BOMBAY AND THE SIDIS

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HERALDIC DEVICE AT THE ENTRANCE OF THE FORT OF DANDA-RAJPURI

BOMBAY AND THE SIDIS

BY

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WITH A FOREWORD

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FOREWORD

Mr. D. R. Banaji has paid me the compliment of asking me to write a foreword to his scholarly thesis on Bombay and the Sidis, which earned him a richly-deserved first class in the M. A. Examination. The subject is one of quite unusual interest, for the Sidis played an important part in the history of the city of Bombay in the latter part of the 17th century, and were, indeed, the only people who have ever seriously threatened it. It is curious to think that, as late as 1680, they could land in Mazgaon, and, behaving "with the insolence characteristic of the Moors in the Moghul's service", sell captives as slaves in the open market and mount on poles the heads of the Marathas they had captured in a raid on Kanheri! I am glad to see that Mr. Banaji pays due tribute to the memory of his gallant countryman, Rustom Dorabji, who, though a mere boy of twenty, organized a force of Kolis, and attacked the invaders with such success that the Company made him Patel of Bombay. The root-cause of the trouble was, of course, the fact that the East India Company was too mean to spend money upon proper fortifications. The wonder is that the city was not attacked more often. The history of Bombay is a fascinating one, and much of it remains even now very imperfectly investigated. Mr. Banaji has made extensive use of the valuable unpublished material in the Bombay Record Office, and it is to be hoped that his example will be followed by other workers in the same field. His work is fully documented, and is an original contribution to the subject of the highest value.

H. G. Rawlinson.

PREFACE

The author does not claim to add a new chapter to the annals of British History in India, but he is confident that his studies may throw new and unexpected sidelights on the early transactions of the East India Company in Bombay.

The few books extant, dealing with this subject, were not written on historical lines, inasmuch as they totally ignored the valuable records of the Bombay Government. These records constitute a rich mine of information, and the author gladly profits by this occasion to express his gratitude for the readiness and kindness with which the Director of Information granted permission to study the official documents.

This permission was all the more appreciated because Janjira State itself had no records to help him in his study. In reply to his request the Dewan wrote : "I am sorry to say there is nothing in our Archives to help you to find materials in connection with your thesis." Later on a visit to Janjira strikingly bore out the Dewan's words. In fact, all the ancient documents kept in the Palace of the Sidis perished when this was burnt in the second half of the last century.

The author spent nine months in the Bombay Government Record Office and went through the tedious task of examining about six hundred books.

Besides these, he has consulted a number of other books, amongst which may be mentioned as the more important the works of Grant Duff, Orme, Foster, Forrest, Anderson, Bruce and Alexander Hamilton. He has obtained access to them after resorting to various well-known libraries, such as the Royal Asiatic, the Secretariat and the Library of the Indian Research Historical Institute. However, the main source of information on which he has relied in developing his thesis are the unpublished documents. The published sources have been used to clear up here and there some doubtful questions, only vaguely mentioned in the unpublished documents.

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For Kenary real throughout Kenery.

INTRODUCTION

Janjira is the Marathi corruption of the Arabic 'Jazirah', meaning 'an island'. Though the whole country is generally called Janjira, yet the name truly refers to the island fortress, namely the Fort of Danda-Rajpuri. It lies between 17°59' and 18°32' north latitude and 72°57' and 73°21' east longitude.

Janjira, also called Habsan, is a small state to the south of Bombay, about 26 miles away from it. It is situated between the Kolaba and the Ratnagiri Districts, and the surface is covered with hill ranges running parallel to the arms of the sea that penetrate eastward into the interior. Near the mouths of the creeks, belts of palm-groves fringe the shore and present a charming view.

Its area is about 324 square miles, and the population, according to the present census, is about 87,000 (76,300 in 1881). 'Amongst the castes that inhabit this state, there are Kayasth Prabhus, Gujarat and Marwar Vanis, Kunbis, Agris, Bhandaris, Marathas, Malis, Jangaris, Guravas, Gavlis, Dhangars, Kolis, Kharvis, Chambhars, Mhars, Mangs, Buruds, Vanjaris, Beldars (religious beggars), Kanphate Nath Gosavis, Gonshalis, Dakujis, Bairagis, Gopals, Kathkaris and lastly Mussalmans. Of the resident population 80 per cent. are Hindus and 20 per cent. Mahomedans.

Among the Mahomedans of Janjira there is a small group of interesting individuals. It consists of the famous Sidis, whose name will often occur in the following pages. According to the census of 1881 their number amounted only to 258, and there is no likelihood that it has considerably increased during the last fifty years. The word 'Sidi' is a term of respect, a corrupt form of Syed, which according to some authorities means 'priest'. But this explanation is contested by many for the simple reason that 'Sidis' became the name of the Abyssinians, men who were notorious for their lack of priestly qualities.

Why and when did these Sidis come to India?—In ancient times much trade was carried on between India and Africa. In those days ships loaded with cargo used to ply between Bengal and the Western Coast of India and Egypt. This cargo was taken to Alexandria, Samarkand and throughout the whole of Europe. Therefore, from early times some countries in Europe thought of carrying on trade with India. Among these were the Genoese, the Venetians and the Aragonese. But they soon found out that the way across the sea was not safe and hence they ceased for a time to trade with India.

The only people who traded with India in the 14th century were the Mahomedans of southern Iran and Arbastan. Now the country of the Abyssinians or the Habshis was not far from Arabia; and in course of time the Sidis also started to trade with India. So, one point is quite clear, and that is that the Habshis or the Sidis came to India only for the purposes of trade.¹

However, the Sidis were not destined to achieve great fame in the line of trade. There were too many competitors in the field, and those competitors, though they may have been less able seamen than the Sidis, had greater resources at their disposal. Accordingly the Sidis were disappointed in their expectations. They then enlisted in the military service of the Brahmani (Bahamani) Kingdom in the Deccan.

This seems to be the true explanation of the way in which the Sidis came to India. There is also a legendary account, which is worthwhile mentioning. According to this legend the Sidis entered Janjira much like the Greeks entered the doomed city of Troy. The Sidis, however, did not build a huge wooden horse; they proceeded in the following manner : About the year A. D. 1489 an Abyssinian, disguised as a merchant, obtained permission from the Chiefs of the Island to land 300 boxes, supposed to contain valuable wares. But in reality every one of these boxes contained a soldier, and by this ingenious trick the Abyssinians possessed themselves of Janjira Island and Fort.

After they had settled in Janjira, they soon began to prosper in a wondrous manner; and within a comparatively short time their influence was much greater than their numbers warranted. Their success was the result of their bravery; for the Sidis proved themselves able seamen and reliable fighting-men. Their prowess on sea resulted in the appointment of Sidi Captains as admirals of the Moghul fleet. Their skill in military affairs is evidenced by the fame of their leaders, men like Malik Ambar,*

¹ Bhonsle, जंजिराचा इतिदास.

^{*} Ferishta-Briggs, III, p. 319 and passim.

Malik Yakub¹ and Malik Kafur, ² names well known in Indian history.

Among these three generals Malik Ambar deserves special mention, because on one occasion he crossed swords with the English at a time when the latter were already powerful. In 1621 Malik Ambar made bold to attack a British Caravan;³ and his attack was successful for he inflicted on the English a loss which amounted to ''210,000 ruppies, but the losse growing thereby would be six leques ruppies''.⁴ Of course, the English were anxious to secure redress for this injury, and Robert Jeffries was sent to Daulatabad by the Surat authorities to discuss matters with the Sidi general.

But Malik Ambar was not inclined to return the booty he had taken. It would seem that by way of retaliation the English had seized one of Malik Ambar's ships. Accordingly, when the British envoy pressed the Sidi to make restitution, the latter was satisfied with asking : "if the English be men of conscience to come to him for monie and yett robb his shipp?"⁵ The result was that the English did not receive the compensation hoped for; on the contrary their capture of Malik Ambar's ship was to cause them considerable trouble in their relations with the Sidis of Janjira, as will be shown later on.

This brief introductory note may help us to gain that initial knowledge about the origin and the character of the Sidis, without which it would be difficult to enter on a study of the relations between the Sidis of Janjira and the British of Bombay.

¹ The Indian Antiquary (1924), p. 36n and passim.

^{*} Ferishta-Briggs, I, p. 365 and passim.

^s English Factories, 1655-60, p. 208.

⁴ Abstract of letters from R. Jeffries, October-November, 1621, English Factories, 1618-21, p. 316.

⁵ Abstract of letters, English Factories, 1618-21, p. 317.

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