CHAPTER II

GEOGRAPHICAL AND SOCIAL PORTRAIT

OF BASSEIN AREA

Etymology

A very old port, Wasti, existed at this location. The name comes from the Sanskrit root –vas-or dwelling. It was also called Vanavasti, or forest dwelling. King Bimba in the 11th century named it Vastspur. In medieval times it was named Gulshanabad by the Sultans of Gujarat. Bahadur Shah named it Bahadurpura. It is generally accepted that Bassein is the English corruption of the Portuguese Bacaïm which itself is a corruption of Wasti.

General

The medieval Bassein Island lies between 19.24’ and 19.28; north, latitude and 72.48’ and 72.56’ east, longitude. It is bounded in the north by the Vaitarna or Dantura river, and in the east by a very narrow channel- the Sopara Creek- which separates it from the mainland. In the south is the Bassein Creek, properly the backwaters of the Bombay harbour and the estuary of the Ulhas River. In the west is the Arabian Sea.

The location of Bassein on the coast of Maharashtra is shown in Map 1. The Bassein Area that is the subject of this thesis is shown in Map. 2. Medieval Bassein Island is at Map 3 and modern surroundings are at Map 4 ¹.

The important islands were Dharavi, Versova, Salsette, Thane, Trombay and then the seven islands of Bombay proper. All these are now connected by causeways, breakwaters embankments and by reclamation. The antiquity of Bassein

Map 1. Location of Bassein on the Coast of Maharashtra

Map 2. Bassein Area.

Map 3. Medieval Island of Bassein
area has been well established as shown later. A graveyard was discovered under the sandy bank of Mahim fort in 1854. This established that the area was inhabited from very early times.

Puranic accounts of Bassein area are contained in various mahatmyas or legendary accounts. Vaitarni, Tungari and Nirmal mahatmyas are particularly interesting. Much information is contained in the puranas, mainly the Padma and Skanda Puranas. The Vaitarna has been identified by some as the Binda of Ptolemy but it is more likely to be the modern Bhivandi.²

Places of Importance

The main places of importance in the Bassein Area under study are described, in brief, below.

Bassein is located about 40 kilometres north of Bombay. The fort is located at 19 20’ north, latitude and 72.54’ east, longitude. The island was about 15 kilometres long and seven kilometres wide. Today, of course, the eastern water channel has disappeared and it is part of the mainland, as shown in Map 4. The island was known in ancient times as the island of Sopara. In 1539 Bassein was described as a town with people of many nations. The land was level and the soil was rich and strong. During rains, however, large parts were under water and it was difficult to walk. There were great groves of trees and many reservoirs. Bassein rose to great eminence and was given the noble appellation “a Corte de Norte” – Chief City of the North. The Bassein harbour, however, was not very deep and not protected from the open seas. The sides facing the sea are, at many places, protected by cliffs of blown sand. A detailed description of Bassein is given later. The traveller Careri in the 17th century described Bassein in glowing terms, with delightful gardens planted with a variety of fruit trees.³ The Mohammedan historian Khafi Khan who travelled in the Konkan during 1680-1735 also describes Bassein as a flourishing area, which yielded a large revenue. The Portuguese raised the best crops. A separate area was set aside for Mussalmans.

Bassein area was ceded to the Portuguese by Bahadur Shah of Gujarat. The treaty was negotiated by Khwaja Shaikh Iyaz and was signed on 23rd December, 1534.⁴ the development of Bassein started with Nuno da Cunha. He had been appointed Governor of the East and the Portuguese King John III had specifically ordered him to capture Diu. On the way, however, he attacked Bassein and destroyed the Muslim fort. The founding of Bassein as the northern capital was mainly the handiwork of Nuno da Cunha. So much so that e was often known as Fundadero de Bacaim.
Sopara. This was, indeed, a very ancient site. It is mentioned in the Hindu epic Mahabharata, under the name Shurparaka. Sopara has also been identified with Solomon’s Ophir. It finds an important place in Ptolemy’s narrative and in the Periplus. In fact, till about the 7th century Bassein was hardly known while Sopara was internationally famous for its trading port. A fragment of Ashoka’s eighth edict was found at Sopara, close to one of its landing places, in April, 1882. So its antiquity is well established. A Buddhist stupa was discovered at Sopara. More about this heritage structure is at Appendix ‘B’. It was the capital of north Konkan then known as Aparanta. Lord Buddha is said to have sent his disciple Purna to Sopara. Sopara is frequently mentioned in Buddhist literature. As the ships became larger, with greater draft, and as the Sopara creek became shallower and shallower due to silting, trade shifted away to Bassein and other places and Sopara lost all its importance. There are many temples at Sopara built after the area came under Maratha control. A wonderful statue of Brahma is lying forlorn near the Ram temple. It is ten feet high and the idol has been beautifully carved. Two women appear kneeling at the feet of the idol. When will the Archaeology Department wake up and preserve this ancient heritage? (See Photograph Number P. 1)

Nirmal. Nirmal is a small township on the Vasai-Arnala Road, about 11 kilometres north of Vasai. The word comes from the Sanskrit nir, meaning without and mal or impurity or stain, in other words, pure. Nirmal, or Nirmala is a common Hindu name. The place was originally called Vimala after the temple of Vimaleshwar, to which a grant was made by a Chalukya king in 1262 AD. Vimala was originally a residence of a demon. It was purified by Parashurama. The temple was destroyed by the Portuguese Inquisition, and the linga was thrown away. On the Marathas occupying the area after the Bassein campaign the temple was rebuilt, the padukas (wooden slippers) of Dattatreya installed in place of the linga and a tank constructed in front of the temple. An annual fair is held here in the month of Kartik on the 11th day after the new moon. A plan of this very famous and very sacred temple is given at Diagram 13. See Appendix ‘B’. Altogether there were eight medieval temples at Nirmal, all being built around 1750. The Harihareshwar mahatmya of Skanda Purana describes Nirmal as the best among the tirthas i.e. place of pilgrimage. The tank in front of the temple measures 1551 feet by 4488 feet and has a depth of ten feet. (See Photograph Number P. 2). An inscription in Sanskrit, found on a stone slab needs researching. The church at Nirmal is also very famous. It was built in 1556 and is quite large.

Agashi. Agashi is a small township and port about sixteen kilometres north of Bassein. Its co-ordinates are 19.28’ north, latitude and 72.40’ east, longitude. In olden days it was a thriving port, famous for its timber trade and shipbuilding. In 1530 when the Portuguese occupied Agashi they used the ships built there and found them as good as those built in Europe. The importance of Agashi dwindled sharply by the middle of the 17th century. Some believe that there was a fort at Agashi but I found no trace of it. There is the famous Phadke Wada, the residence of the Maratha sirsusbedhar Shankaraji Keshav Phadke. Shankaraji figures prominently in the history of that period and is credited with building a number of temples in the area. The temples of Bhavanishankar and Hanuman are the chief ones. The Phadke Wada is in urgent need of conservation. A church was
built by the Portuguese in 1540 and to the credit of the Marathas, they did not destroy it or otherwise interfere with the practice of Christianity. A visitor, Anqueteil du Perron found the lanes full of people going to church as freely as in a Christian country. 

**Mahim.** Mahim is often linked with Kelve and is called Kelve-Mahim. This is, probably, to distinguish it from Mahim Island, now a suburb of Mumbai. It lies about eight kilometres west of Palghar railway station at 18.40’ north, latitude and 72.47’ east, longitude. According to tradition, Mahim and Kelve were captured by Raja Bhim of Mahim (Bombay) in the 13th century. It passed to the Delhi Sultans in the 14th century and from them to the Sultans of Gujarat around 1400 AD It was captured by the Portuguese who built a fort on an earlier structure Captured by the Marathas during the Bassein Campaign of 1737-1739, it finally went under the East India Company’s control in 1818. The Mahim fort has been described in Chapter IX. As far as temples are concerned Mahim is famous for its Venkatesh temple which is over 400 years old.. Shankar Mandir and two smaller temples are also noteworthy. A mosque in ruins is about 250 years old. The mosque bears an influence of Portuguese style of architecture, so much so that from a distance it may well be mistaken for a church.

**Kelve** Kelve lies on the north bank of the Danda Creek, some three kilometres south of Mahim, and diagonally opposite to the Danda fort. See Chapter IX. The Shitaladevi temple is at least 600 years old and draws a large number of devotees. The Kelve –Mahim group of forts are described, and their role discussed, in Chapter IX.

**Arnala.** Arnala is an island, at the mouth of the Vaitarn river. It is located at 19.28; north, latitude and 72.47’east, longitude. The island is quite close to the mainland and a regular ferry service operates to the island. (See Photograph Number P. 3) The East India Company called it the Cow’s Island, derived from the Portuguese Ilha de Vaccas. A novel feature of the place is the presence of free mercury. It is interesting to note that the first Salt Satyagraha of Mahatma Gandhi, started at Arnala. The Portuguese found a strong fort at Arnala in 1530. It was stormed and destroyed. It was partially rebuilt by a Portuguese gentleman to whom the island was handed over. The fort is described in Chapter IX. Arnala has two temples and a Muslim shrine. The temple of Mahadev and Bhavani is inside the fort, much ruined and the temple of Durgadevi is outside, close to the sea. (See Photograph Number 4 ) A novel feature of the temple is a Maratha period sword that is placed in front of the deity. It is still used to behead many fowl and a goat which are sacrificed to please the local deity by the Kolis. Against all CRZ and environmental norms a large Koli community has been allowed to settle on the island, at places the huts touching the fort walls. The Arnala Island has three small, but important, villages, Bhoegaon, Vagholi and Vatar.

**Vajragad.** This is a small fort built on a hillock known locally as Hiradongari. Half way up the slope there are many basalt boulders. On the hill there are remains of many man made structures, many of the medieval period. From the top one can see a wide expanse of territory the notable features being the hill top of Kamandurg fort and the hill of Tingar in the east and the gardens of Sopara and Jeevdhan fort in the north. The place
was the camping ground of Chimaji Appa’s forces during the Bassein campaign. Hirandongari is famous for its Dutta Mandir.

**Shirgaum.** Shirgaum lies about 8 kilometres west of Palghar railway station at 19.44° north, latitude and 72.44° east, longitude. It was an important military station under the Portuguese. It is one of the most picturesque forts on the coast and is described in Chapter IX. The Shankar Mandir was built by the Peshwa. The *samadhi* of Trimbak Mama Pethe lies nearby. The holy shrine of *Satapati*, lies north of Shirgaum and attracts thousands of visitors.

**Tarapur.** Tarapur is located at 19.50° north, latitude and 72.42° east, longitude on the south bank of the Tarapur Creek. There is a village Chinchani on the north bank of the creek and it is often called by the joint name Tarapur-Chinchani. There was a bar at the mouth and the channel was almost dry at low ride but at high tide ships could sail up. In fact there is still the remains of a jetty near the north gate of the fort. Its recorded history starts at about 1280 AD when King Bhima of Mahim (Bombay) captured the city. The Portuguese fleet, sailing along the coast burnt the town. When it came in their hands by treaty with Sultan Bahadur Shah of Gujarat, a massive fort was built and it became an important Portuguese military station. An attack by some Abyssinians was beaten off. Both Ogilby and Gameli Careri describe it as a good town with monasteries. 13 It was the first place to be captured by the Marathas in 1737. It passed to the East India Company permanently in 1803, after the Treaty of Bassein with the Peshwa. In 1818 Captain Dickinson describes it as “one of the largest, best conditioned and most central of the sea-coast forts.”14 The fort is described in Chapter IX. A small image of Maruti is placed very close, almost attached, to the wall. The temple of Hanuman in the village is very popular. The Kolis start their fishing season only after prayers are offered at this temple. By 1820, however, it was ruined. Today, Tarapur Township has nothing special to offer.

**Ghodbandar.** Ghodbandar is located at 19.16° north, latitude and 72.53° east, longitude, on the Salsette Island. It is on the south bank of the Ulhas River where it broadens into the Vasai Creek. Its location was ideal to control river traffic in and out of the Ulhas River. Under the Portuguese it served as a customhouse and once successfully resisted an attack by Shivaji. The fort had a strong garrison and there were a number of Portuguese Native Christians and slaves. Gamelli Careri describes it as a well-inhabited town with monasteries of the Dominicans and Franciscans. The traveller Fryer called it Grebondel. Captured by the Marathas in 1737 it fell into disrepair and lost much of its military value, although it remained as a checkpoint for river traffic. A small hillock at Ghodbandar had a strong fort (See Chapter IX) and also palace of the Nawab of Ghodbandar. It was converted into a Rest House in recent times. Ghodbandar had a considerable Muslim population and its mosque and *dargah* of Hazrat Rahamat Ullha was a meeting place of some importance for the local Muslims. This place is reputed to be over 750 years old. Today the port handles a great deal of traffic, mainly in iron ore.
Thane

Thane is located at 19.11° north latitude and 73.03° east, longitude, and is of great antiquity. Marco Polo describes it as the capital of a great kingdom, inhabited by idolaters. Its sovereign was not subject to any one and it had great trade in leather and cotton. It was the chief town of Salsette Island and was always in the news, especially during the Anglo-Maratha relations and war. It was rich enough to attract the attention of Usman bin Asi Sakiff, the Governor of Baharin and Oman who sent an expedition to loot it in 660 AD. It was sacked again in about 690 AD. A copper plate of 997 AD mentions the place as Shri Sthanaka, the capital of Shilahara kings. Thane comes from Sthanaka. Its location was important as it lay between the Yeur hills of Salsette in the west and the Parsik hills in the east. Originally there was a fishermen’s village –Chendni and the town one sees now came up after the railway line was laid. In the town is the medieval Hirakot or Diamond Fort, now used as a jail and government office. Many improvements were carried out during British occupation, as for example, the dam which reclaimed much marshy land. Thane was famous as a port. In fact there were four landing places, Mandvi, Liberi, Bendi and Chendni. There was considerable trade and sea traffic. Conquered by the Muslim Mubarak Khilji about 1312 AD, in 1480 AD it was capital of a province under Mahamud Begada. Ibn Batauta in 1344 calls it Kukin-Than. It passed to the Portuguese along with the Bassein coast about 1534 AD. Under the Portuguese Thane entered a phase of prosperity. The Franciscan Antonio do Porto built Thane’s first church in 1540. The fort and Thane’s military importance is described in Chapter IX and X.

Versova

Versova was a small village and port on the west coast of Salsette Island. There was a fort at Versova which commanded the harbour. It was described as little and narrow but deep enough for the largest ships of that age. In 1694 a fleet of Muscat Arabs raided Versova and killed everyone, of both sexes. It was with the Portuguese till captured by he Marathas. It came to the notice of the East India Company in 1660 when the Company felt the need for having a strong post on the western coast on Salsette Island. In 1787 Dr Hove describes it as “good command over the river, very old but well placed, and guarded by rocks so that no sea force could ever take it.” In 1800-1804 a party of artillery and infantry was stationed there. Versova was the choice. Under the East India Company it became a training ground for cadets till 1818 when it was abandoned. Close to Versova is the fortified Madh Island. The Versova fort is covered in Chapter IX.

Bandora

The Portuguese Bandora and the English Bandra was a small port in the southwest corner of Salsette Island. Its location was 19.2° north, latitude and 72.53° east, longitude. It was mentioned as an ancient port town. The Portuguese burnt it in 1532. Today it is a suburb of Mumbai, lying on the northern end of the Mahim causeway. Bandra in the Portuguese times was a place where there was considerable Christian activity, and a very high Native Christian population. The original St.Andrew’s Church at Bandra was first built in 1575. Bandra is also famous for the St.Joseph’s Convent. From early British period Bandra was known for its slaughter houses, one for beef and two for mutton. The horned cattle meant for the butchers come from Konkan, Hyderabad, Nashik and Khandesh. St Andrews Church was built by the Portuguese in 1575 by Rev Manuel Gomes, the apostle of Salsette. The present church was built on the same site, and with the same name, in 1864. Today, Bandra is a railway station on the Western (old B.B&C.I.
 Railway) Railway and its value as a port is much declined. The chief industry is tapping of the palm trees and the distilling of toddy spirits. At one time it had a large Muslim population in an area known as Naupada, who had a large number of looms for producing cotton cloth. Bandra is connected with Mahim by a causeway built in 1843 and a stone slab records the contribution of Lady Jamshetji Jijibhai. It was designed by Lieutenant Crawford and built by Captain Cruikshank

Geology

Though similar in its geological composition as the mainland, Bassein has many special features. The rocks are mostly of volcanic origin. There is a basaltic ridge running almost parallel to the coast, with a maximum height of 200 feet. Interspersed were cliffs of black and compact rock. These were excavated extensively and the stones used for building many of the churches in Goa. At places there are small hills around 400 feet high. The level plains were at many places covered with marine deposits over dark, grey trap.

Land and Produce

The strip of land between the western Ghats – the Sahyadri- and the sea is the Konkan. It is broad at Bassein but is quite narrow south of Bombay. At times the spurs of the Sahyadris run down to, and into, the sea so that there is virtually no strip of land or even a beach.

The soil varies from red to black (sweet soil) in narrow belts, especially near the coast. There are also marshy areas and a number of salt pans. (salty soil) During the monsoons the rivers overflow and deposit a rich layer of fine soils along its banks. This is good for cultivation. At one time it was “the best tilled soil in India.” In the black soil mostly rice is grown. On the slopes of hills in the red soil nachni, vari and other coarse grain is grown.

A large area, about 1729 acres, was reclaimed by Mr. F Bakar. One of the first things he did was to raise a mud dam, pitched with stone and covered by red soil. As a result of this and other works, the Bassein area is full of fields and gardens. Sugarcane is freely grown. Plantains are harvested in plenty. There are nine types of plantains, sonkali and bankali being more prized. (See Photograph Number P. 5.) The well known dried plantains of Bassein are of the rajeli variety. Amongst the vegetables may be mentioned white gourd, snake gourd, red pumpkin. Betel vines are seen in most places. Bassein hapus may not be as prized as that of Ratnagiri but is a very good fruit. The betel palm – supari- is grown in plantations. The poorer classes use the trunk of the plant for roof rafters. Most of the land revenue came from rice, coconut, oil, opium, palm spirits, vegetables, fish and betel leaf.
There are extensive forests. The Ain (terminalia tomentosa) is a tall, stately tree. Its wood is durable and hard and is used for both building and fuel. Alu’s wood is useless but the leaves are used as fodder. Amba mangifera indica is valuable both for its fruit and timber. The famous mango variety-Alphonso- is produced here as also the more common pairi. Babul-Accacia arabica though small and hence of little value for its timber, is excellent firewood. Its pods are greatly liked by sheep and cattle. Bakul is known for its fragrant flowers, which are made into garlands and worn by women. Another beautiful tree with long clusters of yellow flowers is the Cassia fistula. Its pods are used in medicine. Khair Accasia catechu is a valuable tree. The Neem tree is well known for its medicinal value.

Amongst flowers the chameli, jai, jui, jaswand and mogra are extensively grown there is a big demand for these flowers in Bombay.

There were extensive woodlands, sometimes reaching up to the water where many mangroves were formed.

The earliest record of a severe famine is that of 1618. In that year the famine was so severe that children were openly sold by their parents to Musalman brokers. The practice was stopped by Jesuit priests and by giving aid from the state and missions. Famine conditions were recorded in 1837 also.

Rivers, Creeks and Roads

The main rivers are the Vaitarna, with its tributary, the Tansa in the north and the Ullhas in the south. Vaitarna has always been considered as a very holy river by the Hindus, Bathing in it washes all sins. It is mentioned in the Mahabharata and it said “let men go to the tripistapa which is famous in the three worlds where is the meritorious Vaitarni river which destroys sins.”. The name Vaitarna comes from vai(truly) and tarini(saving). 19

The Ulhas is the other major river. It opens into the sea via the Bassein Creek. It is not properly a creek but the backwaters of Bombay harbour which curves up to Bassein. Its shallowest point is just south of Thane. Here a rocky bottom provided a good foundation for the railway bridge linking Thane to Kalyan. About 3 kilometres north of Thane this body of water is joined by the Kalyan creek or the estuary of the river Ulhas.

The Sopara Creek is a mere trickle now. At places it has disappeared so that Bassein is now part of the mainland. At other places it is spanned by modern bridges.

The main lines of communication ran from Sopara to the east, along the left bank of the Tansa river to Tal pass and Nashik. Another road ran south east to Malsej Ghat and on to Kalyan. Remains of a Portuguese bridge can be seen at Gokirve. Two cart roads also led from Thane to Surat, one along the coast, Sopara, Agashi, Dantivre, Mahim,
Tarapur, Dahanu and Umbargaon. The second road was inland and its alignment was later made use of in building the Western Express Highway. The road from Vaitarna to Daman was described as “unequalled by any in the world”.

**Weather**

The weather is typical of the western coastal region, quite hot in summer with high humidity. The temperature ranges between 30 to 40 degrees in summer and 21 to 28 degrees in winter. The rainfall is very heavy and lasts from about the middle of June to middle of September. The average rainfall is about 260 centimetres per year.

**The People, Religion and Language**

It is difficult to say, exactly, who were the original inhabitants of Bassein Area. Amongst the tribes, Kolis and Bhandaris are still to be found, the former in large numbers. There was considerable migration from the north, as can be gauged from Emperor Ashok’s various inscription in the Deccan.

The arrival of the Portuguese and their constant efforts to convert the local population to Christianity, by force where persuasion failed, created a large number of Native Christians. There is an old Chinese proverb “If you are planning for a year, plant flowers, if for ten years, plant trees. But if you are planning for fifty years, plant men.” The Portuguese planted ‘men’. In Goa, for example, Albuquerque took away hundreds of women when he evacuated Goa temporarily. On returning he got these women married to Portuguese soldiers and others, giving them a dowry and land. Thus, within a generation a large Christian, Indo-Portuguese population had been created. And these people were loyal to the Portuguese and supported the government against the Hindus. It is no secret that not everyone in Goa was happy when it was ‘liberated’ by Indian troops in 1961.

The situation in Bassein was somewhat similar. But here the converts had not completely cut themselves off from their past and Hindu culture and traditions. For example, when I visited a Koli village next to the fort, I saw some huts with a cross on top of the conical roof but with the image of Hanuman placed within the hut.

The Christian population due to the ruthless conversion by the Portuguese, must have been very large. After the Marathas captured Bassein in 1739 there was no significant conversion. On the contrary, many were re-admitted to Hinduism. During the British occupation there was no large-scale conversion. So, the number of Christians must have decreased. Even so, the census figures for 1881 show 76% Hindus, 20% Christians, 4% Muslims. Thus the Christians formed a very large minority.
The main elements in the population were the Kolis, the Bhandaris, the Kunbis, and a sprinkling of upper caste Hindus. The Maratha landlords who settled at Bassein after its occupation by the Marathas brought a number of slaves. Traces of African blood are sometimes seen even today.

The main classes of people were as follows; The Konkanastha and Deshastha Brahmins form a distinct social order. The Palashis got their name from the village Palshe from which they originally came. They were the family priests of the better classes and are believed to have come from the banks of the Godavari river with King Bimb who established his kingdom at Mahim. The common surnames amongst them are Joshi, Phatak, Pandit, Upadhye, Kshirsagar and Trivedi. The Samvedis are a distinct class. They are strong, tall and fair as compared to others. Shenvis are pure and simple husbandmen. There was a strong tradition amongst them to have their daughters married before, or at, the age of ten. There were many Saraswats at Bassein, but not in large numbers. Another important class of people were the Patane or Pathare Prabhus. As a class the Prabhus were honest, frank, loyal and hospitable. The other classes in small numbers were the Bhatias, the Vanis, the Agris, the Aris and the Hetkaris. There were also artisans like Kumbhars (potters), sonars (goldsmiths) and the chambhars (cobblers).

The general condition of the people was not very good. The Christians and Bhandaris of Salsette and Bassein were comparatively better off. A large number of Kunbis have fallen into the debt trap. They have to borrow money for meeting the expenses of the marriage of their children at exorbitant rates. They are just able to pay the interest and the principal remains outstanding from generation to generation. The Christians of Bassein are the most skilful husbandmen of Bassein. Originally Bhandaris, some Brahmins, Chavakalshis, Pachkalshis and others who were converted to Christianity by the Portuguese. The Vadvalas were the chief traders in timber. The curumbias i.e. Kunbis, were agriculturists. The Portuguese referred to them as lavradores - i.e. farmers. The Kolis fished and the Bhandaris tapped toddy, which was highly prized. Generally, the society was patriarchal and sacerdotal. It was a case of the King in the Sate, the father in the family and the priest in the temple. Child marriages was prevalent and the women of the upper classes were confined within the four walls of the house. Maratha peasantry was described as frugal, industrious, mild and neither distrustful nor insincere.

A village had traditionally three areas – the residential area – vastu, the cultivated fields khetra, and the pastures or govhara. The geography of the village reflected age old religious and magical traditions as well as kinship and caste considerations. There was a socio-religious life where rituals connected with birth, puberty, marriage and death were strictly observed. Generally in Bassein area three types of villages were found; clearly defined area bounded by fields (bhuigaon), the Giriz where the houses were strung length wise along a road and the panju where there is no central street but only footpaths connecting one group of huts to the next. In Bassein the focal point of community life has always been the church, the temple or the village well.

Language
During the Portuguese period the official language was Portuguese and Latin. The common people, however, spoke many dialects such as wadval. The Samvedi Brahmins use kado. The Koli dialect is, of course, very popular and used by the Kolis and Bhandaris. All, however, have a large Marathi base with many words from Gujarati, and Portuguese having been assimilated. English has become common only lately. It is to be noted that even amongst the Christians the language used for church services, marriage vows, baptism and other rituals is Marathi.

Some of the common phrases are given at Appendix ‘A’ to illustrate the mix of dialects and languages and construction of sentences.

Trade

Besides the military importance of Bassein, its extensive trade and commerce also attracted the attention of the Portuguese. The revenue from the area was considerable and all the three powers – Portuguese, the English and the Marathas – coveted it. Some aspects of the trade and commerce are given below.

Crown Monopoly

It should be noted that trade was directly administered by the Crown. Estrada ad India remained a royal enterprise almost throughout the Portuguese rule. This control was exercised through the local Portuguese nobles and landlords. Their interest in India was so great that they looked upon this region as their Fatherland and thought no more about Portugal.  

Agricultural Products

Bassein and its surrounding areas were famous for large plantations. The main produce was husked rice, molasses coconuts and plantains, the last named being famous for its quality and exported in large quantities. See Photograph Number 5. The Portuguese levied taxes on these products as well as on sugarcane, areca nut, betel leaves, cotton, oil seeds, black ink, vegetables of all sorts, flowers and several varieties of timber.

An important feature of this period was that the Portuguese farmed out the lands to its nobles. In fact, the concentration of nobility in Bassein grew to such an extent that the city of Bassein, especially within the fort, was given the title Dom Bacaim. In 1539 land was farmed out to the highest bidder. Thus, the collection and distribution of land revenue and land produce was in private hands. This also meant that the State lost out on
revenue and it was brought to the notice of the King of Portugal by the Controller of Finance, Simao Botelho. A few Indian names figure in the list of revenue farmers.  

**Common Items of Production**

Arrack was produced freely. Oil was extracted from oil seeds and possibly from coconuts. A number of people were employed in making ink and paints. Fishing was very wide spread and was dominated by the Kolis.

**Ship Building**

Bassein area was noted for its timber and ship building industry. Bassein teak was found to be far superior to any timber, pine and oak, used in Europe. The Portuguese built a number of ships at Bassein. Country craft were built at Agashi. The ships being built were mostly Mhangiri, Phatemars, Hodis, Machwas, Padavs and Batelas. These were from 50 to 70 tuns. Sailors were not paid monthly wages but after each voyage, after reserving the owners’ share, the balance was distributed amongst the crew. The captain received a double share. Some allowance for liquor and tobacco was also sometimes given. Many ships were built for the British. The ship building industry, however, declined when the Wadias started their famous ship building docks at Bombay. Moreover, although the Portuguese built ships were stronger, they were not cheaper. This was because the Portuguese officials supplemented their income by sale of local timber at exorbitant rates and hence the total cost of the ship was much greater. Later the Portuguese got their ships built in Brazil. Shivaji ordered his first twenty ships from Agashi shipyard.

The author saw a fairly large boat being built on the beach. A peculiar feature noticed was that there were no structural or engineering drawings. See Photograph Number 23.

**Sugar Making**

The main producers were the Pachkalshis. The production season was from February to June. The sugarcane was harvested, their roots cut off and the rest was cut into small pieces. The sugarcane was then pressed between rollers to extract the juice. The huge rollers were driven by bullocks. The juice was then boiled and refined. When the boiled juice failed to become hard enough to make sugar, and remained as a thick fluid, it was extracted as *Kakavi*.
Some idea of the cost of production can be had by noting the selling price of sugar which was Rs. 30 to Rs. 40 per handi of about 20 man. Kakavi was sold for Rs. 15 to 20 per khandi.

**Cotton Weaving**

Cloth with a checked design was produced at Thana and Sopara and was known for its quality far and wide. There were about 80 looms at each of the two main places. The weavers were Muslims or Hindu converts.

**Salt Pans**

An important source of income was salt, extracted in the districts of Bassein. Extensive salt pans exist even today. There were extensive salt pans near the present Bhayandar RS on the south bank of the Bassein Creek. Approximately 11,374 pans covered an area of 1439 acres. The main season was from January to May. See Photographs Numbers 25 and 26.

**Wood Carving**

During the Maratha period – 1740 to 1818 the wood carvers of Bassein area produced exquisite pieces. The two main items produced were the devarah inside which the deities were ceremoniously installed. The other item was kalamdan or penholder. The finished product was polished by fish scales.

**Paper Making**

Sugarcane refuse, plantain stems, bamboos and wild grasses were used as raw material for producing paper.

**General Impact**

It will thus be seen that Bassein area had considerable trade. The revenue from various trading and agricultural activities was considerable and the Portuguese, the Marathas as well as the English at Bombay were attracted to his area as a source of income, in addition to its strategic value.
Portuguese Religious Policy

This is covered in Appendix ‘C’. 