

UNIT 3 THE MARATHA STATE SYSTEM

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Historians on the nature of Maratha Polity
- 3.3 The Maratha Confederacy
 - 3.3.1 The King and the Peshwa
 - 3.3.2 Bhonsle of Nagpur
 - 3.3.3 Gaikwad of Baroda
 - 3.3.4 Holkar of Indore
 - 3.3.5 Sindia of Gwalior
- 3.4 Institutional Developments
 - 3.4.1 The Administrative Structure
 - 3.4.2 Long Term Trends
- 3.5 Society and Economy
 - 3.5.1 Agrarian Society
 - 3.5.2 Monetization
- 3.6 Maratha Relations
 - 3.6.1 Bengal
 - 3.6.2 Hyderabad
 - 3.6.3 Mysore
 - 3.6.4 Rajasthan
 - 3.6.5 Mughals
 - 3.6.6 East India Company
- 3.7 Let us Sum Up
- 3.8 Key words
- 3.9 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

3.0 OBJECTIVES

This Unit forms part of a Block that aims at reconstructing an integrated picture of the Indian polity in the mid-18th century. In this Unit, you will be introduced to:

- some views about the nature of the Maratha political system,
- the Maratha confederacy and its territorial expansion in the eighteenth century,
- the political and administrative structure evolved by the Marathas, details of which will correct the conventional view of Marathas as marauders,
- society and economy in the region under study, and
- an outline of Marathas relations with the Mughal empire, other regional powers and the English East India Company.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The small Maratha Kingdom constituted in the seventeenth century in the Western Deccan became a nucleus of what has been described as the second much wider Maratha *swarajya* (sovereign state) which spread to the north, east and south in the 18th century.

After the Mughal retreat from the Deccan the Marathas expanded and evolved as a loose association or confederacy of military leaders who were denoted as **sardars**. Formally the **sardars** held temporary assignments of land revenue. But in practice they tended to become hereditary once they established themselves. The new and powerful polity that was established by the Marathas by conquest in the western Deccan is in a focus in this Unit.

We survey the transformation of society and economy that was taking place in this region through the process of state building and the force of commerce.

These circumstances set the context in which the East India Company found the Marathas posing a challenge till the early 19th century.

3.2 HISTORIANS ON NATURE OF MARATHA POLITY

Imperialist historiography generally characterised the 18th century Maratha domination as chaotic and anarchic. On the other hand, in attempt to develop Nationalist historiography, several Maratha scholars saw the Maratha state as the last reincarnation of the Hindu empire.

Irfan Habib’s thesis is that the Maratha movement was essentially a zamindar uprising of the imperial ruling class (**mansabdars** and **jagirdars**) of the Mughal Empire. It is the zamindar context of the Maratha state that he underlines.

Satish Chandra locates the successful bid for regional independence by the Marathas in the crisis of the Mughal **jagirdari** system which failed to balance income and consumption. C.A. Bayly notes the emergence of three warrior states—Marathas, Sikhs and Jats and argues that they reflected popular or peasant insurgency directed in part against the Indo-Muslim aristocracy. The Marathas, he elaborates, drew their strength from the ordinary peasant pastoralist castes. The Brahmin administrators who were on the ascendant pictured the Marathas state a classic “Brahmin” kingdom, protecting the holy places and sacred cattle.

In Andre Wink’s analysis the processes of **fitnas** were central to social and political life in the Maratha state system. Characteristically this implied making use of existing political conflicts through a combination of coercion and conciliation, as opposed to pure military operations. **Fitna** then, is regarded as the political mechanism that was used for the expansion, consolidation and subsequent institutionalization of Maratha power. Ensuring the crucial collaboration/acquiescence of the gentry demanded the political arithmetic of **fitna**. This was essential both for conquest as well as gaining access to the agrarian resource base.

It was through **fitna** that the Marathas penetrated the expanding Mughal Empire in the late 17th century by aligning themselves with different Deccan Sultans against the Mughals. Therefore, Wink argues, rather than representing a revolt against the Mughal empire, Maratha sovereignty emerged as a result of Mughal expansion. In form the Maratha **swarajya** remained a **zamindari** tenure and the Marathas never really shed the status of zamindars.

Frank Perlin’s concern is with broadening the concepts of state and state-formation in the long term, trans-political, subcontinental and international framework. This is because (a) the state had a long-term development, covering different regimes between the 15th and 19th centuries, (b) there is a need for a comparative perspective of transition processes affecting India and Europe before industrialization in order to correct stereotypical views about late pre-colonial societies as being unresponsive to change.

Check Your Progress 1

1) Sum up the **fitna**-based interpretation of the rise of the Maratha state.

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2) Why is it important to examine the Maratha state system in a widened framework?

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3.3 THE MARATHA CONFEDERACY

By the second decade of the 18th century the Maratha powers under Peshwa Baji Rao I were striking out against the Mughals in the Deccan and in central India. Yet, even in the 1780s treaties between the Mughals and the Marathas, the Mughal emperor continued to be recognised as the first among all the kings and chiefs of India. Significantly it was the levying of **chauth** under the sanction, or the pretended sanction of the Mughal Emperor that was the usual prelude for establishment of Maratha sovereignty (as for example Gujarat, Malwa and Berar).

3.3.1 The King and the Peshwa

In 1719 Balaji Vishwanath returned from Delhi with **firman**s for **chauth** and **sardeshmukhi**. The Maratha king became the **sardeshmukh** of the entire Deccan (Aurangabad, Berar, Bidar, Bijapur, Hyderabad and Khandesh) and Karnataka.

In 1719 Balaji Vishwanath made a complex division of the collection of **chauth** and **sardeshmukh** between Shahu and his **sardars**. Out of these collections a fixed share was to be paid to the Raja (**sardeshmukhi** + 34% of **chauth**). The Raja thus became largely dependent on his **sardars** for his finances.

Originally the Peshwa was only a **mukhya pradhan** or prime minister and his post was not hereditary. When Baji Rao, Balaji Vishwanath's son, became Peshwa in 1720, the office became hereditary. In 1740 Balaji Baji Rao (Nana Saheb) became Peshwa. Till Shahu's death in 1749 he was still under the restraint of the Raja of Satra. Thereafter he virtually dislodged the Raja from sovereign power.



6 A Maratha Peshwa with his ministers

Rise of Regional Powers

The expansion of the Marathas had from an early date predominantly been the work of the Peshwas and their sardars. In the 1740s the Marathas conquered Malwa, Gujarat, Bundelkhand and penetrated, as far as Attock in the north, Rajasthan, Doab, Awadh, Bihar and Orissa. Andra Wink's study shows that all these conquests started as *fitna* (conquests on invitation).

It may be pointed out that in the 1740s Maratha sovereignty was not yet decisively established in the north and that it was even more fragile and limited in the south.

3.3.2 Bhonsle of Nagpur

The first *chauth* levies, made in the north-east, independent of the Peshwa, were those made by Parsoji Bhonsle, a descendant of a family of village beadmen from Poona district. One of the first sardars to join Shahu when he returned from the Mughal court in 1707, Shahu recognised his Berar conquests and Balaji Vishwanath too sanctioned his exclusive right to Berar, Godwana and Cuttack. In 1743 Shahu assigned the rights of *chauth* and *sardeshmukhi* in Bihar, Orissa, Berar and Awadh to Raghuji Bhonsle. However, when Raghuji died in 1755, the Peshwa decided to curtail the Bhonsles by dividing the *saranjam* in three parts and thus weakened them considerably.

3.3.3 Gaikwad of Baroda

Bande, Pawar and Dabhade were among the major Maratha sardars who led raids in the Mughal province of Gujarat in the early 18th century. The Gaikwads who started out as lieutenants of the Dabhades, rose to predominance around 1730.

In 1727 the Mughal subedar of Gujarat assigned to Shahu *sardeshmukhi* to 10% of the land revenue of the whole of Gujarat and *chauth* of the south of Gujarat in *saranjam*, in return for punishing marauders.

After Shahu's death, the Peshwa divided the *chauth* and *sardeshmukhi* of Gujarat between himself and Dabhade in 1749. In 1751 Gaikwad forced his way in, in place of Dabhade and made Baroda his capital in 1752.

Like the Bhonsles of Nagpur, the Gaikwad dynasty formally enjoyed merely the status of *saranjamdars*, i.e., assignment holders, not kings.

3.3.4 Holkar of Indore

The Mughal province of Malwa which formed the political and commercial nexus between Hindustan and the Deccan had been invaded by the Marathas since 1699. The first Maratha outposts were established on the Narmada in 1716 and claims of *chauth* made soon after. After the victory at Daroha Sarai in 1738 the Peshwa was made Malwa's deputy governor in 1741. Meanwhile in the 1730s itself the Peshwa had distributed the collections of *chauth* and *sardeshmukhi* between himself and Sindia, Holkar and Pawar. While the Peshwa administered the eastern half of Malwa, the hereditary *saranjams* of Holkar, Sindia and Pawar were located in the western half.

Like the Sindias and Gaikwads, the Holkars were village *vatandars* of recent origin. In 1733 they were assigned the district of Indore which subsequently grew into their dominion or *daulat*. Technically, however, it remained a *saranjam*.

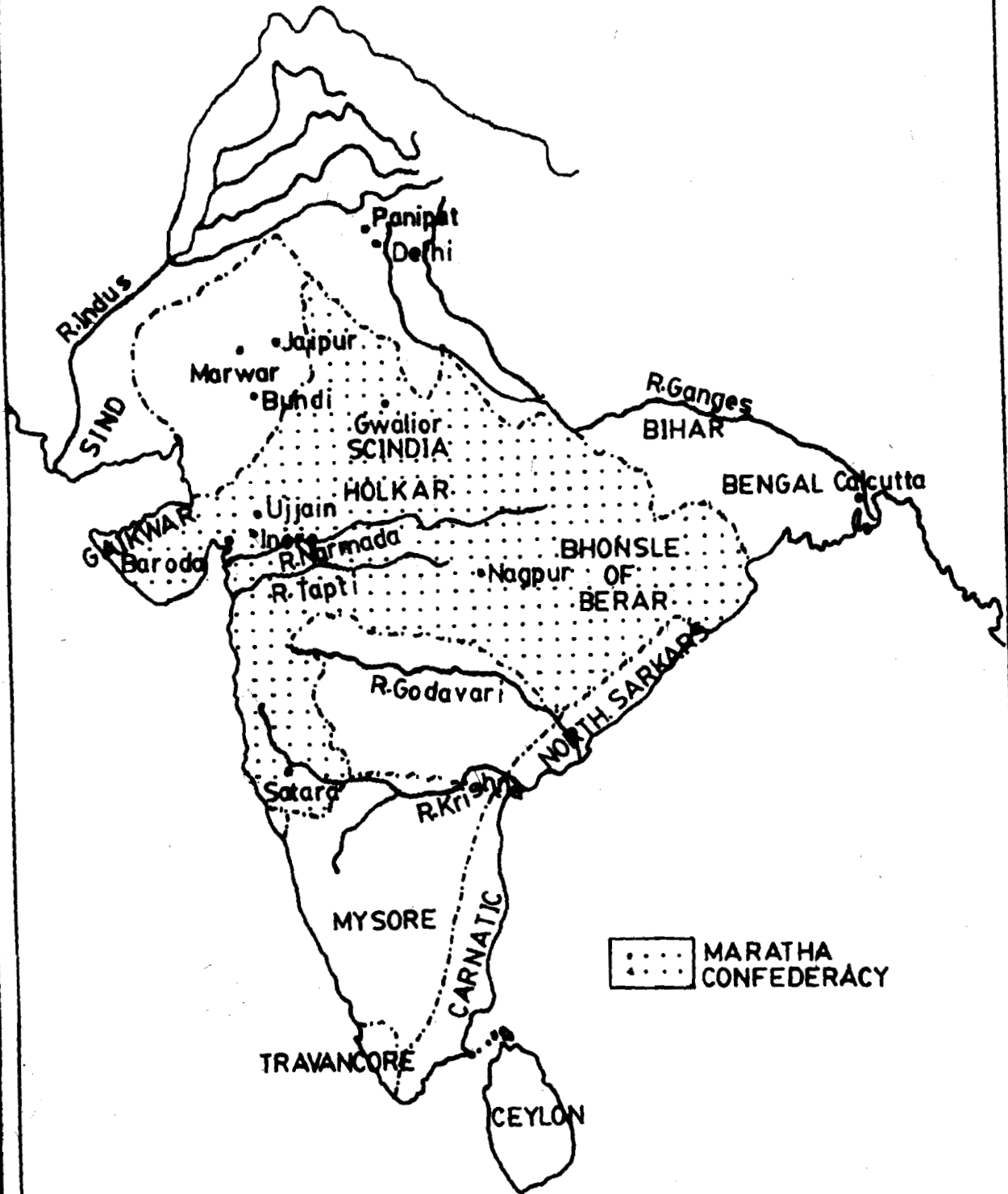
The Holkars remained loyal to the Peshwa even at the height of their power. Between 1788 and 1793 there were constant clashes between Holkar and Sindia with the former lagging behind in terms of territorial expansion.

3.3.5 Sindia of Gwalior

Though associated with the nature of the Sindias, actually Gwalior did not belong to the Sindias till the last quarter of 18th century. This family, which had risen to prominence in Malwa, had Ujjain as its headquarters. Sindia, too, was directly under the Peshwa as a hereditary *saranjamdar*.

Mahadaji Sindia escaped from Panipat in 1761, after his father's contingent was annihilated and reestablished his family's hold over Malwa. After Malhar Rao Holkar's death, he became *de facto* sovereign of Hindustan (see 3.6.4 and 3.6.5).

INDIA IN 1770S





7 A Sindia chief

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) What was the position of the Marathas in relation with the Mughal emperor in 1780s.

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- 2) To what extent did the Peshwa and the Maratha **saranjamdars** extend the Maratha dominion?

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3.4 INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

The Mughals never properly controlled the heartland of Maharashtra and its administrative and property system can be seen evolving well into the 18th century.

3.4.1 The Administrative Structure

Maratha dominion can be broadly divided into what have been called non-regulation and regulation areas.

In the former, zamindars, autonomous and semi-autonomous chiefs were left with internal administrative autonomy. The king's tribute demand from these areas, in contrast with the land revenue demand from regulation areas, was not based on an assessment of the chiefs resources but more in proportion to their power of resistance, the weaker ones paying more than the stronger.

In regulation areas or the area of direct administration, there was a system of revenue assessment, management and accountancy.

Such areas were divided among **vatandars** (see key words). Each unit of about 10 to 200 villages was under a **deshmukh-deshpande** combination. Under **vatandar** system the rights vested not in an individual incumbent but in a brotherhood of patrilineal relatives. **Vatandars** were co-sharers of the land produce with rights like dues from cultivators as salary, customary share in the government's land-revenue exempt land. The division of shares of a **vatan** did not imply partition of the land but of the proceeds. The right to sell any hereditary estate was recognised in principle.

During periods of agrarian or financial or administrative crisis the regulation could be relaxed and zamindars could acquire a temporary authority under a system of revenue farming.

Among the tenants, there were two types (a) resident cultivators with hereditary rights of occupancy (**mirasdars**) and (b) temporary cultivators (**uparis**). The tenancy system of south Maharashtra and Gujarat was more complicated.

In most of the regulation territories the standard assessment rates of the previous period were maintained in the 18th century. Under the Peshwas the **tankha**— a permanent standard assessment for each village — was the baseline of revenue settlements.

In the late 1750s and 1760s the **kamal** (or 'completion') settlement was made. This settlement completed the **tankha** settlement by taking into consideration newly cultivated lands. It was based on measurement and classification of the qualities of land, and the king's share came to one-sixth of the produce.

The internal distribution of the village assessment (**tankha** or **kamal**), once arrived at, was almost entirely left to the **Datil** (village headman) or the village itself.

In addition to the regular land revenue, the government also imposed a number of extra collections (under the head of village expenses), which were intricately recorded by village and district officials. The revenue collectors were commonly designated as **kamavidars** or **mamlatdars**.

In the 18th century, everywhere in the Deccan, southern Maratha country, Gujarat, Central India and Nagpur, the village settlements were made annually.

In the 1790s and 1810s when the Peshwa needed more revenue to pay for armies and obligations to the British there was an expansion of revenue farming and an increase in the state's demands.

In Maharashtra no more than a quarter of revenue was paid in cash. Most often, it was remitted from villages, through the districts, to Poona through bills of exchange.

The administrative systems in the northern **saranjam** states (Holkar, Sindia, Gwalior and Bhonsle) were in principle copies of Peshwa, except that they had Diwans and supervisory officials imposed on their administration from Poona. The bureaucracy in the Deccan and the north was dominated by different grades of Brahmins.

3.4.2 Long Term Trends

From the 14th and 15th centuries, throughout the north and western Deccan, the Central Provinces, Gujarat and Rajasthan certain families were emerging into powerful positions by accumulating offices and rights and veritably establishing the infrastructure of their later influence and state building.

It is in the administrative forms adopted by the great Houses of 17th century Maharashtra (example the Bhonsles), attended on fiscal and military offices,

purchases and commercial dealing that saw significant experiments in administrative forms (such as land survey, cash revenue, accounting and record keeping).

There were also tensions between the centralizing forces of the state and the comparatively equalitarian usages of the local peasantry. **Vatandar** assemblies (**gota**) were often held to protect themselves from state demands. While such assemblies were probably the focus of 17th century popular resistance, it appears that in the 18th century, the authority and powers of regional and village headmen were progressively bypassed through new administrative procedures.

The great Houses or magnates referred to above, through their economic power based on control of land, labour and capital provided the link between the royal court and the local peasantry.

Check Your Progress 3

1) What is the difference between regulation and non-regulation areas?

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2) Briefly describe (a) the office of the **vatandar**, (b) the **kamal** system of revenue assessment.

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3) Compare the administrative systems of the Peshwa and the **saranjam** states.

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3.5 SOCIETY AND ECONOMY

In the earlier section we have discussed the institutional developments during the formation of the Maratha polity. Here we will discuss the society and economy of the Maratha state system.

3.5.1 Agrarian Society

By the 18th century the establishment of villages in the heartlands of the Maratha polity was complete. This implied the spread of population and agrarian settlement

However, the heartland around Poona was poorly irrigated and relatively sparsely populated. By mid-18th century, given the state of its technology, this area was at the limits of its development. This explains the persistent outward pressure of the Maratha into areas of stable agriculture like Tanjore in the south, Gujarat and the Ganges valley in the north.

The elaboration of taxation and other obligation stimulated the need for increased production.

The Maratha rulers adopted two kinds of measures here. The first measure entailed concessional assessment (istava), remission of revenues and loans. These measures helped to bring new land under cultivation. The second measure encouraged initiative of the people to build agricultural facilities. For example an inam of gift land was given to the headman of a village during Shivaji's period to repair or build new dams.

Fukuzawa has noted that such measures of the Maratha rulers i.e. state promotion of agriculture, revenue system etc. had led to a considerable economic differentiation among the peasantry. This varied from holders of 18 acres of land to 108 acres of land in his study. He has also noted that over the years 1790 to 1803 the smaller land holdings completely disappeared. While on the other hand the large land holders increased in number.

By the late 18th century the exploitability of peasantry was significantly increased due to increase in population, taxation, and prices of food grains.

There is abundant evidence of a strengthening hold on peasantry by non-cultivating privileged class (state ministers, **deshmukhs**, military officers with **saranjam**, financiers and traders), many of whom combined more than one function. This perhaps explains the subsequent social differentiation that emerged in the countryside.

There were in the main three forms of control over rural resources — tax, gift of land and hereditary offices.

3.5.2 Monetization

In the period of our study manufacturing and cash cropping for distant markets formed part of the economy in Maharashtra, just as it did in the southern Deccan, Bengal, Bihar and Gujarat.

By the 17th and 18th centuries credit institutions were operating in town and countryside, financing indebted nobility and peasants, as well as daily economic life.

The import of copper and cowries in the 18th century western Deccan was indicative of vigorous, highly monetized local market centres.

Villagers in western Deccan were not only engaged in local market transaction in money, but were also paid daily and monthly wages for agricultural labour, craft production and household service.

Large and small scale mints producing a variety of coins were found in small market towns, the residential houses of important lords as well as in major cities.

In fact there is a wide range of records dealing with rural exchanges during the late 18th century. In Maharashtra there is copious evidence of loans in cash and kind, among persons involved in landholding, peasants, agricultural labourers, craftsman and soldiers. Written contracts specifying exact terms of repayment are also available. All this indicates a knowledge of quantity and calculation among common people.

Check Your Progress 4

1) How did the peasantry become increasingly exploitable in the late 18th century?

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2) What are the indications of monetized local markets?

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3.6 MARATHA RELATIONS

Let us now discuss the nature of Maratha relations with other powers. Here we look at the relations with Bengal, Hyderabad, Mysore, Rajasthan, the Mughals and the East India Company.

3.6.1 Bengal

Shortly after Nadir Shah's invasion in 1740 the Mughal province of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa not long after Alivardi Khan sought the help of the Peshwa against his rival who sought the backing of Raghuji Bhonsle. In 1743 the Peshwa was promised **chauth** over the provinces in return for his help. Later, however, on Raghuji's appeal Shahu assigned **chauth** and **sardeshmukhi** in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa to Raghuji Bhonsle.

In 1751 the Nawab concluded a treaty to pay 12 lakhs of rupees in lieu of the **chauth** of Bengal and Bihar and a stipulated part of the revenue of Orissa to the Bhonsle of Nagpur.

3.6.2 Hyderabad

As viceroy of the Deccan from 1715 to 1717 the Nizam resisted the Maratha claims for **chauth** and **sardeshmukhi** of the Deccan and was constantly at war with them. Around 1720 he encouraged agrarian and revenue officials to obstruct collection by the Marathas. However, in 1724 he agreed to such collection in return for the Peshwa's help against a rival. The entente fell through in 1725-26 when the Peshwa invaded Karnataka. The Nizam therefore replaced Sambhaji of Kolhapur as the collector of the Deccan *subas*. Only after the Peshwa defeated him at Palkhed in 1728 did he agree not to back Kolhapur.

At the height of the Poona-Hyderabad clashes in 1752, the Marathas extracted the western half of Berar between Godavari and Tapti.

3.6.3 Mysore

The Marathas who expanded up to the Tungabhadra, were in constant conflict with Haidar Ali and Tipu Sultan of Mysore and exacted tribute from Mysore in 1726. The Peshwa made successful expeditions against Haidar Ali in 1764-65 and 1769-72 and by the peace of 1772 Haidar lost territory south of the Tungabhadra.

After 1776, however, Haidar Ali made incursions into the Maratha territories in the Krishna-Tungabhadra Doab. Only in 1780 was Mysore allied briefly with the Marathas against the British.

3.6.4 Rajasthan

Here the Marathas did not establish any regular direct administration. However, occasionally in the second quarter of the 18th century they interfered in internal disputes among the Rajputs, in particular in Bundi, Jaipur and Marwar.

Before Baji Rao's visit in 1735 only the smaller states paid **chauth** but therefore even Udaipur and Mewar fell in line.

Collections were neglected in the aftermath after Panipat but were taken up again by Holkar and after his death by Sindia on behalf of the Peshwa and the Mughal Emperor.

3.6.5 Mughals

In 1752 when Ahmad Shah Abdali annexed Lahore and Multan, the Mughal Emperor

sought Maratha protections. He entered into an agreement with Malhar Rao Holkar and Jayappa Sindia in 1752 granting them **chauth** of Punjab and Sindh and the Doab in addition to the subadari of Ajmer and Agra. All this was in exchange for protection against external enemies and disloyal subjects.

The Marathas, however, could not match Ahmad Shah Abdali and were defeated at Panipat in 1761. Punjab and Rajasthan soon slipped out of their control.

In 1784 Shah Alam turned over the management of Delhi and Agra to Sindia in return for a monthly allowance. The Peshwa was given the title of regent and Sindia that of deputy regent. These titles were renewed in 1788 when Sindia reinstated Shah Alam who has temporarily been dislodged by the Rohilla chief, Ghulam Kadir Khan.

The Sindia however, derived very little from this power as the area was mostly held by Mughal chiefs who were only nominally under the Emperor. Therefore, Sindia concentrated on stepping up his demands on the Rajputs.

3.6.6 East India Company

When the Marathas took Basein from the Portuguese in 1739, the Bombay Council of the Company decided to fortify Bombay and sent envoys to Shahu and negotiated a treaty which conceded to the Company the right to free trade in the Maratha dominions.

Tensions in the Maratha confederacy (between the Peshwa and the Rajas of Berar and Satara) and factional disputes between members of the Peshwa's family (in the 1770's) were used by the Company to intervene in Maratha affairs.

How they did so and ultimately shackled the northern **saranjamdars** as well as at the Peshwa forms the subject to Unit 10.

Check Your Progress 5

Comment on Maratha relations with (a) the other regional powers, (b) the East India Company.

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3.7 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we have discussed:

- some of the recent writings on the history of the Maratha state system,
- the evolution of the Maratha confederacy and the expansion of its domain that took shape **within** the shell of Mughal rule,
- the Maratha state institutions at ground level and indicate that historians are now researching the evolution of property and administrative systems over a wider time span, starting from the 15th century and not concentrating only on some regimes in doing so,
- the trends in agrarian society and the monetization of exchange, and
- Marathas relations with other regional powers and the East India Company.

3.8 KEY WORDS

Chauth: One-fourth of land revenue,

Rise of Regional Powers

Deshmukh: District zamindar

Deshpande: Hereditary district accountant

Fitna: (Marathi): Drawing away from allegiance, (Arabic, Persian) rebellion, sedition

Saranjam: Assignment of land or land-revenue

Sardeshmukh (i): Head-deshmukh (ship) on emolument at the rate of 10-12% of collection

Vatan (dar): (Holder of) Hereditary vested right.

3.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) See Sec.3.2. You could say how existing conflicts were used through both coercion and conciliation.
- 2) See Sec. 3.2. You could say how a) any state has long term development, and b) a comparative framework helps to correct stereotype notions.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) See Sec. 3.3.
- 2) See Sub-Sec. 3.3.1 to 3.3.5. Also see Sub-Sec. 3.6.4 and 2.6.5.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) See Sub-Sec. 3.4.1
- 2) (a) & (b) See Sub-Sec. 3.4.1
- 3) See Sub-Sec. 3.4.1
- 4) See Sub-Sec. 3.4.2

Check Your Progress 4

- 1) See Sub-Sec. 3.5.1
- 2) (a) & (b) See Sub-Sec. 3.5.2

Check Your Progress 5

- 1) See Sub-Sec. 3.6.1 to 3.6.6.