

Heptanesia: Seven Islands of Bombay

BY JERRY PINTO

THE STORY SO FAR: BRITISH OFFICIAL GERALD AUNGIER ARRIVED ON THE WESTERN COAST OF INDIA IN THE 1660S. IT WAS UNDER HIM THAT BOMBAY DEVELOPED INTO A PORT CITY

So, my city had turned up on the maps of the maritime powers for yonks. Even if they didn't want to stop here, they had to know about it because they had to know where to get fresh water. And Bombay must have been one of those places where you could take on some fresh water.

Remember the Greeks? One of the greatest minds of all time was Aristotle. There didn't seem to be anything he wasn't interested in. Even if he

is remembered chiefly for his philosophy today, he was interested in everything from aesthetics to zoology. Geography was also part of what he stud-

ied. And on his Mappa Mundi 2, he marked my city as Heptanesia. Add that to the list of names.

"Hept" is the Greek word for seven. "Nesia" is islands. Hence, Polynesia means many islands.

And this may be where we got the notion that Bombay was seven islands. These are supposed to be: Mahim, Colaba, Little Colaba or Old Woman's Island, Worli, Mazgaon, Parel, Isle of Bombay. But why isn't Gharapuri counted? That makes it Octanesia. Or Butcher Island? Nonanesia, then. Oyster Rock? Decanesia?

At First There were the Kolis
Okay, so it was a bunch of islands, seven if you believed the Greeks, more if you just count. And the Kolis lived here and fished in the sea and grew rice where the land wasn't too salty and made offerings to the sea after the monsoon. (They still do, on Nariyal Poornima, which is the full moon day in the month



of Shraavan.) Imagine, if you can, what it must have felt like to confront a storm at sea when you're in a little boat and with only oars to get you to the shore. The sea must have seemed such a vital force — wild, untamed and godlike.

And even today, you don't take

it lightly. I remember listening to the radio as a child and at the end of the day's programme, there would be a weather report which would end (most of the time) with "Machhwaaron ke liye koi vishesh soochna nahin hai". ("There is no special announcement for fishermen".) And if you

went to the market, you were, of course, expected to bargain. But if you tried to bargain too hard, the Koli fisherwoman would say, "Our men go out and die to get these fish. How much will you pay for their blood?"

Then There were Others

History left few marks on the city. Bimbisara, the Magadha king, is supposed to have had his stables at Mahikavati, the old name for Mahim in the sixth century BC. And the Rashtrakutas built the great cave temples at Gharapuri between the seventh and eighth century AD...

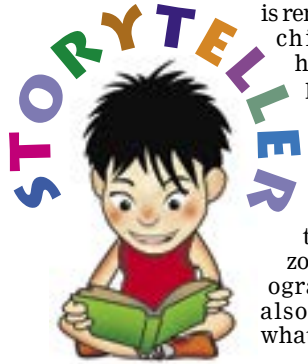
Arrival of the Parsis

The Parsis arrived in India in the tenth century, in Gujarat. Some historians, however, question this date. They had been driven away from the fertile crescent of Iran and had arrived by sea. They sent word to the king of the area asking him for permission to stay. The king is said to have sent them a riddle as an answer — a pot of milk, filled right to the brim. The elders understood what the king did not want to say in so many words: We are full and there is no room for you.

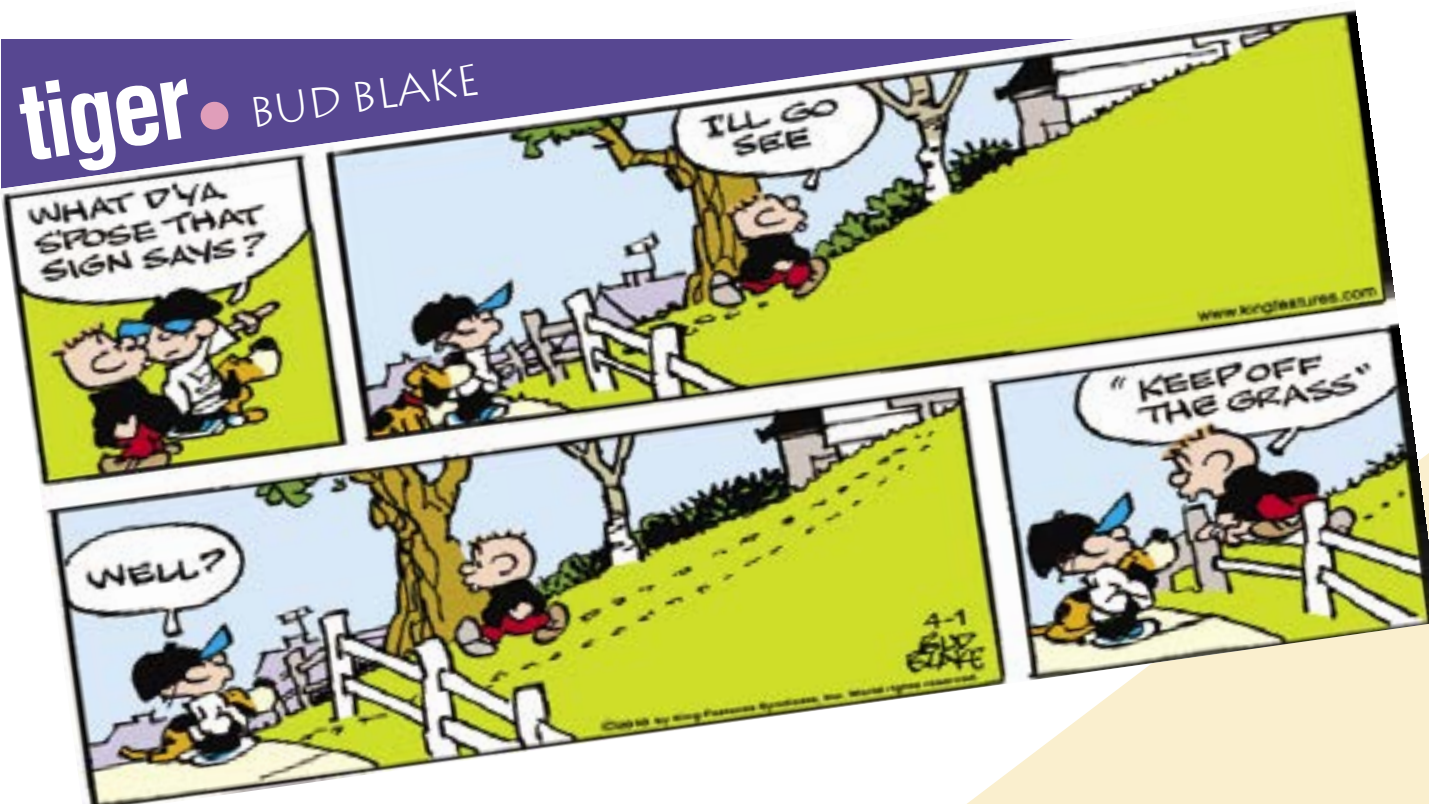
So, the Parsis just added some sugar to the milk and sent it back. In other words: we won't take up much space and we will make things better. They also promised they wouldn't try to convert the locals to their religion and that they would learn to speak the local language — Gujarati.

► **The end**
Excerpted from Postcards from Bombay by Jerry Pinto;
Published by Scholastic;
Price: Rs 131

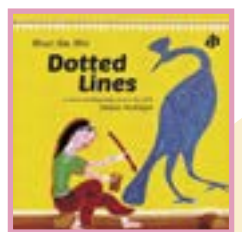
Illustration: Arka Paitandi



tiger • BUD BLAKE



BOOKWATCH



● This is the story of Bhuri Bai Bhil, a tribal artist from Jhabua in Madhya Pradesh. Bhuri talks about her childhood, her village, their gods and festivals. Later she goes to work in the city as a daily wage labourer. One day, someone asks her to paint her traditional Pithora art. After that Bhuri paints more and more, and eventually becomes famous. The pages are beautifully illustrated.

DOTTED LINES
ILLUSTRATOR: DEBJANI
MUKHERJEE
PUBLISHER: KATHA