

# Maratha Empire

The Maratha Empire dominated a large part of the Indian subcontinent in the 17th century.

The empire formally existed from 1674 with the coronation of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and ended in 1818 with the defeat of Peshwa Bajirao II at the hands of the British East India Company.

This article will give further details about the Maratha Empire within the context of the IAS Exam.

## Origins of the Maratha Empire

The origins of the Maratha Empire can be traced back to a series of rebellions led by Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj against the rule of the Bijapur Sultanate and later the Mughal Empire. Based on the principle of *Hindawi Swarajya*, he carved out an independent Maratha kingdom with Raigad as the capital.

In 1674, he was crowned *Chhatrapati* (sovereign) of the new Maratha Kingdom after successfully defending it from Mughal incursions. At the time of his death, the kingdom was defended by a series of forts and well equipped naval establishments. By the time of his grandson's rule in the early 18th century, the kingdom had increased its size and transformed into a full-fledged empire.

Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj (born on February 19, 1630) was succeeded by his eldest son Sambhaji (also known as Shambhu Raje) in 1681. He continued the expansion policy of his father defeating the Portuguese and Chikka Deva Raya of Mysore to expand his borders. These developments were alarming enough for Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb (born on 3rd November 1618) to launch an expedition against the Marathas.

In the 8 years of wars that followed, Shambhu Raje (born on May 14 1657) fought Aurangzeb all along the Deccan region, never losing any battle or his forts. Then in 1689, Sambhaji was ambushed by Mughal forces while on his way to meet his commanders at Sangameshwar. He was imprisoned and later executed by Aurangzeb to demoralise the Maratha forces, but they still fought on.

Aurangzeb later proceeded to occupy the capital of Raigad, holding the family of Chhatrapati Sambhaji hostage. Sambhaji's half-brother Rajaram was crowned Chhatrapati in 1690, the coronation had taken place at Jinji fort in modern-day Tamil Nadu, assuming the regency for the seven-year-old son of Shambu Raje, Shahu. Aurangzeb continued in his attacks against the Marathas and even captured Jinji fort after three attempts. Chhatrapati Rajaram escaped to Berar and died at Sinhagad in Pune in 1700.

His widow, Tarabai, then heroically lead the Maratha forces against the Mughals, successfully fighting them until they crossed the Narmada river and took Malwa in 1705. This was a crucial victory as the long drawn out Maratha-Mughal conflict had drained the Mughal treasury and rebellions in other parts of the country had severely weakened it. This marked the beginning of Maratha ascendancy in the subcontinent.

## Marath Empire during the Peshwa Era

During this era, Peshwas belonging to the Bhat family controlled the Maratha Army and later became de facto rulers of the Maratha Empire till 1772. In due course of time, the Maratha Empire dominated most of the Indian subcontinent.

Shahuji was released from captivity following the death of Aurangazeb in 1707. He proceeded to challenge and defeat Tarabai in a series of battles to regain the Maratha throne. In this way, in 1707, Satara and Kolhapur came into being as two separate principalities. This was confirmed by the Treaty of Varna in 1731.

The death of Aurangazeb had plunged the Mughal Empire into a state of civil war in which his many sons fought for the throne. Chhatrapati Shahuji supported one of these claimants. After appointing Balaji Vishwanath as the Peshwa (Prime Minister), the Marathas marched to Delhi and managed to depose the Emperor Bahadur Shah. Grateful for Maratha support, the new sovereign issued a declaration which gave the Marathas the right to collect taxes in the Mughal territory under Maratha control while granting *swarajya* to in the Maratha homeland. Peshwa Balaji Vishwanath also managed to secure the release of Shahuji's mother from Mughal captivity.

Beginning with Balaji Vishwanath (appointed on November 16, 1713), the Peshwa's began a policy of expansion that saw the Maraths's reach its greatest extent. Balaji's son Peshwa Baji Rao I further expanded the empire to include much of present-day central and south India. In the meantime, the Mughals were reduced to mere puppets under the protection of the Maratha Chhatrapati.

Under Peshwa Balaji Baji Rao, the son of Baji Rao I, the Maratha empire reached its greatest extent with a territory of over 250 million acres (1 million km<sup>2</sup>) or one-third of the Indian sub-continent by 1760.

The Maratha empire suffered a catastrophic setback when it faced defeat at the hands of the Afghan Durrani Empire in 1761. An entire generation of Maratha leaders, lay dead on the battlefield and this caused the Maratha empire to fragment into different holdings under the control of individual Maratha clans. Eventually, the Maratha resurrection was started by Peshwa Madhavrao I and completed by Mahadaji Shinde. But the Maratha Empire would never again operate as a single autonomous unit from this point.

## The decline of the Maratha Empire

A series of succession struggles in the late 18th century by the individual Maratha chiefs led to British intervention through the East India Company (founded on December 31 1660) who themselves were establishing their own power base in India. By supporting a rival claimant to the Maratha throne, the British asked for greater concessions from the new ruler upon his victory weakening the Maratha Empire further. To prevent this blatant interference of their internal affairs, other Maratha chiefs fought the British in a series of three Anglo-Maratha wars. The first one ended in Maratha victory in 1782, with a restoration of the pre-war status quo.

The cause of the second Anglo Maratha War ended in a Maratha defeat in which they were forced to sign a treaty acknowledging British paramountcy. The Third Anglo Maratha War from 1817-1818 was a last-ditch effort to regain sovereignty, resulted in the loss of Maratha independence: it left Britain in control of most of India.

The last Peshwa, Nana Sahib, born as Govind Dhondu Pant, was the adopted son of Peshwa Baji Rao II. He was one of the main leaders of the 1857 revolt against British rule. Though he was defeated in the revolt, his legacy inspired many to continue the struggle in the name of the Indian Independence.

## Legacy of the Maratha Empire

The Maratha Empire did bring fundamental changes in Indian polity and history some of them are as follows:

- Religious tolerance and pluralism were the important pillars of the empire as they were the fundamental beliefs of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj.
- Since its inception, many people of talent were brought into the leadership of the Maratha Empire which made it one of the most socially mobile regimes. Note that the Peshwas of the Bhatt family were from ordinary backgrounds, and Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj's most trusted secretary Haider Ali Kohari was of humble origins
- The empire also created a significant navy which defended its western shores from other maritime powers such as that of the Portuguese and the British.
- The agricultural reforms brought about under the Peshwas standardised tax collection system in the empire based on agricultural produce.

