

The Rise of the Marathas



Fig. Raigad Fort, Maharashtra, with the grand entrance to the palace where Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj was crowned in 1674, marking the formal beginning of the Maratha Empire.

Who are the Marathas?

The Marathas are a group of people native to the Deccan plateau, more specifically present-day Maharashtra. They are identified with the language they speak Marathi - which has had a rich and continuous literary history since the 12th century. In this chapter, we will see them rise as a powerful political entity that will alter the course of India's history.

During the 13th century, most of Maharashtra was ruled by the Yadava dynasty with Devagiri (present-day Daulatabad) as its capital. In the early 14th century, the Yadava dynasty was overcome by the Khilji Sultanate from Delhi.

Amidst such political changes, the cultural traditions continued, particularly those related to bhakti (devotion to the divine or a particular deity). Between the 7th and the 17th centuries, for spiritual upliftment, saints and seekers from several parts of India preferred the path of bhakti to merely external ritualism. These saints, coming from diverse sections of society, composed devotional songs and poetry in the languages of the masses, which allowed their messages to travel far and wide.

Have you ever heard the term 'bhakti'? What does it mean to you? Choose a bhakti saint from any part of India and learn about their life, their teachings, and the message they shared. You can also find one of their poems or bhajans and share it with your classmates.

In Maharashtra, many saints like Dnyaneshwar, Namdev, Tukaram, Ramdas, etc., gained popularity at this time. They helped translate important texts like the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gītā into Marathi, making their philosophy accessible to the people.

Foundation of Maratha Power and the Rise of CHHATRAPATI SHIVAJI

In 1630, Shivaji was born in the Bhonsle clan to Shahji and Jijabai. At the time, Shahji served the Deccan sultanates and was often away from his family. Meanwhile, in his jāgīr at Pune, Chhatrapati Shivaji grew up under the watchful eyes of Jijabai and some trusted officials, receiving values and a good education. At this time, the Pune region was deeply affected by constant infighting between the Deccan sultans whom the Marathas served, which caused much hardship for the common people.

When he was just 16, Chhatrapati Shivaji launched military campaigns, first consolidating his hold over the Pune region by capturing neglected and unoccupied forts and strengthening their defences. His vision of a sovereign kingdom or 'Swarājya' grew over the years, extending to political, economic and cultural aspects, which we will explore in this chapter.

Chhatrapati Shivaji's kingdom soon expanded to India's west coast, and to secure access to the resources of coastal regions, he felt the need to establish a navy.

To protect his people from powerful enemies, Chhatrapati Shivaji had recourse to the tactic of guerrilla warfare, which uses small groups of people in a focused way, with speed, surprise, and knowledge of the terrain to defeat bigger armies. His successes soon invited the wrath of the Bijapur Sultanate, which sent the veteran general Afzal Khan to confront him. Chhatrapati Shivaji and his advisers managed to convince Afzal Khan to meet him for a one-on-one meeting at the foot of the Pratapgad fort amid thick forests. There, Chhatrapati Shivaji killed Afzal Khan, and the Marathas, hidden in the mountains, routed the Khan's army with guerrilla attacks.

DON'T MISS OUT

The wāgh nakh is a small weapon shaped like a tiger's claw, which Chhatrapati Shivaji used to kill Afzal Khan in close combat.



Wāgh nakh or the 'tiger's claw'.

Soon afterwards, the Mughal nobleman Shaista Khan invaded Chhatrapati Shivaji's territories with a big army for three years. Finally, with only a few soldiers, Chhatrapati Shivaji raided Shaista Khan's camp at night. The Khan barely escaped from the raid, losing a few fingers, and promptly left Maharashtra. This daring raid resembles the modern-day surgical strike.

As a retaliatory action for the three-year-long wave of attacks, Chhatrapati Shivaji sacked Surat, a wealthy port city of the Mughal Empire (in present-day Gujarat). There, he obtained enormous treasure worth almost one crore of rupees, an extremely large sum for the time.

The sacking of Surat was a great insult to the might and prestige of the Mughal Empire. Therefore, Aurangzeb sent Jai Singh, a distinguished Rajput general, to defeat Chhatrapati Shivaji. Against him, Chhatrapati Shivaji had to concede defeat at Purandar Fort (near Pune) and enter into a treaty. He had to give up a sizeable part of his kingdom, and his son Sambhaji had to enter Mughal service.

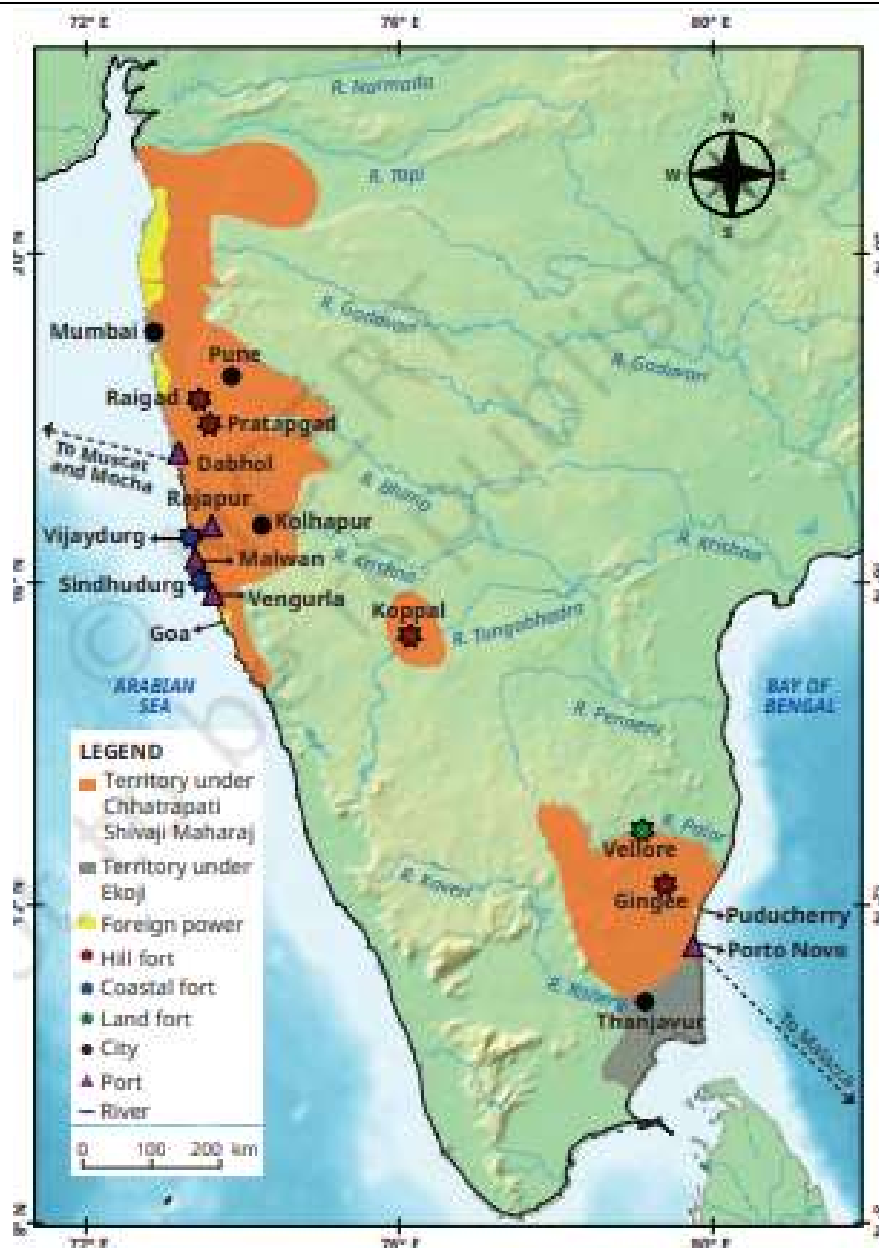
Chhatrapati Shivaji was persuaded by Jai Singh to visit the Mughal court at Agra, where he was made to stand before Aurangzeb, and a Mughal general whom he had defeated earlier. Incensed at this insult, Chhatrapati Shivaji stormed out of the court, following which Aurangzeb put him under house arrest. To escape this, Chhatrapati Shivaji devised a strategy - he started distributing gifts to holy men and Mughal generals. The gifts often contained fruits and sweets, packed in big baskets. The guards initially checked them, but soon stopped doing so; expecting this, Chhatrapati Shivaji and his son Sambhaji hid themselves in the baskets and made their escape. Aurangzeb could never capture Chhatrapati Shivaji again.

A few years later, in 1674, Chhatrapati Shivaji was coronated with full Vedic rites at the strong mountain fortress of Raigad. His formal title after the coronation was 'Shri Raja Shiva Chhatrapati', and like some past rulers, he started his own era, the Rājyābhiṣheka shaka.

After this, Chhatrapati Shivaji embarked upon a conquest of the South, also referred to as the dakṣhina-digvijaya, which included the important and then ill-defended region of present-day northern Tamil Nadu and parts of Karnataka. This southern extension later gave the Marathas great strategic depth against the Mughal invasion.



Fig. A court scene with Chhatrapati Shivaji on his throne receiving visitors
(panel in Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Park, Mumbai)



A fever claimed Chhatrapati Shivaji's life when he was fifty. He was a master strategist and a true visionary, and within his lifetime, his exploits had become legendary across India and beyond. The Europeans compared him with ancient generals like Alexander, and the Bundela prince Chhatrasal was so inspired by Chhatrapati Shivaji's struggle against the Mughals that he managed to create an independent kingdom of Bundelkhand (divided between present-day Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh).

The Marathas after Chhatrapati Shivaji

Chhatrapati Shivaji had two sons - Sambhaji and Rajaram. After Chhatrapati Shivaji's death, Sambhaji became the Chhatrapati. The Marathas were then the only obstacle to total Mughal control of the Deccan. Aurangzeb invaded the Deccan and conquered the Bijapur (or Adil Shahi) and Golconda (or Qutb Shahi) Sultanates. He then captured Sambhaji and, after torturing him brutally, executed him. After this, he captured Raigad, the Maratha capital.

After Sambhaji, Rajaram became the Chhatrapati and fled to Gingee (in present-day Tamil Nadu). The Mughal-Maratha conflict thus spread to south India. The Marathas staunchly defended their fortresses and often had the upper hand over the Mughals in battles and skirmishes. Aurangzeb was thus unable to leave the Deccan and died without having succeeded in subduing the Marathas, who emerged as a strong contender to the Mughals. No longer on the defensive, the Marathas led by Tarabai, Rajaram's queen, made large-scale inroads into Mughal territories, eventually conquering large parts of India.



Fig. Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj (Sambhaji's son), seated right and sporting a falcon, in counsel with Nana Phadnavis

In their northward expansion, the Marathas briefly controlled the areas of Lahore, Attock and even Peshawar (in modern-day Pakistan). They fought with the Afghans, and despite suffering a disastrous defeat at Panipat in 1761, they quickly recovered during the time of Peshwa Madhavrao I. Under the leadership of Mahadji Shinde (also known as Mahadji Scindia), they went on to recapture Delhi in 1771, which remained under their control till the British captured it three decades later.

In the latter half of the 18th century, the chief rivals of the British in India were the Marathas. Three Anglo-Maratha wars (as they are called) were fought between 1775 and 1818. Owing to the Marathas' increased internal disunity and the superior organisational and technological abilities of the British, they succeeded in ending the Maratha power. In effect, the British took India from the Marathas more than from the Mughals or any other power.

DON'T MISS OUT

Did you know that Nana Phadnavis, a powerful official under the Peshwas, is credited with organising the first pan-Indian anti-British alliance? He even united with old adversaries like Hyder Ali of Mysore and the Nizam of Hyderabad in this endeavour.



Fig. A mural of a British officer surrendering before Nana Phadnavis and Mahadji Shinde after the first Anglo-Maratha war.

Maratha Administration

Civilian administration

Chhatrapati Shivaji instituted a relatively centralised administration for his kingdom. He abolished the hereditary posts (generally practised under the Sultans or the Mughals) and land assignments and paid a salary to every government official out of the state treasury. Many officials were periodically transferred as well, ensuring that they would not have enough power to dictate terms to the king.

Chhatrapati Shivaji also gave pensions to widows of soldiers who died in battles, even offering military posts to their sons, thus demonstrating his care for the soldiers and their families.



Fig. Chhatrapati Shivaji minted gold and copper coins in his own name, signifying his sovereignty. The use of the Devanagari script was also an assertion of his cultural identity. Chhatrapati Shivaji also had an aṣṭa pradhāna maṇḍala, or council of eight ministers, to assist him with administration.



The Marathas often levied taxes called chauth (25 per cent) and sardeshmukhi (an additional 10 per cent to chauth) from provinces that were not directly under them, including places in the Deccan and north India. In return, the Marathas protected those provinces and did not intervene in their internal administration. The Mughals also approved of this arrangement through various treaties, and over time, some of these provinces became a part of the Maratha Empire.

DON'T MISS OUT

In the 18th century, the Marathas often adopted the Mughal style of coinage owing to its popularity, but added their own cultural symbols to it. For instance, this rare Maratha coin known as the 'Ganapati-Pantapradhān rupee', minted in the early 19th century by the Patwardhans (generals under the Peshwa), features inscriptions in two scripts - Devanagari and Persian. One side is an invocation to Ganapati (Ganeśha) while the other declares loyalty to the Peshwa (often referred to as 'Pantapradhān' in Marathi).



Military administration

The Maratha armed forces were divided into three parts infantry, cavalry and navy. The cavalry was made up of two types of soldiers - the bārgīrs, whose horses and equipment were paid for by the state, and the shiledārs, whose horses and equipment were paid for by the soldiers themselves. In the 18th century, the Marathas also noticed the superiority of Europeanstyle disciplined troops and artillery, and they tried to raise and recruit such troops. In particular, Mahadji Shinde had a large European-style army.

Swords and lances were the preferred weapons of the Marathas. However, they also used guns in sizable numbers. Rockets were used in military campaigns from the days of Shivaji himself, and by 1770, metal tube rockets were also being used.



Fig. Some of the weapons used by the Marathas.

"Forts are the core of the state. In their absence, the land gets devastated in the face of an invasion. Therefore, all the former kings secured the country by building forts. This kingdom (Maratha kingdom) was created by the late great master [Shivaji] from forts alone ... A great enemy like Aurangzeb invaded [this kingdom], conquered great empires like Bijapur and Bhaganagar [... but] it was due to forts that the [Maratha] state survived despite decades of onslaught."

Maritime supremacy

As we saw, Chhatrapati Shivaji created a navy to secure the west coast. In the 18th century, Kanhoji Angre guided the Marathas to victory in many naval battles, thanks to a clever use of geography and battle tactics, despite the Maratha ships not being as technologically advanced as the European ones.

At the time, the main strength of Europeans in India was their navies. They forced Indians to purchase their naval trade passes (cartaz in Portuguese) at a price; any ship without a pass was confiscated. The Marathas challenged this practice and started demanding passes from the Europeans themselves - who showed their frustration by labelling Kanhoji Angre a 'pirate'!

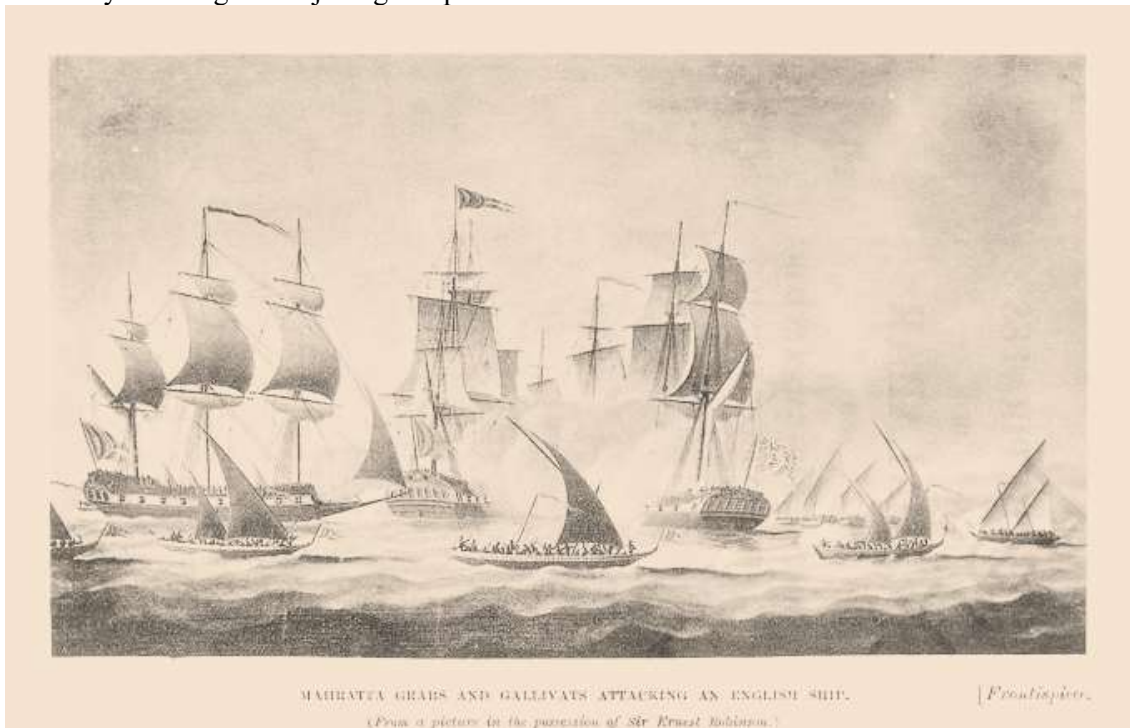


Fig. Maratha ships attacking English ships

Judicial system

The Marathas had an efficient judicial system, remarkable for its moderation in using capital punishment (the death penalty). The panchāyat (not to be confused with the currentday Panchayat, a governmental body) was a local gathering of officials and prominent men, and the main body that delivered justice. An appeal could be made to a Maratha chief in case of an unsatisfactory verdict. Additionally, in various prominent towns such as Pune, Indore, etc., the kotwāl or the police was also deployed to ensure law and order within the city.

Trade networks

Chhatrapati Shivaji encouraged trade and actively participated in maritime foreign trade himself. He and his officials had their own ships, which they regularly sent to ports as far away as Mocha in Yemen, Muscat in Oman, and Malacca in Malaysia. Some of these ships carried cargo like gold, textiles, etc.

Roads were constructed and maintained. In places such as Odisha in the 18th century, a network of ferries was maintained for riverine transport. Bridges were built over rivers and small streams.

Cultural Revival

The Marathas contributed substantially to India's cultural developments. Chhatrapati Shivaji's vision of Swarājya is evident in his seal, which carried a Sanskrit inscription, a notable departure from the prevalent Persian seals - "This seal (i.e. authority) of Chhatrapati Shivaji, the son of Shahji, waxing like the new moon, revered by the world, reigns for the welfare (of the people)."



Fig. Chhatrapati Shivaji's seal

Chhatrapati Shivaji also commissioned a treatise called Rājya-Vyavahāra-Koṣha with the aim of promoting the Marathi language; it provided Sanskrit equivalents for the prevalent Persian words used in diplomatic exchanges, as a result of which, the percentage of foreign loanwords in Maratha diplomacy decreased considerably.

The mighty Maratha women

Tarabai- She was a fearless Maratha warrior queen who ruled in the early 18th century after the death of her husband Rajaram. Realising that with the presence of Aurangzeb and the Mughal army in the Deccan, north India was unprotected, she organised large Maratha armies and sent them to invade Mughal territories in the north. In that sense, she was the architect of the northward Maratha expansion. Her sense of military strategy and her tenacity outsmarted the Mughal Empire and preserved Maratha independence during a critical period.



Fig. Tarabai in battle (painting by M.V. Dhurandhar)

Ahilyabai Holkar -She was a scion of the Holkar dynasty, one of the chief families instrumental for the Maratha expansion in north India; during the 18th century, this dynasty ruled a kingdom of considerable extent in central India, around present-day Indore. Even after losing her husband and son, she bravely governed the state for thirty years, administering it wisely while caring for the common people. Ahilyabai was a devout person who built and restored hundreds of temples, ghats, wells, and roads throughout India, from Kedarnath in the north to Rameswaram in the south.



Fig. A postage stamp commemorating Ahilyabai Holkar

In focus: Thanjavur

Let us turn southward to witness another example of cultural contribution. Ekoji, the half-brother of Chhatrapati Shivaji, conquered the Thanjavur region (in present-day Tamil Nadu) in the late 17th century, marking the beginning of Maratha rule in the area. The Thanjavur Marathas especially helped create a syncretic culture that was rich and full of innovation. They were great patrons of the arts, and many of the rulers themselves were poets and dramatists.

Of all the Thanjavur Maratha rulers, the contributions of Serfoji II are the most notable. He was well-versed in many Indian and European languages and wrote a Marathi play named Devendra Kuravanji, where he describes world geography in detail as was known at the time. Serfoji patronised many talented musicians, and it was during his time that modern Carnatic music took shape, as did the early stages of the famous classical dance form of Bharatanatyam.



Fig. Marathi inscription on a wall of the Brihadishwara temple wall recording the history of the Bhonsle family.

Serfoji was quite interested in medicine and established the Dhanwantari Mahal, a centre of medicine that offered free treatment of diseases using both Indian and Western medicine. He also started a printing press, the first such example in India by a native ruler. He got the history of the Bhonsle family inscribed on the walls of the Brihadishwara temple at Thanjavur, which is one of the largest single inscriptions in India, a record for posterity.

The Maratha legacy

The Maratha rule challenged Mughal dominance and established the largest Indian empire before the British took over the Subcontinent, controlling much of central and northern India. They set up a new way of governing with an efficient administration, and also revived the local Hindu traditions without religious discrimination. Their brave fight against oppressive rule and foreign power was driven by the fiery ideal of Swarājya. Later it inspired many Indians to believe they could govern themselves, planting the early seeds for India's freedom movement.

Let's recall

- Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj founded the Maratha kingdom in the 17th century. Its decades-long resistance to Mughal power, and the experience gained from this, helped in its pan-Indian expansion in the 18th century.
- The British captured India effectively from the Marathas more than from any other Indian power.
- Forts were the core of Maratha state; the Marathas controlled hundreds of forts, thus strategically strengthening their control over the region.
- Their formidable navy resisted European naval supremacy for quite some time despite lack of access to the latest technology of the time.
- The Marathas inspired a new cultural confidence amongst Indians in various regions, thus contributing to the cultural revival and innovation.