CHAPTER IV

BASSEIN AREA IN THE 16TH CENTURY

In the beginning of the 16th century the Portuguese had made their presence felt all along the western coast of India. While relations with Bijapur and Ahmadnagar were more or less friendly. There were only three conflicts with Ahmadnagar, all in self-defence. The relations with Gujarat were strained. Mahamud Bageda of Gujarat was “too staunch a Mussalman to be on friendly terms with a Christian power.” He was also a competent seafarer and was not prepared to let the control of the coastal waters go to the Portuguese. Timber from Bassein was sent to Mecca to help the Egyptians build ships. In 1507 an Egyptian fleet with twelve ships and 6000 men came to Cambay. Mahamud sent his own ships to join them and the combined fleet defeated the Portuguese in a naval battle off Chaul in 1507.

The Portuguese now tried to incite the local Hindu chiefs to rise against their Muslim overlords. In 1509 a Portuguese fleet anchored in Bombay harbour for the first time and took supplies from Mahim. In 1510 Dom Joao de Monoy entered Bandra and defeated the local chief. The first Portuguese factory was built at Chaul in 1516 and fortified later. The permission to build a fort at Chaul was given by Burhan Nizamshah when the Portuguese promised that they would permit import of horses for the Sultan. This enabled the Portuguese fleet to sail up to Bombay without hindrance. Bombay had plenty of food and the Portuguese called it Bon vida or the Island of Good Life. A naval skirmish took place in the Bombay harbour when the Portuguese under Smpayo defeated a Cambay fleet. Another Portuguese force under Dom Joao de Monoy entered the Bandra creek and defeated the commandant of Mahim fort.

The first Portuguese factory at Bassein was established in 1526. At this time there was a small fortification at Bassein which was under the control of Gujarat. A clash took place and the Portuguese commander, Syleveira, defeated Alishah and burnt the city and fortifications. It is said that this exploit so alarmed the Thana chief that he agreed to become a tributary of the Portuguese. In 1531 Nuno da Cunha sailed north in a large fleet to capture Diu but was not successful. He returned to Goa but left behind Antonio de Saldhana with sixty ships. Antonio sailed along the coast and attacked and burnt Tarapur, Kelve Mahim, Agashi and Bassein. In 1529 Lopo Vaz Santpio fought a great naval battle and defeated the Gujarat admiral Ali Shah. When the Portuguese built a factory at Bassein, Bahadur Shah was alarmed and instructed Malik Tujar, the Governor at Diu to fortify Bassein. A strong fort was built and garrisoned by about 15000 men. In 1532, this fort was attacked by Nuno da Cunha and captured and the garrison slaughtered. Nuno had with him 150 ships with 3000 Portuguese and 200 Kanarese soldiers. He landed a little north of the fort and. Diogo de Sylveira and Manuel do Macedo scaled the walls. Thus victory was ensured. A large stock of provisions and other stores fell into Portuguese hands. The coastal towns between Bassein and Tarapur were burnt once again. This brought Bandra and Thana under vassalage. In 1531 Nuno da Cunha collected a big fleet and sailed for Diu. On the way he attacked and looted Daman. Nuno could not capture
Diu on this occasion and returned to Goa, leaving Antonio de Saldhana with sixty ships. At this time Daman, Bassein and Bombay were included within Gujarat limits. The ports which yielded revenue to the Gujarat Sultan at this time were Agashi, Danda (near Kelve-Mahim), Sorab (Sopara), Bassein, Bhiwandi and Kalyan.

At this time Sultan Bahadur Shah of Gujarat was under the threat of an attack by Emperor Humayun. Da Cunha started negotiations with Humayun and captured Daman. This led Bahadur Shah to negotiate and buy off the Portuguese. A treaty was signed in 1533 whereby Bassein and its dependencies were ceded to the Portuguese. It was stipulated that ships from Cambay en route to the Red Sea would have to touch Bassein, pay a toll tax and obtain Portuguese passes or cartaz. It was also stipulated that Gujarat would not build any warships and that they would not enter into any alliance with the Turks.

A fort was constructed at Bassein in 1535 which was enlarged and strengthened from time to time. In 1536 the corner stone of the citadel was laid by Antonio Galvao who had earlier repulsed a Mughal attack. A mosque was pulled down and in its place the Cathedral of St. Joseph was built. Nuno Da Cunha, the Portuguese governor appointed his brother-in-law, Gracia D’Sa as the first Captain of the fort. The Portuguese entered Bassein with bands playing and with villagers lining the road with roots and plants in their hands. Nuno threw a banquet with great pomp where fifty barrels of wine were consumed. Bassein, being the focal point of the Thana coast, was made a separate division and placed under the General of the North. It became an emporium of trade and military strength.

In 1535 Bahadur Shah, humiliated by Humayun, again sought Portuguese aid. In return he had to permit them to build a strong fort at Diu. He tried to wrest control by sending a large fleet but Diu was heroically defended and the expedition failed. In 1540 Sultan Burhan Nizam Shah of Ahmadnagar captured the Gujarat forts of Karnala and Sankshi. Portuguese help was again sought and further concessions made. The Portuguese recaptured these forts but instead of handing them over to Sultan Bahadur Shah, gave them back to Ahmadnagar. However, the Portuguese did help Bahadur Shah to regain his kingdom and even repulsed a Mughal attack on Bassein. It is believed that the Mughal treaty with the Portuguese was as a result of diplomacy of a Portuguese lady, then an inmate of the Mughal harem.

In 1546 war once again broke out between Gujarat and the Portuguese. When attacked, Diu stood firm against Gujarat and Mahamud Shah, now the Sultan of Gujarat signed another treaty. The Portuguese took possession of Asheri and Manor. By 1560 the entire coast from rivers Vaitarna to Daman Ganga was ceded to the Portuguese by Changiz Khan, a great noble of Gujarat. The Portuguese heavily fortified Bassein and from 1590 to the end of the century numerous structures and fortifications were built. Ultimately Bassein would have six churches, four convents, a Jesuit college, a Franciscan college and a fully furnished Jesuit library with books on...
theology, history, philosophy and ethics. A detailed description of the fort and its strategic importance is given in Chapter IX and X.

Ship building started in earnest in the 16th century and evolved into a major industry in the 17th century. Many large ships were built at Agashi and at Papady in Bassein. Bassein was also famous for importing horses from Arabia.

In 1583 Emperor Akbar, after overrunning Gujarat had designs upon Bassein and Daman but was dissuaded by some skilful negotiation. A treaty of friendship was signed and these areas remained with the Portuguese. Once well settled the Portuguese turned their attention to efficient administration and villages were assigned to their nobles. Daman had four districts- Sanjan, Dahanu, Tarapur and Mahim. Bassein had seven districts, Asheri, Manor, Bassein proper, (at times called Saivan), Salsette, Bombay, Belapur and Karanja. Daman was important as it commanded the northern approaches to Bassein.

Francis Xavier landed at Goa in 1542 and visited Bassein in 1544, 1548 and 1552. The Jesuits started their work at Bassein in 1548. The first church at Bassein, within the fort, was built in 1558. An inscription on the walls of the citadel records that it was built by Captain Gacruia de Sa in 1576. This is the earliest inscription within the fort.

Bassein was attacked by Sambhaji’s forces in 1688, but like his attack on Goa, the enterprise had to be given up when success had been nearly achieved. Both Bassein and Agashi were attacked by Nizamshahi forces but without much success.

Abaji Sondev captured, for a brief period, both Kalyan and Bhiwandi. The Portuguese complained to the emperor Jahangir but ultimately had to buy off the Marathas.

Thus, by the end of the 16th century the Portuguese had command over the Arabian Sea, supported by a chain of forts all along its rim as shown in Map 13. On the Indian coast they had Diu, Daman, Bassein, Bombay and Chaul. However two new powers had come upon the scene, the Dutch and the British. The Dutch who were called “the scourge of Portuguese trade” appeared in the Indian Ocean in 1597. The Portuguese power did not lose any of their places for some considerable more time, but nonetheless their power had started declining by the end of the 16th century. This is described in the next chapter.