CHAPTER III
EARLY HISTORY OF BASSEIN AREA

Before dealing with the history of Bassein in the 16th to 19th centuries, it was thought advisable to narrate the early history of Bassein Area so as to provide a proper background or perspective to what is to follow.

The earliest known reference in history is of the 3rd century BC. On a basalt rock in Sopara are inscribed a few lines of an edict of Ashoka. It is known that even at that time it had extensive trade links with the Arab nations and with the West, as far as Rome. It is also believed that Genesis mentions trade links between the Arabs and the Western Coast of India. A passage in the Mahabharata records that Arjuna stopped at Shurparak, i.e. modern Sopara. Sopara has been mentioned as Sophir by Soloman and is also mentioned by Ptolemy and in the Periplus. Another inscription of Ashoka speaks of the people as Maharaththi (male) and Maharaththanis (female) workers who helped build the monuments. The stupa at Sopara, described in Appendix ‘B’ was very diligently discovered and explored by Pandit Bhagwanlal Indraj.

Upper Konkan, i.e., north of Bombay was known as Apparanta and was under the control of the Shatkarnis. They were also known as Satavahanas. Their inscription at Nana Pass gives the date of their occupation of the area as BC 100. Till the discovery of the trade winds by Hippalus in 47 AD ships used to sail along the coast from the Persian Gulf to the west coast of India.

For some time the Satkarnis were driven out by foreigners - the Sythianes, their greatest ruler being Nahapana. From now on they married Hindu women, gave up their foreign names and adopted Hindu customs and rituals. The Satkarni rule was restored by the great Shatkarni Gautamiputra around 124 AD. The Satkarnis have left behind great heritage sites like the caves at Kanheri (in Salsette), Nashik, Nana Ghat, Bhedsa, Bhaja and the stupa at Sopara.

The next important dynasty was that of the Pallavas. In course of time they became Hindus and many of their tribe were later recognised as Marathas. The Persian contacts in India included sending embassies to Indian kings and marrying Hindu princesses. Some scholars believe that there is an element of Persian blood in the Marathas and Konknastha Brahmins.

The Pallavas were followed by the Rashtrakutas and a number of plates and coins found in the region testify to their rule. The Mauryas may have ruled over Konkan for some time but the next great dynasty was that of the Chalukyas who came into prominence with King Kirtivarman and his grand son, Pulakesi. Trade with the Persians
and Arabs was flourishing. Some chiefs were driven out from their original home and appear to have settled down at Sanjan in about 574 AD.

The next to rise were the Silaharas who ruled over north Konkan from about 81 AD to 1200 AD. Who the Silaharas were has not been determined with certainty. Even the name has been spelt, and pronounced, differently – Shailahara, Shilara and Silara. It is believed that Shailahara is a Sanskritised version of a common Marathi name Selar or Shelar. The Shilaharas, however, owed allegiance to the Rashtrakutas till the end of the 10th century AD when they became fully independent. The various inscriptions of that period found in Thana district are in Sanskrit. However, in one inscription the language is Prakrit, the mother of the modern Marathi.

Towards the end of the 13th century the area was under the immediate control of the viceroy of the Deogiri Yadavas. Their inscription has been found at Bassein. Bhim Raja, said to be the son of Ram Dev Raja of Deogiri, ruled from Mahim. By the end of the 14th century the Musalmans had made their appearance in the Deccan. Ala ud-din Khalji had conquered and subjugated Deogiri dynasty in 1298 – 1318 AD. It is a curious fact of history that till the arrival of Ala-ud-din Khalji, the Yadavas had not seen a Muslim or heard of their rule at Delhi. His general, Alap Khan came along the coast up to Sanjan which was captured after a heroic defence by the local Parsi population. But many Yadava chieftains refused to submit and had to be put down by brute force. Emperor Mubarak I (1317 – 1321) occupied Mahim and the island of Salsette. Musalman rule continued during the 14th and 15th centuries. Bassein, however, did not gain much by way of trade as it was channelled through Cambay. The fact that the Turks from Delhi had conquered the coastal areas is corroborated by the accounts of two friars, Jordanus and Odericus who were in Thana between 1320 and 1324. They had destroyed many temples and some churches. Thana was governed by a military officer or malik and by a religious officer, or kazi. Four friars were killed when the malik was instigated by the kazi. For this act of cruelty he was recalled by the Emperor and put cruelly to death.

By 1400 AD a separate Mussalman dynasty had been established in Gujarat and they held the coast up to Mahim. At this time the Bahaman Sultans had established themselves and one of their generals, Malik-ul-Tijar captured Mahim and Salsette defeating the Gujarati general Kutb Khan. This brought the wrath of Sultan Ahmad Shah of Gujarat who recaptured the area and forced the Bahaman general to withdraw. He had come with a fleet of seventeen ships and a strong land force. He had with him his son, Zafar Khan and an able general, Malik Iftikar Khan.

There were attempts by Deccan kings to capture Baglan and other areas and the coastal strip but all attempts failed. In 1499, during Sultan Mahamud Bageda’s time Gujarat controlled all the area-Daman, Bassein and Bombay. The ports mentioned are Bassein, Agashi, Danda near Kelve Mahim, Bhiwandi, Kalyan, Bombay and Panvel. About 1485, one Bahaman general Bahadur Khan Gilani took some parts of north Konkan and harassed Gujarat harbours. Bageda now sought the
aid of Adil Khan and Ahmad Nizam Shah. Both were aspiring to become independent and readily agreed to help Bageda. In 1493 Bahadur was attacked and killed. The coastal forts and ports were restored to Gujarat. This was the position at the beginning of the 16th century.