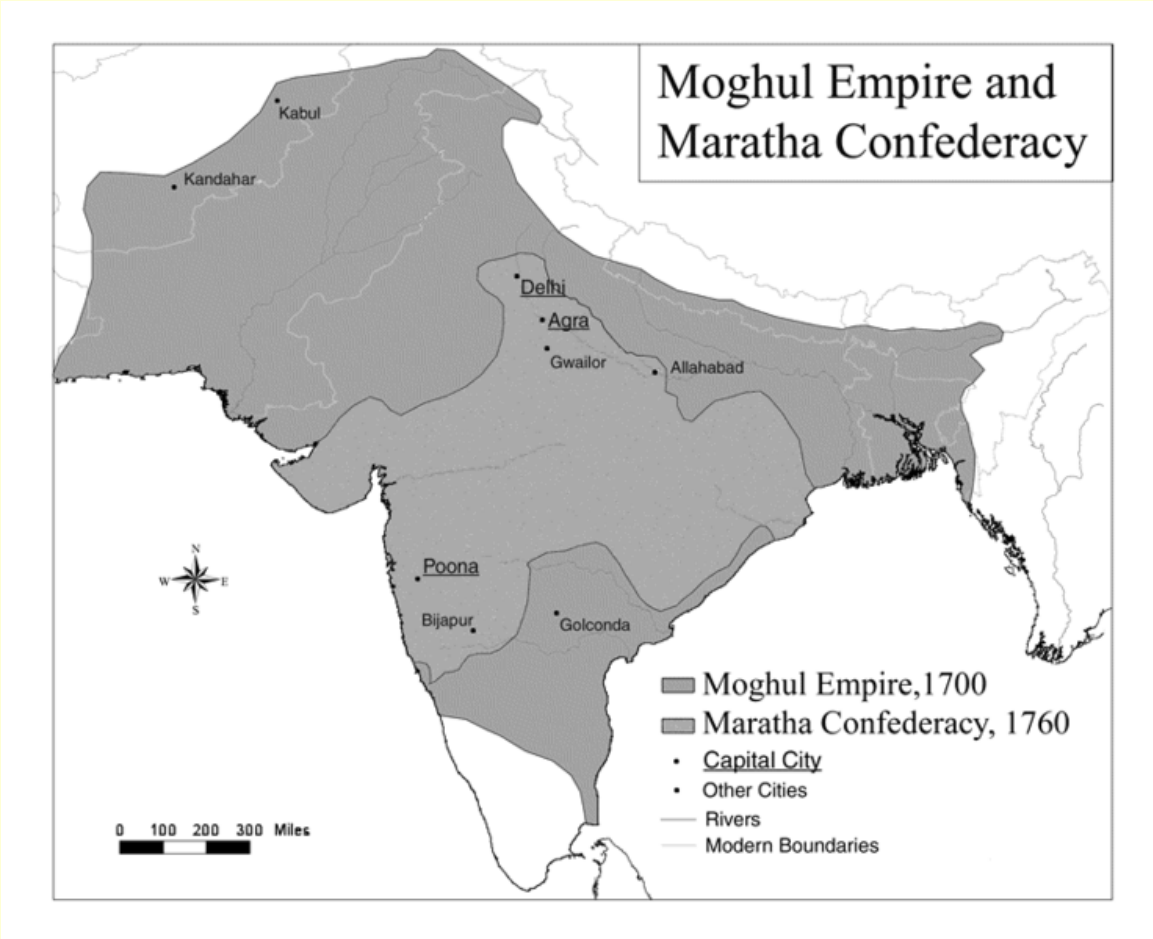
The Political System of the Maratha Confederacy: Its Strengths & Weakness According To Mahadev Govind Ranade

The following pages are extracted from the author's Rise of the Maratha Power [Punelaker & Co., Bombay 1900]. We downloaded the book from Google Books, which digitized an original copy at the University of Michigan.



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IV. One other feature may be noticed, which was at once the strength and the weakness of the Maráthá Power. The history of the Maráthás is a history of confederated States. The central power was always weak after the death of its great founder. Even Shiváji was influenced in his arrangements by his national tendency. He had a Council of Eight Ministers who were more than councillors, being themselves both civil and military leaders. Even in his lifetime, when he was a captive at Delhi, and his country and its forts were in Mahomedan hands, this distribution of power enabled him to raise his head soon after escaping from captivity. When his son, later on, was captured by Aurangzéb's General, the confederate leaders retired to the south, and, again on a suitable occasion, returned and wreaked their vengeance on Aurangzéb. Under the *Péshwás*, this system was developed still further by the establishment of the great Camps of Maráthá Captains at Indore, Gwálior, Dhár, Déwás, Barodá, and Nágpur; and the Bundélkhand Chiefs in Central India, the Patwardhan Chiefs in the South, the Sátárá *Jahágirdárs*, the Bhávés, the Rástés, the Dhulaps, the Ángrés, Mánkars, Mahádiks, the Ghorpadés and many others who might be enumerated, had their

smaller camps all along the eastern and southern boundaries of the Empire. These were so many centres of power and vitality and as long as they were animated by a common purpose and a central idea—and they continued to be so animated for nearly a century—their power was irresistible and even the disciplined British army had to dismember the Confederacy before success could be achieved. For a hundred years there was not an expedition to the south or to the north, to the east or to the west, against the Rajputs or the Delhi Emperors, in Rohilkhand, or Oudh or Bengal, against Hyder, or Tipu, or the Nizám, against the Portuguese, or the English, in which the confederate Chiefs did not act together. The ascendency of the *Péshwás* was like the ascendency of the Prussian Monarchy in the German Empire. The Central Authority represented more the idea than the force of the Confederacy. While the old traditions lasted, it enabled the ministers at Ráigad, Sátárá, Vishálgad, Gingi, or Pooná to carry on the government and direct the national force without the advantage always of having any strong personal ruler at the head. The *Péshwá's* Government under Náná Fadnavis was actually nicknamed in the courts at Hyderábád and Shrirangapatan as

the *Bár-bhái Government*, or the Government of the Confederacy of Twelve Leaders. When the idea ceased to be respected, the Confederacy proved a source of weakness rather than strength. The English rulers knew this weakness, and took advantage of it by appealing to the selfish vanity of each member of the Confederacy separately, and thus loosened its joint force. There was no such experiment of Federal Government on such a large scale undertaken in this country under either Hindu or Mahomedan sovereigns. The experiment was doomed to ultimate failure, for it presupposed virtues which are not hereditary, but as long as these virtues had the ascendency, it had redeeming features of its own which enhance the value of the study to the native and foreign historian.

V. The moral interest of the story is further heightened by the fact that the Confederacy arrangements enabled the Maráthá nation to outlive and grow stronger from the very reverses it sustained during the critical periods of its history. There were four such critical periods:—

i. when Shiváji became a prisoner at Delhi;

ii. when Sambháji was taken captive, and his brother Rájárám had to retreat to the south;

iii. when the battle of Pánipat apparently destroyed all hopes of Maráthá ascendency;

iv. when Náráyanráo Péshwá was murdered, and the Ministers had to set aside Rághobá and carry on the administration with a house divided against itself, and with the whole force of the British Power to oppose.

A nation that could stand four such reverses and catastrophes, and rise superior to them, possesses an interest for the historical student which cannot be adequately measured by the length of time that the Empire lasted.

VI. Lastly, even at the present day, though the British Rulers of India occupy the place of the *Péshwás* and of the Moghul Emperors as suzerain power, to which all other States are subject, the remnants of the Confederacy that are still in the enjoyment of subordinate independence at Gwálior, Indore, Barodá, Kolhápur, Dhár and Déwás, the Southern Maráthá

Chiefs, and the Maráthá population of about thirty millions included in the Bombay Presidency and the Native States, as also in the Central Provinces, Bérárs, and the Nizám's country, represent a power which is second to none among the native communities and States, which enjoy the protection of, and own allegiance to, the British Rule. This element of present influence cannot also fail to have a deep interest to those who can see far into the future of the possibilities open to a Federated India, distributed according to nationalities, and subjected to a common bond of connection with the Imperial Power of the Queen-Empress of India.

These are the principal features in which centres the permanent moral interest of the story of the rise and fall of the Maráthá Confederacy, which we propose to narrate in the sequel.