CHAPTER X

THE MILITARY IMPORTANCE OF BASSEIN

AND ITS SURROUNDINGS

Introduction

Portugal and Spain had known about the extensive trade that existed, from ancient times, between the East, particularly India, and the West, with Rome and other Mediterranean countries. The profits, especially in spices, was enormous. For example, nutmeg bought in India at one pence for ten pounds, and mace, at ten pence, was sold in Europe at £ 1.60 and £ 16, respectively. This was an appreciation of 3200 per cent !!. When Francis Drake captured a Portuguese ship, the value of the cargo, mostly spices, came to the then astronomical figure of £ 100,000. 94

Both Spain and Portugal wanted to participate in this trading activity with the ultimate aim of monopolising it. Unfortunately for them the trade route, carrying these goods, was almost entirely over land. Ships from Indian ports such as Chaul and Sopara carried goods on ships, hugging along the coast, to Persian Gulf. But after that the route was a land route. And this route was totally under the control of the Arabs and other Islamic countries.

It was, therefore, necessary for the European nations to find out an alternate route by sea. The impetus for these voyages of discovery was provided by King Henry the Navigator (1396-1460). He not only supported the expeditions but also did much to further maritime activities such as setting up a nautical school.

Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) while attempting to discover a western route to India found the New World. He landed on an island which is now Cuba. 95 He arrived there on 14th October, 1492 and named the island San Salvador. His expedition was sponsored by the King of Spain.

Vasco da Gama discovered the eastern route to India, rounding the Cape of Good Hope he landed a little north of Calicat on 16th August, 1498. His voyage was sponsored by the King of Portugal. It should be added that a Papal Bull—inter ceta—had been issued (3rd May, 1493) to define the areas of influence (and domination) between Spain and Portugal. With the landing at Calicat, the Portuguese era in Indian history had begun.

Political and Politico-Economic Policy Aims of Portugal
Portugal aimed at completely dominating the trade, in spices and other commodities, from India and the East. This meant that they would inevitably clash with Arab and Indian rulers who were then controlling this trade. It also meant conflict with other European nations, such as England and the Dutch, who would, sooner or later, enter this field.

It was recognised that it was trade that gave a nation its riches. These riches enabled a stable and strong political and economic base to be laid. It also enabled the building of more and more powerful ships to protect and expand sea borne trade.

**Strategic Aims**

Following from the above political objectives, the strategic aim was to ensure command of the seas so that its ships could ply unhindered between Portugal and the East.

The instruments for achieving this aim were:

- A powerful navy and strong merchant fleet.
- A string of forts or fortified bases/colonies which would support naval operations and which would enable the collection and storage of goods.

The Portuguese bases on the rim of the Indian Ocean, established in pursuance of the above policy, are shown in Map.5 Bassein (and its surrounding area) was an important cog in the strategic planning of the Portuguese.

**Military Importance of Forts.**

Before studying the forts it is essential to state, and accept, the concept of Maritime Forts and Coastal Forts. We may define ‘maritime’ as a word to denote activities on the high seas, both naval and commercial. ‘Coastal’ on the other hand denotes activities near or along the coast, usually within a distance of about 30 kilometres. Thus we at once get the difference between maritime commerce and coastal trade; between maritime naval operations and coastal naval operations. And thus between maritime forts and coastal forts.

A maritime fort was oriented more towards maritime operations, especially naval operations. They acted as bases for ocean going vessels. They held naval stores and repair facilities. They provided a place to house the naval and political staff and the commander’s residence. Maritime forts thus played a strategic role. The other forts in Bassein area were all coastal forts, sometimes more of an outpost. They helped the
Portuguese administer their possessions and enforce their rule. These forts thus played, at best, a tactical role. Both types need to be described.

It is also necessary to define and accept the concept of Circle of Control. A Circle of Control is that area (here taken as a circle) around the fort within which the ruler, or fort commander, is able to exercise total political, military and economic control. The radius of this circle will, naturally, depend upon many factors. The strength of the garrison and the naval forces available to the fort commander is an important factor. The will, courage and determination of the commander himself is also an important factor. Other factors can be: the attitude of the people living in the area, the economic condition of the area and the people, the location of the fort and its neighbours and so on. One of the most important factors is, of course, mobility.

For the purpose of this thesis the radius of the circle is taken as 30 miles. Now if arcs are drawn from every fort we see how these overlap. See Map Number 12. It will at once be apparent that with complete mastery over Bassein, Daman and Diu, the Portuguese had complete mastery over the coastal waters and the coastal strip of land. More about this aspect in the next chapter. Another feature also needs mention, the category of a fort. Essentially there were three types of forts, Main Forts, Secondary Forts, and Fortified Outposts.

Main Forts (MF) were large forts, capable of holding a large garrison, well stocked with weapons, munitions and provisions, capable of withstanding a long siege and from where offensive and defensive sorties could be mounted. Secondary Forts (SF) were fairly large, but not as large or strong a main fort. These were designed to support a main fort and its function was mostly defensive in nature. A Fortified Outpost (FP) was a very small fort, not capable of holding a large garrison and whose role was mainly to provide a screen to a main or secondary fort.

The location of the fort is also important. Here we come across the concept of lines of defence. A main fort would always have some secondary forts and fortified outposts to provide defence in depth. The theoretical concept is shown in Diagram Number 10.

Map Number 12. To Illustrate Circle of Control
Diagram Number 10. Lines of Defence. Theoretical and at Bassein.

The defence of Bassein using this concept is also shown in Diagram Number 10.

The importance of Bassein can be gauged from the fact that it was, perhaps, the largest Portuguese fort, in fact a township within the fort walls and known as Dom Bacaim. It was only later that the Portuguese started settling, and building churches outside the fort walls. Militarily it was a maritime fort and a main fort (see definitions infra) and had great strategic value, helping the Portuguese Navy to control the upper reaches of the Arabian Sea, just as Goa enabled them to control the lower reaches of the Arabian Sea. It became the headquarters of the Portuguese General of the North. It was supported by numerous coastal, secondary forts in the area.

It is interesting to note that after its capture by the Marathas, the fort lost its strategic importance as the Marathas did not need it for their northward expansion. The Maratha Navy under Kanhoji Angre did not use Bassein as a strategic post. Later it was commercially important to them but no more. Under the Marathas it was not a maritime but a coastal fort as well as a secondary fort.

The strategic importance of Bassein was revived under the British. The East India Company held sovereign rights over Bombay Islands. Unlike Calcutta or Madras, they did not owe any allegiance, or pay tribute to, any Indian ruler.

The threat to Bombay could come from the sea or from landward. The seaward threat was met and neutralised by the powerful British navy, both the Company’s ships and those of the Royal Navy. Moreover, after the Battle of Vijaydurg in 1556, they had near total command of the coastal waters on the western coast of India. Thus the only threat that remained was from its northern flank, from land. Hence the Company always tried to control Salsette and Bassein. After the Second Anglo-Maratha War they retained Salsette but not Bassein and it remained important to them.

On the coast of Maharashtra every creek or the mouth of a river, has a fort sited at its mouth. This at once suggests its military role as one of controlling the traffic in and out of the creek or river. It also meant that they had command of the coastal waters near to them. And more important they could exercise total, or near total, political, military and economic control over the coastal strip of land. They thus at once assumed a military as well as an administrative role. It enabled the Portuguese to collect land revenue, to collect and hold at a secure place, the spices and other produce hat was meant for export. The term factory has often been used to denote such warehouses. But in those turbulent times, and with the general hostility of the native population towards a foreign power, it was absolutely necessary to secure factories by suitable fortifications. Forts were a natural consequence. This was at a tactical level. At the strategic level the naval elements held at,
and protected by, forts enabled the Portuguese to exercise command over the seas – what we now term the blue water naval control. The command of the seas of the Portuguese was sustained by a ring of coastal forts and fortified ports. This is shown in Map. 13.

It will thus be seen that Bassein was of great strategic importance to the Portuguese. Their navy was powerful and many times superior to the navy of the Arab or Indian rulers. The Portuguese Navy could not be challenged on the high seas. The maritime and coastal forts ensured that even in coastal waters Portuguese control was maintained. The Maratha Navy under Kanhoji Angre posed a powerful challenge for a short time but the Maratha Navy was, after all, a coastal navy (modern coast guard) and could not stand against a blue water navy of the Portuguese and later the British.

Finally it may be noted that the navy and the maritime and coastal forts were complimentary to each other. As the strength of the Portuguese Navy declined, when challenged by the English and the Dutch, so did the importance and value of these forts to their owners.

Map Number 13 Portuguese Coastal Bases.