

Shipbuilding at Bombay

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The arrival of the Portuguese by sea in 1498 introduced navy as a new parameter in the Indian geopolitical equations, placing the Indian rulers at a disadvantage for all times to come. The Portuguese and the Dutch success in East Indies as brought home by the capture of their ships brought the British to the Indian shores in 1608. The trade was extremely lucrative despite the risks. During the third voyage cloves were purchased at Moluccas for £2948, which on return to England fetched £36,287. The first 11 years of trading with East Indies (including India) 'gave clear profits, seldom below one hundred, and often more than two hundred, per cent, on the capital invested on the voyage'. The Portuguese violently opposed the British presence in what they considered to be their own zone of influence. The British decided to meet force with force and inflicted a crushing defeat on the Portuguese on sea in 1612. The chain of events that culminated in the 1757 battle of Plassey in Bengal had its beginning in this sea skirmish. The naval prowess and the religious neutrality of the British greatly impressed the Mughal emperors who though powerful on land like the elephant were helpless on sea which was infested with European crocodiles. The British were asked to contain the fanatically anti-Muslim Portuguese, who were particularly severe on the Haj pilgrims. In return the English merchants received attractive business concessions. (Another factor in favour of the British was the expertise of its ships' doctors, which was made available to the Mughal umra, that is nobility.)²

To protect its trade from the Portuguese and the pirates, the English merchants at Surat locally established, in 1613, east India company's marine. The small naval service consisted of coastal boats, known as grabs and gallivats, on which were mounted two to six guns and which were manned by volunteers from the company's ships who fought as well as traded. This service developed first into Bombay marine and finally into Indian navy³ (see Table 1). Generally speaking,

marine was meant to protect the coastal area, whereas the navy could cast its net wider. It is said that at one time when Lord Nelson, 'the future victor of Nile and Trafalgar' was in embarrassed circumstances, he was a candidate for the appointment of the superintendent of the Bombay marine⁴.

The seaport of Surat was located some 12 miles to the west at a village called Swally. The British repaired their old ships here and in course of time started building new ones. Surat had a long tradition of shipbuilding and even the Mughal emperors got their ships built here. (Figure 1 shows a traditional boat that was used on the eastern waters.) Once the British shifted from Surat to Bombay, shipbuilding activity was also transferred. The first Europeans to touch Bombay were the Portuguese who arrived at Mahim in 1509 and took over the island in 1534. In 1538 (or 1541) Bombay was rented in perpetuity to Garcia d'Orta, a physician and professor of Lisbon (and said to be a converted Jew). He paid a yearly quit rent of about £85. In 1563 he wrote a book 'Dialogues on simples and drugs' where he mentions the island under the names of Bombaim and Mombaim. D'Orta lived in India from 1534 to 1572 (ref. 5).

Bombay

While Portugal and Britain were engaged in bitter rivalry in India, they entered into a royal marriage contract which had far reaching consequences⁶. The English king Charles II married princess Infanta Catherine of the House of Braganza of Portugal. According to the 11th article of the treaty of marriage,

Table 1. The evolution of Indian navy 1612-1950

1613-1686	East India company's marine
1686-1830	Bombay marine
1830-1863	Her majesty's Indian navy
1863-1877	Bombay marine
1877-1892	Her majesty's Indian marine
1892-1950	Royal Indian navy
1950-	Indian navy

dated 23 June 1661, her dowry included 'the Port and Island of Bombay in the East Indies, together with all the rights, profits, territories, and appurtenances thereof whatsoever'. The small island, some eight miles long and three miles wide, no doubt mattered little to the king of Portugal. But it enclosed a land-locked bay and its natural harbour could shelter a large fleet. When the news reached India, the Portuguese circles in India were dismayed and immediately pointed out the disadvantages of making such a gift. An attempt was made to purchase the island back from England, but Charles II wanted such large sums 'that they reach to millions'. The island of Bombay was finally transferred to England on 8 February 1665, without any trace of grace or pleasantness that one normally associates with a bride's dowry. The king's governor of Bombay soon discovered that the island cost more to govern than it yielded as revenue. By a charter dated 23 March 1668, Charles II granted the port and island of Bombay to the East India Company 'to be held to the said Company... in perpetuity and in free and common soccage at a fee farm rent of £10 payable on the 30th of September yearly at the Custom-house'. The island of Bombay was formally handed over to the east India company on 23 September 1668.

While opposing the inclusion of Bombay in the dowry, the Portuguese viceroy of Goa [Antonio de Mello de Castro] had written⁷, 'I foresee that India will be lost the same day on which the English Nation is settled in Bombay.' These words were prophetic indeed. The British shifted their capital from Surat to Bombay in 1686. The little island became the naval fortress from where Britain went ahead to build a vast overseas colonial empire.

Dockyard

Bombay had taken to shipbuilding in the Portuguese time itself. In 1625 when the English and the Dutch jointly raided Bombay they found two boats under construction which they promptly put to