

# The Bombay Dockyard in the early Nineteenth Century



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As most readers will be aware HMS Trincomalee was built in Bombay under the direction of Jamsetjee Bomanjee (1754-1821), the great Parsi master shipbuilder of the Wadia dynasty, the ship being floated out of the dock on 12 October 1817. The following extracts from nineteenth century journals add some colour both to the nature of the dockyard and Jamsetjee Bomanjee himself.

From 'Voyages and Travels to India, Ceylon, The Red Sea, Abyssinia and Egypt in the years 1802-06 by George, Viscount Valentia':

*'The establishment of the' (Bombay) 'dock-yard is almost entirely composed of Persees, a people of whom I shall have much to say hereafter. It has been attempted to appoint an European master-builder, but the new comer has seldom long survived his arrival, and the only builders are now Persees. They are certainly fully equal to the business; but the absolute monopoly they possess has given rise to many abuses. The person who contracts to supply the timber, and the person who examines it on receipt, are both Persees; consequently the articles are frequently of inferior quality. The master-builder has only people of his own persuasion under him; no complaint therefore is ever made of neglect of work on the one part, or of overcharges on the other.'*

*A still greater evil arises from the local circumstances of the dock-yard, which is a perfect thoroughfare, nay more, a fashionable lounging place for all the idlers of the town. The consequence is, that instead of working the whole day, many of the artificers only make their appearance to answer to their name at the hour of calling the roll, and if they please, depart immediately afterwards, without any possibility of their being convicted of the neglect of work; for the dock-yard is open to the town, and they may pass and repass as often as they choose. The frauds which must arise from the same cause are incalculable, and call aloud for reform; than nothing could be more easy, by the shutting up of the yard from all but the workmen and officers, and the introduction of the regulations of his Majesty's docks at Portsmouth, Plymouth and Chatham. The Bombay Government have, to a certain degree, felt obliged to submit to these abuses, from the dread of the Persees giving up the ship-building business, of which they are the only possessors.'*

In 'The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland' of 1860, Jamsetjee Bomanjee is mentioned in an article on 'Traits of Indian Character':

*'Most of us know the liberality with which we bestow the contemptuous epithet of black fellow upon the natives.'*

*General Briggs relates a remarkable anecdote of the caustic sarcasm with which Jamsetjee, the celebrated Bombay Parsee ship-builder of the dock yard, who had risen from the grade of a*

*common ship carpenter to be master builder, acknowledged the epithet. He had completed, entirely by native labour, a frigate for the royal navy; she was ready for the launch, to which the governor, staff and naval officers were invited. During the preparations Jamsetjee walked round the vessel, viewing her with evident pride and complacency. He then went on board, and having gone quietly into the hold, he caused to be engraved upon the keelson:- 'This ship was built by a damned black fellow, A.D. 1800.' He said nothing about it at the time, but some years afterwards when the ship came into dock, he pointed out the inscription, and the reproof it involved.'*



*Jamsetjee Bomanjee Wadia, 1756 – 1821  
Attributed to the artist J. Dorman (National Maritime Museum, London)*

In February 1818, Lieutenant Colonel Fitz Clarence was in Bombay, where he visited the dockyard and on 5th February recorded in his 'Journal of a route across India, through Egypt to England':

*'I was much delighted with the appearance of the venerable Jumpsetjee' (Jomsetjee) 'Bomajee, and had a long conversation with him. I made the veteran builder promise to give me his*

picture. He is to call on me tomorrow, and to bring with him a piece of plate the Board of Admiralty presented to him on the arrival in England of the Minden, 74, built in this dock-yard. Captain Meriton shewed me a model of that vessel, which was built piecemeal and at the same time as the vessel itself, and every timber was added as the shipwright placed them on the vessel in the building dock.....

.....Jumpsetjee called upon me this morning, having brought with him his urn, a present from the admiralty. It is a handsome piece of plate, but not very massy, with an inscription; and the handle on the top is the exact model of the Minden without her masts, and has her name in very minute characters on the stern. Upon the whole it did not seem to me worthy either of the dignity of the donors or the merit of the donee. He presented me with an engraving of himself, a strong resemblance, which I will carry to England with me, as he is a character I highly respect.

I hired a servant to wait on me here, who is a Parsee, and to my astonishment last night refused to put out my candle, but called another person to do it. This originated in the reverence of that sect for the element of fire. I should be curious to know what they would do if their houses were in flames. These gentlemen would make very bad firemen to any of the insurance offices. They are all well educated, and generally speak and even write our language perfectly. They are in their complexion much fairer than the natives, though not quite so fair as the British.'

#### **The final extract is from 'The Literary Panorama and National Regis' of 1817:**

'Bombay, April, 20' (1816) '- On Saturday last, was floated out of the Bombay Docks, the new Ship Buckinghamshire, of the burthen of 1350 Tons, built for the Honourable Company's regular service, and commanded by Captain Frederick Adams: and on the following day, the Amphitrite frigate of 38 guns, built for his Majesty's service.

The ceremony on the first mentioned day was attended by the Right Honourable the Governor; the Commander in Chief; and other persons of consideration, when in naming the Ship, the Bottle was thrown by the fair hand of Lady Nightingall.

We have no hesitation in saying, that two finer Ships were never sent to sea, and we confidently trust, they will not only stand the ordeal of closest inspection, but remain proud monuments, of the excellence of the materials, skill and zeal of the Venerable Builder, and of the ability of the artificers in the Bombay Dock Yard.'

The Trincomalee could only be laid down when the Amphitrite (her sister ship), and the Buckinghamshire had been floated out of the docks, her keel being laid down in the upper old dock on 25 April 1816.

**QD40: Originally appeared In the "Quarterdeck" magazine  
Ref: 2010 Issue 1 (Spring) pages 8 to 10**