

## **RISE OF THE MARATHAS**

The rise of the Marathas in India is an important chapter of Medieval Indian history. The emergence of Marathas as a political power had a number of consequences. It shows us the possibilities of the rise of a Hindu power in Modern India as enumerated in the *HINDU PAD PADSHAH* of Baji Rao I. a possibility that was cut short by the English during Anglo- Maratha wars. As the chapter on the Marathas unfold, we discuss here, in this e – content, some of the underlying causes which led to the rise of the Maratha power in India. This is first of the series of lectures on the topic – Rise of the Marathas.

### **GEOGRAPHICAL REGION:**

The early rise of the Marathas mostly comprised of the regions specified below. The region specified in this unfolding of events are western coastal areas of Konkan, Khandesh, Berar, Nagpur, areas of the south and some areas of the Nizam. This whole area was known as Marathwada in medieval times, according to historian Bhandarkar, an expert in the history of the Marathas. The people collectively known as the Marathas comprised of the Rathis, Rashtriks and Rathiks, who occupied these areas. In due course of time especially 17th century, they were able to organize themselves into a cohesive force whose

sword and diplomacy conquered and held sway over major parts of India in the Deccan and north as well.

### **CAUSES OF THE RISE OF THE MARATHAS:**

Historian Grant Duff opines that the Marathas came out of the Sahayadri mountains like wild fire. Many historians believe that several situations and circumstances propelled the Marathas into action. According to many historians, Chatrapati Shivaji was a great organizer, who created a great Maratha confederacy and organization which unitedly led to action of empire building. As usual historians have varied opinion about the rise of Maratha power, but there are some important factors and reasons, which brought them to the fore of history during the latter part of the medieval period.

Some of the important underlying reasons for the rise of the Maratha domination are discussed below.

#### **1. NATURAL TOPOGRAPHY OF THE MAHARASHTRA REGION:**

The region of Maharashtra naturally comprised mostly of mountains and rocky undulations. The Sahyadri mountain range lie in the north to south region and satpuras – Vindhyas range is located in the east to west directions. According to Ranade, the small peaks, undulated rocky terrains and the rivers Godavari and Krishna provide a special geographical characteristic to this

region. It also makes the forts of the region largely impregnable and difficult to penetrate. In times of attacks, the Marathas found defensive cover in these forts. They were excellent horse riders and the natural surroundings made them hard working, courageous and goal oriented. The geographical character is also exhibited the characteristics of the Maratha people.

## **2. ROLE OF BHAKTI SAINTS:**

Bhakti movement held sway over the minds of the Hindu masses during the large part of the medieval India. The Marathas were no exception to this religious and cultural trends. They were highly influenced by the Bhakti movement of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century. Maharashtra had a series of Bhakti saints such as Guru Ramdas, Eknath, Himadri, Vaman Pandit, Gyaneshwar and Chakradhar who spread this tradition of religious beliefs through poetic compositions and other means like songs, Bhajans and other vernacular language mediums, in this case usually Marathi. The idea of pilgrimages across the country was also promoted by these saints leading to the growth of a unified vision of Maratha kingdom in the face of larger Muslim political domination.

Revival of religion communicated in simple form by these bhakti saints brought about Hindu consciousness amongst the Marathas. The growth of Maratha unity based on religion coupled with good organizational leadership led to the ultimate success of the Marathas.

### **3. UNITY OF LANGUAGE:**

The development of Marathi language and literature in medieval India has an important role to play in the unification and rise of the Maratha power. Medieval bhakti saints taught and spread the message of religion and unity in the language of Marathi. Most Hindu religious scriptures and books were translated into Marathi. This gave a great fill to the Maratha unity because the *Brahmins* no longer enjoyed the sole hold over the religious scriptures. Common man was also able to comprehend these religious scripture as communicated by the saints in common Marathi language. This gave birth to a strong sense of unity amongst the Maratha people.

### **4. SOCIAL EQUALITY:**

The social life of the Marathas was largely based on the elements of equality between different castes. Rich and poor divide was less. There was less impact of the muslim invasions of India. Pardah system was not prominent in this region. Freedom of movement and unhindered economic activity of the Maratha women led to growth of a strong sense of nationalist ideas about independence, contributing to the rise of the Marathas.

### **5. MARATHA CHARACTER:**

It has been noted by many historians that Maratha nature comprised of clever and practical traits. They resorted not only to war and battles but were also adept in the art of diplomacy and politics. According to one historian, they often used every possible means to win the situation. Some traits which were earlier used by the Muslims during their early conquests of India.

#### **6. EFFECT OF HINDUTVA ON THE MARATHAS:**

The decline of the Vijaynagar empire, one of the last bastions of the Hindu cultural and political stronghold in the face of the expanding Muslim empire, had a lasting effect on the minds of the Marathas. Chatrapati Shivaji and the Maratha chieftains wanted to preserve the culture and religion of Hinduism under their rule. The religious orthodoxy of Aurangzeb was also responsible for the unification of the Hindus of the southern region of India.

#### **7. ECONOMIC SITUATION OF MAHARASHTRA:**

According to the historian Rawlinson, one of the primary reasons for the rise of the Marathas seem to lie in the economic backwardness of the region. The economy of this region had political consequences. But the same reason led to the emergence of the Marathas in the 17<sup>th</sup> C.

#### **8. DECLINE OF THE MUSLIM RULE IN SOUTH INDIA:**

During 17<sup>th</sup> century, many important Muslim states had declined. But two very important Muslim states – Bijapur and Golkunda still existed. But they were also in the state of anarchy. Their administrative decline and internal strife was an important factor in the rise of Shivaji in the region.

#### **9. STRONG PERSONALITY OF SHIVAJI.**

Finally, according to many historians, the personality of Chatrapati Shivaji was a binding force behind the rise of Maratha power in medieval India. He was a great organizer who build great Maratha coalition in the face of disparate groups that had been divided throughout the medieval ages. His strong personality was instrumental in creating a strong and well trained army of the Marathas which eventually created an independent empire. Creation of SWARAJYA or independent Hindu state is an important chapter of the late medieval history of India.

#### **10. OTHER MARATHA NOTABLES:**

It has been noted that such creation of an independent state could not have been achieved without the help of many Maratha notables. Their names are many whose sacrifice ultimately led to the creation and expansion of the Maratha empire.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

In the above discussion, we have noted causes of the rise of the Maratha power in late medieval India. These important factors contributed immensely to the rise and growth of Maratha power in India. However, there must be a number of other factors integrated amongst these that cannot be discussed here because this lecture is to address primarily students of undergraduate course.