

UNIT 77 – UPSC Accession of Baji Rao Peshwa at Poona

India's History : Medieval India : Accession of Baji Rao Peshwa at Poona - 1720

Bajirao Peshwa



Baji Rao Peshwa became Peshwa at the age of 20. There was criticism against appointing a person so young but Raja Shahu was committed to the appointment. Besides by the circumstances of his upbringing and inclination, he lacked the will to assert himself and be bothered about the details of administration. The subsequent Maratha rulers refused to accept the treaty of 1719 referred to above, accept Maratha claims on Gujarat and Malwa. The Nizam, Mir Qamar-ud-din used the Marathas to overcome his Mughal rivals but refused to cooperate with the Marathas in recovering Chauth from Karnatak. Attempting to break away from the Marathas shackles he shifted capital from Aurangabad to Hyderabad.

Eventually the Nizam was overcome in 1728 in the battle of Palkhed. The Peshwa marched towards Aurangabad but avoided taking the enemy head-on. Instead he moved towards Gujarat with the Nizam's army in hot pursuit. The pursuit was abandoned in the hilly tract and the Nizam occupied Pune instead. The Peshwa now attacked the Nizam's capital, Aurangabad and was challenged for action in a waterless tract near Palkhed. Starved of food and water, the Nizam sent word to the Peshwa asking for peace.

The growing ambition of Bajirao coupled with the independent streak of the various chieftains was bound to result in conflict, the area being Gujarat. While the Peshwa, elated by his victories was in no mood to give up claims on Northern Gujarat, others like the Gaikwars, Bhonsle, Pawars were opposed to the Peshwa's designs. At this stage the young Dabhade made a tactical blunder of holding secret negotiations with the Nizam to seek his help. Getting a whiff of this, the Peshwa invaded Gujarat and defeated the combined forces of the Senapati / Nizam. This victory forms a landmark in the history of the Peshwas as it left them without a rival at home. Through a series of attacks on the Sidis of Janjira (near Mumbai), the Peshwa reduced the territories under their control and became in all but name a tributary of the Marathas.

Realizing the weakness of the Mughal empire, the Peshwa pursued his northward expansion drive with zeal. He brought Malwa, Gujarat and Bundelkhand (parts of Western, central U.P.) under Maratha control, thereby, for the first time in the history

of Bharat making Deccan as the point of controlling Hindustan. In October 1730, Malhar rao Holkar and Ranoji Sindia were granted the jagir of Malwa with them making Indore and Ujjain their headquarters. The Peshwa's march to Delhi started with his arrival in northern Bundelkhand just about 70 kms of Agra. Malhar Rao Holkar lost to the Governor of Avadh, S Khan forcing the Peshwa to make a tactical retreat. While the Mughals were celebrating their victory, the Peshwa took a detour through modern day Haryana and descended on Delhi. On reaching Delhi he changed his mind and decided not to attack. Through some misunderstanding, the Mughals attacked the Peshwa's forces only to be routed. The successful march had led to a surge in the Peshwa's reputation and generated awe in the enemy's camps.

Unable to accept the growing might of the Peshwa's, the Mughals invited the Nizam and other Rajput chiefs to join hands and push the Peshwa to south of the Narmada. Through a series of strategic moves, the Peshwa's cut off supply lines to the various parts of this alliance, defeated them and forced the Nizam to beg the signing a treaty in 1738. Called the victory of Bhopal, it marks the zenith of the Peshwa's career. It also implied the arrival of a new power in Hindustan. The Nizam failed to keep his promise of ratifying the terms of the treaty. Serious doubts assailed the mind of the Peshwa's strategy that allowed the Nizam to escape in 1728 (Palkhed) and 1738 (Bhopal).

While Bajirao was overrunning Hindustan, his brother Chimnaji Appa defeated the Portuguese in 1740 ending their rule in North Konkan. The persecution of all those who did not conform to the Christian doctrine forced the Hindu leaders to secretly invite the Portuguese to free them of foreign rule. The conquest of Bassein was long cherished by the Marathas as a matter of national pride and glory.

The last few years of the Bajirao's life were clouded by domestic discord. He was fond of a mistress and drank, ate meat in her company. He passed away in 1740. In the words of Sir Richard Temple, he died as he lived, in camp under canvas among his men and he is remembered to this day among the Marathas as the fighting Peshwa and the incarnation of Hindu energy.

Besides securing the Deccan, he was the first Marath to go on the offensive in Hindustan. If Shivaji created a Maratha state, Bajirao transformed it into an empire. While he extracted revenue ably, he paid no heed to the problems of governance. He was a matchless cavalry leader but not a statesmen, far sighted reformer. The Jagir system vested more money in the hands of satraps like Holkars making Bajirao die with a debt of Rs 14 lacs. A centralized monarchy might have changed history. Net net, he gave the Maratha state stability, secured its freedom and opened prospects for expansion.