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Maratha supremacy, geopolitics of the Maratha state: Contribution of forts in the formation of Maratha Swarajya

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Abstract

In this article I have discussed about the important geographical divisions of Maharashtra, about the fort architecture which got adapted to the geography of Deccan. And, Basic elements of Maratha forts, and How the Deccan Plateau was a place for contestation among the various powers of Deccan? Different types of forts and their contribution in the formation of Maratha *Swarajya*.

Keywords: Maratha, Geopolitics, types of forts, chains of forts fort architecture, fort surrounding, water system

Introduction

Main geographical division of Maratha state and its surroundings: The border region, the Konkan, the Sahyandari and the side ranges, the Maval, the Deccan Plateau and the River Basins

The border comprises of:

- **The northern border:** It has the Bhusaval gap, Burhanpur highway, Haldia ghat which is protected by Asirgad fort. Aurangabad is a main centre which is protected by a group of forts in Ajanta range. The other passes in this region is Sandhwa gap, Balaghat from which Khalji descended to Deccan for the first time.
- **The eastern border:** This is very heavily wooded region. Main forts are Pauni, Wairagad, Tapigad.
- **The southern border:** The main forts are Mahur, Parenda, Dharur, Solapur, Naldurg.
- **The western border:** Is dotted with numerous forts as western coast of Maharashtra had a flourishing trade from very ancient time. The European traders used this border.

The Konkan: Is a narrow strip of land between the Sahyadri and sea, about 80 km wide. The strongest fort is Arnala with numerous supporting forts. This is the most important region for coastal trade. Ratnagiri and Malvan are important trading ports and it has a fort protecting it.

The Sahyadri: This range has numerous passes and a fort to control the pass, naturally inaccessible hill top could be converted into a formidable fort.

The Deccan Plateau: A place of contestation, all the powers of Deccan had their capital like Ahmednagar, Bidar, Bijapur, Golkunda, only Shivaji had his capital in the Sahyadri, first at Rajgad and then at Raigad. Shivaji had captured and built not less than 240 forts, this portrays the importance of forts in the military system of the Marathas. Forts on Ghatmatha-Harishchandragad, Shivneri, Jivadhan. Siddhagad, Lohagad, Torana, Raigad, Pratapgad, Hatgad, Vishalgad and many more. Forts on military routes and passes-Jivdhan, Lohagad, Vishalgad, Pratapgad, the hills of western Maharashtra possess two important features-firstly they have scarp and extensive summits on top to facilitate the construction required for forts.

Forest and rainfall: Forest were thick which made impossible for the marching army to penetrate inside the region. Rainfall-rain confined to five months from June to October, Ghatmatha receives maximum rainfall, it is obvious that it was very difficult to conduct military operations in monsoons in this area, in rain shadow area of Sahyadri there is possibility of sieges and military operations.

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Thus forest and rainfall served the purpose of fortification, the forest below made the fort practically impregnable.

Classification of forts

Parmanand classifies the forts into four types. They were 1. Giri durg (Hill fort), 2. Jaladurg (Marine fort), 3. Sthaladurg (Ground fort), 4. Vanadurg (Forest fort).¹ In text Sivattva Ratnakar forts are classified into eight type viz. 1. Mrunmayi (Mud fort), 2. Jalatmika (Marine or water fort), 3. Gramkot (Gadhi), 4. Gavar (Forest or desert fort), 5. Giri kot (Hill fort), 6. Bhatavara (Naradurg), 7. Vkrabhumi (Fort on unusual ground), 8. Visham (Hill cum ground fort). In the Akasabhairavkalp, again, we get eight types, viz. 1. Giridurg, 2. Vanadurg, 3. Vrakshadurg, 4. Jaladurg, 5. Pank durg (mud fort), 6. Nabhi or misradurg (desert fort), 7. Naradurg 2, 8. Kostadurg (Ground fort). The author of Akasabhairavkalp further provides eight varieties of giridurg or hill forts. They are Bhadra, Atibhadra, Chandra, Ardachandra, Nabh, Sunabh, Ruchir, Vardhman. ³ It seems that minute details of physical features like crest, summit, scarp, etc. might have been considered while describing these sub-types:

Hill forts: In the earlier activities Shivaji realised the strategic importance of hill forts and launched a movement to capture them as early as 1645. He captured Simhagad (Kondana), followed by Purandhar, Rajgad, Torna and many more. As his resources were limited, he seek the co-operation of nature in defending his territory, thus hill forts became of outmost importance to him. Shivaji have learned the importance of hill fort to protect his kingdom. Because we know that while defending Nizamshahi kingdom against the Mughals Shahji shifted his centre of activities to the hill forts like Pempiri and Mahuli. Most of the hill forts were located on the trade routes. The main purpose of the hill fort is to protect the political and economic interest of areas which fall under its sphere.

Sea forts: By the end of 15th century, the Nizamshah of Ahmednagar had established their own navy at Janjira, situated at the mouth of Rajapuri creek. The purpose of establishing navy was two- fold. The *Siddi*, who was appointed as the in charge of Janjira, had to supervise the coastal trade as well as the safe conveyance of Muslim pilgrims to Mecca. When Shivaji expanded his territory across the Western Ghats into the coastal region of Konkan, he was severely opposed by the *Siddis* of Janjira. Shivaji established his own navy and constructed and rebuild the marine forts like Vijaydurg, Sindhudurg, Suvarnadurg, etc. to reduce the *Siddis* he constructed the sea fort of Kansa or Padmadurg opposite of Janjira at the mouth of Rajapuri creek. Further he constructed the forts of Kolaba or Alibagh to strengthen his coastal rule. The purpose of establishing naval order was to hold in check various powers of the west coast including the Portuguese, *Siddis* of Janjira, and the English who were the chief rivals of Shivaji. One more reason for the establishing the chain of sea forts on the west coast was that Shivaji wanted to keep an opening for escape by sea if he was overwhelmed by the enemies on land.

Three Chains of Forts

We have seen that a network of forts, particularly of hill forts, was in existence before the rise of Shivaji. Shivaji added some more hill forts and expanded his rule right from

Ahiwant to Tanjore. For establishing the maritime supremacy, he constructed the forts like Sindhudurg⁴, Padmadurg, Khanderi, and Undheri and strengthen the forts like Vijaydurg, Suvarnadurg, and Jayagad. The network of forts was divided by him in three main chains which were in fact responsible for keeping his territory safeguarded from the rivals like the Mughals, the Siddis, and the Portuguese.

The First Line of Defense

The first line of defense was extended from the fort Aseri in the north-west to the Vishalgad in the south. This line include the core of Shivaji's Swarajya which was formed by the forts Kondana, Purandhar and Vajragad on the east, Rajgad, Torana and Rayagad on south, Tale and Ghosale on the west and Sudhagad on north.

The Second Line of Defense

This line of defense was created by Shivaji for two reasons. First was to safeguard his territory against the maritime powers of the Siddis, the Portuguese and the British and secondly for keeping an opening for escape by sea. While forming this second line of defense Shivaji constructed forts like Sindhudurg, Suvarnadurg, and Vijaydurg etc.

The Third Line of Defense

After his coronation, Shivaji started building his third line of defense from Vishalgad to Jinji. During his Karnataka expedition he conquered and annexed a portion of Karnataka territory. For keeping this territory safeguarded, he strengthen the forts like Jinji, Tanjore, Vellore⁵ etc. and also built new ones. Thus Shivaji created a third line of defense in order to make swift military operations from Raigad to Jinji. As this defense line was created by Shivaji, Rajaram could retire to Karnataka from Vishalgad and could defend the Swarajya against the Mughals.

To sum up it can be concluded that three main factors-

1. A network of hill forts
2. Three lines of defense
3. And Shivaji's strategy were responsible for the defeat of the Mughals in Maratha territory

Effect of Geography on History: To summarize the effects of geographical factors on the history of the area was considerable. The terrain, especially the hilly terrain, determined the direction and condition of the routes, immigration and invasions and so, by derivation the location of the forts. Geography also molded the character of the people to a considerable extent. The people of western Maharashtra were 'resolute, enduring, daring...' these qualities were fully utilized by Shivaji.

The history of Maharashtra or the Marathi speaking people- Maharattakas or Rashtrakutas- is of great antiquity. A rock edict of Ashoka of the 3rd century B.C. records the existence of the Rashtrakutas in the Deccan ^[6]. If the period when forts began to lose their importance is fairly easy to determine 1707, the period when they started playing an important role is far more difficult to determine. The antiquity of forts cannot be traced with any degree of certainty in a large number of cases. Not all the forts of Maharashtra were built by Marathas. Fort building in Maharashtra started as early as the 8th century A.D. Many forts such as Rangna, Bavda, Vishalgad, Salher certainly existed much before the Maratha period. Grant Duff records the names of fifteen forts as having built by Raja Bhoja

during his reign, 1178-1193 A.D.^[7].

Considerations has to be given to the conditions in which the forts existed and functioned. In the 17th century we find a very different scenario. The Deccani Muslim nobility - some of them converts from the bravest and the brainiest Marathas and Kanarese⁸ had begun to gain strength. The growing rivalry between the Afghan and the Deccani nobility led to the emergence of a third nobility- the Maratha nobility. In the power game in the courts of Sultans each side sought the support of the Marathas. The inborn character of the Marathas, their courage as well as their loyalty to the Muslim masters made them valuable allies.

The economy was predominantly agrarian and this tied down people to a particular location. The forts too were essentially static in concept and functioning. Not only the physical mobility but also the mental mobility of the people and the rulers got stunted. What if the Marathas had not crossed the Narmada but had first consolidated their position firmly in the Deccan and the extreme south, using the forts as both military and political bases, the triumph of British East India Company would have been delayed or at least restricted to a few areas only.

Structure and Architecture of fort

“Shivaji Raja was famous for his forts” says Lokahitavadi^[9]. He had captured and built no less than 240 forts and strongholds. He used to prize them highly and large sums were usually granted for their upkeep and repair^[10].” This shows the strategic importance of forts and strongholds in the military organization of the Maratha state. Shivaji aimed at efficiency. Vastly inferior to his enemies in numerical strength, he tried to compensate by quality, the lack of quantity. He, therefore tried to enforce strict discipline in his army and appealed not only to the military instinct but also to the patriotism of his soldiers^[11].

The maximum fort building activity in the Deccan took place during the early years of the Maratha period under Shivaji, who was called ‘mountain rat’ by the Mughals. Shivaji knew only too well the value of the mountains, and built innumerable hill forts. He conquered as many as 130 forts, out of which 50 were in the districts of Maharashtra and 80 in Karnataka and below Ghat regions. He also built as many as 111 forts, thus having in his possession more than 240 forts^[12].

Forts were the manifestation of kingly authority. If there is any architectural monument to the genius of Shivaji, it is the many forts up and down the Ghats of Maharashtra^[13]. The forts of Deccan presents us with a rich, diversity of site, function, history, architectural style and cultural heritage, each with a wide range. At one end of the broad spectrum is the mighty mountain fort of Salher, the highest in the entire Deccan, guarding its north – west border. Then comes the massive Gond tribal fort of Narnala in the Vidharbha satpudas, north of the Akola, on the southern edge of the Chandavan valley, then comes the land cum hill fort of Daulatabad, both in design and construction, was one of the most powerful (As it is one of the best preserved) fortresses of the Middle Ages in existence^[14].

These fascinating remains still provide evidence, of not only man’s expression of power, or the privilege of the ruler but also their constant sense of threat, their helplessness and the inborn need for their protection as well as their freedom. Military defenses are practically innumerable throughout India.

Each one fort also has witnessed the plans and plots. The Marathas took advantages of these natural strong holds and transformed them into invincible forts with the minimum artificial additions^[16].

The development of castles and fortifications was bound to be most spectacular during the Middle Ages of the 5th to the 15th centuries all over the world, which in India and in the Deccan prolonged till almost the end of the 17th century by the Marathas. Even a cursory look at the map of India’s medieval military defenses suggests that they were obviously constructed in groups, relatively close together, with only few regions showing heavy concentration and the rest devoid of any fortification. With a few minor exceptions, the rise and fall of almost all the forts in a particular region is uniform. In medieval India the regions around the mountain ranges of the north- south extending Sahyadris in the western Deccan and next the north east running the Aravalis in the Rajasthan were particularly rich in forts.

Location and fort surrounding

According to K. M. Panikkar, “the geography constitutes the permanent basis of every nation’s history”^[17]. The evolution of Deccan has its effect on the history. If India south of Tapi was never subjugated by the alien powers, in the sense in which the northern India was conquered, it was undoubtedly due to its geography dominated by the Sahyadris. The geopolitical importance of such mountain ranges and their rugged environment was immense. Firstly the hilly Deccan region nourished a courageous, enduring, and audacious spirit among the inhabitants. Secondly, they provide the strongholds which are well surrounded by the thick forests to which the natives could retreat whenever they were chased by an enemy. Fortunately for them, the hills offered convenient strongholds so that they could make raids on the low lands and resort back to their inaccessible dens with amazing rapidity^[18].

William Henry Tone states that ‘perhaps no country on earth is better calculated for the purpose of defensive war’ and that ‘a country so strongly situated is unconquerable’^[19]. This barren wilderness provided a tactical paradise to the natives of Deccan and logistically nightmare to the invading foreign armies. According to Sir Richard Temple the hill country of Deccan is regarded by strategists as one of the strongest, in a military sense, to be found in India.²⁰ Grant Duff states that there is probably no stronger country in the world than the Deccan from the military defense point of view. The Sahyadri mountain ranges offered immense political advantages in times of war with the northern powers. The Maratha peoples inborn love of independence and isolation was greatly helped by nature, which provided them with many read made and easily defensible forts close at hand, where they could quickly flee for refuge and whence they could offer a tenacious resistance. Unlike the Gangetic plain, this country could not be conquered and annexed by one cavalry dash or even one year’s campaign^[21].

The word ‘fort’ originates from French word ‘Fortis’ which means strength, and in that sense, the Sahyadri mountain ranges were quite strongly fortified by nature. Even in Indian languages they deserve the name *Durg* which originates from the Sanskrit word *durgamam*, meaning inaccessible.

To discuss about the choice of site, can be better illustrated

by citing the examples of three important fort in the Deccan region. Often isolated position is the source of security and strength of the fort built on it. Sinhagad had always proved to be better suited for defense purposes as compared to Purandhar, which is surrounded by a number of hills. Sinhagad stands on the – Bhuleswar range of the Sahyadris, about 4320 feet above sea level and 2300 feet above the Poona plains ^[22]. Whereas Purandhar is at a height of 4472 feet above sea level and 2566 above the Poona plain and commands a passage through the hills called Purandhar Ghat ^[23]. On Sinhagad the besieger was required to drag the guns to the hills to storm the gates. In 1663, immediately after the night attack of Shivaji on Shaista Khan, Jaswant Singh tried to capture the fort of Sinhagad but in vain. He laid siege to Sinhagad for more than a year but the fort had a tradition of prolonged defense since the first recorded history. Muhammad Bin Tughluq ‘found the fort so strong that he was unable to take it by storm’ ^[24]. So after eight months until their supplies were exhausted and the Koli chief Nag Naik in about 1325 ^[25], surrendered to Muhammad Bin Tughluq. In 1665, the Purandhar fort was besieged by Aurangzeb, and Shivaji fearing its fall surrendered the fort and he himself entered the service of the emperor ^[26]. This shows the vulnerability of the Purandhar fortification. Once the adjoining fortified hill of Rudramal ^[27] [a sub fort of Purandhar was captured before taking Purandhar] was taken by the Mughals [Mirza Raja Jai Singh and Diler Khan besieged the fort of Purandhar for Emperor Aurangzeb] then Purandhar slips away from the hands of Shivaji. Another example is the Royal Capital of Raigad, it derives its basic form and inherent strength from the close contours of the spurs of the rock on which it was built. Though its early history is obscure, its enormous size, strength and strategic position must have made Raigad an important stronghold from very early time. The site is situated to a highway, rendered it less protective.

Physical infrastructure of fort water system

In the context of logistics, apart from being surrounded by a fertile country, the site had to be self-sufficient in supply of water. The heavy rains across the Sahyadri range ensures a regular and abundant water supply. Further, the construction of numerous reservoirs, wells and cisterns, mostly excavated in solid rock conserves the rain water or else stores the spring water, providing perennially water. This aspect tremendously enhanced the staying capacity and the defending power of the Sahyadri forts. Water supply was one of the most important things carefully provided for. The water from a rock cut well on Sinhagad is famous for its medicinal properties.²⁸ The Ambarkhana (Granary house) of Panhala has a holding capacity of 25, 000 *Khandis* of grain ^[29]. The siege of Purandhar in 1665, illustrate how the scarcity of water not merely impaired but totally paralyzed the defense system of the fort. Apart from fortification being exposed to bombardment from the adjoining Rudramal hills, it always suffered from the shortage of water. The sudden collapse of the Maratha resistance even before the attack by Mughal forces under Jaisingh is attributed to exhaustion of water in the fort. Shivaji promptly tried to rectify this drawback. After his escape from Agra, as soon as he succeeded in retrieving the fort of Purandhar, the first thing he did was getting constructed a large tank *Padmavati*, for oil and grain took the highest priority. A site otherwise suitable will be rejected if sufficient water was not

available.

References

1. Shiva Bharata, p. 40.
2. Fort protected by well-equipped army, a system of protection by keeping forces around the city.
3. Bhadra –the hill fort having summit.
Atibhadra-the hill fort having extensive summit.
Chandra-the hill fort having extensive base.
Ardhachandra-the hill fort having moderate base.
Nabha – the hill fort having acute base.
Sunabha – the hill fort having wide base and which is tapering gradually towards spur. Ruchir – the hill fort having great height.
4. English Records on Shivaji, Vol. I, p. 73-100; Shivaji laid the foundation of Sindhudurg on 25th of November, 1664.
5. Vellore fort was captured by Shivaji in 1677. Sidney Toy, Strongholds of India, p. 18.
6. G. S. Sardesai, the New History of the Marathas, Vol. - I, p. 13.
7. James Grant Duff, History of the Mahrattas., I, P-21
8. Sir Jadunath Sarkar, the House of Shivaji, p. 2.
9. Gopal Hari Deshmukh is popularly known as Lokhitavadi, was a social reformer from Maharashtra. He started his career as a translator for the British Raj. The group of article on social reform has come to be known in Marathi literature as Lokhitawadinchi Shatapatre. British government honoured him with the title of ‘justice of peace’ and ‘Raobahadur’. He was also the founder of Gyan Prakash, Indu Prakash & Lokhitawadi periodicals in Maharashtra.
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23. Sidney Toy, the Fortified Cities of India, p. 37.
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25. J. N. Kamalapur, the Deccan Forts, p. 35.
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