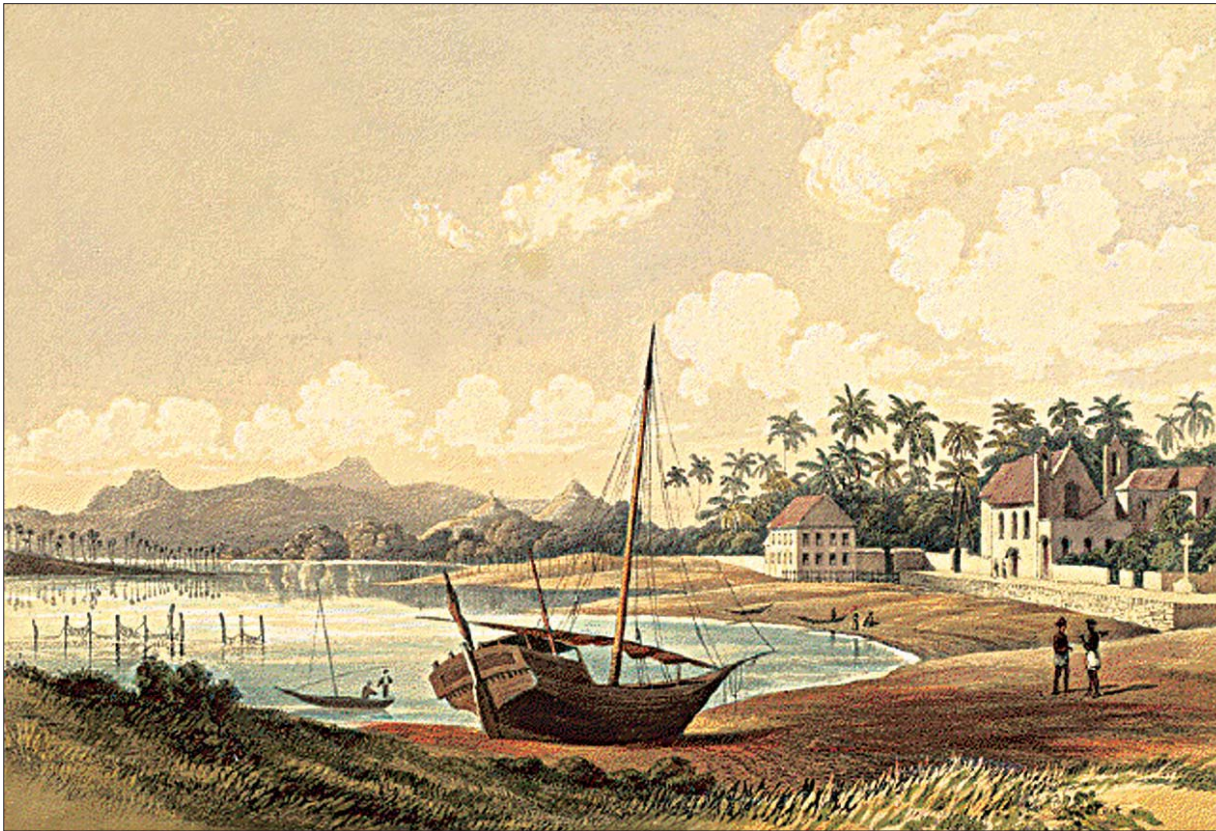
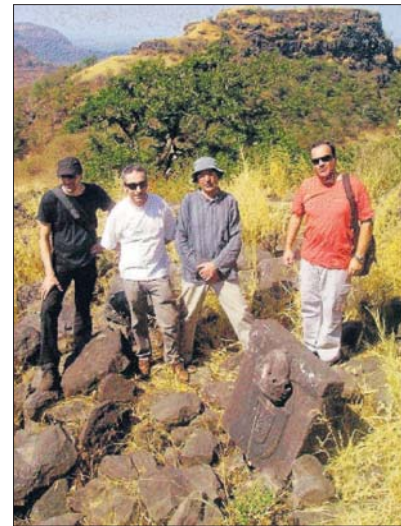


# Portuguese laid foundations for the megapolis

# Bombay before British



◀ Mahim Church, an early example of Portuguese architecture - from a lithograph, British Library, ca. 1850



▲ Paulo Varela Gomes and Walter Rossa (third and fourth from left) stand before a Portuguese stone with other researchers at Asherigad 100 km from Mumbai

The Portuguese were instrumental in the initial development of Bombay much before the British rule

Long before the arrival of the British, the Portuguese had already mounted a clear and strategic presence in Mumbai. After its takeover of Goa in 1510, the maritime power set about consolidating its presence in north Konkan attempting several incursions on the islands of Bombay and Mahim governed at the time by the Sultans of Gujarat.

In 1526, the Portuguese established a factory at Bassein. In 1528-29 they seized the fort of Mahim. With the largest fleet at their command, the Portuguese under Goa's Viceroy Nuno da Cunha had become a nagging maritime presence for for Sultan Bahadur Shah of Gujarat.

Wary of the growing power of the Mughals, Bahadur Shah chose to strike up an alliance with the Portuguese. In 1534 he signed off the seven islands of Bombay and the strategic town of Bassein to the Portuguese in a treaty of peace and commerce, bringing to an end Islamic rule on the islands.

The Portuguese gave the islands various names but they eventually came to be known as Bombaim (or good bay). In 1661, Bombay was made over to the British as part of Catherine of Braganza's dowry when she married Charles II of England. Though Portugal held on to the territories north and east of Bombay - Salsette, Bassein, Trombay and Uran for another century, the British eventually edged them out of these, ending for good Portuguese presence in Bombay.

Contrary to popular perception that Portugal had no territorial empire in the East, between the 1530s and 1740 the colonisers had managed to shore up a 220



◀ A Portuguese architectural ruin at Godhbandar in Thane district near Mumbai

km-long province on India's west coast that stretched from Daman to Chaul (in Raigad) south of Mumbai. Portugal called this the Northern Province and it included settlements at Daman, Diu Chaul, Bassein, Salsette and Bombay.

Portugal followed a policy of political and religious expansionism in the region, but unlike Goa (its Southern Province and prized possession), the colonial power did little with the Northern Province except run a few outposts and factories and collect revenues from the sale of its rich teak, rice, tea and timber. Its 200-year presence in India's commercial capital, except for the churches it built, has been virtually stamped out by the indelible architectural imprint left behind by the British.

But beneath the sprawling, frenzied metropolis that is Mumbai today, are remnants of an urban infrastructure of forts, little towns and roads that was

created by the Portuguese in the 16th and 17th centuries and built over by the British, says Portuguese architectural historian Paulo Varela Gomes who together with historian Walter Rossa heads the research project 'Bombay Before the British'.

For seven years now, a team of Portuguese researchers sponsored by the University of Coimbra and Universidade Nova de Lisboa have been collating and evaluating data on the impact of the Portuguese period on the growth of Mumbai during the 19th and 20th centuries.

The objective, says Gomes, is to put together a database of interactive information online about this little known historical reality. "It changes completely the way Mumbai is seen. As a modern, Indian metropolis, Mumbai is not a British or Indian invention. The base for this vibrant territory and its thriving economy

was laid before the British arrived by the Portuguese *fazendas* (revenue departments) which already existed," Gomes says.

The project which had nine researchers at its peak, has been financially and technologically challenging. Satellite photographs and old maps had to be georeferenced to reconstruct the image of the former District of Bassein or to locate architectural landmarks that no longer exist. Gomes and companions have spent months in Mumbai to identify and map material traces of Portuguese presence in crumbling or lost forts, churches, neighbourhoods and houses.

A trip to Godhbandar, Thane, revealed that a once magnificent 17th century Portuguese nobleman's house has been converted into a hotel.

In 2007, a four member-group of researchers trekked all the way up to Asherigad after a group of week-end hikers alerted them to the find of stones of old Portuguese ruins. The tip-off led them to what was once the 'Serra de Asserim', a 1739 Portuguese fort. "There is a gigantic pool of information that sits there and is still to be tapped," Gomes says, pointing to the vast amount of historical material scattered in archives and libraries in Portugal and India that have yet to be unearthed and studied for the project. With funds at a low, the project has hit a snag for now. But the research, and the interactive search for material will continue, he says, to make the historical facts known.

Devika Sequeira in Panaji