

## Understanding the Geographical Vision of Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaj

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### Abstract

In the pre-industrial terms, an empire or a state was a ‘physical geographic’ concept as it reflected the control over a territorial unit bound by territorial or maritime (sea) boundaries. That’s the reason why the early rulers gave importance to conquering land and expanding an empire. In warfare, importance was given to numerical strength of arms, soldiers, horses, elephants, etc. and the location of enemy troop’s vis-à-vis the location of the ruler, but usually the nature of the terrain, where the war was fought, was given relatively less significance. To understand the value of ‘territory’ in a real sense of the term, fundamentally requires a comprehensive geographical (spatial) vision. Having a geographical vision of the empire was important, esp. when India was getting ready for the conflict with the strong maritime powers of the West during the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. The present paper argues that Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, who established the Maratha Kingdom on the Deccan Plateau in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, was the only indigenous Maratha ruler, who not only realized, but also tried to actualize the geographical vision in the empire building. The paper concludes that by neglecting the study of geographical vision of our own national characters, we are making a mockery of our own Geography.

**KEYWORDS:** Empire, Geography, Geographical Vision

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### 1. GEOGRAPHY AND THE EMPIRE:

In the pre-industrial terms, an empire or a state was a ‘physical geographic’ concept as it reflected the control over a territorial unit bound by territorial or maritime (sea) boundaries. Expansion of an empire, thus, meant inclusion of more territory in the state and shifting of boundaries outwardly. That’s the reason why the early rulers gave importance to conquering land and expanding an empire. Warfare and treaties were the chief modes of expanding the state. In warfare, importance was given to numerical strength of arms, soldiers, horses, elephants, etc. and the location of enemy troop’s vis-à-vis the location of the ruler. But usually the nature of the terrain, where the war was fought, was given relatively less significance.

Further, in the context of ancient and medieval India, most of the kingdoms were basically land-based units, i.e. the rulers ruled over a piece of land and not over the seas. This led to a rigid definition of kingdom where expanding and defending land boundaries was given greatest importance. So the Khalji, Sultanate and Mughal empires did not give sea prowess its due. It happened so because the Turks, Tartars and Mughals came from the places which focused a little too much on the land capability and territorial army as compared to anything else (Mishra, 2009). Much before the Central Asians stepped in; the Indian religious texts too had banned religious Hindus from going overseas. Thus, a ruler who controls vast land used to be a strong ruler; thus land-area was the measurement of the strength of a kingdom. This

resulted in the neglect of sea as a part of the state / empire and of sea coast as a maritime frontier. That is the reason why the local Indian rulers, including the giant Mughals, did not take the entry of Europeans seriously. They failed to realize the real motives of the European mercantile companies. However, one cannot overlook the consistent maritime expeditions made by the Cholas and Pallavas that had left a strong Indian impression on South East Asian region.

It should be noted that till the beginning of industrialisation and colonialism, territorial expansion was not seen much with a resource approach. 'Land is a container of resources. So if ruler occupies more land, he subsequently owns more resources.' This kind of a resource approach was not very prominent earlier as we were not aware of the diversity, extracting and utility of the resources. It strongly came during the era of industrialisation. Strength of an empire is linked with its stability. Ancient and medieval rulers gave a lot of importance to defending boundaries, enforcing a strict legal-administrative system, and systematic collection of revenue, for keeping their state stable. But taking concrete steps to create the feeling of 'integrity', loyalty, 'love' for the state in the mind of the subjects was not a part of maintaining stability of the state. Creating such feelings among the subject's acts as a binding force; it becomes necessary for bringing territorial unity.

Above discussion brings out the lacunae in the administration of the medieval/pre-modern rulers (there were few exceptions) in general. Following things, thus, were stressed:

1. Lack of understanding of the terrain, which is ruled or where the war is fought
2. Negligence towards the sea as a part of the state / empire and towards the sea coast as a maritime frontier
3. Failure to realize the real motives of the European mercantile companies (Such a realization needed a geographical vision that was lacking)
4. Lack of a resource approach in conceiving 'land based state'
5. Absence of concrete steps to create the feeling of 'nationalism' among the subjects, which was necessary for maintaining stability of the state

Possessing or acquiring the above mentioned skills fundamentally required a comprehensive geographical (spatial) vision. The present author argues that India had produced two such visionaries during the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, the period so crucial in the Indian history when India was getting ready for the conflict with the strong maritime powers of the West for the first time; the visionaries were Chatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, who established the Maratha Kingdom on the Deccan Plateau in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and Tipu Sultan of Mysore, who sacrificed his life fighting incessantly against the British. The present article attempts to throw some light on one of the important aspects of Shivaji Maharaj's character, his geographical vision.

## **2. SHIVAJI MAHARAJ AS THE GEOGRAPHER:**

Shivaji Maharaj was a visionary geographer because his career did not reveal the above-mentioned lacunae in the administration of most of the medieval/pre-modern rulers. Shivaji, since his childhood, was grown up in the difficult rugged terrain of the Sahyadri and the Deccan. His childhood activities with his *maval* friends helped him understand the nature of deep valleys, hill-tops, escarpments, narrow plateaus, and rivers. Moreover, his knowledge about the arrival and the nature of SW

Monsoon and its impact on the changing physical landscape of the Sahyadri helped him in drawing military strategies in many wars. Due to his deep interest in geography, (he understood the seminal role of geography in empire building), he had prepared detailed maps of many regions of India. Whenever any foreigner visited him, Shivaji Maharaj used to ask him about the basic geographical, economic facts of the former's country. So, Shivaji was an 'applied geographer' in the sense that he used and applied his geographic knowledge in the construction of his *Swarajya*. The growth of the Marathas as a single group of warriors began in late 1640s with the rise of Shivaji (1627-1680), the son of Shahaji Bhosale. In 1650s, the territory of Bijapur became a Mughal *subha*, when Shahaji was disowned by the Mughals as a part of a diplomatic strategy. In the process, areas around Pune, the original *jagir* of Shahaji was conceded to the Mughals. As a result, Shivaji fought his initial battles with the Bijapur kingdom that marked his ascent in Pune, Junnar, Indapur, Baramati, Chakan, Maval and surrounding regions (Sardesai, 1946; Gordon, 1993; Khobrekar, 2002). These initial encounters paved the way for the construction of Shivaji Maharaj's *Swarajya*.

The Deccan had already been divided between the Konkan, the Ghats and the Desh. This geographical division resulted in a fragmented space providing diverse potentials for various political contestants. The Ghats not only separated Konkan and Desh but also supplied some important strategic locations to build forts. Moreover, the Ghats being the link between the Konkan and the Desh, control over its area by constructing forts was of strategic significance. The Desh, mainly a plateau, comprised unproductive areas in the rain shadow section and a productive section to the west. Due to the said spatial division, any realm in the Desh required to control the Ghats to dominate the trade routes running towards the coast and the agriculturally productive region of the Konkan (Gordon, 1993). This geopolitical condition of the Deccan was efficiently used by Shivaji Maharaj.

### **2.1 Shivaji's Geopolitical Understanding behind the Conquest of Konkan:**

Shivaji Maharaj's conflict with the Portuguese and the conquest of Konkan proves his deeper geographical understanding. After consolidating his position in Deccan, Shivaji was drawn towards the coastal waters of Konkan. The political reason for his conquest was put a formidable challenge to the presence of Mughals and the Bijapur kings there. In the geographic terms, the campaign for Konkan was for the fact that till then he was ruling over an unproductive rain shadow tract of Deccan. To feed his subjects, he needed control over the productive areas of Konkan (Karmarkar, 2005). Thus, he gave importance to Konkan as a resource rich region. Similarly, Konkan was a trade link between the imported commodities and the Plateau. The commodities downloaded on the coast were transported through Konkan Rivers upstream to the regional trade centers like Chiplun, Sangmeshwar, etc. Further these items, used to be transported to the Deccan via passes in the Ghats. Thus, control over Konkan and the connecting routes to Ghats were necessary for stable trade (Karmarkar, 2005). Konkan, in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, was quite sensitive due to the Portuguese naval power, extinction of Ahmednagar kingdom and beginning of the economic downfall of the Mughals. Local elite families were then in the ascension of power (Nairne, 1894). Shivaji's geopolitical strategy in Konkan proved to be significant. At the very commencement of his campaign, the eight vital passes that traversed the Ghats from the interior to the Konkan coast and the part of Kalyan were brought under his control (Gordon, 1993). The entire Konkan came into his hands due

to an agreement with the Mughals (Nairne, 1894). By 1660, south Konkan came under Shivaji's command and Raigad was made his capital. Further, Suvarndurg, Ratnagiri, Jaigad, Anjanvel, Vijaydurg and Kolaba were built, rebuilt and strengthened. Dabhol, Jaitapur and Vengurla were plundered and burnt several times by Shivaji due to their association with the Bijapur Sultans, the British and the Dutch respectively (Nairne, 1894). Subsequently, the busy port of Surat was attacked by him in 1664 with a principal motive of accumulating wealth for strengthening his growing kingdom (Das Gupta, 1979).

Shivaji had also fought with the British and the Dutch, who were then attempting to settle on the Konkan coast, to safeguard his economic interests in Konkan. Rajapur, located in south Konkan, became the centre of British-Maratha struggles. It was a significant port city under the Bijapur Sultanate. Following the establishment of a Dutch factory in Vengurla, the British set up their factory in Rajapur. It also housed the main office and the residence of the authorities of the East India Company (Tikekar, 2004). It was a wealthy emporium to where merchandise from Arabia, Persia, Egypt, Africa, China and Europe was imported for sale (Khobrekar, 2002). As the British interfered in the Maratha-Bijapur conflict, Shivaji ransacked Rajapur in 1661 and again in 1670 and collected a large plunder. Similarly, Vengurla was burnt and looted in 1663 as the Dutch intervened in his conflict with the Savants of Wadi (Tikekar, 2004), although their factories were permitted to function. Different kinds of changing alliances among the Portuguese, the Siddis, the Savants of Wadi, king of Jawhar to oust Shivaji off Konkan underlines the shows the importance of Shivaji Maharaj (Kulkarni, 1996; Khobrekar, 2002; Karmarkar, 2005).

## 2.2 Shivaji's Navy:

The conquest of Konkan along with the formation of his navy in 1659 played a great role in the decline of the Portuguese influence over the Arabian Sea (Yasin, 1995; Karmarkar, 2005). No continental empire, namely the Mughals, the Ahmednagar or the Bijapur could develop naval power, equal to Shivaji's Navy'. The Mughals and the Bijapur were land based power and thus neglected building up a navy. Their pilgrim and merchant ships depended largely on Gujaratis, Parsis and Europeans in the sea. Under such circumstances, Shivaji's stress on naval activities reveals his far-sightedness. With his insightful understanding of the European presence along the Konkan coast, Shivaji Maharaj determined to make the sea an integral part of his *Swarajya*. Construction of navy and sea-forts, thus, was a part of his plan to defend the maritime frontiers of *Swarajya*. Similarly, he aimed at the economic benefits of controlling the seas. Later successful expeditions were planned with support from the naval bases of Kalyan and Bhiwandi. Malwan, Vengurla and coastal areas in the south up to the borders of Goa were brought under Shivaji's control followed by interior centers like Kudal, Sawantwadi and Rajapur. North Konkan also came under his rule and in 1670 Kalyan, Bhiwandi and Mahad became his new bases. Ports of Daman, Vasai, Thane, Chaul, Panvel and Khanderi islands followed suit.

Shivaji's interest in navy was a result of his concern for the safety and security of the coastal tract that was required for his subjects. As mentioned earlier, peace (stability) in the coastal tract of Konkan was significant to maintain trade contacts with Konkan and protect his subjects who were stationed in the unproductive areas of the Deccan. Shivaji Maharaj had understood that his enemies might try to starve him

into submission by stopping provisions from their country. Bahadur Shah actually did so (Yasin, 1995). If command of the sea was in his hands, he could get an abundant supply from the ports of the South even when the usual land (trade) routes of the country were blocked. Shivaji's trading vessels loaded with goods traded with Persia, Basra and Mocha in western Arabia. He had not only salt boats but also regular 'May Fleet' which piled between his ports and those of Arabia and Persia (Yasin, 1995). Evacuation of Siddis of Janjira was also a major objective behind the building of the navy (Khobrekar, 2002). However, the Siddis of Janjira never surrendered to Shivaji even after twenty years of confrontation.

The Shivaji-Portuguese conflict essentially arose out of the Portuguese domination over the Indian seas. It was for the first time that the naval supremacy of the European merchant group was challenged by a king based on land. Portuguese made it mandatory for all those using western coastal route and the Red Sea route to buy passes or cartaz. Cartaz was like a pass that gave permission to use the sea route. It not only fetched handsome revenue to Portuguese but also established a strong political hold over the sea. Refusing to buy the Portuguese cartaz was not a joke at the time when the Portuguese were known for their ruthless violence along the coast. But Shivaji Maharaj refused to take cartazes from the Portuguese and continued to sail in the coastal waters (Khobrekar, 2002). His nationalism challenged him to wrest the revenue from the Europeans traders, when his people were living on the slender resources of his sterile motherland (Yasin, 1995). He also opened a straight military conflict against them. Portuguese letter dated 6<sup>th</sup> August 1659 says, "Shivaji, a son of Shahaji, rebel against Adilshah, has captured the areas near Bassein (Vasai) and Chaul. He has grown strong. He has constructed some fighting vessels in the Bhiwandi, Kalyan and Panvel ports of the Bassein region. We are therefore forced to remain alert. We have ordered the Portuguese captain not to allow these vessels to come out of the ports and see that they do not move out on the seas." The fact that the Portuguese avoided war with Shivaji Maharaj and remained strictly neutral during his wars with the Mughals and the Bijapur strongly proves the strength and authority of Shivaji Maharaj.

Shivaji also laid the foundation of the ship building industry of the Marathas after he captured Konkan in 1650s. Kalyan was made a naval base and dockyards were built accordingly (Khobrekar, 2002). The work of building 20 fighting vessels started under trained hands. Kalyan was essentially used by the Marathas to plunder the Portuguese territories that provided a fresh impetus to urban growth in Konkan. Vasai, Thane, Kalyan, Bhiwandi, Alibag, Bankot, Vijaydurg, and Malwan emerged as the chief ship building centers of the Marathas (Kulkarni, 1997). The choice of these locations was in line with the availability of fine quality teak wood in these areas. D'silva (1990) notes that the ships built at Agashi, near Vasai, were able to make voyages to Europe and stood equal with Portugal's art of ship building. The natural harbors and port towns gave a boost to ship building activities of the Marathas. Chaul, Dabhol, Kalyan, Bhiwandi, Vengurla emerged as the active port towns while Dahanu, Tarapur, Kelva-Mahim, Agashi, Uttan, Vasai, Bandra, Mahim, Nagothana and Shrivardhan emerged as centers of coastal trade (Karmarkar, 1996; Kulkarni, 1997). Shivaji had a naval policy formulated under *Adnyapatra*.

### 2.3 Significance of Planned Warfare Strategies vis-à-vis the Nature of Terrain:

Shivaji Maharaj's understanding of the terrain of the Sahyadri and the Deccan was well reflected in the kind of warfare he developed – the *Ganimi Kawa* or the Guerilla Warfare. His mobility and terrain spoke to British military concerns in India (Kincaid, 1937). Shivaji Maharaj realized that the most vulnerable point of the large, slow-moving armies of the time was supply. *Ganimi Kawa* was a strategy evolved by him, in which he used knowledge of local terrain and the superior mobility of his light cavalry to cut off supplies to the enemy. His troops attacked caravans and devastated the rural hinterlands of the enemy camp site. Shivaji regularly refused a decisive plains battle, which tactics of the day demanded. Instead, he left the battlefield and struck some portion of the enemy territory, perhaps hundreds of miles away, forcing the enemy to chase him. He raised the act of guerilla warfare to a high art. It is evident in his encounter with Afzal Khan at Pratapgad, near Wai.

### 2.4 Shivaji's Forts and *Swarajya*:

Shivaji Maharaj understood the importance of forts for the geopolitics of Maharashtra. The forts were of functioning types mainly for the purpose of guarding the region and the army. Shivaji built many forts in areas where forts already existed. This was because he was not sure of the loyalty of the families who held the existing forts. Only by building his own forts could Shivaji maintain them with troops of proven loyalty. Forts in Konkan as well as Ghats played a seminal role in building of the Maratha '*swarajya*'. They acted as centers of huge conglomeration of arms and garrison, points of vigil and also as borders of the kingdom. They not only kept an eye over the sea front but also over the land frontiers in the Deccan and number of passes crisscrossing the Sahyadri. During the early Maratha period, there were about 350 forts (Deshpande, 1982). These forts consisted of *gadhis* (small residential fortresses), *vandurgs* (forest forts), *sthaldurgs* (ground forts), *giridurgs* (hill forts) and *jaldurgs/janjiras* (marine forts) (Divekar and Apte, 1927). Very few of them developed into settlements like Rajgad and Raigad where a good number of houses and other buildings were made. Some notable features of Shivaji's forts include:

1. Design changes with the topography and in harmony with the contours
2. No ornate palaces or dance floors or gardens
3. Not much difference in the area of higher or lower ranks
4. Marvelous acoustics in the capital
5. Sanskritization of fort names
6. Community participation in the defense of forts
7. Three tier administration of forts
8. System of inspection of forts by higher ups including the king
9. Distinct feature of forts like double/triple line fortification of Pratapgad, Vijaydurg, etc.
10. Foresight in selection of sites

Although most of the forts were constructed in the Ghats, marine forts and cliff forts played strategic role along the Konkan coast. The significance of marine forts for defending the coastal borders of Konkan against the Siddis and the Portuguese was implicit. As a result, Vijaydurg, Sindhudurg and Suvarndurg were rebuilt, while Padmadurg and Kolaba were constructed by Shivaji. Shivaji built two types of Janjiras, or sea forts. Firstly, forts built on a rocky island, surrounded by sea on all sides and secondly, forts on the sea-shore with its entrance from the land side

and rear facing the sea. Sindhudurg, Anjanvel, Yashwantgad or Reddi, Vijaydurg or Gheria, Jaigad, Ratnagiri, Kolaba, Khanderi, Devgad and Bhagwantgad were some of his major marine forts, either constructed, renovated or fortified by Shivaji. All these forts played significant role in monitoring and checking the activities of various powers on the west coast including the Portuguese and also in keeping an outlet for escape by sea (Deshpande, 1982).

Geostrategic location of Shivaji Maharaj's forts in Konkan and Deccan actually established three lines of defense demonstrating a gradual spatial expansion of Shivaji's kingdom. The first line of defense extending from the Asheri fort in the northwest to Vishalgad in the south passed through Purandar and was at the core of Shivaji's kingdom. The second line of defense passed through Konkan incorporating newly built forts like Sindhudurg and Padmadurg and older but strengthened forts, such as, Vijaydurg and Suvarndurg. Both these defense lines established by Shivaji served his descendents, i.e. the Peshwas, as well. Subsequent to his coronation (1674), the third line of defense was built from Vishalgad to Jinji in Karnataka that mirrored the expansion of Shivaji's empire. This line enabled swift military operation between Raigad, the capital of swarajya, and Jinji and helped Shivaji to defend his kingdom against the Mughals. Symbolically, forts were the spatial (geographic) manifestation of Shivaji Maharaj's supra-local power. They were the manifestations of kingly authority and architectural genius of Shivaji Maharaj.

### **2.5 Shivaji and his Urban Perception:**

Shivaji Maharaj's *swarajya* and his perception of state building were basically rural in nature and much less urban. Though it was not as strongly tied to cities as the Mughal Empire, they were the part of the Shivaji's strategy. The city-building activities were never on the agenda of Shivaji Maharaj, his capitals continued to get located in forts and not in cities (Gordon, 1993). It was so because, unlike the Mughals, Shivaji's conception of swarajya was more people-centric (common man at the center), more of a welfare state. Like the Mughals, he did not aim at building royal, capitalist cities with urban elites at the center. The Mughals considered cities as the bases of administration while forts as places of strength and retreat. The Mughal cities thus were strongly defended by their armies. During the peak of the Mughal power, therefore, attacking the city was more difficult than the countryside. In this context, cities became a part of the military-cum-economic strategy of Shivaji. Conquering the countryside and disconnecting its link with the city in the initial stage of the attack was the major part of Shivaji's strategy. In conquest, therefore, Marathas took the countryside first, the smaller towns in the hinterland second and the city, by then cut off from the hinterland and weakened, much later. The conquests of Surat, Burhanpur and Aurangabad followed this pattern (Gordon, 1993). No doubt, Shivaji viewed Mughal cities as centers of capitalist wealth accumulation. It is also true that the Mughal cities were parasitic in nature and their wealth came from the exploitation of the rural hinterlands (Karmarkar, 2005). That was the reason why, Shivaji attacked and looted the elites in such cities like Surat; to take back the wealth of the common people and reinvest the same for the benefit of his rural subjects. Shivaji was a revolutionary, in this context. Such a kind of Shivaji's polity created a feeling of nationalism and integrity in the minds of the people of the Deccan.

Shivaji's forts played a significant role in the backdrop of the urban decline and destruction by the Portuguese in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Das Gupta, 1987). Shivaji's

expertise in building forts and capturing of strategic points of significance in the Western Ghats along the Konkan coast played a significant role in salvaging some nodes, even if not their status. Shivaji built several forts along the Konkan coast and indirectly helped keep some urban centers alive and lend them position of significance in the defense map of the Marathas.

### **3. RELEVANCE OF SHIVAJI'S GEOGRAPHICAL VISION:**

Shivaji Maharaj is one of the highly politicized historical figures of our times. Today, every political party claims ownership on Shivaji Maharaj's character. We are very well aware of the kind of society and polity in which we are living. So, there is no need to ponder much on how the above-mentioned facts about geographical vision of Shivaji Maharaj are relevant today. In the guise of globalization, we have shown utmost negligence to look into our own geography and history. Most of our state policies reveal the fact that we have failed in understanding our geography and put it for efficient use. Our state is far away from the welfare state concept conceived by Shivaji. We are not living in Swarajya. Just one example to conclude - if Shivaji Maharaj, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, could understand the significance of protecting sea frontier, how can our 'veteran' politicians of 21<sup>st</sup> century Maharashtra 'generously' open up our sea frontiers for the terrorists to come in! We have really made a mockery of our own great leader and moreover our own geography!!

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