The Naval Architecture and Administration of the Marathas

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Abstract: *The present paper is an attempt to study the different aspects of Maratha naval administration. It was Shivaji and later Kanhoji Angre and his successors who not only understood the significance of controlling the waters of western coast but also established their own navy at the time when various European powers like the Portuguese, the Dutch and the English were establishing their sovereignty over the sea. Thus by establishing their own indigenous navy the Marathas possessed a strong threat to these European powers. The paper tries to highlight the strategies adopted by Marathas and also the ways in which they dealt with these Europeans as well as the Siddis of Janjira. The present paper largely deals with the naval administration of the Marathas including their shipbuilding activity, types of vessels and ships they constructed, their recruitment policies, various taxes and also the significance of sea forts.*

Key words: *Maratha, Naval power, Ship building, Forts, Europeans*

The western coast of India became a centre of attraction to the various trading communities due to its proximity to the sea and mountain passes which made inland, coastal and overseas trade possible. The Portuguese were the firsts among the Europeans to pave their way into India and due to their power and superiority in naval affairs were able to claim sovereignty and supremacy over maritime trade in Indian Ocean. Along with the Portuguese the other European powers as well as native naval powers like the Siddis of Janjira[1] were opposed both at the sea and land by the indigenous powers in western coast of India. The

benchmark which was already set by the Portuguese in turn led Marathas under the leadership of Shivaji to recognize the significance of a strong naval arm and built a large fleet and chain of coastal forts. By founding their own indigenous navy the Marathas possessed a strong threat to these Europeans who had developed more advanced instrument of sea power (Purohit 2020: 97). Shivaji understood that by governing the waters of western coast and founding his own navy he can oppose the adversaries and can establish sovereignty over the sea. After the demise of Shivaji, the Maratha navy reached its peak under the command of Maratha admiral Kanhoji Angre who valiantly fought against the navies of Europeans and the Siddis, making him the greatest naval hero of India. The present article explores the naval administration of the Marathas during the 17th and 18th centuries and tries to underline the verities of dimensions of the Maratha navy which have not been a part of the earlier historiographical research. This article focuses on the themes like shipbuilding centres, the types of war ships used and naval crew. It also talks about the Maratha sea forts and their importance in the administration of the Navy.

Naval Tactics

Though there was an evolution in the policies and strategies adopted by the Marathas in naval warfare, there were some definite teachings that remained unchanged and had universal applications. These strategies and tactics executed by the Marathas depended on various factors such as the availability of resources, scientific and technological awareness, the nature of the enemy, and diplomatic and political goals. During its initial years the Maratha navy was not in a situation to force a direct naval fight on a strong opponent. Therefore, the Martha naval fleet might have been used to mete out sudden attack on the enemy. By resorting to the element of sudden attack, the Marathas not only made the best use of the physical features of their territories but this principle also allowed them to use their resources and at the same time, served their immediate objective of putting more pressure on their enemy. Later with the development and technological improvement of ships and vessels, the purpose of the Maratha navy shifted to fighting naval-battles and also in keeping the adversary at bay (Apte 1973: 87). Another naval policy adopted by the Marathas particularly during the reign of Shivaji was to overthrow the enemy from strategically important regions and to prevent them from occupying those regions.

The basic principle on which the Maratha naval strategy was based were the acts of devastation and confiscation of the opponent's ship. By seizing their adversary's ships and crew as war booty, the Marathas projected their power and hegemony to their opponents. The Sabhasad Bakhar[2] gives information

regarding the attacks and plundering activities by the Marathas in the enemy's territories. Sabhasad writes, "The Raje's (Shivaji) ships began to plunder the cities and forts at various places belonging to the Mughals, the Firangs, the Dutch, the English and the Kilatav, and twenty-seven such sea powers, as well as various sea coast towns as Bednur, Sunda and Srirangapattan and subsist. They fought at variousplaces and used to bring the Raje grains and other provisions, after providing for their own needs" (Sabhasad Bakhar: 94). This tactic was also implemented by the European Companies against each other. According to a Portuguese document[3], "Shivaji's fleet detained as many as 121 trading ships from the Kamataka ports of Honavar, Mangalore, Barcelore and Gangoli (Cambolim)" (Pissurlencar 1983: 44). It has been often noted that both Portuguese as well as the Marathas were in the habit of seizing and hindering each other ships. In a Portuguese letter of March 1665 there is a reference to a battleship of the Portuguese (navio) having been captured by Shivaji's fleet. One more Portuguese warship (*Pataxo*) was taken captive by Shivaji's fleet in November 1670, while it was sailing from Surat to Daman. In retaliation, the Portuguese captured eleven unarmed Maratha cargo ships and took them to Bassein (Pissurlencar 1983: 46). One of the diplomatic and tactful strategies adopted by the Marathas was to allow these Europeans to establish their trading sessions, harbor and support facilities from which they progress.

For instance, the Europeans like the Dutch and the French had a commercial relation with Shivaji. The Dutch proposed to assist him in seizing Janjira in return for his support in attacking Bombay. While the French tried to obtain his favor by providing him with arms and ammunition.

Ship building

The shipbuilding industry was one of the chief industries that thrived on the western coast of Maharashtra during the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. As per a Portuguese letter of 1659 the regions like Kalyan, Bhiwandi and Panvel were the Maratha shipbuilding centres (Pissurlencar 1983: 41). Shivaji selected these places as his docks due to their richness in fine quality of teak wood. Numerous types of vessels used for different types of purpose were built with the use of finest teak and timber on the Konkan forests. It was believed that the ships constructed at Agashi were able to make the voyage to Europe while the ones built at Vasai were equal in quality with Portugal in the art of shipbuilding. Another shipbuilding centre was Bassein, due to the availability of the best timber there. It is said that the teak was exported from here to Mecca where the Turks used it for constructing their ships. During the eighteenth

century, Bombay became famous for shipping industry and timber which grew on the side of the north Bombay was used for the construction of the ships.The art of building the ships reached to its maturity in the period of Kanhoji Angre. To develop a strong navy Kanhoji Angre encouraged shipbuilding. Teak was even sown in some parts of the western coast to ensure a supply of timber to the Angre forces (Sharma 2010: 60). Many government factories were built at Kolaba fort, east coast of Sakharkhadi, Suvarnadurg, and Vijaydurgh and was believed that the design of these ships and their durability were of very highquality. Shipbuilding on modern European lines was also constructed mainly at Surat, Bombay and Daman (Kumar 2005: 350).

The repairing and construction of the ships was done at Malwan by the Hindu carpenters who belonged to the Konkan region and were known as *Sutars* or Carpenters. The family of Wadias have been referred to as the master builders of the Mercantile Marine and Indian navy warships (Agaskar: 239). Apart from these people, there were Parsis who constructed ships for the East India Company on the European model. These Europeans praised the skills of Indian ship builders. In order to encourage the industry a lot of measures were taken by the state. A number of facilities for a ship-owner were provided by the Marathas. For instance, their ships were exempted from octroi and other goods when it loaded goods for household use and brought them from other ports to the villages (Mahajan 1989: 33).

Types of ships / Vessels

Any ship that was armed or equipped with a gun was designated as a warship in the Maratha period. The Maratha navy contained five types of warships. Among these the most important were the *Ghurabs* and the *Gallivats* which were designed to resist damage and also to impose the same on the enemy. The Portuguese records suggest that initially Shivaji lacked the basic technical knowledge and had to request for the Portuguese help as far as the manufacture of the first twenty armed ships of the Maratha navy is concerned.[4] Shivaji ordered the construction of twenty *galivats* at the Portuguese shipyard at Bassien (Pissurlencar 1983: 42). Several types of vessels such as *machuva*, *shibar*, or *fatimar*, *tarand* and *pagar*[5] were built by the Maratha shipwrights for commercial purpose. The profit gained from the trade and commerce was used to refurbish the navy. Many merchant ships were constructed to carry out trade in the region. The merchant ship was designed to carry cargo were equipped with a few guns for self-protection. They were round in shape and therefore were slow unlike the long ship specially designed for gaining speed in war. The Marathas adopted the

European build in some of their ships. Especially during the Angre period, a number of fighting ships were constructed on the English model (Sabhasad Bakhar: 94).

The *Sabhasad Bakhar* and some other contemporary Marathi chronicles also list the different types of Maratha vessels along with their nomenclature. Sabhasad provides details regarding the numerical strength of the navy and the different types and categories of ships and vessels of the Maratha fleet. These ships were built by Shivaji keeping in mind the naval-strategy and diverse requirements of the state. For instance, flat bottomed boats were suited the specific purpose of being used in the shallow and rocky waters of the various creeks while small rowing boats were used for towing the heavy vessel which could achieve speed once it used sail after reaching out in the open waters and deliver offensive on the enemy. Sabhasad writes, "Ships of various types, such as *Gurabs* and *Tarandes*, *Tarus*, *Galvats*, *Sibads* and *Pagar* were fitted and organized under two Subedars...A Subaconsisting of two hundred ships" (Pissurlencar 1983: 43). These ships were specifically designed for gaining speed in war and were equipped with few guns for the purpose of self-protection.

An estimate about the different kinds of vessels that constituted the Maratha naval fleet can be gathered from the contemporary Portuguese documents. A letter written by the Governor of Goa in May 1662 says, "Ragho Ballal, the (Maratha) Subedar of Dabhol, had requested him to allow five warships (*Sanguiceis)* and one *Pataxo* interned in the Karanja creek to go out to the sea" (Pissurlencar 1983: 43). Another Portuguese letter written by the Captain of Chaul to the Governor of Goa in 1664, mentions that "Shivaji was building fifty ships in upper Chaul and that seven of them were ready to set out to sea" (Yazdani 2017: 536). Several letters of the British in India also offer us with information of similar nature. Initially, Kanhoji's fleet comprised of galleys fitted with guns and it is said that he seized two *ghurabs* from the Portuguese. There were two types of *Ghurabs*. The big one was three masted vessels with a sharp bow and weighed 300 tons while the small one was weighed 150 ton and had two masts. According to the report of British observer Robert Orme, Kanhoji had eight to ten *ghurabs* and forty to fifty *galivats* governing the coast from Bombay to Vengurla. His ships were equipped with up to forty guns a piece, the *ghurabs* usually possessed sixteen to thirty guns each while *galivats* four to ten guns (Apte 1973: 122). During the Angre period many warships were built on the European model. These ships were more sea worthy and could be even compare to their European rival on more or less equal terms. The weapons used by the Marathas

in their naval fight comprised of swords, bows and arrows, spears and guns. (Apte 1958: 113). The Marathas cast heavy artillery and shots with the support of the local iron-smiths. Due to their inferior calibre they used to break when fired. As a result the guns of European manufacturers were extremely valued. Every ship that came from Europe brought guns heavy and light for which there was a ready market here. Adventurous Europeans who were well trained in the technique of artillery were often employed in the armies of the native prince (Apte 1973: 122). Marathas had to depend upon the Europeans for superior guns and artillery.

Naval Crew

During the 16th and 17th Centuries numerous religious communities were engaged in maritime activities such as fishing, seafaring, navigation and shipbuilding. Ample opportunities were provided by the long coastline of Konkan to these indigenous communities to engage in maritime activities. The majority of the naval crew belonged to the communities like *Kharva*, *Kolis* and *Bhandaris* who were 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 (Sen 1958: 182). They had practical knowledge of prevailing winds, celestial navigation, and were aware of the natural topographies of the coast. The *Kharvas* were the most skilled seamen while the *Kolis* always constituted the bulk of the naval force of the Maratha rulers. *Kolis* belonged to the fishermen community of the western coast who knew the sea coat like the palms of their hands and were born seamen. It is said that the *Kolis* of Kalyan region could replicate the structure of foreign ships around. They were completely acquainted of the coastline, its shoals and rocks. Another member of the crew comprised of *Gabits*, who have been referred to as sea fishers and sailors. These *Gabits* called themselves Konkani Marathas and used to manage the navy of Shivaji. There were also Hindu artisans known as *Sutars* or Carpenters who belonged to the Konkan region and were involved in shipbuilding. The Marathas had to depend on the western shipwrights for technical skills as the shipwrights of the Konkan were mostly illiterate. He employed numerous Dutchmen who provided technical skills such as improving the designs and weapons of the Maratha ships (Roy 2011: 17). Other Foreign technicians were employed as gunners, shipbuilders, etc. by him. There was a scarcity of skilled gunners and it was believed that these gunners were mere mercenaries who shifted their amenities from one masters to other. Later in the eighteenth century, an increase in Indians entering the Maratha service as skilled gunners like the *golandaaz* belonging to Muslim families can be observed (Sharma 2010: 61).

The chief of the Fleet was given the honour of *Sarkhel*[7]. Kanhoji Angre was conferred with the title and post of *sarkhel* by Rajaram According to Krishnaji Anant Sabhasad[6], the chief commanders of the fleet were Mai Naik, a Bhandari and Dariya Sarang. Dariya Sarang is said to have commanded the fleet in 1670 expedition while the Khanderi expedition in 1679 was led by Mai Naik. Sabhasad has mentioned a third officer Ibrahim Khan in his list of cavalry, infantry and naval commanders (Sen 1920: 138). A separate department named *armada subha* looked after the armada administration. The *subha-armar* was the military head of the navy whose responsibility was to defend the coast from any attack, to check piracy and also to protect the maritime trade. The captain of the ship was known as *Narkhoda* while *Sarang* was the chief of all sea men who run the ship. Regarding the salary of the officers, a lot of material can be collected from Peshwa diaries.[8] For instance; the personal salary of the *subhedar* of the navy was Rs. One thousand per annum in cash and an allowance sanctioned for maintenance of his horses was Rs. ninety per annum while for his servants was Rs. ninety six (Vad 1906-11: 340-343).

Taxes

The introduction of the *cartaz* system by the Portuguese was another policy to claim exclusive sovereignty over the sea.They forced all trading in Indian seas to purchase their pass (cartaz) which was used as an instrument of domination and authority over maritime trade in Indian Ocean regions (Purohit 2020: 97). These Europeans repudiated the weaker neighbours the sovereignty of the sea. The Marathas denied this entitlement and issued their own passes. Following the strategy of Shivaji, Kanhoji Angre bravely rode the sea and captured the ships which sailed without his passes. The passes issued by the Marathas were -a *Dastak* and a *Kaul*. A *dastak* was a pass permitting the ship to sail within the dominion of the issuing power and was issued on the line of Portuguese *cartaz* to ships under his protection or having paid tribute to him. The Ships which did not carry his *dastak* were likely to get confiscated. While a *Kaul* permitted the holder to travel on all the seas on the authority of the issuing Government. These Europeans considered Kanhoji Angria nothing less than a pirate who seized every ship and caused disasters. Due to this reason his demeanour was often termed as piracy by these trading nations. Though his activities did not differ from that of the Europeans who too invariably denied passing any vessel, except their own to sail without their pass, except a treaty or an agreement had been secured. Even after the demise of Kanhoji his successors continued to be the most dreaded and strong naval administrators in the western coast.

Maratha Sea Forts

The forts played a vital role not only in Marathas political sovereignty but also acted as 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. Several sea forts were occupied, re-strengthened and built by the Maratha rulers to fit into their scheme of the projection of sovereignty over the sea. 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 (Kulkarni 2008: 129). According to Khafi Khan, "Shivaji had built several forts by the seashore and had entirely interrupted maritime intercourse" (Elliot and Dowson 1996: 271) and had a control of 360 forts to defend his rising kingdom. The sea forts of Shivaji were of two kinds: one which were built on rocky island, enclosed by sea on all sides and the other were coastal forts which were erected on the sea-shore with their entries from the land side and rears facing the sea (Kulkarni 2008: 129). 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 major role. He built number of sea forts for the naval bases, shelter and storage (Sorokhaibam 2013: 225) 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.

Naval Bases

The Marathas were completely aware of the fact that for a navy to function smoothly naval bases were of prime importance. These naval bases not only act as the most immediate source of supply of war materials 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. Forts such as Bankot, Anjanvel, Jaygad, Vijaydurg and Sindhugarh formed excellent naval bases. Vijayadurg 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. Marathas erected several forts at choke points of sea routes in western coast that were used simultaneously as commercial factories and naval bases.

Conclusion

Sovereignty over the sea was a concept which started with the rise of naval politics. The Europeans, especially the Portuguese claimed exclusive sovereignty over the sea and compelled all trading in Indian seas to purchase their pass (cartaz) which was used 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. It was Shivaji and later Kanhoji Angre who became a defender of indigenous sovereignty and possessed resistance to these European incursions. They tried to protect the sea as they had the right to establish their equality and exercise their maritime right in their own waters. They refused to accept European sovereignty at sea and issued their own passes. Therefore, several naval battles took place between the Marathas and the European powers. With the rise of the Angres, we see that there was continuous change in the power struggle at the sea between the Maratha naval power and the Europeans.

Thus, the Maratha navy played an important role in the maritime history of India and also proved a blunt instrument for offensive warfare against the Europeans who by the sixteenth century had developed more advanced instrument of sea power. They were the first indigenous state who had made sincere efforts in the field of naval architecture and administration. The administration of the navy under the supervision of Shivaji and later Angres can be considered as the building blocks of naval administration in contemporary India. During the times of Shivaji, new technologies pertaining to warfare, ship buildings were introduced. The Marathas later during the Angres rule achieved technological improvements in the domains of naval construction, ship building, and other sea-related skills. Warships like Gurabs and Gallivats were considered to be more sea worthy, which could even meet their European rival on more or less equal terms, thus giving Marathas a clear supremacy in ocean-going warships. They even constructed a web of fortresses at choke-points of sea routes in western coast that were used not only as commercial factories but also for naval bases. Beside the use of various warfare ships and coastal forts, the Marathas used many naval warfare strategies which enabled them to emerge as one of the chief naval power

of their times. The naval technologies and strategies which were adopted by them proved to be quite useful in the coming years.

End-Notes

[1]The Janjira Island was the political base of the Siddis and from here they extended their power and authority to other parts of Indian Ocean. This Janjira fortress remained an eyesore and head- ache to the Marathas throughout the 17th and the 18th centuries.

[2] Krishnaji Anant Sabhasad has written *Sabhasad Bakhar*, one of the earliest biographical narratives on Shivaji.

[3] Portuguese Letter dated 28 November 1657.

[4] Two Portuguese artisans, Roe Leitao Viegas and his brother Femao Leitao Viegas supervised and helped Shivaji to construct his fighting vessels.

[5] For a detailed description of Maratha ships and vessels, see Apte, 1973.

[6] Krishnaji Anant Sabhasad provides rough estimate of the numerical strength of the Maratha navy. The *Bakhar* also give details regarding the different types of vessels of the Maratha fleet. Sabhasad also gives other facts relating Maratha forts such as the names of Shivaji's eighteen Karkhanas, Shiledars, Subhedars, forts and their income and expenditure.

[7] Admiral of the Navy.

[8] Selection from Satara Raja's and Peshwa's Dairies was prepared by Rao Bahadur Ganesh Chimanji Vad & edited under the orders of the Deccan Vernacular Translation Society, Poona by different authors (D. B. Parsanis, K. B. Marathe, K. N. Sane and B. P. Joshi) and Published by the Society with the permission of the Government of Bombay.

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