

THE MARATHAS (1649-1748) :

The tale of the Marathas' rise to power and their eventual fall contains all the elements of a thriller—adventured intrigue and romanticism. Maratha chieftains were originally in the service of the Bijapur Sultans in the western Deccan; an area that was under siege by the Mughals. The first major threat to Mughal imperial power came from a confederacy known as the Marathas. Located in the mountainous regions of the Deccan, the Marathas were mainly drawn from the lowest caste of society, but they became a powerfully militant community under their ruler, King Shivaji, who died in 1680. Under his leadership, the Marathas managed to carve out their own kingdom. In 1646, Aurangzeb, the last great conqueror of the Mughal rulers, defeated the Marathas and annexed their territories, but the Marathas never put down their arms. They could never be defeated by the Mughals because they adopted guerrilla warfare tactics and took to hiding and living in the forests. They continued to rule over their territory, even though it was under the control of the Mughals, as a separate state within a state. By 1740, the Marathas controlled more territory than the Mughals. In the late eighteenth century, the kingdom of Mysore and the Maratha confederacy were the major obstacles in the British attempt to control the economy of India. The East India Company, originally started as a trading company, had become an official arm of the British Empire. Its objective was to control the economy of India and, if necessary, control the administration of its territories. It turned to the Mughal Empire for its administrative model. However, the very resistant to the British imperialism.

The British, under General Wellesley, defeated Maratha chieftains. Scindia and Holkar, but the Maratha chieftains continued to rebel all throughout the early decades of the nineteenth

century. The Mission of Marathas can be summarised as an ambition to liberate India from the Muslim rule. Shivaji was the most powerful among the Maratha rulers. He conquered the forts of Torna, Rajgarh Purandhar, etc. and became an independent ruler.

Causes of Mughal Downfall: I

The Mughal Empire attained the farthestmost expansion under the rule of Aurangzeb. However, it fell with a dramatic suddenness within a few decades after his death. The Mughal Empire faced its decline because of a combination of factors. The religious policy adopted by Aurangzeb led to disunity among the people. Although the policy did weaken the empire, the prominent cause of the decline was the lack of worthy and efficient successors to Aurangzeb. The character of the Mughal kings had worsened over time. The coming rulers were weak and lacked the character, inspiration and commitment to rule the empire efficiently. They became ease loving and cowardly. They totally forgot their state duties and were unable to stop the fall. The absence of any definite law of succession was another important factor. The war of succession with his brother Dara Shikoh not only led to bitterness, bloodshed and loss of money and prestige of the empire over a period of time, but to its eventual fall. The degeneration of the rulers has also led to the moral degeneration of the nobility.

Causes of Mughal Downfall: II

Another important reason for the decline was the deplorable financial position of the

Mughals. The war of successions revolts and lavish lifestyles had depleted the once large treasury, and had led to financial crisis. During the reign of Aurangzeb, the Mughal Empire had expanded to the maximum size. This vast area had become impossible: for one ruler to control and govern from one centre. It was during the later Mughals that Deccan, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa declared their independence. The expeditions of Nadir Shah, and repeated attacks of Ahmad Shah Abdali, led to further weakening of the empire. The already weakened empire faced further invasions by the British and the French, which were the last nail in the already drowning boat of the empire. The British and the French, who had come as traders, took full advantage of the weakening empire and soon became masters of the whole of India.

Causes of Mughal Downfall: III

Jagirdari crisis

The Jagirdari system had worked with tolerable efficiency till the middle of Aurangzeb's rule. However, during the last years of his reign, because of the rising pressure of the Deccan wars and the financial resources of the empire and disruption of administration, the complicated machinery under which Jagirs were assigned began to lose its capability. For political expediency, Aurangzeb had to give mansabs to a large number of Deccani nobles. This created a crisis of Jagir land. Aurangzeb had to confess to this problem through his famous saying - 'Yak anar sad bimar'. Because of this crisis, the Jagirdars began to extract revenue from the peasantry to the maximum, because they knew that the Jagir given to them could be for very short : period of time. The flight of the peasants from land was the first symptom of this growing crisis which later on spilled into violence and desperate armed uprisings, e.g.,

jat, Satnami, Sikh, Maratha and other revolts in northern India against the Mughal Empire.

Shivaji Bhonsle (1627-1630)

Shivaji was a resolute and ferocious fighter and is regarded as the founder of the Maratha nation. He took advantage of the deteriorating condition of the Mughal rule and established his own principality near Pune, which was later made the Maratha capital. Using guerrilla technique, he was able to sustain and expand his army. He soon had money, arms and horses. Shivaji conducted a series of successful campaigns in the 1660s against the Mughals. In 1674, he adopted the title of Chhatrapati, 'Lord of the Universe'. An elaborate coronation was held, signalling his resolve to challenge the Mughals. It also showed his resolution of re-establishing a Hindu kingdom in Maharashtra. Shivaji's war cries were swaraj and goraksha. Aurangzeb persistently chased Shivaji's successors between 1681 and 1705, but finally he had to retreat to the north as his treasury was becoming depleted. He also realised that thousands of lives had been lost either on the battlefield or because of natural calamities. (In 1717, a Mughal envoy entered into a treaty with the Marathas authenticating their claim to rule in the Deccan. In return they acknowledged the fictional Mughal sovereignty. The Marathas soon annexed Malwa from Mughal control and thereafter moved into Orissa and Bengal. Later South India also came under their control. Acknowledging their political rights the Mughal emperor invited them to function as auxiliaries in the internal affairs of the empire. They were also invited to help the Mughals in driving the Afghans out of Punjab. Though the Marathas had great military prowess and leadership, they were not efficient enough to administer the state or to bring socio-economic reform. Following a policy of plunders and

indiscriminate raids, they annoyed the peasant class. They were respected for stirring the Maharashtrian pride rather than for attracting loyalty to an all-India confederacy. They were left alone prior to the attacks of Afghan forces led by **Ahmad Shah Abdali**. Abdali defeated them on the battlefield at Panipat, in 1761. The defeat hastened the break-up of their loosely knit confederacy into five independent states and put out the hope of Maratha rule in India.



Influence of Poet-Saints on Maratha Unity

Because of the credit of loosening the social and religious barriers, the poet saints of Maharashtra brought the Maratha people closer together. The movement dates back to the days of Jnanadeva (d. 1296), the herald of a puritan and religious revival. The rational explanations of society and firm faith in the basic quality of men of all classes permeated the entire country. The centre of the Bhakti movement was Pandharpur. There came the poet-saints of Maharashtra to worship at the shrine of Vithoba. The Bhakti cult reached its peak point with the greatest Maratha saint **Tukarama** (b. 1608). Another powerful influence was Ramadasa who stressed the urgency and importance of Swaraj for the Maratha people. So, Maharashtra achieved a new religion, simpler, more rational, and more, appealing in a language which people could understand. The Marathas found themselves drawn together with a common tradition, common language, common literature, common religion and common race. These factors were responsible for a new political upheaval; the Marathas aspired to become a nation, and Shivaji fulfilled the urge.

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