

Henry Bartle Frere

1815 - 1884 and

The Frere Bridge

1921

Mumbai Legacy Project
D Ward



The Frere Road Over Bridge, or Frere Bridge, across the Grant Road railway tracks, was constructed in 1921. It reflects the historical and architectural significance of that period and is reminiscent of early development in the city (Mumbai Live, 2021). The bridge was built as an East-West connector in Grant Road, linking the present-day Nana Chowk on the western side of Grant Road station to Maulana Shaukat Ali Road on the eastern side (Siddique, 2019). It was named after a colonial administrator who contributed immensely to the administration and growth of modern Bombay.

Born on 29th March 1815 at Clydach House in Wales, Henry Bartle Edward Frere, Baronet, was the ninth child and sixth son of Mary and Edward Frere. His father served as the manager of the Clydach Ironworks (Martineau, 1895, 18). Henry received his education at the Grammar School in Bath and later attended the East India College, subsequently known as Haileybury (Martineau, 1895, 18). He was an intelligent student, winning prizes and accolades for academics and in other spheres. In December 1833, Henry Frere secured the highest rank among the graduating students of the college. Given the option to choose among the Presidencies, he opted for Bombay because his brother William was already stationed there (Martineau, 1895, 8).

British citizens arriving in India on appointments were required to pass an examination in the native languages before they were formally appointed. Henry had managed to clear it within three months of his arrival while he lived with his brother, a judicial civil servant, after which he was sent to Poona (Martineau, 1895, 17). He commenced his official career in the Bombay Deccan, engaging with people, and was involved in the Land Revenue settlement, a role that involved direct interaction with the agricultural community (Morris, 1890, 149).



Subsequently, in June 1842, Governor Sir George Arthur selected Bartle Frere to serve as Private Secretary to the Governor of Bombay (Ranade, 1990, 6). This appointment provided him with the essential opportunity to assume high offices, as Sir George Arthur relied on Bartle Frere for support with effective administration. During this period, Bartle Frere took the lead in establishing railroads in India, marking a significant achievement for that era (Ranade, 1990, 7).

He wedded Catherine Arthur, the second daughter of Sir Arthur George, in the year 1844. Throughout his career, his wife had been a steadfast companion, sharing the triumphs and challenges of his professional journey. (Temple, 1884, 403). Lady Frere wholeheartedly supported his endeavours for female education and, notably, became the first Lady in authority to welcome Hindu and Parsi ladies to the Government House (Morris, 1890, 149).

After serving as a Private Secretary, Frere fulfilled his appointments as Assistant Commissioner in the Customs at Bombay till 1847, Resident at Satara and later its Commissioner in 1849. In 1850, he received an appointment from the Governor of Bombay, at that time, Lord Falkland, to serve as the Commissioner in Sindh. Recognised as an all-round man, he earned this epithet due to his comprehensive approach to administration. His responsibilities spanned areas such as revenue and finance, public works and improvements, the judicial system, educational initiatives, and the management of diverse communities, encompassing European and native populations (Emery, 1984, 342). It was Frere who introduced municipalities into India in 1849 and 1950. In 1854, he played an important role in introducing postage stamps into Sind, a couple of years before their adoption throughout the rest of India. Additionally, he initiated the canal irrigation system (James, 231).

The position of Governor of Bombay became vacant in early 1862, and Sir Bartle Frere was nominated to assume the role. He promptly took on the responsibilities of Governor and commenced his duties, keeping himself informed about everything going on in Bombay. Sir Bartle Frere demonstrated a keen interest in education, and during his tenure as Governor of Bombay, he actively contributed to its advancement.

Sir Bartle's appointment coincided with a favourable period marked by the completion of the Bhor Ghat railway line in 1863, linking Bombay to the Deccan. This development guaranteed continuous transport of diverse goods, such as cotton and opium, from the interiors, contributing significantly to the town's prosperity (Dwivedi et. al., 2001, 90). It proved instrumental for the commute of passengers and transport of goods, serving as a significant asset in inducing industrial development. Additionally, it stimulated activities at the port, establishing a vital connection to the hinterland through the newly established railway (Dwivedi et. al., 2001, 128).

Sir Bartle Frere's tenure as Governor was notably characterised by a remarkable level of activity, particularly Public Works. Significant strides were achieved during his term, encompassing a spectrum of projects from military to civil administration. Additionally, he advanced crucial road and irrigation works, contributing to the overall progress and development during his governance (Poncha, 2016, 32). The prosperity generated in Bombay, fueled by the expansion of commerce and industry, led to substantial private funding for numerous projects championed by Sir Bartle (Dwivedi et. al. 2001, 90).

Governor Frere firmly believed that the city could reclaim space by dismantling obsolete fortifications and public buildings, paving the way for a fresh and comprehensive redevelopment. His vision entailed a meticulous plan to reorganise the land, introducing new public structures, designated areas for recreation, and the sale of remaining land for building sites. As part of this transformative approach, Governor Frere proposed demolishing various structures, including the gunpowder and gun-carriage factories, the ageing European General Hospital, and the ramparts of the Fort. This ambitious initiative aimed at creating a modern and well-organised town from the cleared space (Martineau, 1895, 462). Sir Bartle Frere enthusiastically undertook this project, securing substantial sums in purchase money from those who competed for the land allotments once the walls came down and a portion of the esplanade was used for building. The funds acquired through this process, coupled with grants from the Government, were aggregated and earmarked into a dedicated fund for constructing public offices and buildings in Bombay (Edwardes, 1902, 284).



The dismantling of the fort walls and the subsequent influx of population and wealth played a pivotal role in the transformation of Bombay. The city evolved from being a fortified trading town to becoming the capital of the Presidency. This metamorphosis not only symbolised colonial power but also bestowed upon Bombay the title of “Urbs Prima in Indis,” signifying it as the premier city in India (Poncha, 2016, 40).

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