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Introduction to the Marathas

The Marathas are a group of people native to the Deccan plateau, specifically present-day Maharashtra. They speak Marathi, a language with a rich literary history since the 12th century. The Marathas rose as a powerful political entity that significantly influenced Indian history.

During the 13th century, the Yadava dynasty ruled most of Maharashtra with Devagiri (present-day Daulatabad) as its capital. In the early 14th century, the Khilji Sultanate from Delhi conquered the Yadavas. Despite political changes, cultural traditions, especially related to bhakti (devotion), continued to flourish. Saints from diverse backgrounds composed devotional songs and poetry in local languages, spreading spiritual messages widely.

Who were the Marathas and their cultural background?

The Marathas were known for their language, Marathi, and their devotion to bhakti saints like Dnyaneshwar, Namdev, Tukaram, and Ramdas. These saints translated important texts into Marathi and inspired social and political awareness.

Exam Question: Who were the Marathas and what role did bhakti saints play in their cultural development?

Answer: The Marathas were people from the Deccan region speaking Marathi. Bhakti saints promoted devotion and translated sacred texts into Marathi, helping spread spiritual and social messages among the people.

Shivaji and the Foundation of the Maratha Empire

Shivaji, born in 1630 in the Bhonsle clan, was the founder of the Maratha Empire. Growing up in Pune under his mother Jijabai's guidance, he witnessed the hardships caused by conflicts among Deccan sultans. At 16, he began military campaigns, capturing forts and consolidating power.

Shivaji established a sovereign kingdom called Swarājya, focusing on political, economic, and cultural aspects. He built a navy to protect the west coast, a revolutionary step at the time, and used guerrilla warfare tactics to defeat larger armies.

What were Shivaji's major contributions to the Maratha Empire?

Shivaji founded the Maratha navy, used guerrilla warfare, expanded his kingdom, and was crowned king at Raigad Fort in 1674. He also promoted cultural revival and governance reforms.

Exam Question: What strategies did Shivaji use to establish and expand the Maratha Empire?

Answer: Shivaji used guerrilla warfare, built a strong navy, captured forts, and promoted cultural and administrative reforms to establish and expand the Maratha Empire.

Military and Administrative Structure of the Maratha Empire

Shivaji created a centralized administration, abolishing hereditary posts and paying salaries to officials. He cared for soldiers' families and had a council of eight ministers (aṣṭa pradhāna maṇḍala) to assist in governance.

The Maratha military had infantry, cavalry (bārgīrs and shiledārs), and a navy. They used traditional weapons like swords and lances, as well as guns and rockets. Forts were central to their defense strategy.

How was the Maratha administration and military organized?

The administration was centralized with salaried officials and a council of ministers. The military included infantry, cavalry, and navy, using a mix of traditional and modern weapons, with forts playing a key role in defense.

Exam Question: Describe the administrative and military organization of the Maratha Empire under Shivaji.

Answer: Shivaji's administration was centralized with paid officials and a council of ministers. The military had infantry, cavalry, and navy, using swords, guns, and rockets. Forts were vital for defense.

Maratha Navy and Maritime Supremacy

Shivaji established a navy to protect the west coast and challenge European naval dominance. The Maratha navy used fast boats called gallivats and clever tactics to win battles despite technological disadvantages. Kanhoji Angre later led the navy to many victories.

What was the significance of the Maratha navy?

The navy protected coastal regions, challenged European control over sea trade, and demonstrated Maratha maritime strength.

Exam Question: Why was the Maratha navy important and how did it challenge European powers?

Answer: The Maratha navy secured the west coast, protected trade routes, and used fast boats and tactics to challenge European naval dominance, asserting Maratha power at sea.

Conflicts with the Mughals and Expansion of the Maratha Empire

Shivaji faced invasions from Mughal generals like Shaista Khan and Aurangzeb. He used guerrilla tactics and daring raids, including the sacking of Surat. After his death, his successors continued fighting the Mughals, expanding Maratha influence across India.

The Marathas fought three Anglo-Maratha wars against the British, eventually losing power in 1818 due to internal disunity and British superiority.

How did the Marathas resist Mughal and British powers?

Through guerrilla warfare, strategic forts, naval power, and strong leadership, the Marathas resisted Mughal invasions and fought the British in three wars.

Exam Question: What were the major conflicts faced by the Marathas and how did they respond?

Answer: The Marathas fought Mughal invasions using guerrilla tactics and forts, raided key cities, and later fought the British in three wars, showing resilience despite eventual defeat.

Cultural Revival and Legacy of the Marathas

The Marathas contributed to cultural developments by promoting Marathi language, literature, and Hindu traditions without religious discrimination. Shivaji's seal and treatises promoted Marathi and Sanskrit. The Maratha women, like Tarabai and Ahilyabai Holkar, played important roles in leadership and cultural patronage.

The Thanjavur Marathas supported arts, music, and dance, contributing to a rich syncretic culture. The Maratha legacy inspired later Indian freedom movements by demonstrating self-rule and resistance to foreign powers.

What cultural contributions did the Marathas make?

They promoted Marathi language and literature, revived Hindu traditions, supported arts and music, and had notable women leaders who contributed to governance and culture.

Exam Question: How did the Marathas contribute to cultural revival in India?

Answer: The Marathas promoted local languages, revived religious and cultural traditions, supported arts and music, and had influential women leaders who fostered cultural growth.

Solved Examples

- Question:** Explain the significance of Raigad Fort in Maratha history.
Answer: Raigad Fort was the site where Shivaji was crowned king in 1674, marking the foundation of the Maratha Empire. It was a strong fortress that symbolized Maratha power and culture.
- Question:** What was the role of the aṣṭa pradhāna maṇḍala in Maratha administration?
Answer: The aṣṭa pradhāna maṇḍala was a council of eight ministers assisting Shivaji in governance, each responsible for specific administrative duties like finance, military, justice, and foreign affairs.

Practice Set

Easy

- Who was Shivaji and why is he important in Indian history?
- What is bhakti and how did it influence the Marathas?

Moderate

- Describe the military strategies used by Shivaji to defend his kingdom.
- Explain the administrative reforms introduced by Shivaji.

Challenging

- Analyze the impact of the Maratha navy on European naval dominance in India.
- Discuss the role of Maratha women in the expansion and cultural revival of the empire.

Answer Key

1. Shivaji was the founder of the Maratha Empire, known for his military and administrative skills, and for establishing Swarājya.
2. Bhakti is devotion to the divine; it influenced the Marathas by inspiring social and religious reforms through saints' teachings.
3. Shivaji used guerrilla warfare, forts, and a navy to defend his kingdom effectively.
4. He abolished hereditary posts, paid officials salaries, and created a council of ministers for efficient governance.
5. The Maratha navy challenged European control of sea trade routes, protecting the west coast and asserting Maratha power.
6. Maratha women like Tarabai and Ahilyabai Holkar played key roles in leadership, military campaigns, and cultural patronage.

Quick Reference

- **Shivaji:** Founder of the Maratha Empire, known for Swarājya and military innovations.
- **Bhakti:** Devotional movement influencing Maratha culture and society.
- **Aṣṭa pradhāna maṇḍala:** Council of eight ministers assisting in administration.
- **Guerrilla warfare:** Military tactic using speed and surprise in familiar terrain.
- **Maratha navy:** Naval force protecting the west coast and challenging European powers.
- **Tarabai and Ahilyabai Holkar:** Influential Maratha women leaders and patrons of culture.

Glossary

- **Bhakti:** Devotion to a deity or divine power, emphasizing personal connection and spirituality.
- **Jāgīr:** Land granted by a ruler to a noble or soldier as a reward, with rights to collect taxes.
- **Guerrilla warfare:** A form of irregular warfare using small, mobile groups to fight larger forces.
- **Chauth:** A tax levied by the Marathas amounting to 25% of revenue from non-Maratha provinces.
- **Sardeshmukhi:** An additional 10% tax on top of chauth collected by the Marathas.
- **Peshwa:** The prime minister in the Maratha administration, often wielding significant power.

- **Wāgh nakh:** A tiger-claw shaped weapon used by Shivaji in close combat.
- **Cartaz:** A naval trade pass required by European powers, challenged by the Maratha navy.
- **Panchāyat:** A local judicial body delivering justice in Maratha society.
- **Kotwāl:** The police officer responsible for law and order in towns and cities.

Chronology of Key Events in Maratha History

Year	Event	Significance
1630	Birth of Shivaji	Beginning of the life of the Maratha Empire's founder
1646	Shivaji begins rule	Start of military campaigns and consolidation of power
1657	Foundation of Maratha navy	Establishment of naval power to protect the coast
1666	Shivaji imprisoned in Agra and escapes	Demonstrates Shivaji's resilience and strategic skills
1674	Coronation of Shivaji at Raigad Fort	Formal establishment of the Maratha Empire
1677	Conquest of the South (Dakshina digvijaya)	Expansion of Maratha territory into southern India
1680	Death of Shivaji	End of the founder's reign, beginning of succession struggles
1682-1707	Mughal-Maratha wars	Continued resistance against Mughal dominance
1754	Marathas control Delhi	Peak of Maratha political power in northern India
1761	Defeat at the Battle of Panipat	Major setback for Maratha expansion
1775-1782	First Anglo-Maratha War	Maratha victory against the British
1818	Third Anglo-Maratha War	End of Maratha power and British dominance in India