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A History of Mumbai

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Introduction

Mumbai, formerly known as Bombay, is a city whose very existence seems improbable—a pulsating metropolis fashioned from seven disparate islands by the force of human ambition, ingenuity, and circumstance. Its story is unlike that of any other Indian city. Over thousands of years, Mumbai has continually reinvented itself: from Stone Age communities and ancient maritime trade outposts, through imperial conquests by Hindu, Islamic, Portuguese, and British powers, to its contemporary role as India's financial powerhouse, entertainment capital, and a global city of distinction.

At the heart of Mumbai's history is transformation. What was once a scattering of low-lying islands fringed with mangroves was steadily knit together by land reclamation, engineering marvels, and the relentless drive of its inhabitants. Each wave of rulers—whether dynasties from the Deccan, European traders, or the administrators of empire—left behind not only monuments, place names, and communities, but also new ideas that shaped the city's evolution. Mumbai's Koli and Aagri fishermen, its early Buddhist monks and Portuguese padres, its Parsi entrepreneurs, British officials, and freedom fighters all contributed layers to the dense historical fabric of the city.

Yet Mumbai's history is not just a tale of ruling elites and their projects. It is equally a chronicle of ordinary people: migrants escaping famine, priests and artisans seeking patronage, traders following the pulse of the global economy, and countless men and women building lives in informal settlements and gleaming towers alike. This is a city of complex contradictions—of great wealth and enduring poverty, spectacular opportunity and daunting challenges, resilient communal harmony and the scars of unrest.

Over centuries, Mumbai became a synonym for opportunity, where people from all corners of India and beyond came to seek fortune or freedom, bringing with them a tapestry of languages, faiths, and customs. The city has been an incubator for social movements, a staging ground for the country's struggle for independence, and the cradle of modern Indian cinema. Its streets have borne witness not only to grand celebrations and pageantry, but also tragedies and trauma—from epidemics and famines to riots and terror attacks.

This book endeavors to unravel the journey of Mumbai in all its complexity. Drawing on archaeology, archival records, oral histories, and accounts of key institutions and communities, it traces the ancient origins of the city, explores the dramatic interplay of politics, trade, and culture that shaped its trajectory, and considers the forces—both local and global—that forged its present identity. By organizing this story into twenty-five thematic chapters, the book hopes to present a nuanced and accessible account

of how Mumbai was made, remade, and is still in the making.

In telling the story of Mumbai, we are also telling a larger story: about migration and coexistence, about resilience in the face of adversity, and about the never-ending process of constructing an urban identity. Mumbai remains ever-changing, a city of contrasts and surprises, resilience and hope—a living testament to its history and the possibilities of its future.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Seven Islands: Prehistoric and Ancient Settlements

Before it became the sprawling, interconnected megacity we know today, Mumbai was something far more fragmented, far more elemental. Imagine, if you will, an archipelago of seven distinct islands, rising gently from the Arabian Sea along India's western coast. These were not towering landmasses, but rather low-lying, verdant outcrops, separated by tidal flats, creeks, and the ever-present sea. This fragmented geography, a natural tapestry woven from land and water, laid the foundation for everything that followed.

The history of human presence on these islands stretches back much further than the grand empires or colonial powers that would later shape their destiny. Evidence unearthed by archaeologists suggests that people were living on these islands as far back as the Stone Age. While the details of these earliest inhabitants remain somewhat shrouded in the mists of time, their artifacts speak of a rudimentary existence, likely centered around exploiting the rich resources of the coastal environment – hunting, gathering, and perhaps early forms of fishing.

As millennia passed, more settled communities began to emerge. Among the earliest known inhabitants to leave a more distinct mark were the Koli and Aagri peoples. These were fishing and farming communities, respectively, deeply rooted in the soil and the surrounding waters. Their origins were tied to the Marathi-Konkani culture of the mainland, but the islands were their home, their livelihood, their world. They navigated the tidal channels in their boats, pulled harvests from the land where possible, and established villages on the more stable ground.

The seven islands that formed this ancient archipelago were known individually: Parel, Mazagaon, Mahim, Colaba, Worli, Old Woman's Island (also referred to as Little Colaba), and the island known simply as Bombay. Each possessed its own character, its own contours, and its own small settlements. Life on these islands would have been dictated by the rhythms of the tides and the seasons, a constant interplay between the land and the sea that defined the existence of the Koli and Aagri people.

For the Koli, the sea was everything. They were expert fishermen, intimately familiar with the currents, the monsoons, and the rich bounty of the Arabian Sea. Their lives were spent on the water, their villages clustered along the shores, filled with the smell of drying fish and the mending of nets. The Aagri, while also connected to the coast, focused more on cultivating the land, particularly the salt pans and fertile areas where certain crops could thrive despite the saline environment.

Even in these ancient times, the strategic location of the islands on the west coast of India did not go unnoticed by the wider world. By as early as 1000 BCE, there is evidence to suggest that the area was already engaged in maritime trade. Small as they were, these islands offered sheltered coves and potential anchorages for the rudimentary vessels of the age. This put them in contact with distant civilizations.

Trade routes crisscrossed the ancient seas, connecting disparate cultures and economies. The islands of Mumbai found themselves, albeit perhaps on the periphery, linked to these networks. Archaeological finds and historical accounts from later periods hint at connections with sophisticated societies like those in ancient Egypt and Persia. What exactly was being traded from these islands at such an early stage is not entirely clear, but it likely involved marine products, possibly timber from the coastal forests, or other raw materials found in the vicinity.

This early involvement in trade, however modest, is significant. It demonstrates that the islands, even in their fragmented state and under the stewardship of their indigenous communities, were not isolated backwaters. They were points of contact, however infrequent, with the broader world, foreshadowing their future destiny as a major global port and commercial hub. The Koli and Aagri, while focused on their immediate survival, were perhaps unknowingly part of a much larger economic ecosystem.

Life on the islands during this prehistoric and early ancient period would have been relatively simple and close-knit. Villages were likely small, built from local materials – perhaps thatch and mud, or timber. The social structure would have been based around community elders and traditional customs passed down through generations. The challenges were those of the natural world: unpredictable weather, the power of the sea, and the need to secure enough food for survival.

The spiritual lives of the inhabitants were deeply intertwined with nature. The sea, the land, and the elements would have been central to their beliefs and rituals. One can imagine shrines dedicated to sea deities or spirits of the land, seeking protection and prosperity for their fishing voyages and agricultural endeavors. These early belief systems formed the bedrock of the cultural identity of the Koli and Aagri communities, an identity that has, remarkably, persisted through millennia of change and upheaval.

The topography of the islands themselves played a crucial role in shaping these early settlements. Each island presented its own unique set of opportunities and challenges. Some, like Bombay island itself or Mahim, offered slightly larger or more fertile areas suitable for habitation and cultivation. Others, like the smaller outcrops or those with more extensive tidal flats, were perhaps used seasonally or for specific purposes like fishing camps.

The separation between the islands, while a defining geographical feature, also meant that development was localized and somewhat constrained. Communication and travel between them would have been primarily by boat, limiting large-scale interaction or the formation of a unified political entity. Each island, to a certain extent, was its own small world, connected to its neighbors and the mainland by the same waters that also kept them apart.

The legacy of these earliest periods, while lacking monumental structures or extensive written records, is nonetheless profound. It is in the enduring presence of the Koli and Aagri communities, who are recognized as the original inhabitants of the land that would become Mumbai. Their traditions, their language (dialects of Marathi), and their deep connection to the sea are living links to the islands' most ancient past.

The Stone Age tools found here and the evidence of early trade routes serve as tantalizing glimpses into a world long gone, a world that existed before the rise of powerful empires and the arrival of foreign powers. It is a reminder that the story of Mumbai begins not with grand designs of urban planning or global commerce, but with the fundamental human act of settling on a patch of land and making a life, interacting with the environment and, eventually, with others beyond their immediate horizon.

The seven islands, in their original, distinct forms, were the raw material. Their unique geography, with its interplay of land and sea, dictated the initial patterns of human settlement and activity. The lives of the Koli and Aagri, centered on fishing and farming, represented the primary way of life for centuries, a sustainable existence shaped by the natural limits and bounty of the archipelago.

While history often focuses on the major turning points – the arrival of empires, the construction of great buildings, the shifts in political power – it is essential to remember these foundational layers. The prehistory and early ancient history of Mumbai, rooted in the seven islands and the lives of its first inhabitants, provided the essential stage upon which all subsequent dramas would unfold. It was the humble beginning of a journey that would lead to the creation of one of the world's largest and most dynamic cities.

The distinct nature of each island also meant that they developed somewhat independently, even as they shared a common cultural background with the mainland. This initial fragmentation would be a recurring theme in Mumbai's history, as different parts of the future city developed at different paces and with different characteristics, eventually to be unified through massive engineering projects and administrative fiat.

The early trade connections, though perhaps limited in scope compared to later periods, were vital in planting the seed of the islands' future. They established the location as a potential point of exchange, a place where goods and ideas from

different regions could meet. This inherent potential, born from geography and recognized even in antiquity, was a critical factor in the islands' long-term trajectory.

The Stone Age inhabitants and the early Koli and Aagri communities faced a challenging environment. The monsoon rains were intense, the sea could be unpredictable, and the low-lying nature of the islands made them vulnerable to tides and storms. Survival required resilience, ingenuity, and a deep understanding of the local ecosystem. These qualities would, in a sense, become embedded in the character of the city itself, which has faced numerous environmental and social challenges throughout its history.

The names of the islands themselves offer clues to their ancient past, though the precise origins of some are debated. Names like Mahim (possibly derived from Mahikawati, the capital of a later kingdom) or Worli hint at long histories of human settlement and significance, predating the more commonly known colonial names. These names are linguistic echoes of the ancient world, whispering stories of the people who first lived on and named these lands.

The transition from prehistoric hunter-gatherers to more settled fishing and farming communities like the Koli and Aagri marked a significant step in the islands' development. It implied a deeper relationship with the land and sea, the establishment of more permanent dwelling places, and the development of specialized skills and social structures necessary for these livelihoods. This laid the groundwork for more complex societies to emerge.

While the archaeological record from this early period is not as extensive as that from later empires, the artifacts that have been found, such as pottery shards or tools, provide tangible links to these ancient inhabitants. Each find is a small piece of a larger puzzle, helping historians and archaeologists reconstruct the lives and times of the people who first called these seven islands home.

The absence of large-scale political structures during this earliest period meant that life was likely organized at a very local level. Decisions would have been made within villages or small communities, based on tradition and the needs of the inhabitants. There was no overarching authority governing all seven islands, reflecting their physical separation and the localized nature of early human settlement in the region.

The natural environment was not just a backdrop to life; it was the primary determinant of existence. The types of fish available, the fertility of the soil in specific areas, the accessibility of fresh water sources - all these factors shaped where people settled and how they lived. The islands were wilder, more untamed, and human life was intimately connected to the rhythms and forces of nature in a way that is hard to imagine in the context of the modern metropolis.

Even the potential for conflict would have been different. While inter-village disputes or conflicts over resources may have occurred, the scale would have been small, confined to the local area or perhaps between neighboring islands. The idea of large armies or organized warfare on these islands belongs to a much later period of their history.

The limited nature of early trade also suggests a predominantly subsistence economy. While some goods may have been exchanged with external parties, the primary focus of the Koli and Aagri communities would have been on producing enough food and resources for their own needs. This self-sufficiency was a hallmark of early island life.

The legacy of the prehistoric and early ancient period is subtle but enduring. It is in the very geography of the city, which still bears the marks of its island origins despite centuries of reclamation. It is in the cultural heritage of the Koli and Aagri communities, who continue to live in Mumbai and maintain aspects of their traditional way of life. And it is in the deep historical roots of the city, reaching back thousands of years before it was given any name that we might recognize today.

Understanding this initial phase is crucial to appreciating the full sweep of Mumbai's history. It provides the context for all the subsequent transformations – the arrival of empires, the integration of diverse communities, the massive engineering projects, and the eventual emergence of a global city. The story begins here, on these seven small islands, with the first humans who looked out at the vast sea and decided to stay.

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