

Q. Discuss the contribution of Peshwa Bajirao I to the rise of Maratha power in North India.

"Two personalities loom large in the history of the Marathas, Shivaji, the founder of the independent Maratha Power and Peshwa Bajirao I, the founder of their empire. They tower head and shoulders above their contemporaries: their policies and actions completely influenced and moulded the shape of things to come."

[Ref: V.G. Dighe, Peshwa Bajirao I & Maratha Expansion, Karnatak Publishing House Bombay, 1944, P. 1]

The Marathas entered the northern provinces of the empire in the first decade of the 18th century: a measure adopted in the early stages of the struggle as a counterpoise against the Mughal attacks on their bases, this northward drive gained in momentum as the century advanced. In Peshwa Bajirao I the policy of northward expansion found its most fearless champion: he realized full well the weakness of the empire, the levity of its rulers, the incompetence and corruption of its officers, and made a bid for the overlordship of Hindustan.

Bajirao I, the second Peshwa (1720-1740) was appointed to the office in succession of his father Balaji Vishwanath by Raja Shahu. The Raja generally kept himself in

the background and the administration of the Maratha dominion was actually carried on by the Peshwa Bajrao I. Bajrao I thought of establishing a Hindu Empire (Hindus - pad - Padshahi) in place of the Muslim Mughal Empire. He therefore, decided to carry the victorious arrows of the Marathas into the Northern India so that they might "strike at the trunk of the withering tree".

Peshwa Bajrao I invaded Malwa in 1723 and conquered Gujrat with the help of the local Hindus in 1724. But his policy of expansion in northern India was opposed by a section of the Marathas who found a leader in Trimbak Rao Dhalade, the samapati or Commander-in-Chief of the Maratha Kingdom. Bajrao I defeated and killed Dhalade in the battle of Dhaboi. He also made an agreement with the Nizam in 1721 by which the Peshwa was to be free to extend his power in North and the Nizam in South India. Bajrao I was without any rival at home and the control that Raja Shahu exercised over him was nominal. In this circumstances Bajrao I easily made the Peshwaship hereditary in his family and resumed his plans for expansion in Northern India.

He allied himself with the Rajput ruler of Amber as well as with

the Bundelas, and in 1737 he marched at the head of Maratha army to the ^{vicinity} ~~vicinity~~ of Delhi. Emperor Muhammed Shaka (1719-1748) in alarm called in the Nizam of Hyderabad who in violation of the treaty made in 1731, sent an army to North India to resist the further advance of Bajrao I. The Peshwa defeated the Nizam's army in a battle near Bhopal and forced him to make peace by a treaty which left to the Marathas not only Malwa but also the territory lying between the Narmada and the Chambal. This treaty was confirmed by the Emperor and Maratha supremacy was thus established over a large part of Hindustan.

In 1739 Bajrao captured Salsette and Bassein from the Portuguese. But Bajrao I had to confront constant opposition from the Marathas many of whom, especially those belonging to the group who were envious of the power of the Brahman Peshwa. In order, therefore, to counter balance the influence of the hereditary nobility Bajrao I created a new nobility from amongst his own supporters and invested them with the administration of large parts of the new conquered Maratha dominions.

Thus was founded the Maratha confederacy consisting of the Sindhia of Gwalior, the Gaekwad of Baroda, the Holkar of Indore and the Bhonsale of Nagpur, all of whom held large territories. They also upheld the

power of Bajirao I and contributed much to the expansion of the Maratha power. But they also formed the nucleus of a feudal body which was ultimately sure to bring division and disintegration amongst the Marathas. If Bajirao I had lived for some years more he might have taken remedial measures. But he died in 1740 at the age of 42. His death was, as events proved, a sad blow to the cause of Hindu independence. According to J.N. Sarkar, "In the long and distinguished galaxy of Peshwas Baji Rao Ballal was unequalled for the daring and originality of his genius and the volume and value of his achievements. He was truly a Carlylean Hero as King or rather as 'Man of Nation'".

