



Maratha Perceptions: Analysing Historical Understanding and Dynamics in the Eighteenth Century

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ABSTRACT:

This research scrutinizes the intricate dynamics between the Marathas and the Rajputs during the late 17th and early 18th centuries. Mughal and colonial perspectives portrayed the Marathas as 'robbers,' shaping historiography. Rajput-centric accounts, analysed through *Khyats* and archival records, present a nuanced view. While Mughal historians depicted Marathas as '*Ashqiya*' ('robbers'), Rajasthani sources often referred to them as '*Dakhanis*.' The study explores shifts in terminology and attitudes, unravelling a complex relationship marked by both conflict and cooperation. Recent research challenges Mughal and British depictions, emphasizing Maratha administrative competence. The latter half of the 18th century saw transformed perceptions, reflecting adjustments in Mughal-Maratha relations. Rajput documents provide a relatively objective assessment of Maratha dominance in Rajasthan. This work aims to revisit biased assessments, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the Maratha-Rajput relationship.

Keywords: Maratha-Rajput Relations, Mughal Perspectives, Colonial Narratives, Rajasthani Sources, Historical Perceptions, Maratha Administrative Competence, 18th Century Dynamics.

The historical relationship between the Marathas and the Rajputs hold a prominent place in the Mughal narratives of the late 17th and early 18th centuries, as well as in the writings of early colonial administrators. Both Marathi and Rajasthani sources offer valuable insights into this complex association. However, these perspectives diverge significantly. The paper seeks to reassess various aspects of the Maratha-Rajput relations, primarily focusing on Rajput sources. It aims to investigate whether the portrayal of the Maratha-Rajput relations as hostile was universal, or is it possible that both conflict and cordiality coexisted within this complex relationship.

As the Marathas had started to resist and ultimately challenge the Mughal Empire, they were often characterized as predatory by Mughal historians. Khafi Khan's significant contribution, *Muntakhab-ul Lubab*,ⁱ a Persian source from the contemporary period, characterizes Shivaji as "the treacherous foe"ⁱⁱ "the truculent rebel"ⁱⁱⁱ, "the bloodthirsty assassin"^{iv}, and "the designing rascal"^v, and the Marathas as "a race of robbers"^{vi} besides being rapacious elements.

Similarly, early colonial administrators portrayed the Marathas as 'robbers' due to their staunch resistance to the expansion of the English East India Company in Central and Northern India.

In Tod's writings, we encounter a consistent portrayal of the Marathas as a monolithic entity. A similar perspective is reflected in the works of V.A. Smith, who characterized Shivaji as a "robber chieftain" responsible for widespread suffering among both Hindus and Muslims. Smith's assertion that the Maratha self-governing dominion in all its forms until 1818 was characterized by a reputation for being led by "professed robbers"^{vii} is indicative of this view. However, it is important to note as Ranade rightfully pointed out that adventurers and freebooters rarely succeed in establishing enduring empires that permanently reshape the political landscape of a vast continent.^{viii} In the traditional historical accounts, Tod's perspective on the Marathas has often been mistakenly attributed to all Rajputs. Tod's perception of the Marathas portrayed them as individuals distinguished by their craftiness, and ruthless plundering.^{ix} He likened the Marathas to locust swarms that crossed the Nerbada River.^x Figures like the Holkars, Sindhias, Pawars, and others, previously less known, rose to prominence in this context. Tod portrayed the Marathas as individuals from humble backgrounds, primarily shepherds and peasants, who harbored aspirations of becoming warriors, holding them responsible for the destruction and usurpation of Rajput lands.^{xi} He described the Marathas as "avaricious"^{xii}, "insolent", and that their "desultory armies"^{xiii} proved to be a curse on Rajasthan.

According to Tod, the Marathas were even worse in comparison to the Mughals, as the latter at least adhered to the semblance of governance and justice.^{xiv} In his view, the Marathas were akin to 'vampire-like groups' that sapped the lifeblood of any place where they sought plunder.^{xv} Tod, as a British officer, sympathized with the Rajputs due to the devastation caused by Maratha raids. The legacy of Maratha encampments left behind abandoned towns, houses

with missing roofs, and untended plains.^{xvi} The aftermath of their presence was marked by a pattern of devastation, where previously thriving regions were turned into desolate landscapes. Their destructive path could be traced for days on end.

Based on Maratha sources, recent research has challenged the Mughal and British depictions of the Marathas. These studies argue that the Marathas did not destroy the economy as a matter of habit; rather, they offered an alternative form of administration in the territories they conquered. Scholars like Andre Wink^{xvii} and Stewart Gordon^{xviii} have reevaluated the Marathas in a more positive light. Wink suggests that the British officers' portrayal of the Marathas as predatory was mere "mentalistic jargon."^{xix} His perspective sharply contradicts the conventional image of the Marathas as a plundering and voracious horde. Furthermore, he highlights the fact that the territories of the Marathas were in a flourishing state, emphasizing the existence of a comprehensive administrative record - the most extensive body of indigenous documents preserved in their archives.^{xx} Stewart Gordon also underscores that despite the Marathas' reputation for warfare and raids in distant areas in the 18th century, there exists a contradiction in the form of a vast archive in Pune, housing a humungous documents related to a highly sophisticated system revenue administration. These archives offer no evidence of 'chaos' or 'decay' but, instead, demonstrate a robust administration focused on meticulously recording the most detailed information of the rural and urban areas, with a commitment to agricultural development. Unlike the Mughal administrative system, which frequently saw the transfer of *mansabdars* and officials, the Maratha system encouraged enduring, personal, and familial associations with specific regions.

These portrayals, originating from Mughal and colonial sources, have endured over time. Many historical accounts still associate the Marathas with the label of 'bandits.' These value judgments made by Mughal historians and colonial administrators have continued to shape historiography. It is essential to revisit these assessments of the Marathas. Moreover, it is crucial to recognize that Mughal-centric accounts of the late eighteenth century offer a different perspective on the Marathas. Some scholars have reevaluated the Marathas by examining village-level Marathi sources. Additionally, there are Rajput-centric accounts of the Maratha-Rajput relations that deserve closer examination.

In his seminal work, *New History of the Marathas*, Govind Sakharam Sardesai pioneered an endeavour to present a comprehensive narrative of Maratha history accessible to a broader audience. As the inaugural Maratha historian venturing into this expansive task, Sardesai aimed to break away from the confines of specialized scholarship and make Maratha history more inclusive. Within the realm of English historical discourse, Sardesai, encapsulating the latest research findings, highlights the persistent bias that has coloured assessments of the Marathas by their rivals and adversaries. Throughout their reign and its aftermath, the Marathas faced unjust portrayals, often depicted in the darkest tones, as if their noteworthy achievements were entirely overlooked. This skewed perspective gained traction during the fervour of foreign conquest but gradually waned over time, allowing for a more objective and impartial evaluation of the Marathas' historical contributions. Sardesai's work stands as a testament to the need for a fair and comprehensive understanding of Maratha history, free from the distortions of biased assessments that prevailed in earlier accounts.^{xxi}

In the official Mughal records, the Marathas have often been referred to as '*Ashqiya*,'^{xxii} signifying 'robbers.' Another term used for Maratha leaders in Mughal documents was '*nasardaran*,' suggesting 'pseudo-chiefs.'^{xxiii} Bhimsen, while penning his memoirs, *Nushka-I Dilkusha*^{xxiv} in 1700, addressed the Marathas as 'malefactors.' However, the Rajasthani sources offer a different perspective on the Marathas. Since the Maratha dominance in Rajasthan faced resistance from the Rajput Rajas, it is intriguing to understand the commonly used terms for them. This leads to the question of whether a chronological examination of references to the Marathas indicates any shifts or continuities in perceptions. The utilization or avoidance of particular words may also reflect varying attitudes.

Upon scrutinizing diverse genres of Rajasthani sources, including *Khyats* (*Khyat* is synonymous with History in Rajasthan) and archival records, the terms used for the Marathas are primarily based on their place of origin. They are often referred to as '*Dakhanis*' or natives of Deccan. Surprisingly, the term 'Maratha,' which typically denotes their ethnicity, is seldom employed. In the late medieval Rajasthani sources, a similar approach is observed in addressing Muslims, who, regardless of their diverse ethnic backgrounds, are simply termed 'Turks.' Even with a more detailed contextual reference to the Marathas, the usage of these terms remains relatively consistent, with the exception being the addition of the suffix 'Pandit' for the Maharashtra Brahmans and prefixes like 'Sindhia,' 'Holkar,' 'Pawar,' 'Bable,' 'Ingle,' 'Jadhav,' and so on to distinguish them from Brahmans. These terms persist across various contexts, whether in military campaigns, visits to the courts of Rajput Rajas, or interactions with local society.

In the neighbouring state of Mewar, concerns about Maratha intentions are evident in Maharana Jagat Singh's letter to Bihari Das. This letter was composed in response to Peshwa Bajirao's visit to Udaipur. Through the letter the Maharana conveyed saying that Bajirao having arrived, was expected to earn recognition by obtaining a contribution from the Maharana, alongside his land requests. He had already begun his operations in his (Maharana's) region, and it was anticipated that he would demand twenty times more from him than from other Rajas. While Malhar had visited last year, the impact was relatively minor compared to Bajirao's current presence. However, if providence would be on his side, Bajirao would depart without securing any additional land. If any meeting were to occur, it ought to be planned beyond Dewalia.^{xxv} Earlier, some of the Rajputs had already anticipated the Marathas as capable of causing significant disruption and representing elements of lawlessness and the ruin of the entire land. Even Sawai Jai Singh, who maintained amiable relations with the Marathas, referred to them as 'thieves' (*chor*) when he learned about their continuous incursions into southern Mewar. In a letter written by Kesho Ram, the agent of Sawai Jai Singh in Ujjain, the term '*ghanims*' (plunderers/enemies) was used to describe the Maratha army.^{xxvi}

Interestingly, in the *Dastur Komwar-Dikhni*, we find that the Marathas were addressed as '*ghanims*' only once. *Dastur* implies dealings and *komwar* means caste wise. Therefore, the *Dastur Komwar-Dikhni* documents pertain to the daily court reports pertaining to the protocol, receptions, honours etc. observed at the court of the Raja of Jaipur in respect of the various Maratha dignitaries. In the year 1734, Raja Aayamal was dispatched from Bundi to Ujjain along with the '*ghanims*'.^{xxvii} Surprisingly, except for this single reference, the term '*ghanim*' used for the Marathas, is not to be found in Rajasthani sources until 1793. Even during periods of heightened tension and hostility, amid the two parties, the Marathas were commonly addressed to as '*Dikhanis*.' This designation is consistent across the *Dastur Komwar*, *Chitthi* records, and *Marwar ri Khyat* throughout the study's duration.

In 1787, when Mahadaji Shinde had reached at Tunga to confront the rulers of Jaipur and Jodhpur, his presence was officially announced with courteous language.^{xxviii} In the *Chitthi* and *Arzdasht* documents, the description of the Marathas arrival was described as '*Dikhniyan ka ghanaa vaahada chhai*,' signifying 'there is significant commotion and/or apprehension related to the *Dikhaniis*.' When Maratha Khanu visited Marwar, it caused alarm for several days, "*so Khanu ko kai din to baido raiyo*."^{xxix} We have recently discovered that in the *Chitthi* documents (written communications) from Jaipur, the term '*ghanim*' has been employed to describe the Pindaris who, while in the service of the Marathas, encroached upon Jaipur territory under the command of Amir Khan.

Notably, in the latter half of the 18th century, the Marathas as perceived by the Mughals underwent a transformation, reflecting the evolving situation in North India at the time. Although the Persian accounts pertaining to the first half of the century primarily provided straightforward narrations of Maratha incursions, most writers in the latter half sought to imbue their accounts with new perspectives and insights. It appears that when Mughal Emperor Shah Alam appointed Mahadaji Sindhia as the *wakil-i mutlaq*, the longstanding enmity between the Mughals and the Marathas began to wane. This marked the commencement of a new era characterized by adjustment and reconciliation between former antagonists, thereby reshaping the political landscape of the Delhi court. Concerted efforts were made to establish a system of mutual cooperation to address the increasing threat of British dominance in North India and to restore peace and order across sizable regions around Delhi. These shifting dynamics and inclinations were reflected in the literature that emerged during the final quarter of the eighteenth century. Chroniclers from North India refrained from using derogatory language, which had previously been employed to describe Maratha military campaigns and the character of their leaders. Instead, they adopted a more polite terminology, referring to them as Maratha leaders (*sardaran-i Maratha*) or leaders, from the Deccan (*sardaran-i Janub*).^{xxx}

It is also worth noting that despite the historical antagonism between the Rajputs and the Marathas, Rajasthani documents generally present a relatively objective assessment of success of the Marathas in Rajasthan, their military advantage over the Rajputs, and how they asserted their power in their interactions with Rajput rulers. During the 1760s, the *Khyat* recognizes the indisputable dominance of the Marathas in Rajasthan, "*Dikhniyan ro moto partap huvo*,"^{xxxi} and their growing power. For instance, it mentions, "The Maratha control was established in Rajasthan, their power continued to grow from *samvat* 1817, but it reached its zenith around *samvat* 1820." (*Raj to samvat 1817 su hi jaman mathe aayo pin samvat 1820 su to arudh huvo*)^{xxxii} and again in 1788 when the Marathas were again asserting themselves, "*Dikhniyan ro jor ditho*."^{xxxiii} Only once in the 1780s, the Rajputs commemorated their triumph against the Marathas and the predicament of Shinde in the Battle of Tunga. It is recorded as Shinde's flight from the battlefield and that he was running away, "*Patel naas gayo*."^{xxxiv}

There is a notable absence of attempts to downplay the achievements of the Marathas, as well as a clear depiction of the dismay and sorrow among the Rajput Rajas regarding the potential loss of prestige, territory, and the substantial financial burdens incurred to secure peace with the Marathas. The rulers' inability to fulfil the promised payments to the Marathas and their reluctant acceptance of the humiliating condition, which involved placing influential figures of the state in their custody as a form of insurance for outstanding dues, are presented as matter-of-fact developments. It is noteworthy that Mahadaji Sindhia and Malhar Rao Holkar, deeply engaged in political conflicts in Rajasthan, were particularly insistent on monetary demands from rival Rajputs. Driven by financial motives, they frequently switched alliances, supporting individuals who offered higher payments, even if it meant abandoning a previously endorsed contender for the throne. Conversely, with a more distant involvement in Rajasthan's political landscape, they adopted a policy of prudent caution. The Peshwa, involved in seeking funds from Rajput Rajas only in dire circumstances and not driven by avarice, raises curiosity. Despite facing economic hardships due to relentless Maratha demands, the Rajas of Jaipur and Jodhpur refrained from using offensive language against them.

Conclusion:

This research intricately unravels the multifaceted tapestry of Maratha-Rajput relations during the late 17th and early 18th centuries. The divergence between Mughal and colonial depictions and Rajput-centric accounts highlights the complexity of this historical relationship. Mughal historians, influenced by political circumstances, portrayed the Marathas as '*Ashqiya*' and '*robbers*,' perpetuating a narrative of predatory incursions. Colonial administrators, confronted by Maratha resistance to East India Company expansion, labelled them as '*robbers*,' echoing Mughal sentiments.

In contrast, Rajput-centric sources, primarily *Khyats* and archival records, offer a more nuanced perspective. The consistent use of terms like '*Dakhaniis*' to describe the Marathas suggests a regional focus on their Deccan origins rather than an ethnic label. This sheds light on how the Rajputs perceived and categorized the Marathas within their social and political landscape. The study reveals a pragmatic approach among Rajput rulers, recognizing the Marathas' growing influence. Latter half of the 18th century witnessed a transformation in perceptions, marked by Shah Alam's appointment of Mahadaji Sindhia as the *wakil-i mutlaq*. This shift indicated a move away from historical animosity towards a more cooperative stance, responding to the looming threat of British dominance. Rajput documents during this period adopt a more respectful tone, referring to Marathas as '*leaders*' from the Deccan, signifying a recalibration of political dynamics.

In conclusion, the research underscores the importance of revisiting biased historical assessments that have endured over time. The portrayal of the Marathas as mere '*robbers*' fails to capture the intricate political, social, and economic realities of the time. The nuanced Rajput-centric view and the changing dynamics in the latter 18th century encourage a re-evaluation of historical judgments. This study advocates for a more comprehensive understanding of the Maratha-Rajput relationship, recognizing the complexity of historical narratives shaped by diverse perspectives, political exigencies, and evolving regional dynamics. By exploring the nuances and contradictions in historical accounts, it provides a foundation for a more balanced interpretation of this crucial period in Indian history.

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