

Contest for Naval Sovereignty on the Western Coast: A Study of the Maratha Navy in the 17th century and the 18th century

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The western coast of India has always been an important region from the point of view of trade and commerce and due to its closeness to the sea and mountain passes, it made inland, coastal and overseas trade possible. As a result of which the region witnessed the growing presence of various European companies on the Coast. These Europeans tried to claim sovereignty and supremacy over maritime trade in Indian Ocean by following vigorous naval policies. In order to safeguard their aims of monopoly on the trade, several features of strength and violence were brought by them, which were accomplished through the formation of forts and factories all across the Indian Ocean.¹ It was this European penetration in the Indian Ocean which ended the system of peaceful oceanic navigation and also denied the others to access them. Due to this dominance these European powers were opposed both at the sea and land by the indigenous powers of India. One such indigenous power during the 17th century were the Marathas, who by establishing their own navy not only possessed a strong threat to these Europeans but also exercised their sovereignty over the coastal waters of western India. After the demise of Shivaji, the naval arm of the Marathas reached its peak under the command of Kanhoji Angre² who fought against the European navies valiantly, making him the greatest naval hero of India. This article tries to explore the efforts and struggles put by the Marathas in order to claim sovereignty and supremacy at sea. The main objective of this article is to throw some light on the different kind of methods employed by the Marathas to insure safety, security and freedom of movement in the coastal waters of their dominion.

The early efforts to secure the freedom of the seas along the coastal extent of his *Swarajya* were done by Shivaji himself. Shivaji understood that the only way to control the waters of western coast is by establishing a navy of his own. By the year 1659 he had complete authority over north Konkan excluding the regions controlled by the Siddis, the Bijapuris and the Portuguese. The regions south of Konkan such as Dabhol, Rajapur, Shringarpur, etc. were also brought under the Marathas between 1661 and 1663. After conquering the Konkan coast, he came up with the idea of building a navy for the state³ as it would not only guard his political prosperities, but also would add to the economic fortunes of his budding *Swarajya*. Hence, Shivaji made earnest efforts to raise a navy as soon as he gained a foothold in the coast of Konkan and transformed Kalyan-Bhiwandi⁴ into a dockyard. A Portuguese letter of 1659 refers to the fact that Shivaji started building his naval fleet in Kalyan-Bhiwandi after capturing the region in 1657.⁵ Another letter of correspondence between the Bombay and Surat Factory of the English East India Company dated 2 December 1672 reports, "We thought good to advise you that here is laid up in our harbour (i.e. Bombay) six small boats belonging to Sevagee with his consent, all new and lately built at *Cullian – Bhindy*(Kalyan-Bhiwandi)".⁶ This decision of Shivaji to build a navy of his own must have been made keeping in mind the natural features of the region as there was availability of good quality teak in the surrounding regions of Kalyan-Bhiwandi.

Another reason in establishing their own navy was to resist the Europeans tactics and domination as well as challenge it by the use of a well-organized navy. It was this indigenous navy of the Marathas which eventually turned out to be the source of conflict and hostility between them and the various Europeans on the Konkan coast. So the time when Shivaji was trying to form his

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military and political authority over the Coast, he came across several maritime powers entrenched at numerous places on the western coast. The existence of these different naval powers like Siddis at Janjira, Portuguese at Goa and English at Bombay resulted in struggle and contest among them in order to control the waters of the Western coast. Shivaji was smart enough to not ignore the importance of the European existence on the western coast, which could help him in providing the naval resources for his budding navy due to their powerful navy as well as strong and well equipped ships. Not only this, he thought that by preserving neutral relationship with these Europeans he can achieve his main objective to overthrow the Siddis from Janjira.⁷ However, while dealing with these European traders his attitude towards them was marked by kindness and friendliness but at the same time he was quite aware to not let them interfere upon his sovereign rights.⁸ The Konkan Coast consequently witnessed a continuous series of conflicts and strategies of power play. After Shivaji, Kanhoji Angre and his successors tried and also were successful in building up a mighty naval force which struck terror among their adversaries. Their main objectives were to protect the Maratha subjects against attacks from rival naval powers and to secure the sovereignty over the seas for the Maratha state.⁹

The Siddis of Janjira were the first naval power with whom Shivaji came into conflict. Shivaji considered them to be a danger to his western defense and also a source of continuous frustration. They were more or less independent who first acted as the naval chiefs of the Bijapuris and later shifted their allegiance to the Mughals.¹⁰ Soon after conquering Kalyan-Bhiwandi, Shivaji commenced the work of building his naval fleet and one of the main aims behind this decision was to fight back the Siddis who were like "rats in the house".¹¹ Even a Portuguese document validates it by saying that Shivaji constructed his first twenty warships with the help of Portuguese artisans in order to meet the danger caused by the Siddi of Janjira.¹² As per English Factory Records, Shivaji requested their assistance in order to secure the coastal stretch around Danda-Rajapuri from the Siddis. On the other hand, the Siddis were quite shrewd and did succeed to have allies and sympathizers like the Mughals and Europeans on their side. Although the Europeans attitude towards the Marathas was neutral but later realizing their growing power at the sea they secretly aided the Siddis of Janjira. The Siddis' approach towards the Marathas became more authoritative when they transferred their loyalty to the Mughals who in return gave them a *mansab* of 900 in addition to a *jagir* fetching Rs. three lakhs per year and appointed Siddi Sambal as an admiral of their armada and got unlimited favours

and support from the Mughals. For instance, because of the pressure from the Mughals at Surat, the English at Bombay permitted the Siddis to winter their ships and offered complete safety from the Maratha. They used the Bombay harbour as their base and made frequent invasions on the Marathas from there. For instance, post their naval contest with the Marathas in 1680, the Siddis went to Bombay with the severed heads of approximately eighty Maratha sailors with the intention of demonstrating them there. However, the Deputy Governor of Bombay did not allow them to commit such act of cruelty.¹³ The English at Bombay at times were hesitant to permit the Siddis to use their port as they did not want to upset the Marathas by openly siding with their enemies. But later it became difficult for the Company officials to keep the Siddi demands under check as they were now officially the admirals of Mughal's navy. It is interesting to know that the English sided with the Siddis in order to resist Shivaji in fortifying Khanderi. But the joint effort turned out to be futile because of the strong determination of Shivaji.

The struggle between the two powers got more intensified when Angres came into the scene. It was only in the reign of Sekhoji Angre¹⁴ reign that the dream of the Marathas to defeat the Siddis was accomplished. A campaign against Janjira in the year 1733 was launched in which the Siddis were forced to agree to the terms dictated by the Marathas. Sekhoji successfully captured regions like Thal and Rewas from the Siddis but couldn't take the island of Underi due to the timely help provided to them by the English.¹⁵ The relation between the Marathas and the European naval powers can also be traced on similar lines. These Europeans tried to keep cordial relations with the native rulers so that there was no interruption to their commercial doings. These European powers were envious of each other and did not fail to invoke the help of Shivaji against their enemy or sometimes even helped each other against Shivaji himself. The Europeans have also admitted in several of their letters that Shivaji had become the master of a considerable stretch of land on the coast and his military and naval activities had grown in strength. Therefore, it was quite apparent that they could not afford to irritate Shivaji by going against him at least for few initial years and avoided a direct clash with him both on land and sea. On the other hand, Shivaji's policy towards the Europeans traders in India were marked by cautiousness and sympathy but at the same time, by a determination not to allow them to intrude upon his sovereign rights. Shivaji was smart enough to not ignore the importance of the European existence on the western coast. He was well aware that only these European powers could help him in providing the naval resources for his budding navy due to their powerful navy as

well as strong and well equipped ships. Not only this, he thought that by preserving neutral relationship with these Europeans he could achieve his main objective of overthrowing the Siddis from Janjira.

The first European powers to take an alarm at this development of Maratha maritime activity were the Portuguese. They could not accept the very idea that a native power should turn out to be a naval power thereby threatening the very source of their power. It was only when Shivaji turned his attention towards Bassein and Chaul that the Portuguese became concerned and tried their best to stop Shivaji from building his own navy. Bassein was one of the important shipbuilding centre of the Portuguese; hence they did not want any other power to build their stronghold there.¹⁶ As per a reference, the Portuguese Governor warned the Portuguese captain regarding the Maratha activities at Sea. It says, "A son of Shahaji, the rebel nobleman of Adilshahi court has captured the territory around Chaul and Bassein and has become quite powerful. He has built some men-of-war in Bhiwandi, Kalyan and Panvel, ports in Bassein Taluka. We are forced, therefore, to be more cautious. To ensure that these men-of-war do not set sail, we have ordered the Portuguese captain not to let them come out of these ports."¹⁷ Another letter by the Portuguese Vice-Rei Conde de San Vincente to the King of Portugal clearly shows that how these Europeans never wanted any native power to invest on the sea. It says, "I am afraid of Shivaji's naval ships. We did not take sufficient preventive steps and so he has built many a forts on the Konkan Coast. Today he has several ships and they are large ones".¹⁸ Even during the rule of the Angres, the relations between both the naval powers were not quite friendly. A letter of the Portuguese Viceroy, dated 8 January 1718, addressed to the King of Portugal reports that "Kanhoji Angre was a very powerful and insolent enemy of the Portuguese who was the main cause of their Cheul trade becoming almost extinct".¹⁹ Although the Portuguese acted neutral towards the Marathas but later realizing their position and power they covertly assisted the Siddis of Janjira and some other feudal lords in order to check the doings of the Marathas at sea.

One of the main reasons in building their own navy was the issue of *cartaz*²⁰ system. It's not a hidden fact that due to their superiority in naval affairs, the Portuguese claimed exclusive sovereignty over the sea and forced all trading in Indian seas to purchase their pass. This tactic was used as a device to implement monopoly and supremacy over maritime trade in Indian Ocean regions. The Portuguese were not the only one to claim this sovereignty. The other Europeans like the Dutch and the English also issued their passes and denied the right of free navigation to others. The Marathas not only

became a defender of indigenous sovereignty but also strongly displayed resistance towards these European intrusions by issuing their own passes like *dastak* and *kaul*.²¹ Initially during Shivaji's time, it seems the Marathas used to purchase these passes but later they avoided the payment. Following Shivaji's policy, Kanhoji bravely seized ships which sailed without his passes. For instance, in the year 1727, Kanhoji captured several richly loaded English ships like the Diamond, Bombay, Success, Robert, Otter and Charlotte. This policy of seizing ships by him was followed up by occasionally seizing ships of other Europeans like Dutch and the French. For instance, a Dutch man-of-war, known as John Burniston, wrote in a letter, dated 11 March 1702, "We have a report of Cannajee Angria's trapping a Dutch ship of 30 guns who put in near their port for wood and water, which their boats went. The villain took his opportunity of seizing them and sending his people in galvets on board, who being baled by the ship, answered that they had provision for them, and on such a pretense surprised and mastered her".²² Thus, in order to maintain peace and harmony in trade, even the Europeans had to respect his rights on the sea. As a result of which numerous treaties were settled between the Marathas and the others naval power on different occasions which shows how the Marathas forced these Europeans to accept their rights and equality at sea. The Angres made it compulsory for everyone trading in their domain to purchase their passes or else their ships were conquered. The general of Louis De Melo had written to the king that they have to take the *dastak* of Kanhoji Angre and then travel in the sea in the letter of 27 December 1712, saying "Kanhoji Angre has become very rich by looting the European businessmen'. He is becoming more powerful. He is very rich, powerful. He has established his own rule of the coast. There is no solution to him. Only to face him is possible with sword".²³ Therefore by issuing their own passes, the Marathas effectively demonstrated the possibility of defying the Europeans in their own area. Even after the death of Kanhoji, his successors remained one of the most feared and tough administrators in the western coast. Every ship that passed through their region had to purchase passes through them.

With the development of Maratha maritime activity in the region these Europeans made many offensive and defensive alliances with each other and sometimes with regional naval powers like the Siddi of Janjira in order to counter the rising influence of the Marathas in the region. For instance, the English formed an alliance with the Siddis to resist the Marathas in conquering the Island of Khanderi. The reason why this occupation was worrisome for the English was because it was a direct threat to them in Bombay. Despite the resistance offered

by the Siddis and the English, Shivaji witnessed the naval success. Later, the English were determined to crush the powers of Angres²⁴ and even the Portuguese agreed to be a part of this alliance in order to eliminate Kanhoji Angre from his headquarters at Kulaba. Though, due to Kanhoji Angre's brilliant tactical approach this joint expedition too led by Portuguese and the English failed miserably.²⁵ Even the Dutch, to avenge the attacks made by the Marathas against them, formed an alliance with the Portuguese and attacked Gheria, which was the naval base of the Marathas. This joint attack did not last long and was a complete failure and the forces retreated. Another instance of alliance and rather the most significant in the history of Marathas was the defeat of Angre's navy at the hands of joint forces of the English and the Peshwa in the year 1756 causing the culmination of the glorious era of the Maratha navy in the Konkan. This act can be regarded as one of the political mistakes on the part of the Peshwa that with the help of the English they defeated the Angres in the famous battle of Vijaydurga and led to the rise of establishment of the base of the English in west coast of India. Not only did they make alliance with the other powers but also secretly helped each other against the Marathas. Often it was seen that the English shipwrights helped Mughals or their allies the Siddis in assisting the constructions of their warships. The English at Rajapur factory aided Siddis against Shivaji which later created a rift between the two powers.²⁶ So the Marathas adopted an aggressive attitude with the Europeans only when they felt that they were favouring their enemies and trying to hinder their business.²⁷

In order to project sovereignty over the seas, the Marathas under Shivaji and later Angre constructed many warfare ships, built several coastal forts and even worked hard enough to promote shipbuilding industry which eventually enabled them to emerge as one of the chief naval powers of its times. Shivaji selected places like Kalyan, Bhiwandi, Agashi etc. as his docks mainly due to their richness in fine quality of teak wood. Several warships and merchant ships were also built with the use of finest teak and timber on the Konkan forests. Among these ships the most important were the *Ghurabs* and the *Gallivats* which were designed to resist damage and also to impose the same on the enemy. Various kinds of vessels such as *machuva*, *shibaror fatimar*, *tarand* and *pagar* were built by the Maratha shipwrights for commercial purpose. These ships were built by the people who belonged to the communities of *Kharva*, *Kolis* and *Bhandaris* who were excellent fishermen and sea navigators. Due to their valour and strength they were not only employed by the Marathas but also by the English and the Siddis.¹⁹ They had practical knowledge of prevailing winds, celestial navigation, and were aware of the natural features of

the coast. During the Angre period many warships were built on the European model. These ships were more seaworthy and could be even compared to their European rival on more or less equal terms.²⁸ The weapons used by the Marathas in their naval contest were comprised mainly of swords, bows, arrows, spears and guns.

A large number of forts were built by the Maratha rulers to fit into their scheme of the projection of sovereignty over the sea. These forts not only played an important role in Maratha political sovereignty but also acted as a medium of projection of the state's authority over the sea. The Konkan coast which was blessed with many fortified locations had military as well as strategic value. Most of these forts are located near the important ports or safeguarding the tidal mouths of the various Konkan Rivers or even sheltering dockyards. Shivaji well understood that the forts had significant emblematic value. He not only utilized the land and the hills in his territory for the establishment of forts but also did not spare the sea when he understood the importance of navy.²⁹ According to Khafi Khan, "Shivaji had built several forts by the seashore and had entirely interrupted maritime intercourse" and had a control of 360 forts to defend his rising kingdom.³⁰ Two kinds of coastal forts were constructed by Shivaji: one which were built on rocky islands and were enclosed by sea on all sides and the other were coastal forts which were constructed on the sea-shore with their entries from the land side and backs facing the sea.³¹ Shivaji paid special attention to the protection of the coastal region in view of the challenges he perceived on the oceanic front of his Swarajya. He was well precise in his decision as the western coast very soon saw a keen struggle for mastery in which the coastal forts played a major role. He built a number of sea forts for the naval bases, shelter and storage during his period to fight mainly with the Siddis of Janjira and also to protect his land and sea from the European powers on the western coast. The Marathas were also aware of the fact that for a navy to function efficiently naval bases were of prime importance. These naval bases not only act as the most immediate source of supply of war supplies but also a safe refuge for the fleet in case of any danger during the time of naval battles. They believed that the naval bases, if rightly fortified and with plenty of resources, ammunition and garrison, would successfully stand against the attack of any enemy. Several forts like Bankot, Anjanvel, Jaygad, Vijaydurg and Sindhugarh formed exceptional naval bases. Vijaydurg was the main base of the Maratha navy particularly under the Angres who built and repaired Maratha war vessels in the Vijaydurg dockyard. The forts supplied war necessities and were a place of shelter to the navy. The Marathas erected several forts at choke

points of sea routes in western coast that were used simultaneously as commercial factories and naval bases.

Thus, the first and primary aim of the Marathas was the sovereignty of sea and the projection of Maratha military strength over the coastal settings which they wished to achieve by having their own naval arm. They believed that every person had the right to navigate the high seas because the sea was common to all as per the law of nature. Though Shivaji faced a severe crisis of resources and also opposition from the neighbouring rulers, still he was well determined to secure the freedom of the seas along the coastal extent of his *Swarajya*. Although the Portuguese were able to dominate the high seas, the Marathas under the leadership of Shivaji and later Angres continued to offer stiff resistance and sought to deny their waters to the Portuguese and the other Europeans powers. So when the other indigenous power like the Marathas tried to challenge these European powers at sea they described them as pirates. This kind of fallacies and influences were handed down in the historiography by many colonial historians who labeled Kanhoji Angre and his successors as "pirates". But in reality it was Shivaji and later Angres who became a defender of indigenous sovereignty and possessed resistance to this European incursion. Kanhoji Angre and his successors cannot be declared as pirates, instead they were trying to defend the sea as they had the right to establish their equality and exercise their maritime right in their own waters. They refuse to accept European sovereignty at sea and issued their own passes and even surprised them in their own game. When compared with the other Europeans, there was only one shortcoming in Kanhoji Angre which was the lack of scientific knowledge. However, as far as courage, knowledge of naval warfare, and organizational skill of the navy is concerned, there was hardly any other seaman of that caliber

Notes

1. C.R. Boxer, *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire*, Hutchinson & Co., London, 1969, p.51.
2. During the tenure of Rajaram, Kanhoji Angre was given the title of 'Sarkhel' (admiral of the fleet) as a mark of his exemplary service.
3. Deccan College Post-graduate Research Bulletin, Vol. II, Nos. 2 and 3, p. 404-05.
4. This populated town near Bombay was recognized as an important shipbuilding place. Shivaji recovered Kalyan and Bhiwandi from the Mughals by 1670 and established his control over there by 1674.
5. P.S. Pissurlencar, *Portuguese-Mahratta Relations*, Maharashtra State Board For Literature and Culture, Bombay, 1983, p. 41.
6. B.G. Paranjape, *English Records on Shivaji (1659-1682)*, Shivaji Tercentenary Memorial Series, Vol. VI, Shiva Charitra Karyalaya, Poona, 1931.
7. The island fortress of Janjira was the main stronghold of the Siddis, which remained an eyesore and trouble to the Marathas throughout the 17th and the 18th centuries.
8. V. B. Kulkarni, *Shivaji - The Portrait of A Patriot*, Orient Longmans Limited, 1963, p. 163.
9. B. Arunachalam, *Essays in Maritime Studies*, Maritime History Society, Mumbai, 1998, p.36.
10. B.K. Ahluwalia, Shahshi Ahluwalia, *Shivaji and Indian Nationalism*, Cultural Publishing House, New-Delhi, 1984, p. 123.
11. *SabhasadBakhar*, p. 91.
12. Quoted by P.S. Pissurlencar, *Portuguese-Mahratta Relations*, Maharashtra State Board for Literature and Culture, Bombay, 1983, p. 42
13. B.G. Paranjape, *English Records on Shivaji (1659-1682)*, Shivaji Tercentenary Memorial Series, Vol. VI, Shiva Charitra Karyalaya, Poona, 1931., Vol. 11, no. 513, p. 315.
14. He was the son of Kanhoji Angre who became the 'Sarkhel' of the Martha navy after the death of his father.
15. C.K. Srinivasan, *Baji Rao I The Great Peshwa*, Asia Publishing House, 1961, p. 90.
16. Prof. A. R. Kulkarni, *Medieval Maratha Country*, Diamond Publications, 2008.
17. Goa Archives, MR 26, fl 383v. Quoted by P.S. Pissurlencar, *Portuguese-Mahratta Relations*, Maharashtra State Board For Literature and Culture, Bombay, 1983, p. 36.
18. Letter to the King of Portugal from Vice-Rei Conde de San Vincente, dated 20 September 1667. Quoted by P.S. Pissurlencar, *Portuguese-Mahratta Relations*, Maharashtra State Board For Literature and Culture, Bombay, 1983, p. 43.
19. P.S. Pissurlencar, *Portuguese-Mahratta Relations*, Maharashtra State Board for Literature and Culture, Bombay, 1983, p.123
20. It was a written permit which the native ships as well those trading had to buy in order to sail in the sea.
21. B.K. Apte, *A History of the Maratha Navy and Merchant Ships*, State Board for Literature and Culture, Bombay, Govt. Central Press, Bombay, 1973, pp. 201-03. He gives details about two types of passes: Dastak and Kaul. A Dastak was a pass permitting the ship (possessing it) to sail within the jurisdiction of the issuing power, while a Kaul allowed the holder to move on all the seas on the authority of the issuing government.
22. S.N. Sen, "The Angrias and the Dutch", in *Early Career of Kanhoji Angria and other papers*, Calcutta Review, February, 1938, p. 27.
23. D.R. Ketkar, *Sarkhel Kanhoji Angre*, Mrunmayi Rugvedi Publication, 1997, p. 36.
24. B.K. Apte, *History of the Maratha Navy and Merchantships*, State Board of Literature and Culture, Bombay, Govt. Central Press, 1973, p. 27.
25. Dolly Purohit, 'Marathas in Relation to the Portuguese: Naval Confrontations and Collaboration in the 17th and 18th centuries', *Sambodhi Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 3: 97-100, 2020, p. 98.

26. Krishnaji Anant Sabhasad, *Virachit Chhatrapati Sri Shivaji Raje Yanchi Bhakhar*, Pathan U.M (ed.) Snehwardhan Publishing House, Pune, 2000, p. 42.
27. Philip MacDougall, *Naval Resistance to Britain's Growing Power in India, 1660-1800 The Saffron Banner and the Tiger of Mysore*, Boydell Press, 2014, p. 42.
28. B.K. Apte, 'The Maratha Weapons Of War', *Bulletin of the Deccan College Post-Graduate and Research Institute*, Vol. 19, 1958, p. 113.
29. A.R. Kulkarni, *Medieval Maratha Country*, Diamond Publications, Pune, 2008, p. 129.
30. H.M. Elliot and Dowson. J, *History of India as told by its Historians*, D.K. Publishers, New Delhi, 1996, p. 271.
31. A.R. Kulkarni, *Medieval Maratha Country*, Diamond Publications, Pune, 2008, p. 129.