The Bombay Country Ships 1790-1833

Anne Bulley

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ANNE BULLEY

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In the year 2000, to the
citizens of Mumbai

Foreword

An increasing interest in Asian maritime trade, along with the port cities which mirrored its fluctuating patterns, has been a notable feature of the historical research carried out in the India Office Collections over the last twenty years. Monographs, learned papers and a spate of international conferences have, though, more recently begun to place the European Companies in their Asian context, while the search for original material to counterbalance the archival wealth of Europe continues to provide new insights.

Until at least the mid-eighteenth century the English East India Company was only one, and by no means the most important, among many different trading groups operating in Asian waters. Its commercial learning curve occupied much of its first century, particularly the lesson that the export of European manufactured goods could not produce return cargoes from Asia, and English penetration of some of the mechanisms of inter-Asian trade was a slow process. Success depended upon partnership with members of existing merchant communities ranging from the Armenian diaspora to Persians, Gujaratis, Golconda Muslims and Chinese 'sojourners or settlers.'

The English Company, though, did develop one special feature – the formal enlistment of the entrepreunrial instincts of its servants by permitting them to engage in private trade, making them stakeholders in the success of the enterprise as a whole. commanders, officers and even seamen on the Company's ships making the voyages from London were allowed to import permitted quantities of certain goods on their own accounts. But the real opportunities were those available to its servants 'on the spot' in Asia. The Company's Presidents, Agents, Chiefs and members of Councils in Bombay, Madras, Bengal and Bantam, plus dozens of intermediate trading posts, were able to use positions and contacts arising from their official duties to enter into lucrative private arrangements with Asian merchants and ship-owners. There also emerged a growing number of 'free merchants', many of them ex-servants of the Company, who were licensed to live and trade in Asia and who were in great demand as commanders in what the English came to refer to as 'the Country trade.'

Sources for all this private enterprise are relatively few. The archives of the English Company really only record anything in depth in cases of abuse, usually unauthorised borrowings of official funds to finance private ventures. Anne Bulley's first work *Free Mariner* was uniquely able to use surviving family papers of a Country trader. The present work breaks new ground in giving us an overview of the Country trade when the merchant fleet based on Bombay in the period was at its zenith.

Anthony Farrington, Deputy Director,
India Office Collections,
British Library

Preface

Plant a tree, dig a well, write a book, and go to heaven.
Gujarati Proverb

In this study of the Bombay Country ships I have concentrated on the period 1790–1833 but with special emphasis on the years at the beginning of the nineteenth century when the Bombay merchant fleet was at its zenith. Overall I have tried to give a general picture of the ships and their trade and the men who owned or sailed in them. This private enterprise was made possible by partnership, in the broadest sense, of native British, who had made their careers in India, and native Indians, who had inherited a maritime tradition stretching back to a distant past before the European East India Companies had reached India. The picture is built up from a mass of details and references unearthed in the Company's records as well as other sources and books and includes a few contemporary experiences of sailing in these ships. Where appropriate I have used verbatim extracts to give as an immediate a view as possible of the Bombay maritime Country trade. The Company's records usually only refer to the Country trade when it concerned them directly. That part of the Country trade that acted independently of tenders to the Government would not, for the most part, be recorded at all, so for a start this makes any well balanced study of the English Country ships extremely difficult; there are black holes in the evidence. Few statistics will be found because there is not enough material complete enough on which to base them.

The earlier Bombay newspapers provide some information about, say, voyages planned, sale of ships with details of tonnage etc. as later does the *Asiatic Journal. The East India Register* regularly gives lists of ships from 1803 and in a few earlier surviving issues. Log books for the Country ships, with a few exceptions, only exist for a voyage to England when a ship was taken up by the Company as an 'Extra Ship'. Logs are not preserved for the return voyage if, as was usual, the ship was no long the Company's concern. For this reason the journal-like letters of John Adolphus Pope, during the course of a long Country voyage, from December 1785 to October 1788 are

of absorbing interest. In an attempt to unravel his career in the East Indies, when I was editing his early letters, published by B.A.C.S.A. as *Free Mariner* in 1992, I found that almost nothing had been written exclusively about the Bombay Country trade so for the sake of clarification, I had to include a good deal on the subject in that. It was at the suggestion of the late Professor Ashin Das Gupta formerly Director of the National Library of India, who referred politely to that book as my 'visiting card' – (what follows is perhaps more like a postcard from the edge) – and the encouragement of P.J. Marshall, Professor Emeritus of King's College, London University, that I decided to explore further the Bombay Country ships. The ground work was prepared by my putting together lists of Bombay registered ships, their tonnage, owners and captains with as much information as possible about voyages. An on-going project, it may be consulted on the open shelves in the Oriental and India Office Collections Reading Room at the British Library, and the Caird Library, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. Apart from anything else it has proved useful for those making genealogical searches. The recently acquired private letter book and common place book of James Horsburgh, the East India Company's hydrographer, gives a first hand account of his work, when a country captain, of preparing his ship for voyages to England, as well as other rare insights into the trade. I am very grateful to Dr. Andrew Cook of the British Library for drawing my attention to them.

A study of the Country ships is incomplete without similar study being made of those of Bengal in the same period, although the two 'fleets' of ships were then remarkably distinct. John Phipps, Master Attendant at Calcutta, as early as 1823 made a good start. His study does include the Bombay ships but he was not so familiar with them as the Bengal ones. The latter were much smaller and their patterns of trade usually very different. Bombay and Bengal were a world apart. Their affairs were divided by a long sea voyage, southwards down the Malabar coast, impossible in some months of the year, round the tip of Ceylon, the Pointe de Galle, northwards up the Coromandel coast to Madras and then weeks further to the mouth of the Bengal river. From there it was fifty miles up river to Calcutta. The journey was extremely tedious, especially in certain seasons. This accounted for the isolation of the Bombay Presidency.

The spellings of Indian and Arabic words and names for a foreigner are a mine-field and I do apologize for any errors or inconsistencies. Where Parsi names are concerned, at the beginning of the nineteenth century Framjee Cowasjee was spelt like that, by the second decade it was usually Framji Cowasji. I have gone along with that. On advice for place names I have used the *Imperial Gazetteer of India* (1897) as being perhaps most suitable to the period. As for Indian words, *Hobson Jobson* is of course the arbiter but unfortunately it is not nearly so informative for words used exclusively on the west coast.

I have to thank the staff of the India Office library, who are unfailingly helpful and those who with good humour used to drag up from somewhere those immense weighty volumes of records, now luxuriously housed in the new British Library and electronically summoned. My very warm thanks to my husband, Alan Maier and to our children for their lively interest in my projects.

Where this book is concerned, I owe four huge debts of gratitude: first and foremost to Matthew Maier for help with all things nautical and who, times without number, cheerfully answered my 'May-day' calls for help with computer programmes; to Julian Johnston, for initially drawing the maps so efficiently; to Tony Farrington of the British Library, who, with his special expertise on the East India Company's affairs, has kindly written the foreword and Peter Marshall, who generously suggested reading the typescript and who took time from all his numerous commitments to give me once again, the benefit of his advice.

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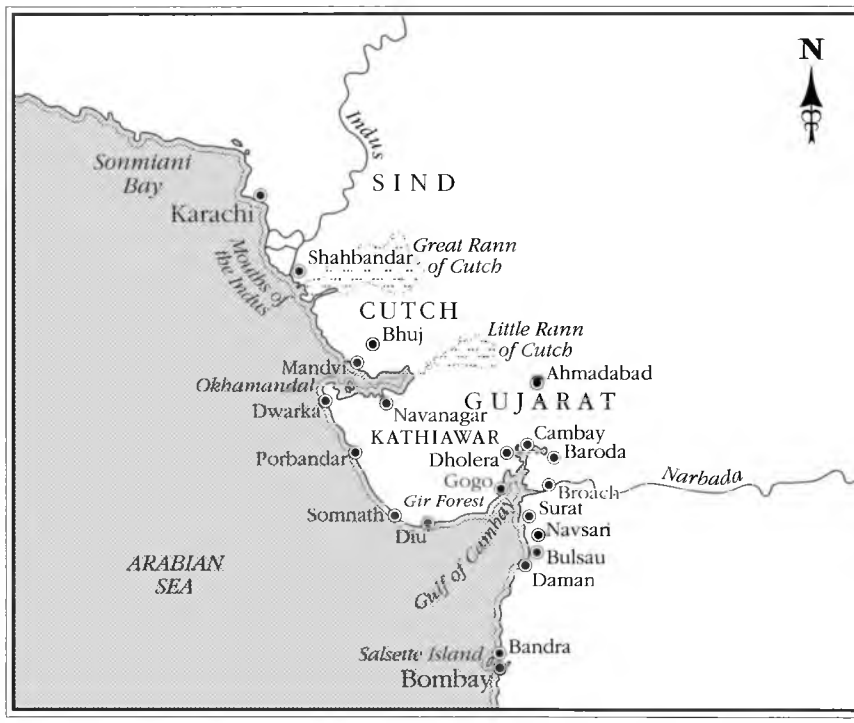
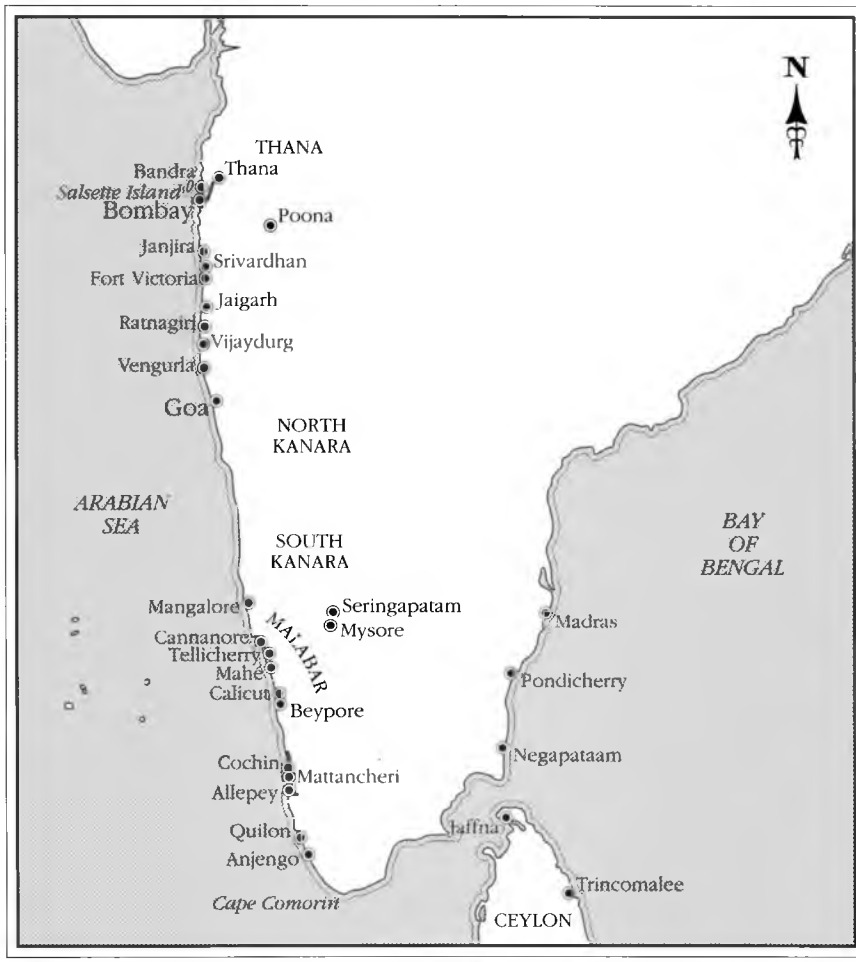


Map 1. The west coast of India: Sind to Bombay, showing places mentioned in the text.



Map 2. The west and east coasts of India: Bombay to Cape Comorin to Madras, showing places mentioned in the text.

Introduction

The East India Company's ships, the 'East Indiamen' that sailed annually from England for India and China, following the move of the Company's west coast headquarters from Surat to Bombay in 1687, were seldom involved in the Indian coastal trade. The days were long gone when, having unloaded their English cargoes, they ventured down the coast, 'calling at Rajapur for fine cloth, at Katwar for coarse cloth and weightiest pepper and at Calicut for spice, ambergriz, granates, opium, saltpetre and back to Surat before the caravans arrived.'[1] This sort of trade, in which already the native Indians, Muslim and Hindu, the Armenians and the Portuguese of Surat were well experienced, was in future left almost entirely to the Country ships. These 'Country' ships were privately owned merchant vessels that operated under special restrictions. Under licence from the East India Company, they traded along the Indian and Malay coasts to Sumatra, the Eastern Islands and to China and later to Botany Bay; to the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and sometimes to the East coast of Africa. But so as not to infringe the Company's monopoly, they were forbidden to sail west of the Cape of Good Hope. The trade of the Indiamen from England is recorded in detail; log books of voyages are preserved and every detail of the maritime service may be examined whereas the activities of the Country ships, since they were independent, only randomly feature in the Company's records. Yet, although privately owned, their trade was acknowledged to be of prime importance in shoring up the tottering finances of the East India Company. Until the close of the first decade of the nineteenth century, the Company was unable to provide enough specie in Canton to pay for its increasingly large purchases of tea, always contracted for a year in advance. Because the Indiamen could bring few cargoes from England that were of interest to the Chinese, the Company relied on the country trade for ready money. The Country ship owners and Country captains paid the proceeds of the sale of their Indian goods and the results of the barter and trade they did on the Malay coast, Sumatra and China into the Company's Treasury in Canton and in exchange they received bills on London at 365 days sight. The benefit to some owners

and captains was that they had a legal means of transferring their wealth to England and others were able to finance their trade. It should be remarked that the English East India Company was fully aware of the value of the Country trade to its finances. A despatch from the Court of Directors in London in 1755 emphasized the importance of private trade in India. It was perfectly acceptable for Company servants as well as free merchants and mariners to own ships and engage in trade on their own account, in contrast to the policy of the Dutch East India Company. The alternative for the private merchants was to send goods home by means of the 'clandestine trade' – in those ships mainly from Ostend or from, say, Denmark, foreign in name but owned and manned by Englishmen.

Until the Indian trade was 'thrown open' at the renewal of the East India's Company's Charter in 1813, there was an on-going struggle on the part of the private merchants and the Court of Directors because they wanted to be free to send their goods home in their own India built ships. A champion of their cause in the 1790s was David Scott, twice Chairman of the East India Company but at heart a free merchant, which is what he had been for many years in Bombay before he went back to England in the 1780s. In a letter in 1800 to the Court of Directors he quoted figures for 1790 to show that the clandestine trade was immense.[2] The ludicrous situation had arisen whereby foreigners could trade freely with England, especially Americans, while the British in the trade from India with their own home country were shackled by such numerous Acts of Parliament that they were driven (since 1777) to using clandestine means.

The British private merchants in India, (were they Company servants or free merchants), by now dominated a maritime trade that operated from the Coromandel and Malabar coasts of India to the Eastern Isles, to the Malay coasts, to China and to the Persian Gulf, occasionally to North America, New South Wales and East Africa. For the most part, the ships from Bombay sailed mainly to the Malabar Coast, Bengal, China and to the Persian Gulf in harmony with the pattern of the two monsoons. The China trade was the most important. Most of the ships from Bombay bound for China chose a period from April to October when the south west monsoon helped them on their way and returned home eased by the north east monsoon usually before February or March. The north east monsoon too made it possible to reach Muscat in a fortnight. For four months of the year there was no trade to the Persian Gulf. The best time to make for the Red Sea was between mid February to mid March when Mocha could be reached in eighteen days. As for the Indian ports, the Malabar coast was avoided in May to August but from mid April to mid August Madras could be reached in twelve to fifteen days and Bengal in a few days more. After that the voyage became tedious because of having to keep away from the Coromandel coast and to head for the east of the Bay of Bengal so as to be able to approach the entrance to the river not to windward but on a long reach.[3]

Seagoing under sail was always of course hazardous, not only complicated by winds and tides but plying the Arabian, Indian and China Seas was especially so. A ship could be caught out by the early setting in of the monsoon, by typhoons, by unfamiliar shallow shores and rocky coasts or be set upon by some of the numerous different tribes of pirates lying in wait and for much of the period the British were at war with the French. Until Mauritius fell ships could fall prey to their naval squadron or the ubiquitous and intrepid privateers. Not until as late as 1808 did Napoleon relinquish a dream of driving the British from India. Following the Peace of Tilsit in 1807 when all Europe, with few exceptions, was ranged against the British, the incoming Governor General Lord Minto expressed the British anxieties about French machinations. Their 'ascendancy at the Porte or positive conquest of Turkey – confederacy with Russia in Oriental schemes would tend to the furtherance of Buonaparte's schemes against India ...' Bombay thus became the port of departure for several missions to Persia in attempts to forestall such an appalling scenario.

The history of the west coast of India during the period is the story of the continuing extension of some form of British jurisdiction. This was brought about by the end of the fourth Mysore war, culminating with the death of Tipu Sultan, and, following the end of the French wars, by the final defeat of the Maratta chiefs and the destruction of pirate strongholds south and north of Bombay. By 1833, the greater part of the west coast of India from the borders of Sind in the north to Travancore in the south was either under British jurisdiction or was bound by defensive treaties concluded with friendly princes. (The Gaekwar of Baroda's subscription to the Patriotic Fund in 1800 was considered 'highly satisfactory'.) During the Napoleonic Wars, there was the annexation of Dutch, French and Portuguese ports and territories to keep the warships and transports busy, but not all that were taken by force of arms, like Bourbon, Mauritus and Java, were to be such permanent acquisitions as the Cape of Good Hope or Ceylon.

Apart from trade, the Country ships were used by the Company to carry mail or hired as troop transports. In certain years some were taken 'into the service' of the East India Company as 'Extra Ships' to England and occasionally they were transformed temporarily into men of war.

While the Company's East Indiamen were forced to move according to their pre-ordained London schedule, the privately owned Country ships were free to explore the coasts and take advantage of trade wherever it existed provided of course they kept to the terms of the licence. In fact what the English Country ships were doing was to follow trade routes that had been established from antiquity where in the past Asain and Arab vessels and others had once predominated.[4]

As for the European powers, by the end of the 1770s neither Dutch nor Portuguese ships offered any real competition to the rapidly expanding fleet of English Country ships. The Dutch Cochin shipping lists showed that 'seventy British ships, 27, 000 tons of shipping, were manned by four

thousand lascars and defended by five hundred and sixty-five guns'.[5] The Country fleet was twice the size as had visited six seasons before and outnumbered all European rivals two to one in terms of ships and three to one in terms of tonnage. Asian and Portuguese shipping had declined during the same period although that of the French shows an increase. Indigenous Asian shipping was mainly restricted to Indian coastal waters but, that said, it still formed a very important arm of the Country trade.

From Bengal the main staple of the India-China trade was opium and from Bombay, since the 1770s, raw cotton. This would change when, in the first decade of the nineteenth century, Bengal began to rival Bombay in the quality of the cotton cargoes sent to China while still remaining a major exporter of opium, the growing of which was a Company monopoly. Bombay's chief export to China, by the mid-1820s, was not cotton but Malwa (Maratta) opium, that is opium grown in regions outside the Company's control in the hinterland of the west coast. From this, at first, the Company gathered no revenue.

Country ships were either registered at Calcutta or the Port of Bombay and occasionally in Madras. Those that concern us here were licensed in Bombay between about 1790 and 1833. Maria Graham, an acute observer of the Indian scene, (as a Naval officer's wife she had been invited by the Master shipwright, Jamsetjee, to inspect the 74 ship of the line he was building in the Bombay dockyard), took passage in a Country ship to Ceylon and, having of course made the voyage out to India, was in a position to compare it with an Indiaman. Her description will serve as an introduction to a Country ship of 1809:

> We came here in an 800 ton Country ship, where everything is as new to me as if I had never been on board of a large vessel before. All the sailors are lascars. the only Europeans are the Captain three officers and the surgeon; the gunners and quarter masters, of whom there are ten are Indian Portuguese; they are called seacunnies. The best lascars are Siddees, a tribe of Mahometans, inhabitants of Gogo in Guzerat. They live chiefly on rice and salt fish, but occasionally tea sugar and fruit, as preventives and cures for the scurvy. The ship is built of teak wood ... it does not shrink so little caulking is required ... The masts are of poon, which though lighter than teak is cumbrous compared with European timber. The rigging is of coier rope, which is made of the coconut husk, steeped till the woody part decays, when the fibres are beaten, washed and laid by hand, as they are too stiff to be spun. The coier rope is served very strong and does not shrink; fresh water rots it so that the standing rigging is over with wax cloth and hempen yarn, but salt water preserves it and coier cables are bound to answer.[6]

The Country ships were either owned by partnerships, the so-called Agency houses or the captain or other individuals, often with part shares. A great number of the owners or part owners were Parsis and, particularly in the

latter part of the period under review, Muslim or Hindu, licensed to own ships as inhabitants of Bombay sailing under the British flag.

During the American war some of the Bombay Agency houses, formed by partnerships between private merchants and Company servants acting in a private capacity, often in association with Parsis, had become extremely wealthy and, during the French wars that followed, such merchant houses as Forbes and Co, Bruce Fawcett and Alexander Adamson, became increasingly powerful and not only owned ships, traded on their own account but acted as bankers to an impoverished Bombay Government. An authority on the country trade wrote that 'without the facilities provided by its own servants either individually or through the Agency houses, the Bengal government could not have carried on from one day to the next in its double capacity of sovereign and merchant.'[7] Such a comment could equally well apply to Bombay. The private wealth of the merchants had been built up over the years. As far back as the seventeenth century the British merchants of Surat had enjoyed special trading privileges from the Mogul Emperor. A traveller had admiringly remarked that:

> A few years here has rais'd several of the Presidents to Plentiful Estates, who besides their Salaries which is 300 per annum and several advantages by the Ships, are permitted a free Trade to all parts of the East. This is indulg'd likewise to all the Companies Servants to what station soever, which is a favour attended with considerable Benefit, suits well with the freedom of an English subject, and is a profitable Blessing for which the Dutch Factors are earnest supplicants, and from which they are very strictly restrain'd.[8]

In December 1800 the East India Company's Court of Directors in London, at a time when there were high hopes of them increasing their share of the trade carried by the Country ships, emphasised the importance of Bombay. It and Surat were:

> the critical places on which principally depends the extensive trade carried on for eight months in the year from August to May from one end of the Malabar Coast to the other, to the Gulfs and from Cape Comorin to Sind. Bombay being open at all seasons must be considered the first port in point of consequence and it connects the whole of the commerce on these extensive coasts in such manner, that in fact no proper assorted cargo can be depended upon for scarce any one market without the greater part being furnished at one of the above places. Ships in fair season take in the first part of their cargoes at Bombay and then fill upon the Malabar coast. In the rainy season they may solely depend on Bombay it being the depot for such parts of the cargoes as is the produce of Malabar Coast and countries to the Northward as far as the Indus because the rainy season admits of no navigation on these shores.[9]

In the earlier years the Country ships were commanded and officered exclusively by British Europeans but after 1820 there was an increase in

Muslim nacodas and officers. The Petty officers, such as the serangs, tindals or seacunnies[10] were native Indians, Portuguese Indians or foreign nationals and the crews, lascars. In the 1790s on two or three occasions the nacoda of a ship that was ostensibly commanded by an Englishman, is mentioned; it is possible that the captain in those cases was more of a supercargo and the ship was in fact navigated by the native nacoda.

The Parsis who emigrated to Bombay at the same time as the British did so under favourable financial terms from the ruling East India Company; religious tolerance meant that their Aghirs and Towers of Silence became as typical of Bombay Island as the Fort or the cotton screws. The Parsis had thrived. They were the landlords in the island. A traveller in the 1780s remarked that there were 'hardly ten houses which Parsis are not proprietors of.' It was a good relationship; the British were as dependent on the good will, trading connections and above all the capital of the Parsis as the Parsis were dependent on their protection. The British were also heavily dependent on the wealth of the Gujarati Banias, many of whom had also emigrated from Surat to finance their undertakings. There was a further large influx of Parsis in the 1790s as a result of famine in Gujarat.

The first Parsi shipwright, Lowjee Wadia, was engaged by the British in 1672 and when about a hundred and thirty years later the Bombay Marine Board requested a number of Surat ships' carpenters they could still be easily provided from there. The generations of Wadia Master Builders were all men of talent and integrity but they did not become immensely wealthy and it has been shown by Amalendu Guha in his article *Parsi Seths as Entrepreneurs.*[11] that their scope for capitalist expansion was limited and, although the terms of contract with the government are not fully known, they never participated in risk taking and continued to work for remuneration. After 1789 they were partly paid on commission on marine bills and received occasional land grants. They paid their carpenters themselves. The Parsis were also among the principal ship owners; by 1792, according to one source, they owned twenty Bombay registered ships.

When the island of Bombay had fallen into the lap of the British as part of the dowry of Catharine of Braganza on her marriage to Charles II its trade was minimal, the Portuguese being more interested in saving souls or in shipping spices. The eighteen square mile island, wooded, rocky and marshy in spite of its huge natural harbour, probably the best in the world, did not at first appeal as a great entrepot. Its climate was thought to be unhealthy and it was under constant threat from seaborne attack. After many vicissitudes, a century later, it was a different story. The harbour was full of ships, the streets crowded with merchants from all over the world and the elegant houses of the prosperous merchants adorned the hillsides. The only dry docks that existed on the sub-continent, had been constructed mid-eighteenth century. The dockyard, as it was in the 1790's, may be imagined from James Wales's water-colours made before he went up to Poona to

execute his impressive canvasses for the Resident, Charles Warre Malet.[12] From the 'bason for small vessels' with its Bundar or Custom House Pier, the Dock and Pier Batteries can be seen to the left. Not far from 'the commodious wharves and cranes' stood the regular stone quadrangle of the Castle, the centre of government. Inside, a large tank of water had been constructed in case of invasion from the sea, The anchoring ground for ships was between Butcher's Island and Bombay Fort.

The Fort, including the dockyard, lay along the eastern shore to the south of the pear-shaped island. The line of the Western Ghats is hazily discernible across that stretch of sea, part of which forms the huge natural harbour. Two long arms of land at the southern extremity of the island of course embraced a much wider extent of Back Bay than survives today, much by now having been drained. On the westernmost, the wooded Malabar Hill, stood as now, the Parsi Towers of Silence and on the eastern arm, comprising Old Woman and Kolaba Islands (now joined to the mainland) stood the Lighthouse.

In spite of this apparent prosperity, as far as the East India Company was concerned, a separate Bombay Presidency was something of an expensive luxury. Walter Ewer was sent out to Madras and the west coast of India by Henry Dundas at the Board of Control in London to report on its viability. He formed a very low opinion of the Bombay Council's administration and advised its 'reduction' from a Presidency. His advice would probably have been taken if it had not been that the threat from Buonaparte transformed Bombay into a first line of defence against possible attack from the sea, (though as a result of his report, the Malabar coast was in fact removed from the jurisdiction of Bombay to Fort St George, Madras in 1800). His advice was also taken that Company servants should not be allowed to indulge in private trade and they were forbidden after 1806. On the other hand he held the free merchants of the place in high regard.

> The Court has always been jealous of sending out Free Merchants, but it is a narrow policy, the immense trade now carried on owes its prosperity to the Free Merchants. If this not granted the trade would go into the hands of foreigners. I always heard those who made objections to this measure in England say that it was unproper because every precaution should be made use of, that the character of Englishmen may not be disgraced, whereas I find the chief culprits are the servants of the Company.[13]

It was commercial ambitions of the private merchants and the Company servants who also acted in a private capacity who made the port of Bombay function successfully. Apart from their commercial undertakings, as citizens of Bombay they served on the Grand Jury, officered the Fencible Regiment, often took an interest in Indian history, botany and languages but above all together with the Parsis and others they were single mindedly involved in making money. It is not fanciful to imagine that, in the years before the renewal of the East India Company's charter in 1813, the disappearance

from Bombay of certain of its citizens seemed to signify the end of a golden age for the Country ships – the resignation in 1812 of the champion of India built ships, William Taylor Money, the Marine Superintendent and partner of Bruce Fawcett & Co. and the return to England of the free merchant Charles Forbes, a ship owner and an unofficial banker to the Government, considered by his contemporaries, although not a servant of the East India Company, as next to the Governor in importance in the Presidency. Henry Fawcett, partner of Bruce, Fawcett, another firm on which the Government depended for funds during the Maratta war, had gone home in 1804. Others, prosperous Country ship-owners like Alexander Adamson and his partner Ardesir Dady, had died. Such characters were typical of those who, for three decades, had called the tune in Bombay. Many of those who came after appeared to follow a different ethos.

PART ONE

Shipping

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CHAPTER ONE

Shipbuilding

> *It is really astonishing to see the Persees at work in the dockyard which for expedition, proportion, strength and beauty beat any ship building I ever heard of. It is more like cabinet work. ... and the speed with which they despatch the largest fleets equipped with everything is truly admirable.*

So observed Captain FitzMaurice of H.M.'s 10th Regiment, arriving in Bombay in 1801 on board a Calcutta ship, *Cuvera*, to join the great sea-borne expedition aimed at evicting the French from Egypt. He was an intelligent observer, whose diary records the transporting of troops in Country ships. General Baird, commanding the expedition, sailed in the *William* 'a fine ship from this port', which had been launched the year before in Bombay for Alexander Adamson, a Company servant in his role of private merchant, and had already completed a trading season in China. (She had been caught in a typhoon in the China sea and almost lost.) Once arrived in the Red Sea the *William* was used by Baird as his Headquarters.[1]

FitzMaurice was only one of numerous travellers who marvelled at the unique Indian shipbuilding processes and materials. From the seventeenth to the late eighteenth century, ships for private merchants had been built at Surat; a traveller there noted the Parsis' attention to detail and slavish following of the European designs but the use of a quite different technique:

> The ship-carpenters at Suratt will take the Model of any English Vessel, in all the Curiosity of its Building, and the most artificial Instances of Workmanship about it, whether they are proper for the Convenience of Burthen, or of quick Sailing, as exactly as if they had been the first Contriver. The Wood with which they build their Ships would be very proper for our Men of War in Europe; for it has this excellence, that it never splinters by the Force of a Bullet, nor is injur'd by those violent Impressions beyond the bore of a Shot.[2]

Because of the predominance of the Parsis in the Bombay dockyard it is easy to overlook another Gujarati community who were also involved in shipbuilding, the Konkani Muslims, such as the Chelliaby [Chillaby], who

continued to build at Surat until the end of the eighteenth century although much less is known about their ships.

In 1736, the Parsi, Lowjee Nusserwanjee, already a noted shipbuilder, was persuaded to take the momentous step of leaving Surat and moving to Bombay Island, to assist in the building of a 90 foot grab. With him in the first instance came eleven other Parsi carpenters. He himself was to found a dynasty of Master Shipbuilders which after 1774 became known as the Wadias (from the Gujarati *vadia* – a ship builder) Other Parsis were to follow such as the Banias who acted as brokers to the English.

The first report on Bombay harbour was made by a Dutchman[3] in 1666, only a year after it formally came under British control and was rented to the English East India Company. The harbour had a depth of six fathoms at high and four at low water. Four years later the East India Company Court of Directors in London ordered the making of docks. Nothing was then done although in 1689 iron work was sent for repairing vessels. The marine yard was established around a mud basin. Five years after Lowjee's arrival the English Master carpenter died before he could complete the vessel they were building. Lowjee completed the task to the complete satisfaction of the Bombay Council. Mid century saw a marked increase in shipbuilding for the Bombay Marine in order to counter Maratta aggression at sea and in 1748 instructions were sent from London for work to start on a dry dock and by 1750 it was finished. A second dock was added before the end of 1762. With the completion of a third, they would become known as the Upper, Middle and Lower Old Bombay Docks. Built of granite they were deepened during the 1780s on the advice of the Admiral, because they were too shallow to allow large warships to leave during 'neaps'.[4] From 1764 Lowjee was always referred to as Master Builder. No English shipwrights were employed in the Bombay yard until the retirement of his great grandson.

An Englishman, Anthony Parsons commented on the three pairs of strong gates, allowing three ships of the line to be repaired at the same time 'as the outermost ship can warp out and another be admitted in her place every spring tide without any interruption of the work to the second and innermost ships.'[5] (The timber for the gates was brought from Tellicherry.) Near the dock was a fine ropewalk and a 'convenient place to haul down several ships at once'. In the 1770s another traveller commented that 'among the large number of good arrangements made by the English in Bombay for trade and shipping, the dock is most considerable and important ... Two ships can be careened at a time and a third basin is preparing. ... When I was in Bombay I saw a ship of war belonging to the Imam of Sana which he had sent to be refitted.'

To the Country merchants the docks were of prime importance. A dispatch from the East India Company Court of Directors in 1755 encouraged them to trade from Bombay. In peacetime, when the Maratta

Plate 1. Maneckjee Lowjee (b.1720, d.1792). On the death of their father Lowjee Nusserwanjee in 1774, he and his brother Bomanjee were appointed joint Master Shipbuilders in the Bombay dockyard. They built many of the Country Ships. (From R.A. Wadia *Bombay Dockyard* (1957))

Plate 2. Framjee Maneckjee (b. 1749). Joint Master Shipbuilder in Bombay with his cousin Jamsetjee Bomanjee, until his early death in 1804. (From R.A. Wadia *Bombay Dockyard* (1957))