

Maratha Empire, Rise, Peshwa Era, Anglo-Maratha War, Decline of Maratha, UPSC Notes

July 1, 2026 • vajiramandravi.com



The Maratha Empire was an early modern Indian confederation that rose to prominence in the 18th century, dominating much of the Indian subcontinent. The Maratha Empire was established by Chhatrapati Shivaji in the late 17th century as a response to the chaos and misrule in the Deccan region.

The confederacy was officially recognized as a tributary state by Emperor Bahadur Shah I in 1707 after a long rebellion. From 1737 to 1803, the Marathas played a crucial role in the imperial politics of Delhi, influencing the power dynamics of the region and shaping the course of Indian history during this period.

Maratha Empire Rise

During the seventeenth century, the Marathas rose to prominence in the Indian subcontinent under the leadership of Shivaji. He challenged the Adil Shahi dynasty and the Mughals, establishing a kingdom with Raigad as its capital. Aurangzeb's religious policies turned non-Muslims against him, causing his forces to suffer heavy losses in both manpower and finances during the Maratha uprising. This allowed the Marathas to gain power and control over large parts of the former Mughal territories in northern India.

Various factors played a role in the rise of the Marathas during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, including:

- **Geographic Advantages:** The physical geography of the Maratha region, with its mountainous terrain and dense forests, fostered their bravery and skill in guerilla warfare.
 - They constructed numerous forts on these mountains to strengthen their defences.
- **Religious and Political Unity:** Political unity was largely achieved through the leadership of Shivaji. **The Bhakti movement**, which spread through Maharashtra, instilled a sense of religious unity among the Marathas.
 - Spiritual leaders such as Tukaram, Ramdas, and Eknath promoted social cohesion.
- **Maratha Political Influence:** Many Marathas held important positions in the administration and military of the **Deccan Sultanates of Bijapur** and **Ahmadnagar**.
 - While notable clans like the Mores and Nimbalkers had their roles, the strong Maratha state was mainly founded by **Shahji Bhonsle** and his son, **Shivaji**.

Maratha Empire Under Shivaji (1630-1680)

Shivaji (1630-1680) founded the **Maratha state** and fought against the **Sultanate of Bijapur** in 1645, capturing forts like **Torna**. He established **Hindavi Swarajya**, made **Raigad** his capital, defended his kingdom against the Mughals, and was crowned **Chhatrapati in 1674**.

- After the **Battle of Purandar (1665)**, Shivaji briefly became a Mughal vassal but continued expanding Maratha's influence by building forts and creating a navy.
- He set up an improved administration, brought back Hindu traditions, and promoted Marathi and Sanskrit over Persian.
- Shivaji was known for treating women with respect and for his inclusive policies, hiring people from all castes, religions, and even Europeans in his administration and military.

Successors of Shivaji

Shivaji had two sons, **Sambhaji** and **Rajaram**, who were half-brothers from different mothers. After **Shivaji died in 1681**, **Sambhaji inherited the throne** and continued pursuing his father's expansionist ambitions.

- **Sambhaji** was later captured and executed by the Mughals.
- **Rajaram** then took the throne but was forced to flee to Ginjee Fort by the Mughals. He later died at Satara.
- Rajaram's young son, **Shivaji II (Ramaraja)**, succeeded him with his mother, **Tara Bai**, as regent.
- The next ruler, **Shahu**, son of Sambaji saw the rise of the Peshwas to power.
- In 1713, Shahu designated **Balaji Vishwanath** as the **Peshwa**.

Maratha Empire Administration

The Maratha Empire had four types of administration: Central, Provincial, Revenue, and Military.

- **Central Administration: Ashtapradhan**, or Council of Eight, was a group of eight ministers responsible for governing the Maratha Kingdom. This system was established by Shivaji. The titles of the ministers were derived from Sanskrit and comprised:

- **Peshwa or Pantpradhan:** Prime Minister responsible for overseeing the entire administration.
- **Amatya or Mazumdar:** Finance Minister, managing the Empire's accounts.
- **Shurunavis or Sacheev:** Secretary, who prepared royal orders.
- **Mantri:** Interior Minister, overseeing internal affairs and intelligence.
- **Sari-i-Naubat or Senapati:** Commander-in-Chief, in charge of the military and defense.
- **Sumant or Dabir:** Foreign Minister, managing relationships with other rulers.
- **Nyay Adhyaksh:** Chief Justice, handling civil and criminal justice.
- **Panditrao:** High Priest, managing religious matters.
- **Chitnis:** Personal Secretary to the Chhatrapati, acting as a senior writer and sometimes seen as second to the Peshwa in their absence.
- **Provincial Administration:** Shivaji divided his kingdom into several provinces for taxation and administration. He stopped the practice of outsourcing land revenue collection and had state officials collect taxes directly from the farmers (ryots).
- **Parganas and Tarafs:** Each province was subdivided into **Parganas and Tarafs**, with villages serving as the smallest units.
- Provinces were divided into **Tarafs (districts)**, which were further split into **Parganas (sub-districts)**.
- Officers called **Deshpande and Deshmukh** were responsible for **law and order in the Parganas**, which were made up of villages called **Mauza, Kulkarni, and Patil**.
- **Prants and Sarsubedar:** Conquered lands were organized into provinces called **prants**, each overseen by a **sarsubedar and subedar** officers.
- The district officer was known as the **Havaladar**.
- **Revenue Administration:** Shivaji developed a revenue system based on Malik Amber's Kathi system to assess land value. Local farmers had to pay 40% of their harvest in taxes.
- **Chauth tax:** Shivaji introduced the **Chauth tax**, which took one-fourth of the earnings from nearby Mughal territories for military support, and a 10% additional tax called **Sardeshmukhi**.
- **Ryotwari system:** Shivaji developed the **Ryotwari system** to enhance the communication between the government and farmers (ryots). This reduced corruption from middlemen.
- **Mirsadars:** Shivaji kept strict control over the Mirasdars, who had inherited land rights and paid little tax. He later challenged their power and took control of their land.
- **Military Administration:** Shivaji established a strong military administration, paying ordinary soldiers in cash and giving chieftains revenue payments called **Saranjam**.
 - His cavalry, known as **Paga**, included 30,000 to 40,000 troops managed by **Havalgars**.
 - Shivaji was the **first Indian king** to recognize the need for a naval force, building dockyards and ships for trade and defence.
 - He also trained his troops in **guerrilla warfare** and mountain combat.

Maratha Empire During Peshwa Era

The Peshwa period began when Shahu appointed Balaji Vishwanath as Peshwa in 1713. One of his first major achievements was the **Treaty of Lonavala in 1714** with **Kanhoji Angre**, who later accepted Shahu as Chhatrapati.

Maratha Empire Under Balaji Viswanath (1713-1720)

Balaji Viswanath started as a minor revenue official and became **Peshwa in 1713**, establishing a powerful hereditary position. In **1719**, Balaji Viswanath obtained important rights from **Mughal emperor Farukh Siyar**, who recognized **Shahu** as king. He helped Shahu become the Maratha king by gaining support from other Maratha leaders.

Maratha Empire Under Baji Rao I (1720-1740)

Baji Rao was the eldest son of Balaji Viswanath and became **Peshwa** at the young age of twenty. Under his leadership, Maratha's power reached its peak.

- He established a confederacy among the Maratha chiefs, granting each chief the autonomy to govern their designated territory independently.
- This approach enabled numerous Maratha families to gain prominence and authority across India, including the **Gaekwads** in Baroda, the **Bhonsles** in Nagpur, the **Holkars** in Indore, the **Scindias** in Gwalior, and the Peshwas in Poona.
- During Baji Rao I's reign, he is said to have fought over 40 battles, including the "Battle of Palkhed" (1728), the "Battle of Delhi" (1737), and the "Battle of Bhopal" (1737).

Maratha Empire Under Balaji Baji Rao (1740-1761)

Balaji Baji Rao, also known as **Nanasaheb**, succeeded his father as Peshwa at just nineteen. He supported agriculture, protected the local population, and greatly enhanced the region's conditions.

- In 1752, the Peshwa agreed to protect the Mughal Empire in exchange for collecting **Chauth from northwest provinces** and total revenue from Agra and Ajmer.
- **Third Battle of Panipat**: The Battle was fought between the **Marathas and Ahmad Shah Abdali in 1761**.
 - The Marathas were responsible for defending India during Abdali's invasion and fought bravely but were ultimately defeated.
 - After Balaji Baji Rao died, the **Third Battle of Panipat** greatly weakened Maratha's power and caused internal conflicts within the confederacy.

Marathas and Mughals

The Marathas and the Mughals were two influential powers in India during the 17th and 18th centuries. Maratha warriors, skilled in **guerrilla warfare**, resisted Mughal authority, using their terrain knowledge to confront the formidable Mughal army.

- The conflict between the Marathas and the Mughals lasted many years, involving numerous battles and negotiations.
- Eventually, the Marathas emerged as a significant force in Indian politics, challenging the Mughal Empire's authority.

Anglo-Maratha War

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the Marathas and the English fought three times for political control, with the English emerging victorious. The conflicts were fueled by British ambition and internal Maratha divisions, allowing the English to establish control, like in Bengal.

- **The First Anglo-Maratha War (1775- 1782)**: The First Anglo-Maratha War was fought between the **Maratha Empire** and **the British East India Company**. It began with the **Treaty of Surat** and concluded with **the Treaty of Salbai**.
 - **Treaty of Surat**: The Treaty of Surat in 1775 enabled the English to gain control of the territories of **Salsette** and **Bassein**, along with a portion of the revenues from the **Surat** and **Bharuch** districts.
 - **Treaty of Salbai**: The Treaty of Salbai, signed and ratified in **1782**, ended the First Phase of the Struggle by establishing a twenty-year peace between the English and Sindhia.
 - This treaty followed several English military victories, including the captures of Ahmedabad, Bassein, and Gwalior.
- **The Second Anglo-Maratha War (1803-1805)**: The Second Anglo-Maratha War (1803-1805) represented the second significant clash between the two powers, culminating in a decisive victory for the British.
- The war ended with the **Treaty of Rajpurghat (1806)**, which greatly weakened the Maratha's power and influence in India.
- This defeat caused a substantial weakening of their empire.
- **The Third Anglo-Maratha War (1817-1818)**: The Third Anglo-Maratha War occurred from 1817 to 1818 and was the **final conflict** between the Maratha Empire and the British East India Company.
 - This war is also referred to as the **Pindari War**, as it involved fighting between the Pindaris and the British forces.
- Ultimately, the Marathas were defeated by the British East India Company in this conflict.

Maratha Empire Decline

In **June 1818**, the Peshwa surrendered, which led to the collapse of the Maratha Confederacy.

The position of Peshwa was abolished, and **Bajirao** was made a British retainer in **Bithur**, near Kanpur.

Pratap Singh, a direct heir of Shivaji, was appointed as the ruler of the small principality of **Satara**. Several factors contributed to the Marathas' defeat by the English, with the primary reasons outlined below.

- **Ineffective Leadership**: The Maratha state's governance was influenced by despotic leaders, but later leaders including Bajirao II proved to be ineffective and failed to match the English officials' capabilities.
- **Flaws in the Maratha State**: Since Shivaji's time, the unity among the Maratha people has been weak and unplanned.
 - It lacked real efforts for community development, education, or unification.
 - This became clear when they faced a well-organized European power based on Western practices.
- **Fragile political structure**: The Maratha Empire, led by Chhatrapati and Peshwa, was a loose confederation with powerful chiefs like Gaikwad, Holkar, Sindhia, and Bhonsle forming their semi-independent kingdoms.
 - The rivalry and lack of cooperation among these chiefs weakened the Maratha state.

- **Weak Military Structure:** Although the Marathas were brave fighters, they were not as organized or equipped as the English in terms of military strategy, weapons, discipline, and leadership.
 - Their failures were due to divided command, betrayal among their ranks, and a lack of effective use of modern artillery techniques.
- **Weak Economic Framework:** The Marathas did not establish a stable economic policy to meet changing needs, which resulted in a lack of industries and foreign trade opportunities.
 - This situation made the Maratha economy unsuitable for a stable political environment.
- **Proficient English Diplomacy:** The English were skilled in diplomacy, forming alliances, and isolating their enemies, while the disunity among the Maratha chiefs made it easier for them to attack.
 - Unlike the Marathas, who were unaware of their enemies, the English had an effective spy network that gathered crucial intelligence.

Other Related Posts	
Battle of Plassey	Robert Clive
Battle of Buxar	Anglo Mysore Wars
Dual Government in Bengal	Tipu Sultan
Anglo Maratha Wars	Maratha Empire
Third Battle of Panipat	Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj
Battle of Bhima Koregaon	Anglo Burmese War
Maharaja Ranjit Singh	Anglo Nepal War

Source: <https://vajiramandravi.com/upsc-exam/maratha-empire/>

© Vajiram & Ravi. For personal use only.