushes and creepers that have sprung up on it, have caused it to fall.

The next church to visit is the Matriz or the Church of St. Joseph. It was called Matriz as it was the mother church and was built in 1546. Its ruins are located on the right, near the rampart, as one approached the sea gate. The façade of the church is the tallest in Bassein fort. An inscription is engraved on top of the door. Translated it reads

“In the year 1601 the most illustrious Senhor Dom Frei Aleixo de Menezes being Archbishop primate and the Reverend Pedro Galvao Pereira the Vicar, the Matriz was built.”

The belfry tower had steps leading right to the top. The upper steps fell down during a storm and now only about 60 steps remain. For two and a half centuries the huge bellfry of this parish church had called the residents to rejoice at the baptism of a newborn or mourn the death of someone. There are a few tombstones lying within. One is of special interest. The engraving reads

“To this grave are transferred from Goa the bones of Pedro Galvao, servant of the Lord, who managed and enlarged this church. He died on the 19th March, of the year 1618.”

The Church of the Holy Name of Jesus is a Jesuit church. It is one the best preserved monuments within the fort and is a most splendid piece of architecture. The church faces west. Its façade has an arch and columns with fluted shafts. Near the top of the upper arch, are the letters HIS with a cross above. This semi circular façade is 65 feet high. The foundation stone of the church was laid in 1549. The main church was started in 1561 and the whole structure took 17 years to be completed. This is the only church within the fort that is still in good enough state of preservation for it to be used. There are many small ancillary buildings but one must note the College and its quadrangle, which is large—about 75 feet square— it has four columns and four arches still standing. It should be mentioned that the Jesuits is an order of priests, which was started by St Ignatius Loyola in Spain in
1540. St. Francis Xavier was one of the first famous saints of this order. The mortal remains of his body, miraculously preserved, can still be seen in Goa.

From very olden times the annual celebrations of the Feast of St Gonsalo Garcia (1517-1597) is held in this church. The fourth birth centenary celebrations were held in 1957. Mention should also be made of the Chapel of Parashuram Joshi. He was a Brahmin scholar and astrologer and was converted to Christianity with great pomp and ceremony. He took the name of Anrique Da Cunha.

He next church to be described is the Church of Renunciation of the Augustinians. This order was established in the 4th century –350-430 AD. They came to Thane in 1572 and to Bassein in 1595. The Church and the college occupy the south west corner of the fort. The church is almost totally destroyed to day and it is difficult to imagine what it must have looked like in its hey day. The Augustinians built a convent first and added a church later. The word ‘convent’ comes from the Latin ‘con-venir, i.e. ‘come together’. Formerly the term convent was used for structures both for men and women. Today it is used for women only.

St Anthony’s Church of the Franciscans is situated close to the west-land-gate of the fort. The order of Franciscans was founded by Francis of Assisi in Italy in 1210 AD. St Anthony was born in Lisbon in 1195 and died in 1231. The Franciscan friars in Bassein raised this church in his honour. The church is in ruins but there is enough left to give us an idea of its once greatness. The most distinguishing feature is what is known as the ‘flying arch’ ( See Photograph Number 15). It is a long, about 37 feet arch at a height of 20 feet and spans the entire width of the nave. Another feature worth noting is the large number of tombstones within and just outside the church. The Bell Tower is quite high and resembles the belfry of the other churches. It became a target of Maratha shelling St Francis Xavier (1506-1552) was the patron saint of Bassein. He visited Bassein three times. An inscription inside the building records –translated –

“ Governing the State of India the Viceroy Dom Miguel de Noronha, Count of Linhares, this portal was built on which St Francis Xavier was placed as the patron of this city on the 10th May, 1631.

The Chapel of Our Lady of Health (St.John of God) or in Portuguese nossa Senhora de Saude. The church was built in 1685. St john was originally from Portugal who came to India and spent his life tending to the sick and starting hospitals. From the foundation and the plinths that have survived one can get a good idea of the original structure

The residence of the captain of the Fort is now in ruins. It was located right next to the bastion of St Sebastion, in the northern part of the rampart. ( See Diagram No. 5 ) Part of the residence was on top of the rampart. There were some rooms which are now barely discernable. At the base of the rampart there are three rooms. The door leading to them is blocked, but the rooms are now roofless and one
Diagram Number 5. Layout of Captain’s Residence, Bassein Fort.

can take a look inside by climbing on a ladder. It is probable they were used for storing arms and ammunition.

The most intriguing part of the residence is an underground passage, or a tunnel, as shown in the diagram. It was explored by a party from Bassein and a fairly good idea of its location was charted. But the purpose for which the tunnel was dug cannot now be ascertained.

Father Correa records that once there was a stone slab near the land gate which recorded

“During the reign of the most high and the most mighty king D Joao of Portugal, the third of this name, and governing India, the Viceroy Alfonso de Noronha, son of Marquis of Villa Real, Francisco de Sa being captain of the Fort and City of Bassein, this bastion, name San Sebastion, was built on 22nd February, of the year 1554.”

The Land Gate is in the western face of the rampart. It has an intricate design, with a small courtyard and a passage between the outer gate and the inner gate. In medieval times the outer gate was studded with spikes to discourage elephants from smashing in the door. The courtyard and the blind passage were meant to confuse an enemy if he ever succeeded in entering the outer gate. The top of the gate can be reached by a long flight of stairs from inside the rampart. Here,

on the flat top is a flag mast, or victory pole where the Marathas unfurled their flag after capturing the fort. The land gate was heavily bombarded by the Marathas.

The Sea Gate –Porta do Mar- was in the eastern side of the rampart. It had two doors the outer one and an inner one concealed by a twisting passage. This arrangement was common in medieval forts. The inner door was never visible from the sea and thus could not be shelled. See Diagram Number 6

Nearby are two tanks with a partially ruin screen. These are the baths, one for men and the other for women.

The walls of the rampart were forty feet high and had a parapet at its front edge. Actually, two high, strong, walls were built at a distance of about ten feet from each other and then the space between them filled with rubble and stamped down. This gave it great strength. There were ten bastions of typical Portuguese triangular shape Their names, are shown in Diagram 6. The entire circuit of the rampart is about 2.4 kilometres. In the north the widest of the rampart is about 60 feet broad. Towards the sea t becomes narrow.
There were two main gates. The West gate was the land gate, while the East gate was the sea gate.

The Chimaji Appa memorial is towards the north of the fort, near the St. Sebastion bastion, which was blown up and through which the Marathas gained entry. It is a peaceful spot and holds an equestrian statue of the great Maratha warrior. It was inaugurated on 12th May 1990. The statue was sculpted by the renowned sculptor, Shri. Shashikant Mahtre. The work of the statue and the park around it was undertaken by the Vasai Vijay Smarak Samiti. Today the monument is looked after by Vasai Municipality. See Photograph Number 16.

Hanuman Mandir is a small temple dedicated to Hanuman. It was built after the fort was captured by the Marathas. It was built by Shankaraji Patharvat on 27th July, 1739 just two months after the capture of the fort. Architecturally it is of no interest.

No description of Bassein fort will be complete without mentioning the existence of a block of modern tenements, in total disregard of archaeological norms. These house the staff of the customs and excise office. Who gave the permission to build these flats and why a place inside the fort was chosen could not be ascertained by me. The western and eastern ramparts were also broken through to allow a modern road to connect Bassein with the Bassein jetty.

A photograph of the entrance to the Citadel and of many other structures are given at the end. See Photographs Numbers 8 to 14. Next to the citadel, and touching it is the famous Church of Our Lady of Life, with its famous flying arch. See Photograph Number 15. There is reason to believe that it was here that the Peshwa Baji Rao IInd signed the infamous Treaty of Bassein on 31st December, 1802. Inside the fort is also the famous monument of Chimaji Appa, the brother of the Peshwa Baji Rao I, who captured Bassein in 1739. It is probable that on top of the citadel was a statue of St. Sebastian. He was the patron saint of the fortress. Of the many ruins that one can now find inside the fort, some are noteworthy. The most important is the Governor’s Palace. The palace has two main sections, one is a smaller room, probably the reception area. The bigger one was the residence. The churches within the fort have been described above. Those outside the fort are mentioned in Appendix ‘C’

Arnala
Arnala is an island fort, situated at 19.28’ north, latitude and 72.47’ east, longitude. The island was known as the Cow’s island to the Portuguese – Ilha de Vaccas- and later to the East India Company and lies at the mouth of the Vaitarna River. (See Map. 2) It was built by Sultan Muhammad of Gujarat about 1516 AD and lies on the north west corner of the island. The Muslim fort was destroyed by the Portuguese. They handed over the island to a Portuguese noble who built a fort like structure with a tower and manned by guards. According to an inscription on the main gate the fort was extensively rebuilt in the time of Baji Rao Ist after its capture by the Marathas. A plan of the fort is a Diagram Number 7. The ramparts are still in very good shape, although very few buildings remain inside. The temples of Trimbakeshwar and Dutta are still in use and people from the mainland go regularly across the short stretch of water by means of a regular ferry service. (See Photographs Numbers 3 and 4.) The tombs of two saints, Shah Ali and Haji Ali can also be seen.

The main gate in the northeast corner and is flanked by two bastions. An inscription records the renovation of the fort by Peshwa Baji Rao Ist after its capture by the Marathas from the Portuguese in 1537. An isolated bastion lies at a short distance in the south of the fort. The purpose for which it was built is not precisely known. Some of the sculptures found on the walls are shown in Photographs Numbers 17 and 18.

The fort was used as a naval depot by the Portuguese. Its tactical value lay in its location, commanding the entry to the Vaitarna River and Agashi creek, thus controlling all sea borne traffic in that area. It also acted as a screen to Bassein. Some ship building activity also took place at Arnala, especially after Agashi ceased to have that role. Colonel Goddard captured it in 1781 but it reverted to the

Diagram Number 7. Layout of Arnala Island and Fort.

Marathas. It finally came under the Company’s control in 1817. It was garrisoned by a small force till about 1662.

Arnala was one of the few places where free mercury was to be found.

Mahim

Mahim, (See Map. 2) located at 19.40’ north, latitude and 72.47’ east, longitude was a coastal fort of some importance under the Portuguese. It was originally built by King Bimba Dev in the 13th century. It was attacked by the Musalmaans and later the Portuguese took over. In the village close to the fort many Portuguese families lived. The name of Mahim is linked with Kelve, and it is often known as Kelve-Mahim. This is probably to distinguish it from Mahim fort built on one of the Bombay Islands. Kelve lies on the other side of the creek, two kilometres south of Mahim.
The coast is rocky and a reef, partly dry, can be seen. At one time Mahim was an important tactical outpost of the Portuguese. The fort and the village are mentioned by Gamelli in 1695. The fort is still in good shape and is located next to the present local hospital. The hospital compound was once the outer court yard of the fort. High ramparts and two bastions can still be seen. The fort was long and part of it was washed by the sea. Over time the fort underwent many changes. In 1818 it had shrunk to a square about 80 feet square. A peculiar feature is that the parapet on the rampart has loop holes facing both outwards and inwards, overlooking the court yard. This may possibly suggest that the court yard was used to house prisoners. Except for a guard room under one wall, there are no other structures remaining.

Tactically, Mahim was important as a link between Bassein in the north and Bombay in the south.

**Kelve**

Kelve, 19.35° north, latitude and 72.45° east, longitude, lies at the northern end of a long, shallow, beach. As it provided a good landing spot for smugglers and others, the Portuguese may have thought it fit to protect it with a fort. The beach is today a popular, and therefore very dirty, picnic spot.

Nothing remains of the fort except part of a wall, half covered by sand. See Photograph Number 18. The gates have disappeared and a gap in the wall can now be used to gain entry to the fort, which was quite small. Its tactical value to the Portuguese seems doubtful.

**Tarapur**

Tarapur, 19.52° north, latitude and 72.39° east, longitude, (See Diagram Number 5) was a fort built by the Portuguese on the site of an earlier Hindu construction attributed to King Bimb Dev. It was a strong fort, almost square in shape, with high walls and bastions. It was built on the left, or south bank of the Tarapur Creek. The sea has now receded but the creek and the Portuguese jetty can still be seen. On this side, above the gate, is a Portuguese coat of arms. From the village on the north bank of the creek, Chinchani, it is often known by the twin name of Tarapur-Chinchnai. The layout of the fort is shown in Diagram Number 8.

In 1634 the bar at Tarapur creek was as wide as the one at Dahanu. The channel is in the middle and it was only at high tide that ships could sail up to the jetty. In 1750 the German, Tieffenthaler describes it as a strong fort. In 1776 Raghunath Rao took shelter in this fort. In 1818 it was described by Captain Dickinson as one of the largest and best conditioned. The Peshwa had given it inam to Vikaji Mehrji and his descendents are
still to be found in the village near the fort. Today, the fort is in ruins, with no old buildings standing within it.

Diagram Number 8. Layout of Tarapur Fort.

Tarapur was tactically important as it helped the Portuguese to control coastal waters in that region. It acted as a link to Bassein in the south and Dahanu (and further on Daman) in the north. It was strongly held and the Marathas could capture it only after a very stiff fight. It finally came under the control of the East India Company in 1803.

Shirgaum

It was a very small fort but is still one of the most picturesque. It was built along the coast, about 5 kilometres north of Mahim. The fort was oblong with a length of 200 feet and a breadth of about 150 feet. The walls were high, about thirty feet and thick-about ten feet. There were three towers and a bastion in one corner. Much of the fortifications have been obliterated, possibly because of the high tide which entered the fort. It passed to the Marathas in 1739 and to the English in 1803. Why the Portuguese built it is not precisely known as apparently it had no tactical value.

Agashi

Agashi (See Map 2) is located at 19.27’ north, latitude and 72.35’ north, longitude. It is north of Bassein and today about 6 kilometres west of Virar railway Station on the Western railway. One cannot see any fort at Agashi now. The only old structure is the Phadke Wada which may have been fortified at one time. It is mentioned as an important place in the Mahikavatichi Bakhar Its importance to the Portuguese is doubtful. Agashi is famous for its temples, one of which is described in Appendix ‘B’.

Ghodbandar

Ghodbandar (See Map 2) is located at 19.16’ north, latitude and 72.53’ east, longitude. It is well inside on the left, or south, bank of the Bassein Creek and the mouth of the Ulhas river.
It must have been a strong fort as two terraces can now be seen, overlooking the creek and the palace of the Nawab of Ghodbandar, which was built at a later date. Today there are only ruins inside the fort. See Photograph Number 21. It was a place of gathering of the Muslim sea farers and its mosque and dargah still survive and attracts a large number of people.

Its tactical value must have been to control and keep an eye on the trade carried from and to the River Ulhas and places inland.

**Mahim Group of Forts**

There are eight very small fortified structures all located within a radius of ten kilometres. This is shown in Diagram Number 9. Although in some accounts they are listed as forts, in reality they were nothing more than solitary outposts, some as small as about 25 feet square. Some, like Mathane, can no longer be identified. Their military value was doubtful Only Pan Buruz (See Photograph Number 21) can be said to have some value as it is located at an entrance to a creek, but in very shallow waters. Such solitary bastions, manned by perhaps ten or fifteen men and carrying one or two canons, are not very common on Indian shores. In some other places, for example in Mauritius, they are called Martello Towers and much is made of them.

Diagram Number 9. Mahim Group of Forts.

What use were they for the Portuguese is very hard to fathom. They certainly had no military value. The area was, probably, unstable and these fortified outposts may have been used to enforce Portuguese political and military power.

**Military Role of Forts**

This is dealt with in the next chapter.