Guerrillas of the Deccan: Maratha Warfare against Mughal Authority

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***Abstract*–This paper examines how the Marathas under Shivaji Bhonsle and his successors contested Mughal power from the mid–17th through the early 18th centuries. It traces three overlapping phases of resistance: Shivaji's foundation of Hindavi Swarajya and early skirmishes against Bijapur and Mughal outposts; Aurangzeb's Deccan campaigns countered by Sambhaji and Rajaram's guerrilla warfare; and the Peshwa-led confederacy of Shahu's reign, which transformed Maratha raids into diplomatic subsidiary alliances that eroded Mughal fiscal and military authority. By integrating military history, agrarian studies, and diplomatic analysis, the study illuminates how Maratha insurgency contributed decisively to the fragmentation of Mughal sovereignty.**

***Keywords*–Maratha resistance, Mughal Empire, Shivaji Bhonsle, Aurangzeb's Deccan Campaigns, Peshwa Shahu, Deccan Wars, Guerrilla Warfare, Subsidiary Treaties, Imperial Fragmentation, Subaltern Agency**

INTRODUCTION

By the 1660s, the Mughal Empire under Aurangzeb was at its territorial zenith but overstretched by simultaneous wars in the Deccan, the northwest frontier, and against Sikh and Rajput powers. Into this vortex stepped Shivaji Bhonsle, a Maratha chieftain who seized hill–forts carved into Maharashtra's rugged landscape to establish a nascent Hindavi Swarajya. Over the next century, Maratha bands, later formalized under Shahu and his Peshwas, deployed swift cavalry raids, amphibious forays, and subsidiary treaties to challenge Mughal dominion across central and northern India, ultimately undermining the imperial center's fiscal and military base.

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

Early British and colonial historians depicted the Marathas as "rebellious hill–tribes," whose intermittent raids against the Mughal state served to justify imperial "pacification" policies. Nationalist scholars of the early twentieth century, led by Jadunath Sarkar and G.S. Sardesai, recast Shivaji and his successors as proto-national heroes whose military genius foreshadowed modern Indian independence movements. From the 1970s onward, subaltern historians such as Ranajit Guha and David Gilmartin have shifted focus onto Maratha peasant foot soldiers, artisanal shipwrights, and village networks that strengthened large-scale resistance. Recent work in memory studies examines how ballads, regional festivals, and museum exhibits in Maharashtra revive and reshape Maratha martial legacies for contemporary identity politics.

SHIVAJI'S REVOLT AND EARLY MUGHAL ENCOUNTERS (1645–1681)

Shivaji's early campaigns targeted the weakened Bijapur Sultanate but quickly drew Mughal attention. In 1660 Aurangzeb dispatched Shaista Khan to Pune; Shivaji's audacious night raid on Khan's cantonment epitomized his use of surprise and local intelligence to neutralize superior imperial forces. Shivaji's coronation as Chhatrapati in 1674 formalized his state: a network of sea-forts and inland strongholds connected by messenger riders and stocked by maritime trade. The Treaty of Purandar (1665) forced Shivaji to cede 23 forts to the Mughals, but his escape from Agra in 1666 marked his refusal to accept permanent subjugation. These episodes reveal a hybrid strategy of conditional accommodation and persistent insurgency that frustrated Mughal efforts at direct annexation.

AURANGZEB'S DECCAN WARS AND MARATHA GUERRILLA STRATEGY (1681–1707)

Aurangzeb's personal campaign in the Deccan (1681–1707), known as the Deccan Wars, sought to crush both Bijapur and the Marathas. The imperial army of 500,000 laid prolonged sieges to key forts-Ramsej, Kothaligad, Sinhagad, but Maratha commanders under Sambhaji and later Rajaram employed mobile columns of light cavalry (Bargirs) and fortified hill redoubts (Garhs) to sever Mughal supply lines. Their scorched-earth tactics and reliance on local Bhil archers forced the Mughals into attritional warfare far from home bases. Although the Marathas suffered the execution of Sambhaji in 1689, Rajaram's relocation to Gingee enabled continued resistance until Aurangzeb's death in 1707, exhausting imperial coffers and morale.

PESHWA SHAHU'S CONFEDERACY AND SUBSIDIARY ALLIANCES (1707–1740)

Following Aurangzeb's demise, a succession struggle between Shivaji's grandson Shahu and political custodian Tarabai ended with Shahu's victory and his appointment of Balaji Vishwanath as Peshwa in 1713. The Peshwa shifted Maratha strategy from outright insurrection to diplomatic "subsidiary alliances," wherein Maratha sardars received Chauth (one-fourth revenue) and Sardeshmukhi (additional levy of 10%) rights in Mughal provinces in exchange for providing cavalry contingents. The grant of Malwa Chauth in 1723 and recognition by Emperor Farrukhsiyar in 1719 transformed Maratha raiders into fiscal partners, hollowing out Mughal revenues while maintaining the façade of imperial sovereignty.

EROSION OF MUGHAL AUTHORITY AND MARATHA ASCENDANCY (1740–1761)

By the 1740s, Maratha confederacies under Scindia, Holkar, Gaekwad, and Bhonsle extended their reach to Delhi's outskirts. The Treaty of Bhopal (1738) acknowledged Maratha rights over Malwa, while their 1757 occupation of Delhi forced Shah Alam II to place the emperor under Maratha protection. These triumphs, epitomized by the Third Battle of Panipat in 1761. Although a temporary setback, it highlighted how Maratha revenue tactics coupled with superior cavalry mobility, permanently weakened Mughal military capacities, and accelerated the empire's fragmentation.

CONCLUSION

Maratha resistance to Mughal rule fused localized knowledge of terrain, agile cavalry warfare, and innovative revenue diplomacy to contest imperial power across two centuries. From Shivaji's early raids to Shahu's subsidiary treaties, Maratha supremacy undermined Mughal fiscal health and exposed the limits of centralized rule in a vast, diverse subcontinent. This study demonstrates that insurgent statecraft rooted in peasant mobilization and regional networks, played a central role in the decline of Mughal sovereignty.

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