

Baji Rao I (1700 - 1740)

Baji Rao I, commonly known as Bajirao Ballal, was the seventh Peshwa of the Maratha Empire, born as Visaji on 18 August 1700 and died on 28 April 1740. During his twenty year reign as Peshwa, he conquered the Mughals and their vassal Nizam-ul-Mulk in wars such as the Battle of Delhi and the Battle of Bhopal. Baji Rao's accomplishments include the establishment of Maratha domination in southern India as well as a political power in northern India. Hence, he was instrumental in creating Maratha supremacy in Gujarat, Malwa, Rajputana, and Bundelkhand, as well as rescuing Konkan (India's western coast) from Janjira Siddis and Portuguese domination. The sensitive subject of Baji Rao's relationship with his Muslim wife has been adapted in Indian novels and movies.

About Baji Rao I

Baji Rao was born in Sinnar, near Nashik, into a Bhat family. Balaji Vishwanath, the Peshwa of Shahu I, was his father, and Radhabai Barve was his mother. Baji Rao had two younger sisters, Anubai and Bhiubai, as well as a younger brother, Chimaji Appa. Anubai married Ichalkaranji's Venkatrao Ghorpade, and Bhiubai married Baramati's Abaji Naik Joshi. Baji Rao grew up in his father's freshly acquired dominion of Saswad. He and Chimaji were inseparable. The lives of Shivaji, Ramchandra Pant Amatya, and Santaji Ghorpade influenced Baji Rao.

His father trained him as a diplomat and a fighter. Born into a Brahmin household, his schooling included reading, writing, and learning Sanskrit, but he did not confine himself to his books. Baji Rao showed an early interest in the military and frequently joined his father on military missions. He was with his father when Damaji Thorat imprisoned him before releasing him for a price. Baji Rao had accompanied his father on the expedition to Delhi in 1719 and was persuaded that the [Mughal Empire](#) was collapsing and incapable of resisting the northward Maratha advance. When Balaji Vishwanath died in 1720, Shahu chose Baji Rao, then 20, as Peshwa against objections from other chieftains.

Personal life of Baji Rao I

Kashibai, the daughter of Mahadji Krishna Joshi and Bhawanibai of Chas (which was a rich business family), was Baji Rao's first spouse. Baji Rao always showed love and respect to his wife Kashibai. Their marriage was a joyful one. They had four sons, Balaji Baji Rao (also known as Nanasaheb), Ramchandra Rao, Raghunath Rao, and Janardhan Rao, all of whom died young. In 1740, Shahu appointed Nanasaheb as Peshwa, succeeding his father. Baji Rao married Mastani, the daughter of Rajput ruler Chhatrasal and his Muslim concubine. The relationship was arranged for political reasons in order to appease Chhatrasal. In 1734, Mastani gave birth to a son, Krishna Rao. Because his mother was Muslim, Hindu priests refused to perform the upanayana rite for him, and he became known as Shamsher Bahadur.

Following the deaths of Baji Rao and Mastani in 1740, Kashibai adopted Shamsher Bahadur, a six-year-old boy. Shamsher was given a share of his father's rule over Banda and Kalpi. During the [Third Battle of Panipat](#) between the Marathas and the Afghans in 1761, he and his army fought alongside the Peshwa. Shamsher died several days later in Deeg after being wounded in the fighting. In 1728, Baji Rao relocated his headquarters from Saswad to Pune, laying the groundwork for the transition of a kasba into a big city. In 1730, he began building on Shaniwar Wada. It was finished in 1732, ushering in the era of Peshwa authority over the city.

Becoming Peshwa

On April 17, 1720, Shahu nominated Baji Rao as Peshwa, succeeding his father. The Mughal ruler Muhammad Shah had backed Maratha's claims to the provinces ruled by Shivaji at the time of his appointment. A contract granted the Marathas the power to collect taxes (Chauth) in the six provinces of the Deccan. Baji Rao persuaded Shahu that in order to defend itself, the Maratha Empire needed to go on the offensive against its enemies. He believed that the Mughal Empire was already in decline and wished to capitalise on the situation by aggressively expanding into North India. Baji Rao compared the Mughals' dwindling fortunes to a tree that would topple if assaulted at its roots. He is quoted as saying:

"Let us strike at the trunk of the withering tree and the branches will fall off themselves. Listen but to my counsel and I shall plant the Maratha flag on the walls of Attock".

However, as a new Peshwa, he faced various problems. Senior figures such as Naro Ram Mantri, Anant Ram Sumant, Shripatrao Pant Pratinidhi, Khanderao Dabhade, as well as Kanhoji Bhosle were envious of his appointment at such a young age. Baji Rao supported young men like himself as leaders, including Malhar Rao Holkar, Ranoji Shinde, the Pawar brothers, as well as Fateh Singh Bhosle; all of these men did not come from hereditary Deshmukh families in the Deccan sultanates. The Purandare family, who were close friends of the Bhat Peshwa family, also played an important role in Baji Rao's success. Nizam-ul-Mulk Asaf Jah I, the Mughal viceroy of the Deccan, had established a de facto independent kingdom in the area. He claimed that he didn't know if Shahu or his cousin, Sambhaji II of Kolhapur, was the real heir to the Maratha throne. The Marathas needed to exert their authority over the nobles of the recently acquired Malwa and Gujarat regions. Several nominally-Maratha regions, for example, were not actually under the Peshwa administration; the Siddis, for example, commanded the Janjira fort.

Death

Baji Rao's body was worn out from endless wars and military campaigns. While encamped in Raverkhedi, he contracted a virulent fever and died on April 28, 1740. He was cremated on the same day on the Narmada River's bank. Balaji Baji Rao directed Ranoji Shinde to construct a chhatra as a memorial. A Dharamshala encircles the memorial. The compound contains two temples devoted to Nilkantheshwar Mahadev (Shiva) as well as Rameshwar (Rama).

Military Conquests of Baji Rao I

The Nizam of Hyderabad

Baji Rao visited Nizam-ul-Mulk Asaf Jah I at Chikhalthana on January 4, 1721, to settle their differences. The Nizam, on the other hand, refused to acknowledge the Maratha right to collect taxes from the Deccan regions. In 1721, emperor Muhammad Shah appointed him vizier of the Mughal Empire, then in 1723, worried by his growing influence, relocated him from the Deccan to Awadh. The Nizam defied the command, resigned as vizier, and marched to the Deccan. The emperor despatched an army against him, which the Nizam destroyed at the Battle of Sakhar-kheda, forcing the emperor to recognise him as Deccan viceroy. The Marathas, led by Baji Rao, aided the Nizam's victory. Baji Rao was awarded a robe, a 7,000-man mansabdari, an elephant, and a diamond for his bravery. Following the war, the Nizam attempted to pacify the Maratha Chhatrapati Shahu and the Mughal emperor; in truth, however, he desired to carve himself a sovereign empire and saw the Marathas as his Deccan rivals. In 1725, the Nizam dispatched an army to cleanse the Carnatic region of Maratha revenue collectors. To confront him, the Marathas deployed a force led by Fateh Singh Bhosle; Baji Rao joined Bhosle but did not lead the army. The Marathas were forced to retire; following the monsoon season,

they launched a second campaign but were once again unable to prevent the Nizam from removing the Maratha collectors.

Sambhaji II of Kolhapur State had emerged as a rival claimant to the title of Maratha King in the Deccan. The Nizam took advantage of the internal squabble by refusing to pay the Chauth because it was uncertain who was the true Chhatrapati (Shahu or Sambhaji II) and proposing to arbitrate. Shripatrao Pant Pratinidhi encouraged Shahu to start talks and agree to arbitration. Chandrasen Jadhav, who had battled Baji Rao's father a decade before, backed Sambhaji II. Baji Rao persuaded Shahu to reject the Nizam's invitation and start an attack.

The Nizam conquered Pune and established Sambhaji II as King. He then marched out of town, leaving a detachment led by Fazal Beg behind. Using his artillery, the Nizam pillaged Loni, Pargaon, Patas, Supa, and Baramati. Baji Rao launched a retaliatory guerilla attack against the Nizam alongside his trusty lieutenants Malhar Rao Holkar, Ranoji Shinde, and the Pawar brothers on August 27, 1727. He began to destroy the Nizam's towns, leaving Pune and crossing the Godavari River near Puntamba to loot Jalna and Sindkhed. Before heading north-west to Khandesh, Baji Rao devastated Berar, Mahur, Mangrulpir, and Washim. He crossed the Tapi River at Kokarmunda and reached eastern Gujarat, arriving in January 1728 at Chota Udaipur.

After learning that the Nizam had returned to Pune, Baji Rao made a beeline towards Burhanpur, believing that the Nizam would try to rescue the strategically important city. Baji Rao, on the other hand, did not enter Burhanpur, instead arriving in Khandesh on 14 February 1728 at Betawad. When the Nizam learned that Baji Rao had damaged his northern provinces, he left Pune and marched towards the Godavari to face Baji Rao on an open plain where his artillery could be effective. The Nizam advanced ahead of his artillery; on February 25, 1728, the troops of Baji Rao and the Nizam met at Palkhed, a town approximately 30 miles (48 kilometres) west of Aurangabad. The Nizam was rapidly surrounded and besieged by Maratha soldiers, and his lines of supplies and communication were severed. He was obliged to make peace, and on March 6, he signed the Treaty of Mungi Shevgaon, recognising Shahu as King and the Maratha right to collect taxes in the Deccan. This fight is regarded as an example of great military strategy implementation.

The Malwa

Baji Rao led an expedition to southern Malwa in 1723. Maratha lords such as Ranoji Shinde, Malhar Rao Holkar, Udaji Rao Pawar, Tukoji Rao Pawar, and Jivaji Rao Pawar had gathered Chauth from across the state. (Later, these leaders established their own kingdoms: Gwalior, Indore, Dhar, and Dewas State - Junior and Senior). The Mughal emperor chose Girdhar Bahadur as governor of Malwa to oppose Maratha's influence. Baji Rao moved his attention back to Malwa after conquering the Nizam. In October 1728, he delegated a big army to his younger brother, Chimaji Appa, who was backed by his trusty generals Udaji Pawar and Malhar Rao Holkar. On November 24, 1728, the Maratha force reached the Narmada River's southern bank.

They crossed the river the next day and camped at Dharampuri. They marched quickly north, crossing the ghat near Mandu and stopping at Nalchha on November 27. When the Maratha army began to climb the ghats, the Mughal army, led by Girdhar Bahadur and his cousin Daya Bahadur, quickly prepared to resist them. Girdhar Bahadur anticipated that the Marathas would ascend the ghat near Amjhera, believing that the route near the Mandu fort was strongly defended; he and his army advanced to Amjhera and established a strong position there. He assumed that the Marathas climbed near the Mandu fort and set out for Dhar on November 29, 1728, because they did not materialise there. Girdhar Bahadur noticed Maratha horsemen approaching him. Chimaji's forces beat the Mughals in the Battle of Amjhera on November 29, killing Girdhar Bahadur and Daya Bahadur. The Mughal forces withdrew, and their camp was pillaged; the Marathas took eighteen elephants, horses, drums,

and other valuables. Peshwa, who was visiting Chhatrasal, heard about the triumph. Chimaji marched on Ujjain but was forced to withdraw due to a lack of supplies. Maratha army had entered present-day Rajasthan by February 1729.

The Portuguese

Several sections of India's west coast had been colonised by the Portuguese. They broke their deal to provide the Marathas with a factory site on Salsette Island and were hostile to Hindus in their area. The Peshwa sent a Maratha force (headed by Chimaji) against them in March 1737. Despite the fact that the Marathas captured Ghodbunder Fort and practically all of Vasai in the Battle of Vasai and took possession of Salsette after a long siege on 16 May 1739, Nader Shah's invasion of India drew their attention away from the Portuguese. Vasai's battle prizes included many Church bells, which may be found in many notable Hindu temples throughout Maharashtra.

The Bundelkhand

Chhatrasal revolted against the Mughal Empire in Bundelkhand and created an independent kingdom. A Mughal force commanded by Muhammad Khan Bangash assaulted him and besieged his fort and family in December 1728. Despite Chhatrasal's repeated requests for Bajji Rao's assistance, he was in Malwa at the time. He compared his predicament to Gajendra Moksha's. Chhatrasal wrote the following in his letter to Bajji Rao:

"Know you, that I am in the same sad plight in which the famous elephant was when caught by the crocodile. My valiant race is on point of extinction. Come and save my honour, O Bajji Rao".

In response to Chhatrasal's request, the Peshwa proceeded towards Bundelkhand with 25,000 horsemen including his lieutenants Pilaji Jadhav, Tukoji Pawar, Naro Shankar, as well as Davalji Somwanshi in March 1729. Chhatrasal evaded capture and joined the Maratha army, which grew to 70,000 men. Bajji Rao's army surrounded Bangash and severed his supply and communication links after moving to Jaitpur. Bangash launched a counterattack against Bajji Rao but was unable to breach his defences. Qaim Khan, Muhammad Khan Bangash's son, learned of his father's dilemma and arrived with reinforcements. His army was assaulted and defeated by Bajji Rao's soldiers. Bangash was eventually compelled to flee, signing a promise that "he would never assault Bundelkhand again". Chhatrasal's position as Bundelkhand's monarch was restored. He gave Bajji Rao a vast jagir and gave him his daughter Mastani. Before his death in December 1731, Chhatrasal abandoned one-third of his territory to the Marathas.

Gujarat

Bajji Rao resolved to reassert the Maratha right to collect taxes from the affluent province of Gujarat after solidifying Maratha control in central India and sent a Maratha force led by Chimaji Appa there in 1730. Sarbuland Khan, the province's Mughal governor, gave the Marathas the power to collect Chauth. He was quickly succeeded by Abhay Singh, who accepted the Maratha right to collect taxes as well. Trimbak Rao Dabhade, Shahu's Senapati (commander-in-chief), was irritated because his forefathers had conquered Gujarat multiple times and claimed the authority to collect taxes from the province. He revolted against the Peshwa because he was enraged by Bajji Rao's dominance over his family's sphere of power. Damaji Rao Gaekwad and Kadam Bande, two more Maratha nobles from Gujarat, also supported him with Dabhade.

The Mughal emperor dispatched Jai Singh II to conquer the Marathas after Girdhar Bahadur's loss in 1728. Jai Singh advocated for a peaceful solution, but the emperor rejected him and replaced him with Muhammad Khan Bangash. Bangash allied with the Nizam, Trimbak Rao, and Sambhaji II. Bajji Rao discovered that Dabhade and Gaekwad had planned an open battle on the plain of Dabhoi with a force

of 40 thousand, whereas Baji Rao's total force numbered just 25 thousand. Baji Rao constantly messaged Dabhade, urging him to settle the disagreement amicably in the presence of Chatrapati Shahu. But Dabhade remained stiff and stubborn, rejecting Baji Rao's proposal, thus on 1 April 1731, Baji Rao launched an attack on the joined armies of Dabhade, Gaekwad, and Kadam.

The Dabhade was riding an elephant, while Baji Rao was riding a horse. During the battle, however, a bullet pierced Trimbakrao's head, and he died instantly. It was later determined that the fatal shot was fired by Dabhade's maternal uncle, Bhau Singh Thoke. On 13 April, Baji Rao settled his disagreement with Sambhaji II by signing the Treaty of Warna, which delineated the lands of Shahu and Sambhaji II. On December 27, 1732, the Nizam met Baji Rao at Rohe-Rameshwar and agreed not to interfere with Maratha operations. After subduing Trimbak Rao, Shahu and Baji Rao averted a feud with the powerful Dabhade dynasty; Trimbak's son, Yashwant Rao, was chosen as Shahu's Senapati. The Dabhade clan was granted permission to continue collecting Chauth from Gujarat in exchange for depositing half of the earnings in Shahu's treasury.

Siddis

The Siddis of Janjira ruled over a small but strategically significant area on India's west coast. Although they initially controlled only the Janjira fort, after Shivaji's death, they extended their control to a wide portion of central and northern Konkan. Following the death of Siddi leader Yakut Khan in 1733, a succession battle erupted among his sons, one of them, Abdul Rehman, who sought assistance from Baji Rao. Baji Rao dispatched a Maratha force led by Sekhoji Angre, Kanhoji Angre's son. The Marathas reclaimed control of many Konkan districts and attacked Janjira. After Peshwa's adversary, Pant Pratinidhi, conquered Raigad Fort (near Janjira) in June 1733, their strength was diverted. In August, Sekhoji Angre died, further weakening the Maratha position, and Baji Rao signed a peace deal with the Siddis.

He enabled the Siddis to keep Janjira if they acknowledged Abdul Rehman as ruler; they were also allowed to keep Anjanvel, Gowalkot, and Underi. Raigad, Rewas, Thal, and Chaul were kept by the Marathas. Soon after the Peshwa returned to Satara, the Siddis started an effort to reclaim their lost territory, and Baji Rao deployed an army to prevent them from taking over Raigad Fort in June 1734. On April 19, 1736, Chimnaji launched a surprise raid on a Siddi camp near Rewas, killing approximately 1,500 people (including their leader, Siddi Sat). The Siddis signed a peace deal on September 25, that year, limiting them to Janjira, Gowalkot, and Anjanvel.

Battle of Delhi

Bangash's coalition against the Marathas disintegrated after Trimbak Rao's death. The Mughal emperor removed him from Malwa and reappointed Jai Singh II as governor. However, in the 1733 Battle of Mandsaur, the Maratha leader Holkar defeated Jai Singh. After two more wars, the Mughals decided to grant the Marathas the right to collect 22 lakh in Chauth from Malwa. Baji Rao and Jai Singh made an accord in Kishangad on March 4, 1736. Jai Singh persuaded the Emperor to approve the idea, and Baji Rao was named vice governor of the province. Jai Singh is thought to have discreetly advised Baji Rao that the time had come to conquer the ailing Mughal emperor.

On November 12, 1736, the Peshwa began his march from Pune to the Mughal capital, Delhi, with a force of 50,000 horsemen. When the Mughal emperor learned of the advancing Maratha army, he directed Saadat Ali Khan I to march from Agra to check the advance. Malhar Rao Holkar, Vithoji Bule, and Pilaji Jadhav, Maratha chiefs, crossed the Yamuna and raided Mughal territory in the Doab. Saadat Khan led a 150,000-strong force against them, beat them, and retired to Mathura. Near Gwalior, Malhar Rao Holkar rejoined Baji Rao's army. Samsam-ud-Daulah, Mir Bakshi, and Muhammad Khan Bangash hosted a dinner in Samsam-ud-tent Daulah's in Mathura, believing the Marathas had fled to the

Deccan. During the feast, they discovered that Baji Rao had taken the Jat and Mewati hill route (rather than the direct Agra-Delhi route) and was now in Delhi. The Mughal commanders abandoned the feast and hurried back to the city. To halt Baji Rao's march, the Mughal emperor deployed a force led by Mir Hasan Khan Koka. The Marathas destroyed his force in the Battle of Delhi on March 28, 1737. Baji Rao then retreated from the capital, fearful of a greater Mughal force approaching from Mathura. Baji Rao's raid on Delhi was so daring and audacious that neither Mughal generals nor Mughal intelligence could fathom or foresee his movements.

Battle of Bhopal

Following Baji Rao's march to Delhi, Mughal emperor Muhammad Shah sought assistance from the Nizam; the Nizam set out from the Deccan, met Baji Rao's returning force at Sironj, and informed the Peshwa that he was coming to Delhi to repair his friendship with the Mughal emperor. The Nizam was supported by other Mughal lords, and a 30,000-man Mughal army (enhanced by artillery) was deployed against Baji Rao. The Peshwa raised an army of 80,000 men. To resist the Nizam's Deccan aid, Baji Rao stationed a 10,000-man force (under Chimaji Appa) on the Tapti River, with orders to block Nasir Jung from marching beyond Burhanpur. He and his forces crossed the Narmada in early December 1737, interacting with agents and spies stationed there to observe enemy moves.

The Nizam took refuge in Bhopal, a walled town with a lake in its rear, to protect his soldiers and artillery. Baji Rao surrounded the Nizam, cutting off outside supplies. The Marathas maintained their distance and tormented their lines because of the Nizam's artillery; no food could flow in from outside, and the troops and their animals were starving. On 7 January 1738, the Nizam, which was unable to hold out any further, signed a peace treaty at Doraha. Malwa was surrendered to the Marathas; the Mughals consented to pay 5,000,000 in reparations, with the Nizam vowing on the Quran to uphold the pact.

Battle Tactics of Baji Rao I

Baji Rao was famed for his quick tactical manoeuvres in combat, employing cavalry inherited from Maratha generals like Santaji Ghorpade and Dhanaji Jadhav. The Battle of Palkhed in 1728, in which he outmanoeuvred the Mughal governor of the Deccan, and the Battle of Delhi in 1737 are two examples. His strength was in moving huge numbers of cavalry at high speeds. Bernard Montgomery, a British field marshal, examined Baji Rao's tactics in the Palkhed War, particularly his troops' ability to survive off the land (with little regard for supply and communication links) while executing "manoeuvre warfare" against the enemy. Montgomery writes about Baji Rao's victory at Palkhed in his work, *A Concise History of Warfare*:

"They (Marathas) were at their best in the eighteenth century, and the Palkhed campaign of 1727–28 in which Baji Rao I outgeneralled Nizam-ul-Mulk, is a masterpiece of strategic mobility. Baji Rao's army was a purely mounted force, armed only with sabre, lance, a bow in some units and a round shield. There was a spare horse for every two men. The Marathas moved unencumbered by artillery, baggage, or even handguns and defensive armour. They supplied themselves by looting".

Montgomery also penned:

"Baji Rao resented the Nizam's rule over the Deccan and it was he who struck the first blow. In October 1727, as soon as rainy season ended, Baji Rao burst into the territories of Nizam. The lightly equipped Marathas moved with great rapidity, avoiding the main towns and fortresses, living off the country, burning and plundering. They met one reverse at the hands of Nizam's able lieutenant, Iwaz Khan, at the beginning of November 1727, but within a month they had fully recovered and were off again, dashing east, north, west, with sudden changes in direction. The Nizam had mobilised his forces, and

for a time pursued them, but he was bewildered by the swift unpredictable movements of Marathas, and his men became exhausted”.

Baji Rao was described as a "heavenly-born cavalry leader" by Jadunath Sarkar. Jadunath Sarkar also wrote about his twenty-year military career:

“Twenty years spent in breathless activity and tireless journeys across the Indian continent, from Delhi to Srirangpatan and Gujarat to Hyderabad, wore out the most wonderful man of action that the Hindu race has produced since the days of the great Shivaji”.

According to V.G.Dighe, Baji Rao is the most celebrated man in Maratha Empire history after Shivaji. Baji Rao cut enemy supply lines by using local terrain. He led from the front, employing classic Maratha tactics such as quickly encircling the opponent, appearing from behind, striking from an unexpected location, distracting the enemy's focus, putting them off-balance, and shaping the battlefield on his own parameters. Baji Rao kept comprehensive information about opposing forces to himself, attacking in unexpected places and instilling dread. After Shivaji, Baji Rao is regarded as the most charismatic and active leader in Maratha history. He is also regarded as one of the finest military commanders of all time. K. M. Panikkar wrote in his introduction to Baji Rao I: The Great Peshwa:

“Baji Rao, the great Peshwa, was without doubt the most outstanding statesman and general India produced in the 18th century. If Shivaji was the founder of Maratha State, Baji Rao could claim that he was the one who saved it from disruption and transformed what was national state into an Empire”.

Chatrapati Shahu had absolute faith in Baji Rao as well. He had issued orders that "all should obey Baji Rao faithfully and should do nothing to offend his temper". On another occasion, he referred to Baji Rao as "the man with iron nerves".