

## Maratha Empire

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It is the people of the country that define that country. There are many empires and dynasties in India that are a part of India's rich and varied history. These empires and dynasties have undoubtedly played a major role in the betterment and development of India as a country. They have contributed in making India what it is today. They are our nation's pride, which we as citizens ought to celebrate, respect and remember, for they have made us who we are today. One such empire is the grandiose and large Maratha Empire.

The Maratha Empire as a consolidated Empire ruled over a large portion of the Indian subcontinent from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It formally began ruling as a consolidated power under the rule of Chhatrapati Shivaji who ascended the throne in 1674. He was of the Bhosale dynasty. This great sovereign is considered by historians to be the founder of the Maratha Empire.

Chhatrapati Shivaji revolted against the Adil Shahi sultanate of Bijapur as well as the Mughal Empire. His goal was to free the Marathi people and establish a separate Hindu Kingdom for them, which was based on the lines of self- rule. Later, he started consolidating lands under his control and established a kingdom with its capital as Raigadh. By the time of his death, his kingdom had about 300 forts, 40,000 cavalry, 50,000 foot soldiers and powerful naval establishments all over the west coast. Thus, he founded the Maratha Empire, and laid the base for it to become one of the greatest Empires India has ever seen.

After the death of Shivaji, his son Sambhaji ascended the throne of the empire that his father built in 1681. He had the same goals as his father. He played a major role in expanding the empire further. He had such a stronghold that he never let Aurangzeb's forces to capture a fort or win a battle. Unfortunately, in 1689, Sambhaji and his main advisor Kavi Kalash were captured and executed by Aurangzeb's forces.

After Sambhaji's death, his half -brother Rajaram succeeded him and ascended the throne. But, his reign was full of war. The Mughal attacked Raigad, forcing Rajaram to run from Raigad for his safety. He managed to recapture many forts that had been captured by the Mughal forces. Rajaram wanted peace. He offered a compromise with Aurangzeb in 1697, but it was rejected by him. After three years, Rajaram died. After his death, his widow Tarabai took over the throne in the name of her son, Shivaji II. She took control and fought against Aurangzeb's forces, thus aiming to regain control and defending the empire.

Soon after this, in 1707, Aurangzeb died. The Mughal throne now had a new ruler. The throne was assumed by Aurangzeb's son, Bahadur Shah I. He decided to release Sambhaji's son Shahu, who was earlier captured by Aurangzeb on the condition that Shahu would follow the terms of the new Mughal

ruler. Bahadur Shah I even kept Shahu's mother and Sambhaji's wife as hostage so that Shahu would have no choice but to comply. After his release, Shahu wanted to take over the throne of the Empire, but his opponents were Tarabai (his aunt) and her son. Thus, Maratha kingdom came into conflict over the accession of the throne. Consequently, Shahu honoured Balaji Vishwanath with the title of Peshwa. Balaji guided Shahu and helped with the release of Shahu's mother from Bahadur's Shah I's captivity. Shahu decided to honour the goals of his father and his grandfather. He further expanded the Empire in the East, West and North directions, with the help of Peshwa Balaji Bajirao. But, slowly, the office of the Emperor lost its importance and started losing power. The real power was assumed by the Peshwas when they started to control the Maratha Army. Soon, it was the Peshwa that was ruling the Empire. Shahu, the sovereign became just a figurehead.

Peshwa Balaji Vishwanath was instrumental in expanding the Empire and taking it to new heights. In 1720, Peshwa Vishwanath died. After his death, the Maratha king Shahu appointed Balaji's son, Baji Rao I as the next Peshwa. Baji Rao I proved himself to be one of the most fearless and powerful Peshwas that India has ever seen. He is credited with further expanding the Maratha Empire. The Maratha Empire now controlled most parts of India. Baji Rao never lost any battle he fought, such was his power. During his career, he defeated the Nizam of Hyderabad. Consequently, he gained control over the territory of Malwa. With the help of his brother, he also defeated the Portuguese kings that ruled the Vasai region. After his death, his son Balaji Bajirao, popularly known as Nana Saheb, became the next Peshwa of the Maratha Empire. He won the battle of Arcot and defeated the ruler of Arcot, Dost Ali. He expanded the Empire to the south and brought Rajputana region under the control of the Maratha Empire. He also expanded the Empire to Bengal, Orissa and Bihar. Balaji understood the importance of agriculture and trade and encouraged them, leading to prosperity of the Empire. With the help of his brother Raghunath Rao, Balaji brought the territories of Delhi, Peshawar, Lahore and Rohilkhand under his control by defeating Afghan forces.

Soon after this in 1761, the third battle of Panipat took place. The great forces of the Maratha Empire fought against the forces of Ahmad Shah Abdali, the king of Afghanistan. He was supported by two Indian allies. They were the Rohilla Afghans of the Doab and Shuja ud Daula, the Nawab of Awadh. In the battle that followed, the Afghan forces led by King Ahmad Shah Abdali won against the Maratha forces. Consequently, the Marathas had to let go of the suzerainty over Punjab. This battle also worked as a check over the expansionist conquests of the Maratha Empire. The Marathas who were till yet undefeated, tasted defeat.

Later in 1761, Peshwa Madhav Rao I was appointed as the fourth Peshwa of the Maratha Empire. He was

instrumental in regaining the power that the Maratha Empire had earlier lost. He tried to unify the Maratha Empire from within and further expanded to the south by defeating the Nizam of Mysore. He also decided to send his trusted generals to the north to reconsolidate Maratha control over that region. Madhav Rao was a force to reckon with. He was strong, ambitious and extremely loyal. During his short term in office, the Empire started to regain its power and stature. But, unfortunately, as fate would have it, Madhav Rao died at the young age of 27. His death became a major weakness for the Maratha Empire. But, even during his short lifespan, he managed to achieve things that most can't even in all their long lives. After the death of this great ruler, the Maratha Empire started to lose its power.

For the purpose of properly ruling the large Maratha Empire, Peshwa Madhav Rao had given powers to some powerful warriors of the Empire. But, after his death, there was no one strong enough to replace him. These warriors started gaining power, which ultimately resulted in the functioning of semi-autonomous states. These states started gaining power as there was no one to keep check on their own personal ambitions. The Maratha Empire, once strong and unified, became a Confederation.

Consequently in 1785, the Marathas fought with the forces of Tipu Sultan. In this Maratha–Mysore War, the Marathas lost. Soon after, the Maratha Empire sided with the British East India Company in a bid to defeat Tipu Sultan. Mysore was annexed in the fourth Anglo-Mysore war.

Soon after, the Marathas came into conflict with the East India Company when the latter tried to intervene in a Peshwa family succession feud. In this war, which was called the First Anglo-Maratha War, Marathas won a decisive victory. This consolidated the position of Marathas in India. But soon after, in 1805-1809, the Marathas lost to the British forces in the Second and Third Anglo-Maratha Wars. This defeat resulted in the East India Company gaining power over most parts of India. The Maratha Empire lost its grandeur.

Maratha Empire still evokes a sense of pride in the citizens of India. It gave India a lot of brave and courageous rulers who were loyal and stuck to their principles. The Maratha Empire is an inspiration to all.

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