

UNIT 76 – UPSC - Maratha raids Bengal

India's History : Medieval India : Maratha invade Bengal - 1742

Marathas & Bengal

Maratha Raids a scourge in eighteenth-century Bengal were a sequel to Maratha rivalry with the Mughals. Aurangzeb, the last of the great Mughals, had started operations for the annexation of the entire Deccan and his ever-extending warfare affected the Marathas. His attempt to win the Maratha chiefs by grant of mansabs ultimately proved a failure. Some Maratha chiefs were won over, but others took their place in building new fortunes by ravaging Mughal districts. The name (Bargi) by which these Maratha raiders are known in Bengal is a corruption of bargir, meaning the lowest clans of Maratha common soldiers whose arms and horses were supplied by the state, as contrasted with soldiers who owned their own horses and equipment. The Marathas ravaged the country and brought untold miseries to the people.

During the period of the later Mughals, the most important challenge to their power came from the Marathas, whose armies overran the whole of India under the Peshwa Balaji Baji Rao (1740-1761). Between 1742 and 1751 Bengal was repeatedly invaded and, in 1751, the Bengal Nawab had to cede Orissa to the Marathas.

A Maratha army from Nagpur invaded Burdwan district in early April 1742. Nawab alivardi khan arrived at Burdwan from Cuttack on 15 April 1742. The Marathas under Bhaskar Pandit cut off his grain supply, and another group plundered the country for forty miles around. Alivardi broke through the cordon after a desperate attempt and reached Katwa on 26 April. Mir Habib, a Persian peer of the nawab betrayed him and joined the Marathas at this time. He guided their operations with all his local knowledge. His extraordinary ability and implacable enmity towards Alivardi Khan gave to the Maratha incursion into Bengal its long-drawn and murderous character.



Alivardi Khan (1740-1756) nawab of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. Originally known as Mirza Muhammad Ali, he was the son of Mirza Muhammad, an Arab by descent and an employee at the court of Azam Shah, second son of Aurangzeb. His mother belonged to the Turki tribe of Afshar settled in Khurasan. His grandfather was a foster

brother of Aurangzeb. On his attaining adulthood, Azam Shah appointed him as the superintendent of the filkhana (elephant stables); he was also given charge of the zardozkhana (department of embroidered clothes). The death of Azam Shah in a battle in 1707 and the consequent loss of employment put Mirza Muhammad Ali's family in great trouble. For his livelihood he came to Bengal in 1720 with his wife and daughters in a state of penury.

But Murshid Quli Khan, the nawab of Bengal, did not receive him kindly. He proceeded to Cuttack, where he was received by Shujauddin Muhammad Khan with due honour. He was initially appointed to a post carrying a monthly salary of Rs one hundred and subsequently elevated to a higher rank as a reward for his satisfactory and faithful services, notably, in reducing to submission some refractory zamindars of Orissa, effecting satisfactory arrangements for the administration of the villages belonging to those zamindars, and effectively reforming the department of finance. Orissa, thus, served as the practising ground in administrative affairs for Mirza Muhammad Ali, who was destined to be the future subahdar of Bengal.

Besides his satisfactory work in Orissa, Mirza Muhammad Ali helped Shujauddin considerably in securing the masnad of Bengal after the death of the latter's father-in-law Murshid Quli Khan. Shujauddin bestowed rewards and favours on members of Mirza Muhammad Ali's family in recognition of his sound advice and meritorious services. Mirza Muhammad Ali was appointed faujdar of the chakla Akbarnagar (rajmahal) in 1728 and was invested with the title of 'Alivardi'. The people of Rajmahal enjoyed peace and prosperity under the efficient administration of their new faujdar.

Alivardi became the principal adviser of Shujauddin in all affairs of state. The nawab placed so much reliance on Alivardi's advice that he used to summon him once a year from Rajmahal to murshidabad to help him in the transaction of the political and fiscal affairs of the subah. When, in 1732, Emperor Muhammad Shah added Bihar to the Bengal subah (Bihar remained an appendage of the Bengal government from then till 1912) and automatically placed it under Nawab Shujauddin, the nawab did not think it advisable to keep the entire charge of Bihar and Bengal under himself and appointed Alivardi naib nazim of Bihar in 1733. A few days before Alivardi received this new appointment, his youngest daughter amina begum, married to his youngest nephew Zainuddin Ahmad Khan, had given birth to a son, sirajuddaula. Alivardi had no son of his own; he adopted the child as his successor, and made him an object of special favour and affection, as his birth was synchronous with his elevation to that high post. After his stay at Azimabad (Patna) for one full year he was summoned to Murshidabad by Shujauddin, who bestowed him with the title of Mahabat Jang and the rank of panch hazari mansabdar, after which he returned to Azimabad.

During the nawab's stay at Katwa, Mir Habib lured Bhaskar Pandit with the prospect of boundless plunder, to make a sudden dash to his capital during his absence. On 6 May 1742 Bhaskar Pandit's Maratha raiders reached Dahipara, a suburb of murshidabad, burnt its bazars, and then crossing over to Murshidabad itself plundered it, taking three lakhs of rupees from the house of the banker jagat sheth alone. Alivardi arrived to save his capital in the morning of 7 May. The raiders retreated to Katwa, and a line of burning villages marked their track. From the month

of June Katwa became the headquarters of a Maratha army of occupation. Mir Habib acted as their chief adviser and agent. Early in July he managed with the help of his friends in Hughli to imprison the drunken faujdar of the district, Muhammad Reza, and a Maratha garrison under Shesh Rao was stationed there. Thus, the districts west of the Ganges, from rajmahal to Medinipur and Jessore, passed into the hands of Maratha invaders, and Shesh Rao was installed as their governor. Mir Habib acted as the diwan of Bengal on behalf of the Marathas, and summoned the zamindars to pay chauth to the Maratha administration. Many people abandoned their homes and migrated to the eastern side of the Ganges in order to save the honour of their women.

Occasional Maratha raids also threatened the nawab's rule in the area east of the Ganges. Roving Maratha bands committed wanton destruction and unspeakable outrage in territories from which the Nawab's authority had disappeared. Due to Maratha plundering merchants and weavers fled away from Birbhum. Maratha devastation in other areas scared away the weavers of silk products. The adangs (silk and cloth factories and emporia) were deserted; food grains became scarce, trade laboured under every disadvantage.

Alivardi decided to attack the Marathas before the drying of the roads (during the monsoon recess), which might provide the light Deccani horse its natural advantage. Early in the morning of 27 September 1742 the nawab's troops made a surprise charge upon the sleeping Maratha camp of Bhaskar Pandit at Katwa; the Marathas fled, leaving behind all their camp and baggage. Bhaskar recalled his troops from all their outposts in Bengal and led the fugitives into Medinipur district where he looted and burnt Radhanagar, a famous silk-rearing centre, and took up position at Narayangarh. Alivardi marched in person and recovered Cuttack, driving the Marathas beyond Chilka Lake in December 1742. He returned to Murshidabad in triumph on 9 February 1743.

Due to his declining authority, the Mughal emperor was compelled to agree to pay chauth for Bengal, Bihar and Orissa to Raja Shahu who, it is said, had assigned it to Raghuji Bhonsle, the raja of Nagpur. But, in the meantime, the Mughal emperor had appealed for help to Peshwa Balaji Baji Rao, the rival and personal enemy of Raghuji. The peshwa had agreed in November 1742 to eject Raghuji from Bengal by force. Raghuji, however, was bent upon exacting the chauth and in early March 1743 he arrived at Katwa along with Bhaskar Pandit.

The peshwa entered Bihar with a strong force from the south in early February 1743. From Benares he traversed the plains, hills and jungles of Bihar and took the road to Murshidabad. After exchanging oaths of friendship, the peshwa and the nawab agreed on 30 March 1743 that the nawab would pay the chauth for Bengal to Raja Shahu, and also Rs. 22 lakh to the peshwa for the expenses of his army, while Shahu undertook to effect a final settlement with Raghuji, who would not trouble Bengal in future.

Raghuji on hearing of these two allies advancing together against him decamped from Katwa to Birbhum. The peshwa made a rapid cavalry dash, leaving the slow Bengal army behind, overtook Raghuji on 10 April 1743, drove him away into the western

hills with heavy loss of men and baggage. Raghuji took the road to Sambalpur and then returned to Puna. The nine months from June 1743 to February 1744 passed in peace. The Maratha invasions of the past two years doubled Alivardi's army expenses, while his coffers had been exhausted as a result of the subsidy exacted from him by the peshwa. The nawab had paid him 22 lakhs of rupees for ensuring protection against all the Bargi raids. But in return, Nawab Alivardi did not get the assured peace. He was utterly bewildered by the revival of the Maratha menace at the beginning of March 1744, when Bhaskar Pandit again invaded Bengal by way of Orissa and Medinipur. The two Maratha chiefs, the peshwa and Raghuji settled their differences through the mediation of Shahu on 31 October 1743. By this arrangement the portion of Bihar lying west of Patna and including Shahabad and Tikari, yielding 12 lakhs of rupees a year, was assigned to the peshwa. Raghuji Bhonsle was to enjoy Bengal, Orissa, and the portion of Bihar east of Patna.



Alivardi Khan now indulged in a treacherous tactics to scare away the Maratha invaders. He invited Bhaskar Pandit and his captains to an interview with him for making a peaceful settlement of the question of chauth of Bengal. The meeting was to take place in a huge tent set up at Mankara on 31 March 1744. On entering the tent, assassins hidden behind the screens massacred Bhaskar Pandit and 21 of his captains, and all the Maratha detachment vacated Bengal and Orissa. This incident gave the three eastern provinces peace and prosperity for fifteen months.

Alivardi's campaign for the recovery of Orissa from Mir Habib started towards the end of 1746. His general mir jafar defeated Habib's lieutenant Sayyid Nur in a decisive battle near Medinipur town. But Mir Habib came up from the south of Balasore and was soon afterwards joined by the Maratha force under Janoji Bhonsle (son of Raghuji). At the news of this turn of events, Mir Jafar fled to Burdwan, abandoning Medinipur district. Alivardi defeated Janoji in a severely contested battle near Burdwan in March 1747. The baffled Maratha raiders fled back to Medinipur. Murshidabad and Burdwan districts were cleared of them. The nawab returned to his capital and stayed there during the rainy season. During the whole of 1748, the Marathas remained in undisturbed possession of Orissa and the territory up to Medinipur. In March 1749 Alivardi set out to reconquer Orissa. Fighting a few skirmishes the Marathas constantly fled further and further. By the middle of June

1749 the reconquest of Orissa was completed. But only a week after Alivardi had marched out of Cuttack in June 1749, the Marathas under Mir Habib defeated and captured Alivardi's agent. The old and exhausted Alivardi returned to Medinipur to close the path of Maratha raids from Orissa into Bengal.

At the end of February 1750 the Marathas resumed their raids into Bengal. On 6 March 1750 Mir Habib arrived near Murshidabad and plundered the country around. So Alivardi quickly fell back from Medinipur to Burdwan. The raiders disappeared into the jungles and the nawab returned to Medinipur (April 1750) to guard that frontier post. Mir Habib had gained nothing from the barren province of Orissa in these years and his raids into Bengal had always failed due to Alivardi's vigilance and vigour. He, therefore, entered into a peace treaty with Alivardi according to which Mir Habib would become a servant of Alivardi and act as a naib-nazim (deputy governor) of Orissa on his behalf. Alivardi was to pay 12 lakhs of rupees as chauth for Orissa and the surplus revenue of the province to Raghuji. The Maratha government agreed not to set foot in Alivardi's domains again. But with Mir Habib's assassination by the Maratha troops on 24 August 1752, Alivardi lost his control over Orissa once again, and the province came under Maratha occupation.

The repeated Maratha raids proved disastrous for Bengal. The untold miseries of the people were so severe that the incident came to be referred to in a popular lullaby. The repeated failure of crops added to the miseries of the people. The burning of villages by Maratha raiders struck terror in the minds of the people, which in turn led to large-scale migration to the districts east of the Ganges, where the density of population increased, causing various economic problems. The economic effects sapped the financial strength of the Bengal nawab, which in turn led to the disaster, which was to befall his successor in the near future.