



THE RISE OF MARATHA POWER AND ITS ROLE IN MEDIEVAL POLITICS

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Abstract

This paper attempts to study how the Maratha kingdom was ruled by Peshwas, who were all ministers who served as the king's top executives and subsequently assumed the highest administrative post. By the mid 18th century, the city of Pune was in the ascendant on the political map of India. As the seat of the Peshwas, hereditary ministers to the Maratha king, this riverside town of little previous significance grew into a prominent centre of commerce and diplomacy, attracting large numbers of traders, artisans, courtesans and mercenaries. A massive season of construction was launched as the Peshwas—descendants of a clerk risen to greatness—left their enduring stamp on the city. They renamed areas that honoured previous Islamic rulers and introduced new temples and festivals into the lives of various castes and people. There was a massive population explosion too: One estimate suggests that Pune rose from being home to 25,000 residents in 1700 to 100,000 at the dawn of the next century, making it “equal to Copenhagen, bigger than New York, a little smaller than Marseilles”—but either way a major urban node in pre-colonial India. The Maratha confederacy was founded in the 18th century after the collapse of Shivaji's Maharashtra state in western India due to Mughal pressure. Following the death of Mughal ruler Aurangzeb (1707), Shivaji's grandson Shahu restored Maratha authority. He gave the Brahman Bhat family, who became hereditary peshwas, authority (chief ministers). He also intended to advance northward using peshwas-controlled forces. The confederacy showed a broad sense of Maratha nationalism, but it was torn apart by the jealousies of its chiefs. The Asht-Pradhan, created by Shivaji too had become ineffective in administration. In these circumstances, the Maratha nobles were contending among themselves for power. The Peshwas of Shahu, found solutions to these problems by their capabilities. They rose to be good diplomats and commanders. They provided the Marathas an ideal – ideal of extending their power and influence towards the North. They rose above all other Maratha chiefs by sheer merit and they also led them to become the foremost power in India. The first Peshwa of Shahu was Balaji Vishwanath (1713-20 A.D.). He was the Sar Subahdar of Poona and Daulatabad when Shahu entered Maharashtra after his release from imprisonment of the Mughals. He sided with Shahu and also brought Dhanaji Jadav, the commander-in-chief of Tara Bai, to the rise of Shahu which helped him in capturing the throne of Maharashtra. This paper intends to explore and analyze Peshwa, the post of chief minister among the Maratha people of India, which was initially the head of the raja Shivaji's advisory council (reigned c. 1659–80). Peshwa-ship was resurrected following Shahu's death in 1749, the peshwa Balaji Baji Rao became the de facto ruler of the Marathas, ushering in the vast Maratha Confederacy.

Introduction

The Marathas combined **guerrilla warfare, strategic fortifications, and an efficient administrative system** to expand their influence across western and central India. Beyond mere military prowess, they played a crucial role in the decentralization of power during the late medieval period, encouraging local governance and the assertion of regional identities. By the 18th century, the Marathas had become the dominant power in India, acting as kingmakers and key players in the struggle for supremacy among declining Mughal authorities, regional kingdoms, and emerging European colonial powers. With the rise of the Maratha power a new dimension was added in the Deccan politics. This not only changed the complexion of the Deccan states but also influenced the Mughal-Deccan relations. In the present Unit we will discuss the factors that ultimately contributed to the rise of the Maratha power. You will read how the Marathas were able to rise to the prominence of a 'kingly' state from the major element in the Unit. It mentions how the Marathas kept challenging the supremacy of the Marathas till the turn of the century and the latter could never succeed in crushing them completely. The characteristic features of Maratha administration are also discussed. The Unit also takes into account Maratha relations with the new emerging European powers in the Arabian sea.

RISE OF THE MARATHAS

The rise of the Marathas in the seventeenth century is an important and fascinating event in the history of India.

The rise of the Marathas in India is an important chapter of Medieval Indian history. The emergence of Marathas as a political power had a number of consequences. It shows us the possibilities of the rise of a Hindu power in Modern India as enumerated in the HINDU PAD PADSNAHI of Baji Rao I. A possibility that was cut short by the English during Anglo-Maratha wars. As the chapter on the Marathas unfolds, we discuss here, in this content, some of the underlying causes which led to the rise of the Maratha power in India. This is first of the series of lectures on the topic – Rise of the Marathas.

This rise is primarily due to Shivaji and the circumstances that shaped his character and that of his followers. Shivaji welded the Marathas into a superb mobile fighting force. The Marathas fought for the defence of their religion and territory against Mughal rulers.

Various views and opinions have been expressed by scholars regarding the rise of the Maratha power. Grant Duff describes it as the result of 'conflagration' in the forests of Sahyadri. But according to M.G. Ranade, it was much more than the mere fortuitous circumstances. He calls it a national struggle of independence against foreign domination. This opinion is disputed on the ground that if the Mughals were foreigners then Bijapur and Ahmednagar rulers were also equally alien. If the Marathas could accept the domination of one power then why not of the Mughals?

Jadunath Sarkar and G.S. Sardesai emphasised the emergence of Maratha power as a 'Hindu' reaction against the communal policies of Aurangzeb. Yet, one finds Shivaji applauding Akbar's ideas of sulh kul. In fact, this argument also does not seem to have any sound base. Their earliest patrons were Muslims, i.e., the rulers of Bijapur and Ahmednagar. Besides, one does not find Shivaji fighting for the cause of Hindus and their welfare outside Maharashtra. Even within Maharashtra one does not find him undertaking social reforms. It is said that his assumption of the title *haindava dharmodhharak* at the time of his coronation was not much new in that period.

Internal Weakness of the Marathas

The empire of the Marathas was not a well-knit empire under one chief. It was a confederacy of five Maratha chiefs who, quite often, were in conflict with one another. The nominal unity of the Marathas remained only up to the period of the rule of Peshwa Madhav Rao I. After him, the Peshwa could not control his subordinate chiefs. The Sindhia, the Holkar, the Bhonsle and the Gaekwad pursued self-interested policies, which many times, were pursued against the interests of one another resulting in fighting among themselves. The British took complete advantage of it. The Maratha chiefs themselves gave them the opportunity of interfering in their internal affairs and fighting against them one by one. Therefore, the absence of unity among the Marathas remained their weakness vis-a-vis the English from the beginning till the end.

The Marathas never attempted to create an organised, orderly and well-governed empire. They never took the responsibility of improving the economic, cultural and moral conditions of their subjects. Their primary aim remained plunder, particularly in the territories beyond their effective control. Therefore they failed to secure the loyalty of their subjects and the Indians in general even when they came into conflict with a foreign power. By the time the Marathas were locked in conflict with the English they had lost their human virtues. The Marathas had succeeded against every other native power because of certain qualities of their character, viz., simplicity, hard labour, determination to fight against all odds. But, gradually they lost them all. By losing their morals – and thereby, their vitality, they remained no better than the rest of the native rulers and therefore, met the same fate at the hands of the English.

The Marathas lacked political wisdom and farsightedness. When they had become the strongest power in India, the only wise course for them was to remove the last semblance of the Mughal Empire and assume the authority and responsibility of the Imperial power. Instead like many other groups at the court and outside, they simply desired to control the Mughal emperor and use his name and dignity for achieving their narrow objectives. They therefore, failed to achieve political unity of India and, thereby, failed to utilize the resources of the country either for the benefit of its people or for meeting the challenge of a foreign foe.

Incapable Leadership

All capable Maratha chiefs died by the end of the eighteenth century. After that the leadership of the Marathas was taken over by Bajji Rao II, Daulat Rao Sindhia, Jaswant Rao Holkar and Nana Phadnavis. Among them Bajji Rao was completely incompetent, Daulat Rao Sindhia and Jaswant Rao Holkar were selfish and the role of Nana Phadnavis is a matter of controversy. Thus, the Marathas lacked capable leadership. On the other hand, the English produced remarkable leaders like Lord Wellesley, Lord Hastings, Arthur Wellesley, General Lake and Civil Officers like Elphinstone, Malcolm etc. This was certainly one of the major causes of the failure of the Marathas against the English.

Weakness in the Social Organisation of the Marathas

The Marathas had grown to power because of the spirit of Maratha nationality which Shivaji had created among them. It was this spirit which had broken the backbone of Aurangzeb. But the spirit was lost afterwards. The caste-system raised its ugly head. In many Cases, the Peshwas were challenged by other Maratha chiefs, simply because they were Brahmanas. Feudal organisation of the army and the system of

collecting revenue by hereditary chiefs further divided the Maratha society. The division of society into varied and sometimes conflicting groups certainly weakened the Marathas.

Military Weakness

of the Marathas The Marathas were certainly weaker than the English militarily. Different scholars have assigned different reasons for it. Dr. S. N. Sen expressed the view that “When the Marathas adopted European means of warfare they recruited people of different races in their army. Therefore, their army no more remained a national army and lost that strength which a national army usually possesses. That constituted their primary weakness.” This view is not acceptable to many other historians. It has also been very emphatically observed by some other historians that the Marathas lost their battles against the English because the Marathas left their traditional method of guerilla warfare and adopted the European methods. The view, however, contains only partial truth. The guerilla method of warfare could be certainly effective in the plateau of the Deccan but it is doubtful if it could be very effective in the plains of north India. The majority of the historians, therefore, say that the primary cause of the military weakness of the Marathas was that they adopted European means of warfare but failed to perfect them. The factories established by the Peshwa and the Sindhia for manufacturing guns and arsenals did not produce sufficient material of a good quality. The same way, the Maratha soldiers trained by the French in European methods did not achieve perfection in their training. The dependence of the Marathas on the French for training and command of their armies also proved to be their weakness because the French mostly left them in their hour of crisis.

Jagirdari System

The Jagirdari system grew among the Marathas during the period of war of Independence against Aurangzeb when every Maratha commander was allowed to keep as his own jagir the territory captured by his own efforts. Peshwa Baji Rao attempted to remove this evil and desired that a jagir should be jointly held at least by two persons. He fought against the Senapati on this very issue and was successful. But, his efforts were given up after his death and different Maratha chiefs kept their independent jagirs. That finally resulted in the formation of Maratha confederacy and the Maratha empire no more remained one entity. Besides, Maratha chiefs distributed jagirs to their officers for facilitating collection of Chauth and Sardeshmukhi which led to the growth of jagirdari system. The system did not permit Maratha chiefs to centralize their economic and thereby their military resources as well. It weakened Maratha chiefs in all respect.

Conclusion

After Aurangzeb's death, the Mughal Empire descended into civil war, with his many sons vying for the throne. Farrukhsiyar, one of the claimants, was supported by Chhatrapati Shahuji. The Marathas marched on Delhi after selecting Balaji Vishwanath as Peshwa (Prime Minister) and succeeded in deposing Emperor Bahadur Shah and installing Farrukhsiyar on the throne. The new sovereign, grateful for Maratha help, issued a proclamation allowing the Marathas the authority to collect taxes in Mughal territory under Maratha control while also extending swarajya to the Maratha homeland. Shahuji's mother was also freed from Mughal captivity thanks to Peshwa Balaji Vishwanath's efforts. The Peshwas launched a programme of expansion with Balaji Vishwanath (appointed on November 16, 1713), which saw the Marathas reach their highest extent. Balaji's son, Peshwa Baji Rao I, extended the kingdom even farther, including most of modern-day central and southern India. Meanwhile, under the protection of the Maratha Chhatrapati,

the Mughals were reduced to little more than puppets. The great effort put in by the Marathas to coronate Shivaji and officially create the Maratha Empire in 1674 demonstrates their dedication to creating a traditional Hindu kingdom in the subcontinent. This came at a time when grand Hindu imperial coronations were rare, due to most rajas being the rulers of smaller states or under Mughal control. During the coronation, Shivaji housed and fed 50,000 guests including Brahmins (Hindu priests) from all over India, had himself weighed against seven metals and various valuable spices, all before bathing in water brought over from the Ganges river, sacred to Hindus. Finally, he was declared lord of the umbrella (Chhatrapati, his title), a traditional symbol of kingship for great Hindu and Buddhist rulers, in imitation of the gods Varuna and Vishnu, signifying that the world was encompassed under the great king's umbrella. Thus, by intent and symbolism, it is clear that the Marathas were clearly establishing an empire steeped in Hindu culture and symbolism, if not formally so in a political manner.

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