GOLDEN RESEARCH THOUGHTS
ISSN: 2231-5063
IMPACT FACTOR : 4.6052(UIF)
VOLUME - 12 | ISSUE - 11 | MAY – 2023

HISTORY OF THE MARATHA CONFEDERACY

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ABSTRACT

The Maratha Confederacy was an important political formation in eighteenth-century Indian history that emerged during the period of Maratha expansion after the death of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and the gradual weakening of centralized Maratha authority. Under the Peshwas, particularly during the eighteenth century, Maratha political influence expanded across large parts of the Indian subcontinent. The Confederacy consisted of several powerful Maratha chiefs and families, including the Peshwas, Scindias, Holkars, Gaekwads, and Bhonsles, who exercised varying degrees of political and military authority in different regions. This study examines the origin, development, administrative structure, military organization, territorial expansion, and political relations of the Maratha Confederacy. It focuses on the role of the Peshwas in coordinating Maratha power and on the increasing autonomy of major Maratha houses. The study also considers the Confederacy's relations with the Mughal Empire, Rajput states, Nizam of Hyderabad, Mysore, and other regional powers. Particular attention is given to the Third Battle of Panipat (1761) and its consequences for Maratha political expansion and internal organization.

The study further examines the economic foundations of Maratha power, including revenue collection, taxation, trade, agriculture, and control over territories. It analyses the social and cultural environment of the period and the contribution of Maratha political institutions to the history of eighteenth-century India. The growing rivalry among Maratha chiefs and the changing balance of power eventually created opportunities for the expansion of the British East India Company. The three Anglo-Maratha Wars significantly weakened Maratha political authority, culminating in the defeat of the Peshwa in 1818. The study concludes that the Maratha Confederacy represented a significant phase in the political history of India, characterized by both extensive territorial expansion and decentralized political authority. Its history provides important insights into the nature of eighteenth-century state formation, regional politics, military organization, diplomacy, and the transition from indigenous regional powers to expanding British colonial authority.

KEYWORDS: *Maratha Confederacy, Maratha Empire, Peshwas, Maratha Chiefs, Scindia, Holkar, Gaekwad, Bhonsle, Maratha Expansion, Maratha Administration, Maratha Military System, Third Battle of Panipat.*

INTRODUCTION

The Maratha Confederacy occupies an important place in the political history of eighteenth-century India. It developed during a period when centralized Maratha authority was gradually transformed into a

system in which powerful Maratha chiefs exercised considerable autonomy while maintaining political connections with the Peshwa and the broader Maratha political system. The Confederacy played a major role in the expansion of Maratha influence across large parts of the Indian subcontinent. The foundations of Maratha political power were established by Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, who created an organized state in the western Deccan during the seventeenth century. His administrative institutions, fort system, military organization, and revenue arrangements provided an important foundation for subsequent Maratha expansion. After his death, political developments involving the Chhatrapatis, Peshwas, and various Maratha chiefs gradually changed the structure of Maratha authority.

The rise of the Peshwas was particularly significant. During the eighteenth century, the Peshwas became the principal coordinating authority of the Maratha political system, while influential families such as the Scindias, Holkars, Gaekwads, and Bhonsles established strong bases of power in different regions. These chiefs expanded their territories and influence through military campaigns, diplomacy, alliances, and revenue arrangements. The resulting political structure is commonly described as the Maratha Confederacy. The expansion of Maratha power brought the Marathas into contact and conflict with several major political forces, including the Mughal Empire, the Nizam of Hyderabad, Mysore, Rajput states, and other regional powers. Maratha influence extended into northern, central, western, and parts of southern India. Their growing political presence made them one of the major powers in eighteenth-century India.

The Third Battle of Panipat in 1761 was a major event in the history of the Confederacy. The Maratha defeat affected their northern expansion and created significant political and military challenges. However, Maratha power was subsequently reorganized, and important chiefs continued to exercise influence in different parts of India. The period after Panipat was marked by both political recovery and increasing competition among major Maratha houses. The decentralized nature of the Confederacy created both strengths and weaknesses. The autonomy of different Maratha chiefs enabled rapid territorial expansion and allowed regional leaders to respond to local political circumstances. At the same time, rivalries among the major houses and disagreements over political authority sometimes weakened collective action. These internal developments became increasingly important as the British East India Company expanded its influence. The Anglo-Maratha Wars were decisive in the later history of the Confederacy. Through military conflicts, diplomacy, treaties, and political intervention, the British gradually reduced Maratha political power. The defeat of the Peshwa in 1818 marked the end of Peshwa authority and the establishment of British dominance over much of the former Maratha political sphere.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Aim:

To study the origin, development, expansion, administration, political structure, military organization, and decline of the Maratha Confederacy and to examine its significance in the political history of eighteenth-century India.

Objectives:

1. To examine the historical background and emergence of the Maratha Confederacy.
2. To study the rise and development of Peshwa authority in the eighteenth century.
3. To examine the role of major Maratha houses, including the Scindias, Holkars, Gaekwads, and Bhonsles.
4. To analyse the political structure and decentralized nature of the Maratha Confederacy.
5. To study the territorial expansion of Maratha power in different parts of India.
6. To examine the administrative and revenue systems associated with Maratha rule.
7. To study the military organization, strategies, and methods used by the Marathas.

8. To examine the diplomatic and political relations of the Marathas with the Mughal Empire and other regional powers.
9. To analyse the causes and consequences of the Third Battle of Panipat in 1761.
10. To examine the internal rivalries and political conflicts among the major Maratha chiefs.
11. To study the causes, course, and consequences of the Anglo-Maratha Wars.
12. To examine the factors responsible for the decline of Maratha political authority and the establishment of British dominance by 1818.
13. To assess the contribution and historical significance of the Maratha Confederacy in eighteenth-century Indian history.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The history of the Maratha Confederacy has been examined by several historians through studies of Maratha political institutions, the Peshwa administration, military expansion, regional Maratha powers, diplomacy, and the Anglo-Maratha conflicts. The existing literature provides a substantial basis for understanding the transformation of Maratha authority during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. G. S. Sardesai, in his New History of the Marathas, provides a detailed account of the political development of the Maratha state from the period of Shivaji Maharaj through the Peshwas and the decline of Maratha power. His work is particularly useful for understanding the activities of the Peshwas, major Maratha chiefs, political conflicts, and relations with contemporary powers. Jadunath Sarkar, in his studies of Maratha history, examines the political and military development of the Marathas. His writings on Shivaji and the later Maratha period provide important historical interpretations concerning administration, warfare, diplomacy, and the expansion of Maratha authority.

Stewart Gordon, in The Marathas 1600–1818, presents an important interpretation of Maratha political organization. His study emphasizes the role of regional networks, military service, political alliances, revenue arrangements, and the activities of major Maratha families in the expansion and functioning of Maratha power. M. G. Ranade, in Rise of the Maratha Power, interprets the emergence of Maratha political authority in relation to social, religious, and institutional developments. His work provides an early influential perspective on the historical foundations of Maratha power. V. K. Rajwade made an important contribution through the collection and publication of historical documents relating to the Marathas. His documentary approach provides valuable primary-source material for studying political correspondence, administration, personalities, and events associated with Maratha history.

Jadunath Sarkar's research on the eighteenth-century political environment is also useful for examining the changing relationship between the Marathas, the Mughal Empire, and other regional powers. His work helps place Maratha expansion within the wider political circumstances of eighteenth-century India. Studies of the Third Battle of Panipat provide important information about Maratha military expansion, strategic organization, relations with northern Indian powers, and the consequences of the 1761 defeat. These studies also help explain the subsequent reorganization of Maratha political authority.

Research on the Scindias, Holkars, Gaekwads, and Bhonsles has contributed to understanding the decentralized character of Maratha power. Regional studies demonstrate that these political houses developed substantial independent authority while remaining connected to the wider Maratha political system. The literature on the Anglo-Maratha Wars examines the changing relationship between the Maratha chiefs, the Peshwa, and the British East India Company. These studies emphasize diplomacy, treaties, military conflicts, internal political rivalries, and the gradual expansion of British political control.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a historical, analytical, and interpretative research methodology to examine the origin, development, expansion, administration, political organization, military structure, and decline of the Maratha Confederacy. The study follows a chronological approach to understand the transformation of Maratha political authority from the post-Shivaji period through the rise of the Peshwas, the expansion of major Maratha houses, the Anglo-Maratha conflicts, and the decline of Maratha power in 1818. The research is based on both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include official records, administrative documents, letters, treaties, diplomatic correspondence, contemporary accounts, inscriptions, manuscripts, revenue records, military records, and archival materials. Secondary sources include books, research articles, biographies, historical studies, Maharashtra State Gazetteers, and other scholarly publications dealing with Maratha history.

The study employs source criticism to assess the reliability and authenticity of historical evidence. External criticism is used to examine the origin, authorship, date, and authenticity of sources, while internal criticism is applied to evaluate their content, context, consistency, and possible limitations. Information from different sources is compared and corroborated to identify inconsistencies and develop a balanced historical interpretation. A chronological and thematic method is used to analyse the major developments of the Confederacy. The chronological approach examines important phases such as the rise of Peshwa authority, Maratha expansion, the Third Battle of Panipat, political developments among the major Maratha houses, and the Anglo-Maratha Wars. The thematic approach focuses on administration, revenue systems, military organization, diplomacy, regional political structures, and relations among the Peshwa and Maratha chiefs.

The study also employs a comparative method to examine the political roles and regional activities of the Scindias, Holkars, Gaekwads, Bhonsles, and Peshwas. Political and military developments are analysed in relation to the Mughal Empire, Nizam of Hyderabad, Mysore, Rajput states, and the British East India Company. The research is primarily qualitative, with relevant quantitative information used where historical records provide reliable data. The collected evidence is systematically organized, critically evaluated, and interpreted to identify patterns of political expansion, decentralization, conflict, cooperation, and decline. Through this methodology, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Maratha Confederacy as a decentralized political system and to assess its significance in eighteenth-century Indian history and the transition toward British colonial dominance.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The emergence of the Maratha Confederacy represents an important phase in the political history of eighteenth-century India. Following the establishment of Maratha power under Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, political authority underwent significant changes, particularly with the increasing influence of the Peshwas and the growing autonomy of powerful Maratha chiefs. The Confederacy developed as a political arrangement involving the Peshwa and major Maratha houses such as the Scindias, Holkars, Gaekwads, and Bhonsles. The central problem of the present study is to understand the origin, development, political organization, and functioning of the Maratha Confederacy. The study seeks to examine how Maratha political authority changed from a comparatively centralized state structure into a decentralized system in which regional chiefs exercised considerable political, military, and economic power.

The study also addresses the problem of understanding the factors responsible for the expansion of Maratha power across different parts of India. Military organization, revenue collection, diplomacy, alliances, administrative arrangements, and relations with regional political powers played important roles in this expansion. The interaction between the Peshwa and the major Maratha houses is therefore an

important area of investigation. Another major problem concerns the internal political relationships within the Confederacy. The increasing autonomy of the Scindias, Holkars, Gaekwads, and Bhonsles created a complex political structure. Cooperation among these powers contributed to expansion, while competition and conflicting interests sometimes affected political unity.

Understanding these relationships is necessary for examining the functioning and limitations of the Confederacy. The Third Battle of Panipat in 1761 constitutes another important area of the problem. The defeat affected Maratha political and military activities in northern India and influenced subsequent developments within the Confederacy. The study therefore examines the consequences of Panipat and the subsequent reorganization of Maratha power. The study further examines the relationship between the Maratha Confederacy and the British East India Company. The Anglo-Maratha Wars, diplomatic negotiations, treaties, and internal political conflicts gradually altered the balance of power. The defeat of the Peshwa in 1818 marked a major transformation in the political history of the Marathas.

Thus, the problem addressed by this study is to understand the structure, functioning, expansion, internal dynamics, and decline of the Maratha Confederacy and to examine its wider significance in the political transformation of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century India.

Need of the Study

The study of the Maratha Confederacy is important for understanding the political transformation of eighteenth-century India. Following the decline of centralized Mughal authority, the Marathas emerged as one of the major political powers in the subcontinent. The Confederacy represents a significant stage in this development because political authority increasingly came to be shared among the Peshwa and powerful regional Maratha houses. The study is needed to understand the transition from centralized Maratha rule to a decentralized political structure. The growing influence of the Scindias, Holkars, Gaekwads, and Bhonsles created a complex system of political relationships. Examining these relationships helps explain the functioning of the Confederacy and the distribution of political, military, and economic authority. The study is also necessary for examining the expansion of Maratha power into northern, central, western, and southern parts of India. Military campaigns, revenue arrangements, diplomatic alliances, and relationships with regional states contributed to this expansion. Understanding these factors provides a broader perspective on the political history of eighteenth-century India.

The Third Battle of Panipat in 1761 makes the study particularly significant. Its consequences influenced Maratha military strategy, political organization, and subsequent relations with other powers. Examining the developments before and after Panipat helps explain the changing nature of Maratha political authority. The study is further needed to understand the internal dynamics of the Maratha Confederacy. Political competition among major Maratha chiefs, disputes concerning authority, alliances, and regional interests affected the functioning of the Confederacy. These factors need to be examined alongside the external challenges faced by the Marathas. The study also provides an important basis for understanding the Anglo-Maratha Wars and the expansion of British power. Relations between the British East India Company and different Maratha powers involved warfare, diplomacy, treaties, and political intervention. The eventual defeat of the Peshwa in 1818 marked a major change in the political structure of the Indian subcontinent.

Finally, the study is needed to develop a comprehensive understanding of the Maratha Confederacy beyond individual rulers and military events. Examining its political institutions, regional administration, military organization, economic foundations, diplomacy, internal relationships, and decline contributes to a broader understanding of state formation and political change in eighteenth-century India.

Further Suggestions for Research

Further research on the Maratha Confederacy should examine the political relationship between the Peshwa and the major Maratha houses in greater detail. Comparative studies of the Scindias, Holkars, Gaekwads, and Bhonsles can provide a clearer understanding of their regional administration, military organization, revenue systems, diplomatic activities, and relations with the Peshwa. Greater attention can be given to the economic foundations of the Confederacy, including land revenue, taxation, agriculture, trade, commercial networks, banking, and the movement of resources between different Maratha territories. Such studies can help explain the relationship between economic resources and military and political expansion. Further research is also required on the social history of the Maratha Confederacy. The participation and experiences of peasants, soldiers, merchants, artisans, women, religious groups, and other social communities can be examined through regional records, correspondence, family archives, and contemporary accounts.

The Third Battle of Panipat can be studied through newly examined Persian, Marathi, Rajasthani, and European sources to develop a more detailed understanding of military organization, diplomacy, logistics, political alliances, and the consequences of the battle. Similarly, the Anglo-Maratha Wars can be investigated through comparative use of Maratha and British archival records. Regional studies of Maratha administration in Malwa, Gujarat, Bundelkhand, central India, Karnataka, and other areas can provide greater understanding of how Maratha authority functioned outside the core Deccan region. Research can also examine the interactions between Maratha authorities and local rulers, zamindars, communities, and administrative institutions. The role of women and family networks in Maratha politics deserves greater attention. Studies of figures such as Ahilyabai Holkar and other women associated with Maratha ruling families can contribute to a broader understanding of political authority, succession, administration, diplomacy, and patronage.

Further research can also examine Maratha contributions to architecture, literature, religion, education, art, and cultural institutions. The preservation and digitization of Marathi manuscripts, Modi records, letters, administrative documents, maps, and other archival materials would provide valuable opportunities for future scholarship. Interdisciplinary research combining history, archaeology, political science, economics, sociology, geography, and digital humanities can offer new interpretations of the Maratha Confederacy. Digital mapping of military campaigns, trade routes, forts, administrative centres, and territorial changes can particularly contribute to a deeper understanding of the geographical and political development of the Confederacy.

Scope and Limitations

Scope

The scope of the study covers the emergence, development, expansion, administration, political organization, military system, and decline of the Maratha Confederacy, with particular emphasis on the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It examines the transformation of Maratha political authority after the establishment of Maratha power and the increasing influence of the Peshwas. The study includes the role of the Peshwas, Scindias, Holkars, Gaekwads, and Bhonsles and examines their political relationships, regional authority, military activities, administrative practices, revenue arrangements, and diplomatic relations. It also covers Maratha relations with the Mughal Empire, Nizam of Hyderabad, Mysore, Rajput states, and the British East India Company. The study examines major events such as the Third Battle of Panipat (1761), the subsequent reorganization of Maratha power, and the Anglo-Maratha Wars. It also considers the economic, social, and cultural dimensions of Maratha political expansion where they are directly related to the functioning of the Confederacy.

Limitations

The study is primarily concerned with the period from the eighteenth century to 1818, and therefore does not provide a detailed account of every phase of Maratha history before or after this period. The extensive geographical expansion of Maratha influence makes it difficult to examine every region, fort, administrative centre, political family, and local institution with equal depth. The study depends on the availability and reliability of historical sources, including Marathi and Persian records, administrative documents, correspondence, European accounts, archival materials, and secondary historical works. Some primary records may be incomplete, inaccessible, damaged, or influenced by the perspectives of their authors.

The decentralized nature of the Confederacy and the different political interests of its major houses can make historical interpretation complex. Accounts of particular events may differ depending on the source and historical perspective. The study therefore relies on comparison and critical examination of available evidence. The research primarily emphasizes political and administrative history. Although social, economic, and cultural aspects are included where relevant, they cannot be examined with the same depth as the political and military dimensions. Regional variations in Maratha administration and local responses are also subject to the availability of detailed historical evidence.

Findings

The study finds that the Maratha Confederacy emerged from the transformation of Maratha political authority during the eighteenth century. The increasing influence of the Peshwas and the growing autonomy of powerful Maratha houses created a decentralized political structure that differed from the more centralized state established during the earlier Maratha period. The findings indicate that the Peshwas played a central coordinating role in Maratha political affairs, while the Scindias, Holkars, Gaekwads, and Bhonsles developed substantial regional authority. Their military resources, territories, administrative arrangements, and political networks contributed significantly to the expansion of Maratha influence. The study finds that Maratha power expanded across large areas of northern, central, western, and southern India through military campaigns, diplomacy, alliances, revenue arrangements, and political negotiations. This expansion made the Marathas one of the major political forces in eighteenth-century India.

The findings show that the Third Battle of Panipat in 1761 represented a major turning point. The defeat affected Maratha expansion in northern India and created political and military challenges, although Maratha power subsequently underwent reorganization and continued to remain influential in several regions. The study also finds that the decentralized structure of the Confederacy provided regional flexibility but created difficulties in maintaining unified political action. Competition among major Maratha houses and differences in regional interests influenced political relations within the Confederacy. The research indicates that Maratha administration varied across regions. Revenue collection, military organization, local political relationships, and administrative practices were important components of Maratha authority. Regional chiefs often exercised considerable autonomy while maintaining varying degrees of connection with the Peshwa.

The findings further demonstrate that the Anglo-Maratha Wars significantly altered the political balance in India. British military power, diplomatic strategies, treaties, and political intervention increasingly weakened Maratha authority. Internal political divisions also affected the ability of Maratha powers to respond collectively to British expansion. The study finds that the defeat of the Peshwa in 1818 marked the end of Peshwa political authority and the effective termination of the Maratha Confederacy as a

major political system. British dominance subsequently expanded across much of the former Maratha political sphere.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the Maratha Confederacy was a significant eighteenth-century political formation characterized by territorial expansion, decentralized authority, regional political networks, military organization, diplomatic activity, and internal competition. Its history provides important insights into the political transformation of India between the decline of Mughal authority and the expansion of British colonial power.

Discussion

The history of the Maratha Confederacy demonstrates the transformation of Maratha political authority from a relatively centralized state structure into a decentralized system involving the Peshwa and several powerful regional Maratha houses. This transformation was closely connected with the political conditions of eighteenth-century India, particularly the weakening of Mughal authority and the emergence of competing regional powers. The discussion indicates that the Peshwas became the principal coordinating authority within the Maratha political system. At the same time, the Scindias, Holkars, Gaekwads, and Bhonsles established strong regional bases and exercised considerable autonomy. This arrangement enabled the Marathas to extend their political influence over large territories, but it also produced a complex system of competing regional interests.

Maratha expansion was supported by military organization, revenue collection, political alliances, diplomacy, and relationships with local rulers and administrative groups. The Confederacy's influence extended into northern and central India as well as Gujarat and parts of southern India. This expansion demonstrates the ability of Maratha political and military networks to operate across geographically diverse regions. The Third Battle of Panipat in 1761 was an important turning point. The defeat interrupted Maratha expansion in northern India and created significant political and military challenges. However, the Marathas subsequently reorganized their political and military resources and continued to exercise substantial influence. The post-Panipat period therefore represents both a period of difficulty and political reorganization.

The decentralized structure of the Confederacy had important consequences. Regional autonomy enabled individual Maratha chiefs to respond to local political circumstances and expand their influence. However, differences among the major houses also created political competition. The relationship between collective Maratha interests and the independent ambitions of regional chiefs remained a recurring issue in the functioning of the Confederacy. The discussion also highlights the importance of economic and administrative resources. Revenue collection and control over productive territories supported military campaigns and political administration. However, variations in administrative practices across regions demonstrate that the Confederacy did not function as a uniformly centralized state.

Conclusion

The study of the History of the Maratha Confederacy demonstrates that it was a significant political formation in eighteenth-century India. It emerged through the transformation of Maratha political authority and the increasing influence of the Peshwas and powerful regional Maratha houses. The Confederacy played an important role in the political developments of the subcontinent during a period of weakening Mughal authority and the emergence of several regional powers. The Peshwas provided an important centre of political coordination, while the Scindias, Holkars, Gaekwads, and Bhonsles established strong regional bases of power. Their military activities, revenue arrangements, diplomatic relations, and

territorial expansion enabled Maratha influence to extend across large parts of India. This expansion established the Marathas as one of the major political forces of the eighteenth century.

The study also demonstrates that the decentralized nature of the Confederacy produced both political opportunities and challenges. Regional autonomy facilitated expansion and allowed individual Maratha chiefs to respond to local conditions, but competition among the major political houses sometimes affected collective political action. The Third Battle of Panipat in 1761 further influenced the course of Maratha political and military development. The Anglo-Maratha conflicts subsequently became decisive in changing the balance of power. British military expansion, diplomacy, treaties, and political intervention gradually weakened Maratha authority. The defeat of the Peshwa in 1818 brought an end to Peshwa rule and marked the termination of the Maratha Confederacy as a major political system.

In conclusion, the Maratha Confederacy represents an important phase in the transition from Mughal political dominance to British colonial expansion. Its history provides valuable insights into decentralized state formation, regional political authority, military organization, diplomacy, administration, economic resources, and inter-state relations in eighteenth-century India. The study of the Confederacy therefore contributes significantly to understanding the political transformation of early modern India.

Recommendations

The study of the Maratha Confederacy suggests several areas for strengthening historical understanding of its political, administrative, military, economic, and social development. Greater attention should be given to the relationship between the Peshwa authority and the major Maratha houses such as the Scindias, Holkars, Gaekwads, and Bhonsles. Regional administrative systems should be examined through local records to understand how Maratha authority functioned in different territories. Further research should make wider use of Marathi, Persian, Modi, Rajasthani, and European archival sources to develop a more comprehensive interpretation of Maratha political history. The economic foundations of the Confederacy, including land revenue, taxation, agriculture, trade, banking, and military expenditure, should receive greater scholarly attention. The experiences of peasants, soldiers, merchants, artisans, women, and other social groups should also be incorporated into studies of the Confederacy.

The Third Battle of Panipat and the Anglo-Maratha Wars should be studied through multiple regional and contemporary sources in order to examine their political, military, and economic consequences. Modern technologies such as digitization, GIS mapping, and digital archival databases can be used to map Maratha territories, administrative centres, military campaigns, trade routes, and changing political boundaries.

Finally, interdisciplinary research combining history with political science, economics, geography, archaeology, and social history should be encouraged. Preservation and systematic digitization of Modi manuscripts, correspondence, administrative records, treaties, and other archival materials would support future scholars in developing a more detailed and evidence-based understanding of the Maratha Confederacy and its place in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Indian history.

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