

CHAPTER - I

BASSEIN ON THE EVE OF THE PORTUGUESE CONQUEST.

It is said that at the instigation of one of the ministers named Madhava, the Turks of north India decided to invade Gujarat. A contemporary Jain author, Jinaprabha Suri, confirms that instigated by Madhava, the Turkish invaders came to Gujarat.¹ Alla-ud-din Khilji accepted the offer of Madhava and decided to send an army into Gujarat. The sultan was attracted towards this southern state because of the wealth of this sea-kingdom². He sent two of his most trusted agents, his brother, Ulugh Khan and Nasarat Khan to invade Gujarat. The Turkish army reached Gujarat and captured Patan and Anhilwara - Patan. The Gujarat king, Raja Karna, shocked by the surprise attack, abandoned the capital. In this way Gujarat fell into the hands of Muslims. Alla-ud-din Khilji appointed his brother-in-law Alpkan as Governor of Gujarat. He is considered the founder of Muslim rule in Gujarat³.

The Governor of Gujarat outwardly acknowledged the sovereignty of the Delhi Sultanate for some time, but in 1407 he declared himself the sovereign ruler of Gujarat and ascended the throne as Sultan Muzaffar Shah. He was succeeded by his grandson, Prince Ahmad, in 1411 who took the title as Ahmed Shah and ruled over Gujarat till 1441. It was under his reign that North Konkan, including Bassein, came under the Gujarat Sultans⁴, who ruled

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1. Jina Prabha Suri, Vividh Tirtha Kalpa, ed. by Jina Vijaya (Shantiniketan 1934) Part I. p.30.
 2. S.C. Misra, The Rise of Muslim Power in Gujarat, (Delhi, 1982) second Ed. p.61.
 3. Ibid., p. 71.
 4. Ibid., p. 194.

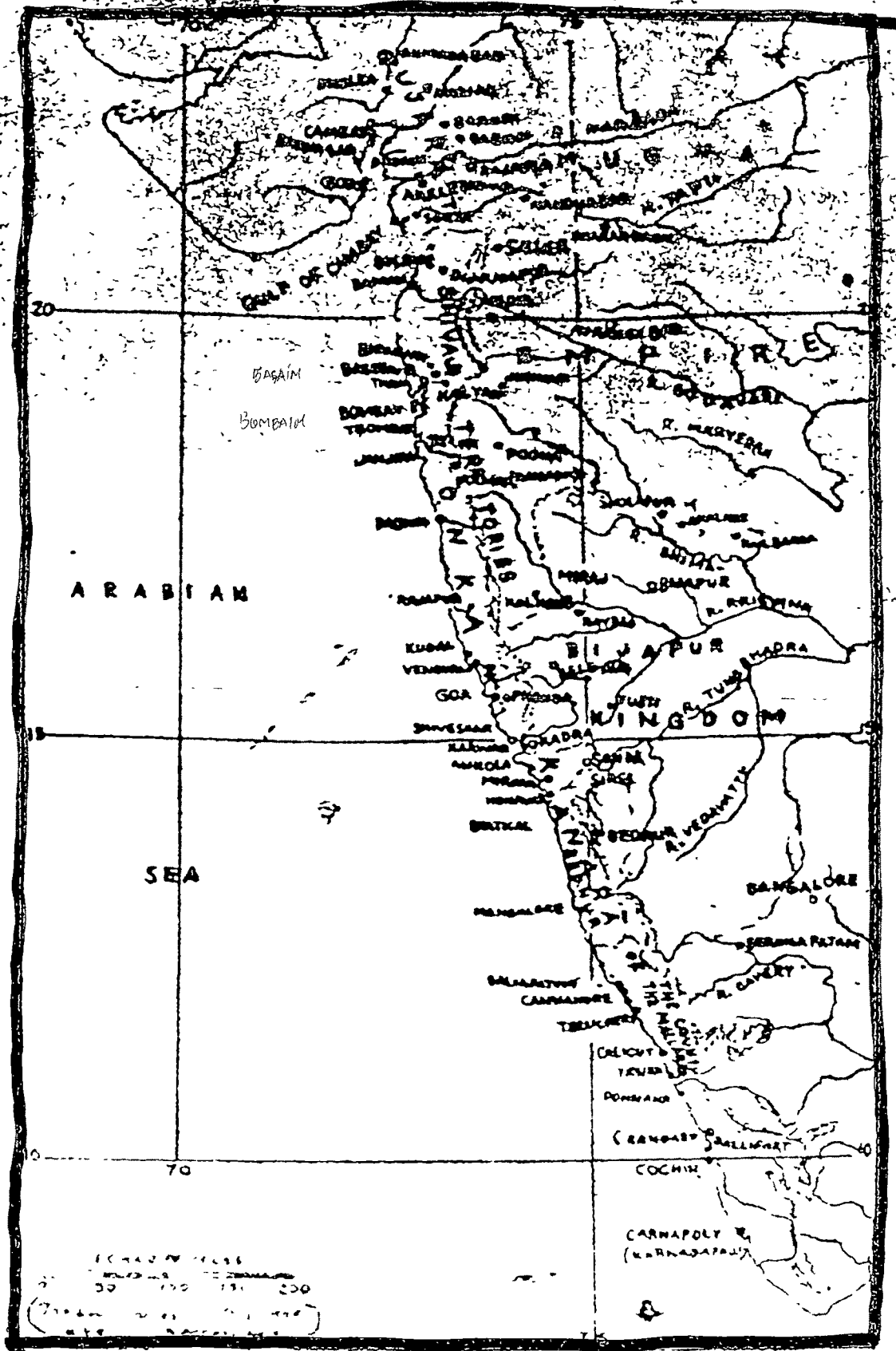


Plate VI. Western India 1877

Western India

over it for more than a century. They named it Basai. Sultan Bahadur Shah of Gujarat became the last muslim ruler of Bassein when he handed over the town to the Portuguese in 1534. At one time Bassein was known as Bahadurpura after him. Even today, older people in Bassein refer to Bassein Proper as Bahadurpura.

The Portuguese ruled Bassein for more than two centuries and named the town Bacaim. The Marathas who captured Bassein from the Portuguese in 1739 named it Bajipur, after the Peshwa Bajirao I⁵. A particular part of Bassein proper is called Bajipur even today. But the Marathas established a new town outside the fort wall, instead of developing the fort-town and this new site became the centre of activity. The British who became the masters of this region after the fall of the Maratha-Raj in 1818 named it Bassein⁶. But in independent India, Bassein has once again reverted to its original name, Vasai.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Very little is known about the ancient history of Bassein and the surrounding areas. But it is an accepted fact that the coastal region of Thane district had trade relations with the lands beyond the Indian Ocean since pre-historic times. There are signs of trade with Egypt, Phoenicia and Babylon from 2000 B.C. to 500 B.C.⁷. In Bassein, there were Persian contacts and settlements from A.D. 250 to A.D. 640 and there were Muslim trade relations and Musalman settlements from Arabia and Persia from A.D. 700 to A.D. 1200⁸.

5. E.P. Coelho, op. cit. p. 1.

6. J.G. da Cunha, op. cit. p. 117.

7. E.P. Coelho, op. cit. p. 2.

8. James Campbell, op. cit. Vol. XIII, Part II, p. 402.

The earliest reference to the ancient history of Bassein is found in the inscription of the Ashoka Pillar. A fragment of this pillar containing a few lines of the eighth edict was discovered in April, 1882 at Sopara in Bassein⁹. The North Konkan was the centre of political activities from 315 B.C. to the end of the 13th century. The important ruling dynasties of India reigned over this part, of which Sopara was the major city. They were the Mauryas (315 B.C. - 192 B.C.), the Chalukyas (A.D. 300-500), the Rashtrakutas (A.D. 767-850) revived Chalukyas (A.D. 970-1182), and the Yadvas of Deogiri from A.D. 1182-1294. The Konkan, soon after the defeat of Ramadeva Raja of Deogiri by Alla-ud-din Khilji in 1294, was taken over by Bhim Raja who was the son of Ramdeva Raja¹⁰. His chief received subordinate governments in Kelve and Bassein etc..¹¹

Bassein under the Gujarat Sultanate

In 1428, when Bassein and the surrounding areas including Mahim,¹² were under the Gujarat Sultanate, Kutubkhan, the Governor of Mahim was on his deathbed. Sultan Ahmad Shah Bahamany considered

9. A. Vaeth. The Ancient Ports of Northern Konkan, (Bombay, 1912) p. 5.

10. James Campbell, op. cit., Vol XIII, Part II, pp. 409-417.
C.V. Vaidhya, History of Medieval Hindu India (Poona, 1926), Vol. III., p. 31.

R.G. Bhandarkar, Early History of Deccan, (Bombay, 1884). P.87

11. A.K. Nairne, History of the Konkan, (Bombay, 1875). p.22.

12. Mahim - There are two places in Maharashtra having the same name as Mahim. One of them is Mahim in Greater Bombay near Bandra and other is in the Northwestern Maharashtra in Palghar taluka of Thane district, which is generally known as Kelve-Mahim. The students of Indo-Portuguese history are always confused because both the places were under the Portuguese control for a long time. The island referred here is

(Contd...)

a favourable opportunity to obtain possession of Mahim, which he conquered without any trouble. The Sultan of Gujarat (Ahmad Shah) immediately deputed his youngest son, Zafar Khan, with a large force commanded by Mullik Iftikar Khan, to retake Mahim. An order was issued to the Governor of Diu and Cambay to give all possible help to assist Iftikar Khan. A fleet of seventeen ships was despatched towards Mahim. Similarly a separate army was sent by land to Thane which had also fallen into the hands of Deccanis.¹³

When Iftikar Khan arrived on the scene, he decided to attack Thane. The fleet of the Gujarat Sultan was off the port of Thane and all communication by sea and land was cut off by the Gujarat army. The Deccani officer who was commanding the garrison made two or three gallant sallies towards the Gujarat forces, but was always repulsed. He sustained great losses, and found himself incapable of making any effective defence, as he was completely isolated by the Gujarat army. Ultimately he decided to evacuate Thane and proceed towards Mahim.¹⁴ The fort of Thane was captured the next day. After retaking Thane, Iftikar Khan marched on to retake Mahim which also was liberated from the Deccanis.¹⁵

During the reign of Sultan Mohamad Begda (Begram 1458-1511) an important decision was taken regarding the dominion of the Gujarat Sultanate. He extended the boundaries of the Sultanate in all direction from North to South, that is to say that from

the place in Greater Bombay, which was an island during this period.

13. Feristha, History of Mohamedan Power in India. Ed. by Briggs, (New Delhi, 1981). Vol. IV, p. 17.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

Mandu in the North to the northern bounds of Chaul in South (modern Revandanda in Maharashtra). It was quite impossible to keep effective control over these distant parts, so he divided his kingdom into five provinces. The province of Thane and Bassein etc., was given under the command of Nizam-ul-mulk¹⁶ whom the Portuguese called Nizamuluco.

It was Mohamed Begda who first came into conflict with the Portuguese because at this time the Portuguese were eager to establish control over the straits of Camby. He joined the Sultan of Turkey in an attempt to turn the Portuguese who had already established their foothold at Cochin, out of Indian water. This was a great challenge to the Muslim rulers of Gujarat as the Portuguese were threatening to monopolise the spice trade, which had been in the hands of the Muslim traders. The Portuguese were also trying to control the important sea-ports in Western India like Camby, Chaul, etc..

The Egyptian fleet under the command of Amir Hussain, Governor of Jedha and the Gujarat army under the command Malik Iyaz¹⁷ defeated the Portuguese naval squadron in 1508 near Chaul. Dom

16. Feristha, op.cit., p. 37.

17. Malik Iyaz was by birth a Russian, who was made a captive by the Turks and taken to Constantinople. The Turks sold him to the Sultan Muhamad Shah (1442-1451) of Gujarat. The Sultan was impressed by his bravery and granted him freedom. Being wise and prudent in the Court, he became one of the most dominating officers of the Sultan's court. Later on he was appointed as the Governor of Diu (Ref. Barros II-I pp. 210if). According to Feristha, he died in 1521. (Ref. Feristha op.cit. Vol. IV. p. 57) but in fact he died in 1523 as confirmed by Barros and others.

**ENVIRONS OF
BASSEIN.**

Scale $\frac{1}{4}$ " = 1 mile

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Bassein Creek

Godabunder

Kenherycave

Thana

Tubli Lake

Malad

Boruli

Mt. Powser

Bhayner

Fort

Bassein Road

Scale $\frac{1}{4}$ " = 1 mile



2. History

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de Almeida, the son of the first Portuguese viceroy of Goa, Francisco de Almeida, was in command. He lost his life in this skirmish.

The Portuguese Governor, Francisco de Almeida, decided to avenge the death of his son by launching a fierce attack on the combined Muslim army. On his way to Diu, he captured a Mohammedan ship with twenty four Muslims belonging to Gujarat.¹⁸ He decided to destroy some parts of Bassein at this time. When the Portuguese arrived on the coast of Bassein, most of the people in the town and the surrounding areas fled to the mainland.¹⁹ Then followed a series of attacks on Bassein by the Portuguese commanders, leading towards its capture by Nuno da Cunha in 1533 and resulting in its cession to the Portuguese in 1534, which will be dealt with later on.

Composition of Society

The earlier inhabitants of Bassein were fishermen (Kolis), the Mangelas and the Aagris. The Aagris were farmers, fishermen and salt-pan workers.²⁰ The fisherman usually lived on the sea-shores and fishing was their only livelihood. They were separated in North and South Bassein. The majority of them resided in South Bassein in villages called Pachu Bunder, Killa Bunder etc. During the peak period, i.e. from October to May, they lived by the sea but shifted to the interior during the rainy season.

The Kolis who lived in North Bassein near Agashi did not live exactly as Agashi but near Arnala island or Ilha das vacas, as the Portuguese called it. Some of them lived on the island

18. Julio Gonsalves, op.cit. p. 68.

19. OP, (BP), Vol. 7,8,9, op. cit., p. 97.

20. E.P. Coelho, op.cit., p. 16.

itself, but most of them resided in the adjoining village of Arnala.

The Aagris constituted the majority of the inhabitants and lived in the interior part of Bassein. They were involved mainly in agriculture though they were also engaged in fishing and working the saltpans. Though they lived in the interior part of Bassein there were many creeks and artificial ponds where they fished. As Bassein was an island, there were ample opportunities for fishing throughout the year.

The Mangelas were untouchables also known as Shudras, who lived on the outskirts of the villages. They were despised by the other communities and they ate the meat of dead animals. They were given food to eat in common but avoided touching the givers. Their work was to clean the houses and streets. They were called Farzes ²¹(sic). They were also employed as executioners.²²

The largest group that settled in the northern part of Bassein during the early medieval period were the Samvedi Brahmins. They had their settlements on the Vaitarna and in and around Sopara. Even today they occupy the same region but some of them were converted to Christianity during the Portuguese period. They were the immigrants by sea who probably came from the northern part of Gujarat and Sind,²³ perhaps to escape persecution at the hands of their Muslim rulers.

Another section of the Brahmin community called Palshe

21. Frazes, Garcia da Orta was confused with the word Asprushya in Marathi which means untouchable.

22. Garcia da Orta, Markham ed., Vol. II, p. 342.

23. James Campbell, op.cit., Vol. XIII. Part I, pp. 60-61.

Brahmins came to Bassein with King Bimb. They practised medicine and astrology besides performing the religious ceremonies and rites of their sects.²⁴ In addition to these two Brahmin communities, there was another Brahmin community called Baniyas who were involved in the commercial activities. The Baniya community participated actively in trade and commerce. They stayed with the Muslims with whom they carried on their trade.²⁵ They were great usurers, falsifiers of weights and measures and great liars.²⁶

The other communities which came to Bassein during the early medieval period were the Somavanshi Kshatriyas and the Sheshavanshi Kshatriyas. Bimb, in 13th century brought twenty-seven families of Somavanshi Kshatriyas and nine of Seshavanshi Kshatriyas from Champaner.²⁷

The Somavanshi Kshatriyas formed two sub-divisions - the Panchkalashi and the Wadvals. These distinct names have been derived from their social customs and professional skill. The former (Panchkalshis) obtained this name because of the five Kalashas²⁸ used by them at the time of wedding ceremony in the community, while the latter (Wadwals) got this name because of their profession as Wadiwale i.e., the people looking after Wadis²⁹ or vegetable

24. E.P. Coelho, op.cit. p. 17.

25. Donald F. Lach, Asia in the making of Europe, (London, 1971) 2nd Ed. Vol. I., p. 400.

26. Duarte Barbosa, op. cit., Vol. I. p. 112.

27. V.K. Rajwade, op. cit. P. 33.


28. Five Kalashas - The Kalash meaning the bronze pot generally used for religious festivals in Hindu Community. Here meaning the five bronze pots.

29. Wadi- Wadi generally means village having vegetable gardens. The people used to live in these villages (Wadis) cultivating different types of vegetables and fruits around their houses. Even today the people of Bassein live in the same manner and it is a surprising fact that most of the people

gardens.

The Sheshvanshi Kshatriyas are known as Bhandaris derived from the word Madhara, meaning dealers in intoxicating drinks. Though the main profession of this community was producing toddy from palm trees, they sometimes worked as agricultural labourers especially during the rainy season. At present, most of the people of this community have given up their ancestral profession and are employed in offices and factories in Bombay. The Hindus who tilled and sowed the lands for rice and other crops, were generally known as Kunbis.³⁰

There was a Muslim community at Bassein as well when it was under the Muslim control for more than a hundred years. A large Muslim community had settled in this region even before it came under the control of the Muslim rulers. It was due to the commercial involvement of this community that they had come and settled on the coastal lines. They had commercial contacts through their Arab counterparts who dominated trade and commerce for along time before the arrival of the Portuguese.³¹ Though the Hindus were in the majority in the interior and on the coast, the Muslims dominated commercial activities.³²

In addition to these two major communities, namely the Hindus and the Muslims, there were Jains, Parsees and Christians who resided in Bassein before the  Portuguese period. Sometimes

staying in these wadis who embraced christianity during the Portuguese rule, did not change the names of their Wadis. So we come across the Christian villages having the Brahmin names like Brahman Bhat, Gaiwadi etc. meaning the village of Brahmin or the village of cow, respectively.

30. Henry Yule, Cathay and the way Thither, (London, 1913).p.114.

31. Garcia da Orta, op.cit. p. 342.

32. Castanheda, op.cit. p. 314.

the travellers have confused the words Jains and Baniyas. The Jains were generally involved in commercial activities. So sometimes they are called Baniyas as the Europeans called anyone involved in mercantile enterprise, a Baniya. However, the Jains were not Baniyas. They believed in non-violence. They were so particular about it that the local people used to catch birds and demand money from the Jains to set them free, under the pretext, that the birds were caught for food.³³

The Parsees who stayed in Bassein were confused with the Jews. Garcia da Orta clarifies this point saying that they were not Jews but the Parsees. They looked towards the East while praying. They did not circumcise and the eating of pork and beef were forbidden to them. They came from Persia originally. They had many superstitions. Garcia da Orta provides information about the funeral of the Parsees. At the time of death they used to take the corpse out from a door other than that which was generally used.³⁴ They had sepulches, where the corpses were brought and kept until they decomposed and dissolved.³⁵

Before we speak about the Christian inhabitants of Bassein during the pre-Portuguese period, it will be worthwhile to examine the existence of Christianity in this part during the period, which at one time was considered a controversial issue.

33. Duarte Barbosa, op.cit., Vol.I. p.112.

34. Garcia da Orta, op.cit., p.343.

35. Perumalil, C.R. "The apostle of Kalyan" Journal of Indian History, Vol.XXII, (Madras, 1943), pp.71-72.

Eusebius (A.D. 265-340) and Jerome³⁶ (A.D. 342-420) have testified the Indian apostolate of St. Bartholomew in their assertion. Eusebius is called the father of church history and is an authority on Biblical Geography. He not only knew the geography of India but was acquainted with the Brahmins of India and their philosophy. In the same way Jerome gives minute details of Indian culture and civilisation.³⁷

According to modern researchers, Christianity existed in Bassein even¹ before the arrival of the Portuguese.³⁸ The gospel of Christ was first preached in North Konkan by St. Bartholomew, one of the twelve apostles of Christ.³⁹ There are several references to the existence of Christianity in Thane, Kalyan and Bassein. We have the indisputable evidence of Kosmos Indicopleustes having seen in Kalyan, a flourishing Christian community in the 6th century,⁴⁰ Ordoric, an Italian traveller saw many Nestorian Christians in Thana in the year 1321.⁴¹ Again Jordanus, in 1322 found many Nestorian Christians at Sopara, one of the towns of Bassein.⁴² He lived there for two years during which he had seen a chapel dedicated to St. Thomas, one of the apostles of Jesus Christ. He had come here from Thane with four dead bodies of his colleagues who

36. Eusebius and Jerome are two ancient ecclesiastical writers, respected for their erudition and scholarship.

37. Romain Rolland, The life of Vivekananda (Almore, 1947) p.388. Elsie Baptista, op.cit., p.5.

38. J.B. Tavernier, Travels of Jean Baptiste Tavernier, translated by V. Ball and ed. by W. Crooks, (Oxford, 1925) Vol. II. p.279.

39. Elsie Baptista, op.cit. p. 6-7.

40. Kosmos Indicopleustes, Christian Topography, (London, 1913). p.3.

41. Henry Yule, Cathay and the Way Thither, op.cit., p.227.

42. Friar Jordanus, Mirabilia Descripta, translated and edited by Henry Yule (Hypsart, 1946). p. 6.

were killed by the Muslim Governor of Thana. He made a few converts during his stay.⁴³

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles referred to this Christian community of Bassein as the Christians of St. Thomas and St. Bartholomew.⁴⁴ It is stated that during the reign of the Silhara king who ruled over northern Konkan during the pre-Portuguese period, there existed many mosques, churches, a synagogue and fine temples, which not only underlines the fact of the existence of Christianity and Christians but also of the presence of Muslims, Jews and Parsees in the regions. When the mohammedans became the masters of this part during the beginning of the fifteenth century (1411), an infinite number of temples, churches were destroyed. All these facts show that there were Christians in Bassein even before the arrival of the Portuguese in these parts.⁴⁵

Components of the Society:

All the above mentioned groups made up the different components of the village community. They were divided into landlords, farmers, craftsmen, artisans, merchants, financiers and bankers. They depended on each other and were essential for the proper functioning of the village society.

The landlords who had received their properties directly from the rulers, were called Watandārs or the Inamdārs. There were two kinds of watandāri or landlordship. Those landlords

43. James Campbell, Vol. XIV Thana, op.cit., p.322.

44. B. Thorpe, The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, Vol. 2, (London, 1961) p.66.

45. R.D. D'Silva, Proceedings, op.cit., p.343.

who had hereditary rights did not pay any kind of revenue to the king. The king had no right to withdraw this kind of watan. It was known as Dharādattabhog.⁴⁶

But the Watan known as Adhikārbhog, was under the direct control of the king. In the Watans of this kind, the watandārs controlled the lands so long as he enjoyed the friendship of the king. The latter had every right to withdraw this kind of watan from any particular watandar in whom he has lost confidence.⁴⁷

These landlords enjoyed supreme authority in their villages and sometimes behaved like independent kings. They leased their land to other leaseholders and collected various kinds of taxes. Sometimes they became dictators and har-assed the people who could not ask the king to redress their grievances as he had practically no control over the landlords particularly those with hereditary rights.

Besides the landlords, the village community was comprised mainly of two groups of citizens who were responsible for the village production. The first was called Krishivalas or the farmers and second Kārros or artisans like carpenters, black-smiths, etc.⁴⁸ The Krishivals were the primary producers of the agricultural goods. They and their families worked in the fields of the landlords and were paid in kind. They obtained a weekly or monthly quota of grain from the landlord for which they toiled throughout their lives. At the time of a wedding, they borrowed money from the landlord and worked for the rest of their lives in his field to repay it.

46. V.K. Rajwade, op.cit., p.48.

47. V.K. Rajwade, op.cit., p.48.

48. Ibid.

The Kārros or artisans formed an essential part of the village community. They produced the things of day-to-day use and supplied them to the farmers and other villagers. Both these sections of society were dependent on each other for daily needs. The farmer could not survive with the articles provided by the artisans and the artisans lived only on their produce. The farmers paid the artisans in kind, especially with the grain they grew in their fields. This grain was called Balutā and the method of payment was known as the Balutedāri system.⁴⁹ The state had no control over Balutedāri as it had come into existence with the emergence of the Grāmsastha. In the Gramsastha, all the producers of the village like farmers, carpenters, blacksmiths, barbers, washermen etc. were known as Vruttivantas. The village Panchāyat comprised all Vruttivantas.

The next components of society was the merchant class. Most of them residing in Bassein during this period were either Hindus, Jains or Muslims, etc. originally from outside but now settled here. The local muslim merchants were of less importance in the activities of trade and commerce with the partial exception of the Boharis and the Khojās. Most of these foreign Muslim merchants resided in their own houses and so were only inherent being domiciled in such places as Alexandria, Damascus, Persia, Syria and Afghanistan. These merchants were so successful that they were described as having the cream of the trade.⁵⁰ The Baniya merchants

49. V.K. Rajwade, op.cit., p.48

50. Tome Pires, Sum-a Oriental of Tome Pires, Ed. Armando Cortesão (London, 1944) Vol. I. p.41.

of this region were quite wealthy and had orchards, gardens and tanks in their compounds. They lived on a diet of milk, butter, sugar and rice.⁵¹

The last and indispensable component of the village community were the financiers and money lenders. The money lending business was dominated by a particular capitalist class known as Shrof.⁵² These people were apparently few in number but played a pivotal role in the economy both under the Sultanate and in the later period. They issued Hundis which could be used either as letters of credit to distant places or as short-term capital. They financed the production on which the prosperity of a particular business or an area was based.⁵³

Village Administration and Revenue:

The village Pānchāyat was the sole administrative body in the village. It looked after production and distribution, law and justice and other community responsibilities. As far as justice was concerned the decisions of the Pānchāyat were final and there was no appeal over them. Meanwhile, the village Pānchāyat became overburdened with too many responsibilities, when the situation changed after sometime and especially when the village was confronted by a powerful enemy in the time of war or invasion, when help was sought from the king. Thereafter, the villagers started paying a part of their income from this service and this

51. K.M. Munshi and R.C. Muzumdar, History and Culture of Indian People, Vol.VI,(Bombay, 1980),p.656.

52. Shrof. The word shrof is the corruption of an Arabic word 'Saraf' which means a banker. In the local language the word is pronounced as Saraf.

53. Irfan Habib, "The system of Bills of Exchange (Hundis) in the Mughal Empire" Proceedings of 33rd session of Indian

"tax" was called Rajdām or state revenue. In this way, a new kind of village system came into existence in which the king became the sole dominating authority and collected revenue from his subjects.⁵⁴

When King Bimb established his control over this area, he introduced his own system of village administration. According to this new system, a province or mahāl was divided into different groups. The first part of the province was called mokāse in which the villages were given to military commanders for their service to the king. They were to maintain their armies out of the income of these villages. The second part in which the villages were under the direct control of the king was known as Rajbhog.⁵⁵ The Mokāse villages were also known as Khotigoans. These names became very popular during the Muslim rule.

The third group was called Watan or Inām. We have already seen the two kinds of watans. In addition to this watan system the king received the revenue directly from the cultivated and uncultivated land which was divided into state revenue and village revenue. The money which was paid to the state treasury was called Rājbhog and that paid to the village called Urutti.⁵⁶

Society and Culture

As far as society and culture of this region is concerned documentary evidence for the pre-Portuguese period is not

History Congress (Muzaffarpur session, 1972) pp.290-303.
For details refer the Agrarian System of Mughal India,
by the same author, (Bombay, 1963).

54. V.K. Rajwade, op.cit., p.48.

55. Sherwani and Joshi, History of medieval Deccan (Hyderabad, 1972-73) Vol.II., p.545.

56. Rajwade, op.cit., p.48.

available. It is the European travellers who give some idea about the special customs of the region.

Friar Odoric, who visited Thane and Bassein in 1321-22, was surprised to see some strange customs. In his travelogue, he has described a marriage procession in Bassein, where the men wore high caps and rode on horses. The young girls of the locality sang in a row, in front of the couple till they reached the house, when they were both left alone. When they got up in the morning, they went naked again as before.⁵⁷ This seems to be an exaggerated account of the event or the writer must have visited an Adivasi or gypsy village in a distant jungle of this part and away from the civilised world.

The local people in Bassein were idol-worshippers and also worshipped fire, serpents and trees.⁵⁸ Mandeville who was here around 1355 says that the people of this region had diverse laws of worship. They worshipped the sun, some worshipped fire, snakes and trees and some, the first thing they encountered in the morning.⁵⁹ The Brahmins of this place wore a cotton garment (Dhotar) below the waist with nothing above except a cord or the holy thread over their shoulders. Both men and women married only once in a life-time.⁶⁰ Adultery on the part of women was punished by death by poisoning unless it was with her brother-in-law with whom it was lawful to sleep.⁶¹ In this community, sons were the only

57. Henry Yule, Cathay..., op.cit., p.116.

58. Malcolm Letts. Ed. Mandeville's Travells, (London, 1967), Vol.I, p.118.

59. Barbosa, op.cit., p.117.

60. Castanheda, op.cit., Vol.III. pp.314-315.

61. Barbosa, op.cit., Vol., p.117.

legitimate heirs to the father's property and position.

Economy:

During the pre-Portuguese period, the main profession of the people of Bassein was agriculture. But the agricultural production depended on regular rainfall. It was not sufficient as water was needed for irrigation even after the monsoons. So artificial wells, tanks and canals were constructed. Similarly, every attempt was made to save the fields from excessive rains. Thorn-bush hedges were raised to protect the fields.⁶²

Rice was the main agricultural produce of this region.⁶³ The cultivation of rice needs fairly good rains. The portion of Bassein adjoining the coast was quite fertile and suitable for rice cultivation. In the interior, it was cultivated only during the rainy season where there was no provision of artificial ponds because of the salty water below a certain depth. But on the coastal side, there was a provision for irrigating the fields and the farmers could get a double crop. In addition to rice, millet (jawar) was cultivated in some parts.⁶⁴ Among the cash crops cotton and sugarcane were the major crops.⁶⁵ Thus the fertile land of Bassein produced enough rice, millet, sugarcane and to a certain extent cotton. Sugar and jaggery manufacture was an indigenous industry which flourished on the local agricultural products.⁶⁶ The luxuriant flat coast of Bassein had enough wheat, barley, vegetable etc. Fruits of different types

62. Mirat-i-Sikandari, F.L. Faridi, (Dharmapoor, 1899), Vol. I, p. 14.

63. Mandelslo, op.cit., p. 15.

64. Irfan Habib, The Agrarian System of Mughal Empire, op.cit., pp. 37, 38.

65. Ibid.

66. Thevenot, op.cit., p. 102.

were produced to feed its large population and for export and to support the substantial livestock. Among the natural products were indigo, opium, poppies etc., and at least twenty different types of colours of cotton cloth, soap, honey and wax were produced.

Agriculturist and Peasantry

The peasantry formed the major group of the working class. They lived in poverty and misery.⁶⁷ Rice, being the major crop, formed the staple diet of the masses. They also ate jawar and bajra. The foodgrains were generally supplemented by vegetables or pot-herbs. Beans and other vegetables were usually on sale in the smallest of villages.⁶⁸ Meat was rarely consumed by the peasants. In the large villages, where the influence of the Muslim prevailed sheep, fowls and pigeons were kept for sale but not in the village where the Hindu Baniyas were in the majority.⁶⁹ Sweetmeat, dry and liquid and gur were available in abundance and they were commonly consumed in the villages by the peasants. Spices such as cumin-seed and ginger were probably within the reach of the peasants but cloves, cardamom and pepper were rarely consumed by them.⁷⁰ Drinking toddy was quite common among the people as it was available in abundance in the coastal area and tobacco-smoking had become a habit of the masses.⁷¹

As far as clothing is concerned, the male tied a langute or a decent cloth which hung below their waist. The women also

67. Irfan Habib, op.cit., p.90

68. J.B. Tavernier, Travels of Jean Baptiste Tavernier, op.cit. p.238.

69. Ibid., Part I, p.38.

70. Irfan Habib, op.cit., p.93.

71. Ibid., p.94.

tied a cloth called lugude. In other words, a small dhoti was enough for men and a sari for women and they wore nothing else.⁷²

Sale of Products:

Though agricultural production was abundant, the sale was not regularised due to the scarcity of transport facilities. The weekly markets were the only openings which were inadequate. The bullock-carts, camels and pack-oxen carried the commercial goods on land routes. The caravans or quaafilas of merchants carried only the articles of higher value. They carried goods in bulk like foodgrains, sugar, butter and salt. These caravans were organised by the famous caste of Banjaras who had a complete monopoly of this trade.⁷³

They carried the merchandise with herds of pack-laden bullocks. The Banjaras were a nomadic community and lived with their families in camps called tandas. A large tanda sometimes consisted of as many as 600 to 700 people and 15000 to 20000 bullocks, carrying thousands of tons. The cost of transport under this system was quite low. Hence it was a very popular system of carrying foodgrains from one place to other.⁷⁴ Foodgrains, like other commodities, were subject to a duty called Zakat, which was sometimes lifted during a time of scarcity. There was a further tax on this kind of transportation known as Rahadari or octroi.⁷⁵ Foodgrains and other articles of mass consumption were generally exempted from this kind of tax.⁷⁶

72. Irfan Habib, op.cit., pp.94-95.

73. Ibid, pp.61-62.

74. Ibid., p.63.

75. Ibid., p.67.

76. Ibid., p.78.

A large portion of the agricultural produce of the peasants was ultimately put on the market. Sometimes they had to part with this portion in lieu of land revenue and in such cases, the Zamindar or their agents used to arrange for the sale. But generally, the peasant was obliged to pay the revenue in cash if possible. So they generally took their produce to the local markets in bullock-carts.⁷⁷

But it was quite possible that all the peasants would not take their produce to the market. So they were compelled to sell it to their creditors at a low price. These creditors were the local merchants or the village money-lenders. The urgent need for the cash to pay the revenue forced them to sell the produce as soon as it came into their hands but the merchants generally waited for some time. They were obliged to pay various kinds of dues on the way when they carried their grain to the market. Similarly these poor peasants were so ignorant that they were easily defrauded in weighing their produce or when they were paid cash.⁷⁸ Thus the peasants got very little return for their produce due to their indebtedness, different kinds of taxes, mal-practices in the market etc. In this way, the agrarian system of the village did not depend on the produce of the town, but the town consumed a large portion of the village. This was made possible only when there was heavy land revenue demand. The land revenue came back to the town in the form of money that had gone out to buy food and raw material from the countryside.⁷⁹

77. Tavernier, op.cit., Part I. pp.24-25.

78. Tavernier, op.cit., Part I, pp.24-25.

79. Irfan Habib, op.cit., p.89.

B) Trade Economy

Bassein was known by the name of Sopara, which was a flourishing port right from ancient times. When Bassein came under the Sultan of Gujarat it was still an important port.⁸⁰ It was connected with all other ports of the Sultanate like Surat, Cambay, Kalyan, Thana and Bhiwandi.

Duarte Barbosa who visited Bassein in 1518 gives the following account of the town. "Further along the coast of Dinuy⁸¹ (sic) is another town which they call Baxy⁸² (sic) where both Moors⁸³ and Heathen⁸⁴ dwell, a very good harbour also pertainint to the kingdom of Gujarat. It has a great sea-trade and there is a traffic⁸⁵ in wares of diverse kinds of goods. Many Malabar ships come hither with cargo of areca, coconuts, spices and other goods and take hence other things which are wanted in Malabar".⁸⁶

This small paragraph of Barbosa sums up the commercial importance of the port of Bassein, even when it was not considered an important trading centre. The natural fertility of the soil and the plentiful rain led to the production of surplus crops which was exported aborad. It can be assumed that the production of different articles like clothes, shoes etc., was done by the artisans working with their families. They were advanced money by the moneylenders so that they might buy their raw material and support

80. Bulhão Pato, Ed. Documentos Remittidos da India, op.cit., Vol.V., p.340.

81. Dinuy means modern Dahanu which is on the border of Gujarat and Maharashtra.

82. Baxy referred here is Bassein.

83. Moors - meaning Muslims.

84. Heathen-meaning Hindus.

85. Traffic-meaning trade.

86. Duarte Barbosa, op.cit., Vol.I., p.151.

themselves, while they worked. This indigenous system was later adopted by the Dutch and the English.⁸⁷

Internal Trade

The internal trade of Bassein was mainly carried out through the land routes. The merchants used bullock-carts, camels etc. to carry their merchantdises from one place to another. We have already seen how the caravans carried out the things from one place to other.

There were weekly markets in different places where the villagers used to purchase the articles useful for their day-to-day life and the food provisions for the whole week. It was here that the artisans who produced independently at home, sold their articles. The big merchants collected these articles and carried them to the port, from where they were exported.

The second pattern of the internal trade was carried through the coastal area by ships. The ports like Surat, Cambay, Diu, Sopara, Kalyan, Thana, Bhiwandi were not only connected to each other but they were linked with the southern ports of Malabar from where they brought spices mainly. The traditional trade of Malabar had been pepper sent by sea in exchange for opium and cotton. As Bassein did not produce good quality cotton, it came from the northern parts of Gujarat. The internal trade of Bassein during this period was handicapped due to the lack of transport facilities.⁸⁸

87. W.H. Moreland, India at the death of Akabar, (Delhi, 1962) pp. 175-76.

88. Irfan Habib, op.cit., pp.74-75.

External Trade

The external trade was carried out by the trading countries of the Sultanate like Surat, Cambay etc., touching the port of Sopara and going further south and also many foreign ships coming from Malacca, Ormuz, Aden, Cairo etc.. In addition to Sopara, there were minor trading centres in Bassein which dealt with the imported goods brought to Sopara from foreign countries.

As far as foreign trade is concerned Bassein was directly or indirectly connected with Italy, Greece, Aden, Cairo, Jedhah. The Arab merchants took the export from Bassein to Venice and from there it was taken to the European countries, as there was no direct sea route known to the sailors during this period. The most important trade of Gujarat was that linking Aden and Malacca via her own great ports. As a contemporary observer saw "the kingdom of Gujarat chiefly stretches out two arms - with her right arm she reaches out towards Aden and the other towards Malacca."⁸⁹

The goods imported to the port of Sopara included gold, silver, quick-silver, vermilion, copper, rose-water, wool and brocades.⁹⁰ The foreign traders exchanged these for the local goods mainly cotton and spices brought from Malacca coast. The trade between Gujarat and Malacca was conducted almost entirely in Gujarati ships, but the merchants were from different parts. The majority among them were the Gujaratis but there were many others from countries in West Asia.⁹¹

89. Tome Pires, op.cit., Vol. I, p.39.

90. APO. (BP), (Goa, 1937), Vol. I. Part I, p. 128.

91. Tome Pires, op.cit., Vol. I., p.43, Vol. II, pp.269-70.

Trading Ships

We also get an idea about the trading ships used during those days. The ships trading long distance had masts with very large rudders worked by two cords on either side of the board. Nails and glue were sometimes used for their construction. The ships had no decks, which increased the carrying capacity. Huts were provided for the passengers and some valuable cargo. These ships dominated all the international routes of the South and South-East Asia.⁹²

There were different types of ships having varied capacities. In this respect the largest seems to have at least equalled contemporary Portuguese ships.⁹³ The early sixteenth century records speak about these ships having a capacity of 375 to 800 tons. belonged to the Sultan of Gujarat. One of these ships was captured by the Portuguese at Ormuz in 1510. It was one of the biggest ships that used to sail in the gulf of Cambay and was famous (in many parts) for its size.⁹⁴

Monetary System

Western travellers and Portuguese historians provide us with enough information about the monetary system of this region under the Gujarat Sultanate during pre-Portuguese period. It seems that the economy of Gujarat was not monetized until the seventeenth century. Those areas which depended solely on producing cash crops presumably still paid revenue in kind. In great ports, however, money was widely used along with the system of exchanging goods. Sixteenth century Portuguese account are full

92. Gaspar Correa, Lendas da India, op.cit., Vol. I, pp.122-24.

93. M.N.Pearson, Merchants and Rulers of Gujarat, (Berkely, University, Press, California, 1975), pp. 7-8.

94. Castanheda, op.cit., XII, p. 35.

of lists of the rates of conversion of Gujarati and other coins into Portuguese currency.⁹⁵

Meanwhile, the struggle between Humayun and Bahadur Shah took a serious turn. The Mughals wanted to conquer the entire kingdom of Gujarat. So they waged a fierce war against the Sultanate. Moreover, Bahadur Shah was always afraid of a Portuguese attack on Diu.⁹⁶ Thus, the Sultan was caught between the Mughals from the North and Portuguese from the South. As he wanted to keep safe from the Portuguese, some kind of settlement between the two was expedient.

These were the political, social and economic conditions of Bassein and the surrounding area on the eve of the Portuguese conquest. It proves that Bassein was in forefront of commercial activity right from pre-historic times to the beginning of the 12th century. It was ruled by various important dynasties from time to time. The entire story of this sea-port revolves around Sopara, now one of the insignificant towns in Bassein. It lost its importance as a sea-port from the beginning of 12th century due to various reasons referred to earlier.

The commercial activities of Bassein went into obscurity for some time till the Portuguese later on brought back the ancient glory of this town. It was destined to become the capital of the Portuguese province of the North, during the later period. But then the centre of activity was shifted from Sopara in the North to the new town on the extreme South of Bassein.

95. R.J. de Lima Felner, Ed. Subsidios, para ..., op.cit., pp.40-45.

96. Simão Botelho, Tombo, op.cit., p.133.

Out Line map of
Bassein

