

The Rise of Maratha Naval Power: Role of Konkan Ports in Regional and Global Trade.

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Abstract

The rise of Maratha naval power in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries marked a decisive shift in the maritime history of western India. Under the visionary leadership of Chhatrapati Shivaji, the Marathas recognized the strategic and economic significance of the Konkan coastline, dotted with natural harbours and fortified seaports such as Sindhudurg, Vijaydurg, and Kolaba. These ports not only served as bastions of defense against external powers but also functioned as thriving nodes of regional and transoceanic trade. By consolidating control over maritime routes, the Marathas effectively challenged the dominance of the Portuguese, Dutch, and later the British on the western seaboard. Figures like Admiral Kanhoji Angre further strengthened Maratha naval supremacy, employing innovative tactics and asserting authority over merchant shipping in the Arabian Sea. The Konkan ports facilitated commerce in spices, textiles, and other goods, linking the Deccan economy with markets in the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, and Southeast Asia. Beyond their economic role, these ports also became cultural intersections, reflecting the currents of cross-cultural interaction through diplomacy, trade, and naval encounters. The Maratha maritime enterprise thus reveals a dynamic interplay among local defence strategies, global economic currents, and regional assertions of sovereignty. This study highlights the pivotal role of Konkan ports in embedding the Maratha polity within the larger Indian Ocean world, reshaping both regional connectivity and global trade dynamics.

Key Words: Maratha Navy, Konkan Ports, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, Kanhoji Angre, Indian Ocean Trade, Maritime Power.

Introduction

The history of the Indian Ocean is deeply entwined with the rise and fall of maritime powers that controlled its trading routes. For centuries, India's western coastline played a pivotal role in linking the subcontinent with wider networks of commerce stretching across Arabia, Africa, and Southeast Asia (Pearson, 1976). The Konkan coast, with its rugged cliffs, deep creeks, and natural harbours, offered both challenges and opportunities to rulers seeking to assert control over seaborne trade. By the seventeenth century, European colonial powers such as the Portuguese, Dutch, French, and English were competing fiercely for maritime dominance (Danvers, 1894). Amidst this struggle, the Marathas emerged as a formidable power that recognized the significance of the sea for both security and economic prosperity.

While much scholarly attention has focused on the Marathas' land-based campaigns (Gordon, 1993), their naval enterprise reveals a sophisticated vision of maritime sovereignty. Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj laid the foundation of Maratha Sea power by fortifying key ports such as Sindhudurg, Vijaydurg, and Kolaba (Kulkarni, 1997). These became strongholds of defense and thriving hubs of commerce. Later, Admiral Kanhoji Angre carried forward this legacy, establishing the Marathas as arbiters of Arabian Sea trade (Sen, 1958).

This paper examines the rise of Maratha naval power with a focus on the role of Konkan ports in regional and global trade. It explores their strategic, economic, and cultural functions, situating the Maratha maritime project within the broader Indian Ocean world.

Historical Context

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed profound changes in the Indian Ocean economy. With the arrival of the Portuguese at Goa in 1510, the western seaboard of India became a contested zone between indigenous polities and European maritime empires (Danvers, 1894). The Portuguese sought to monopolise trade through a system of passes (cartaz) and fortified settlements. They faced resistance from local rulers, yet their naval superiority enabled them to dominate for much of the sixteenth century. By the seventeenth century, however, new competitors—the Dutch East India Company (VOC), the English East India Company, and later the French—entered the arena (Wink, 1990). The Arabian Sea became a theatre of naval rivalries, piracy, and mercantile competition.

The Deccan region, under the declining Adilshahi and Mughal authorities, was unable to exert effective control over the Konkan coast (Guha, 2004). This vacuum allowed emerging powers like the Marathas to carve out their influence. The economy of the Deccan depended on coastal outlets for exports of textiles, rice, horses, and spices, as well as for the import of firearms and luxury goods (Subrahmanyam, 1990). Hence, control of Konkan ports was not only a strategic necessity but also an economic imperative.

It was within this volatile context that Shivaji recognized the importance of maritime defense and economic autonomy. By building sea forts and fleets, he sought to challenge European monopolies and secure an independent route for the Maratha state into the wider Indian Ocean trading system (Sen, 1955).

Shivaji Maharaj and the Foundations of Maratha Naval Power

Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj (1630–1680) was among the first Indian rulers to grasp the geopolitical significance of the sea (Rajwade, 1904–1919). While his contemporaries focused largely on land-based warfare, Shivaji realized that without maritime strength, the Konkan coast would remain vulnerable to European aggression. His naval policy was therefore both defensive and economic in nature (Kulkarni, 1997).

One of his earliest initiatives was the construction of strategically located sea forts. Sindhudurg, built on an island near Malvan, epitomized his vision. Designed by architect Hiroji Indulkar, the fort could house a permanent garrison and withstand European artillery (Sen, 1958). Similarly, Kolaba near Alibaug and Vijaydurg further south provided fortified naval bases. These forts allowed Shivaji to control maritime traffic, collect customs duties, and prevent Portuguese or English incursions into Maratha territory (Pearson, 1976).

Shivaji also initiated the organization of a modest but effective fleet. Although initially smaller than European squadrons, it was well-adapted to the local conditions of the Konkan coast (Kulkarni, 1997). Shivaji's emphasis on coastal defense ensured that the Marathas developed a sustained naval tradition, later expanded by commanders like Kanhoji Angre. His vision marked a turning point: the sea was no longer a neglected frontier but an integral component of Maratha sovereignty.

Konkan Ports: Economic and Strategic Role

The Konkan coast stretches from Mumbai to Goa, characterized by rocky shores, deep estuaries, and natural harbours. This geography provided the Marathas with both defensive advantages and commercial opportunities (Pearson, 1976). Ports such as Sindhudurg, Vijaydurg, and Kolaba became the backbone of Maratha maritime enterprise.

Economically, these ports were gateways for commodities from the Deccan plateau. Textiles from western India, spices, rice, salt, jaggery, and coconuts were shipped to markets in the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, and Southeast Asia (Subrahmanyam, 1990). In return, the Marathas imported horses, artillery, luxury goods, and bullion. The ports also served as customs points, where duties were levied on both indigenous and foreign merchants. This maritime revenue supplemented land-based taxation and sustained the Maratha economy (Kulkarni, 1997).

Strategically, the ports acted as bastions against European dominance. Their location along the rugged Konkan coast made them difficult to capture (Gordon, 1993). Maratha ships could quickly retreat into shallow creeks inaccessible to larger European vessels. The ports thus allowed the Marathas to maintain a

defensive edge, while simultaneously projecting power into the Arabian Sea (Wink, 1990). By consolidating control over these harbours, the Marathas ensured that no foreign power could dominate regional trade without negotiating with them.

Admiral Kanhoji Angre and Naval Supremacy

The true consolidation of Maratha naval power occurred under Admiral Kanhoji Angre (1669–1729), who is often regarded as the greatest naval commander in Indian history (Sen, 1958). Rising to prominence in the early eighteenth century, Angre transformed the Maratha navy into a formidable force that could challenge European powers in the Arabian Sea. Appointed as the Sarkhel (Admiral), he established his headquarters at Kolaba and maintained strongholds along the coast.

Angre's naval strategy relied on agility and intimate knowledge of the Konkan terrain. He employed swift, shallow-draft vessels known as gallivats and grabs, which could out manoeuvre larger European ships (Gupta, 2002). By exploiting local geography, Angre made the Maratha fleet highly effective in hit-and-run tactics. His authority extended over merchant shipping, and he levied protection duties from traders who sought safe passage, effectively asserting Maratha sovereignty over the sea lanes (Gordon, 1993).

Despite being branded a “pirate” by European sources, Angre was a naval commander defending indigenous interests against colonial monopolies (Guha, 2004). He successfully resisted repeated assaults by the English and Portuguese, most notably defeating combined Anglo-Portuguese expeditions. His naval campaigns ensured that the Marathas remained a decisive maritime power well into the eighteenth century, embedding the Konkan ports firmly into regional and global trading circuits.

Global Trade Networks and the Arabian Sea

The Maratha naval enterprise was embedded in the broader Indian Ocean trading system, which connected South Asia to the Middle East, East Africa, and Southeast Asia. The Arabian Sea was a vital artery in this network, linking Indian ports with Basra, Muscat, Mocha, and Zanzibar (Pearson, 2003). The Konkan ports under Maratha control thus became critical nodes in sustaining this transoceanic commerce.

Key exports from the Maratha domains included cotton textiles, spices, rice, jaggery, salt, and coconuts, which were in high demand across the Indian Ocean littoral (Subrahmanyam, 1990). Imports included horses from Arabia, firearms, bullion, and luxury goods. By participating in this trade, the Marathas not only enriched their treasury but also integrated their polity into the global economy (Wink, 1990).

The Marathas also positioned themselves as arbiters of regional commerce. By collecting customs and offering protection, they created conditions for secure maritime exchange. Although their policies sometimes antagonized European companies, they reflected a sovereign attempt to regulate trade on indigenous terms (Gupta, 2002). Thus, the Maratha engagement with global trade networks highlights a dynamic interplay between local strategies of power and wider economic currents of the Indian Ocean.

Cross-Cultural Interactions and Diplomacy

The Konkan ports were not only centres of commerce but also zones of cultural and diplomatic interaction. Maritime trade brought diverse communities—Arabs, Persians, Gujaratis, Konkani's, and Europeans—into regular contact. This cosmopolitan milieu fostered exchanges of ideas, technologies, and cultural practices (Pearson, 1976).

The Marathas engaged diplomatically with both Asian and European powers. They negotiated treaties with the Portuguese and maintained diplomatic correspondence with Arab merchants in Muscat and Aden (Wink, 1990). At the same time, they dealt with European companies, often balancing between conflict and collaboration. For instance, while Admiral Angre frequently clashed with the English, he also allowed trading concessions when favourable (Gupta, 2002).

Culturally, the ports reflected the pluralism of the Indian Ocean world. Architectural styles, culinary exchanges, and linguistic borrowings reveal the deep interconnectedness of coastal societies. The maritime frontier was therefore not merely a military space but a cultural contact zone (Subrahmanyam, 1990). The

Marathas' ability to harness these interactions enhanced their legitimacy as rulers who were not isolated but integrated into broader networks of diplomacy and exchange.

Decline of Maratha Naval Power

Despite their successes, the Maratha navy began to decline by the mid-eighteenth century. Several factors contributed to this process. Internally, the fragmentation of Maratha authority following Shivaji's successors and the rise of powerful chiefs weakened centralized naval control (Gordon, 1993). The growing dominance of land-based campaigns against the Mughals and other regional powers diverted resources away from maritime defense.

Externally, the rise of the British East India Company posed the greatest challenge. Equipped with superior naval technology and global resources, the British systematically eroded Maratha control of the Konkan coast. The capture of key forts such as Vijaydurg in 1756 marked a turning point (Sen, 1958). By the early nineteenth century, British naval supremacy was unchallenged in the Arabian Sea.

Economic transformations also played a role. As European companies gained direct control over trade routes, the Marathas' ability to levy customs duties and regulate commerce diminished (Guha, 2004). Without sustained investment in fleets and fortifications, the once-powerful Maratha navy could no longer compete. Thus, the decline of Maratha maritime power illustrates the broader shifts in the Indian Ocean world, where indigenous polities were gradually marginalized by European empires.

Legacy of Maratha Naval Enterprise

Although the Maratha navy eventually succumbed to British power, its legacy remains significant. Shivaji's vision of maritime defense and Kanhoji Angre's naval campaigns demonstrated that Indian polities were capable of challenging European powers at sea (Sen, 1955). Their forts and strategies highlight indigenous innovations in naval architecture, logistics, and coastal defense.

The memory of Maratha maritime resistance has been preserved in regional folklore and nationalist historiography, where Angre is celebrated as a hero who defied colonial encroachment (Gupta, 2002). The forts of Sindhudurg, Vijaydurg, and Kolaba stand as enduring symbols of Maratha naval ambition. In modern times, these monuments are recognized as heritage sites, embodying the maritime history of western India.

Furthermore, the Marathas' integration into Indian Ocean trade underscores the global dimensions of their polity. By embedding themselves into transoceanic networks, they influenced patterns of commerce and diplomacy across Asia and Africa (Pearson, 2003). Their story complicates simplistic narratives of European domination, reminding us of the resilience and adaptability of indigenous powers.

Conclusion

The rise of Maratha naval power marked a decisive chapter in the maritime history of India. Rooted in Shivaji Maharaj's recognition of the sea as a strategic frontier, the Marathas built forts, fleets, and institutions that secured the Konkan coast. Under Admiral Kanhoji Angre, they asserted sovereignty over Arabian Sea trade and resisted European monopolies. The Konkan ports became not only bastions of defense but also vibrant nodes of regional and global commerce, linking the Deccan to the wider Indian Ocean world.

Though ultimately overshadowed by the rise of British naval supremacy, the Maratha maritime enterprise reveals a dynamic interplay between local strategies of power, economic currents of trade, and cultural exchanges of diplomacy. Their achievements challenge Eurocentric narratives and highlight the agency of indigenous states in shaping global history.

In tracing this history, we recognize the enduring importance of the Konkan ports as sites where sovereignty, commerce, and culture converged. The Marathas' naval legacy stands as a testament to the maritime imagination of early modern India, embedding western India firmly within the global currents of the Indian Ocean.

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