



THE LIFE OF SHIVAJI MAHARAJ FOUNDER OF THE MARATHA EMPIRE

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Chapter 15

Sea Power

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A long strip of the Konkan sea-coast was by this time under Shivaji. To secure the tranquillity of this great province, Shivaji had either destroyed or received the submission of the turbulent local nobility. Among these there was one who had still baffled Shivaji's attempts at conquest. This was the Abyssinian state of Janjira. Shivaji had indeed fought many successful campaigns with the Abyssinians and stripped them of some of their richest districts. He had even raised many a defensive fortification in the conquered territory. But his armies had never made any head-way in the reduction of the key of the Abyssinian power, the stronghold of Janjira. The naval resources of the Janjira chiefs had made an effective blockade impossible. His naval armament hovered over the neighbouring shore and making sudden descent upon Shivaji's possessions harried the country far and wide. Janjira was the base of this hostile navy; but to capture Janjira it was necessary to create a naval power that could successfully cope with the Abyssinian. Without a naval contingent a siege of Janjira was impossible. Another circumstance which helped to lead Shivaji to this conclusion was the fact that by his naval strength the Janjira chief was enabled to levy contributions upon the mercantile vessels plying in the Konkan and it was necessary to deprive him of this source of plunder.

With this determination, Shivaji collected from all ports artisans and masters skilled in the art of ship-building with the zealous co-operation of his ship-wrights. With their help he was soon able to launch a navy consisting of

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from four to five hundred vessels of all forms and sizes. These vessels were variously classified according to their size. Upon the construction of this nucleus Shivaji spent about ten lakhs of rupees. Naval batteries were installed and crews of marines and sailors recruited. His crews consisted of men who belonged to sea-faring tribes, such as fishers, pirates, and lascars. The chief command of this contingent was vested in two admirals, Mainaik, Bhandari and another whose title was Daryasarang.¹ The ships set sail and at once encountered the vessels of foreign nationalities, such as the Moors, Portuguese, Dutch, French and English. Shivaji obtained a vast booty as the result of these naval encounters enough indeed to defray the expenses of the naval contingent. The Abyssinian chief was now in terror. His lordship of the Konkan sea was at stake. The two navies constantly came into collision with one another. The Portuguese and the English companies had to pay annual tribute to Shivaji, in order to ensure the safety of their vessels. As Shivaji's naval power rose on the western coast that of the Abyssinians had a corresponding decline.

Shivaji had next to arrange for sheltered anchorages for his naval contingent. With this view he repaired and re-equipped many a maritime fort on the Konkan coast. He got possession of the fort of Kolaba, restored its fortifications, and made it the central basis of his naval power. Here it was that the cargo of all foreign and native crafts was searched and examined. Among other dismantled forts which were remodelled and brought into fighting order were the famous fortified sea-ports of Suvarnadurg and Vijaydurg, the latter of which became more famous in the writings of Mahomedan and European historians under the name of Gheria. Under the batteries of these forts Shivaji's fleets rode safe at anchor. The officers at each principal naval station were to report on and account for the plunder obtained by falling upon pilgrims' vessels bound for Mecca or the more richly laden fleets plying on the coast in the interest of commerce. These reports were to be submitted to the naval head-quarters at Kolaba.

The Portuguese were among the first nations to take an alarm at this development of Shivaji's maritime activity. They sent their envoy to Shivaji's court to obtain exemption and privileges for the commerce of their nation. Articles were signed between the two powers, by which the Portuguese agreed to furnish every year to Shivaji a certain amount of guns and ammunition and other war material, in consideration for which their mercantile fleets were to

1. Vide; foot-note at the end of this chapter.

pass unmolested by Shivaji's fleet. The agreement was renewed from year to year. There are some authorities who assert that between Shivaji and the British East India Company also there was a similar agreement.

Shivaji never assumed the chief command of his navy, nor did he make naval campaigns in person. Only once, on the occasion of the sack of Barcelore (Basnur) did Shivaji travel by sea. But the voyage was a very painful experience. In the first place, both Shivaji and a great number of his men suffered from sea-sickness, and secondly, Shivaji learnt by experience the helpless position of a fleet at the mercy of storms and tides and winds, and the uncertainty in a general's movement who confided himself to these elements. If a commander of the position of Shivaji were unexpectedly becalmed in the midst of important manoeuvres or prevented by adverse winds from proceeding to his destination, he would for days be cut off from all communication with his followers. With this experience before him, he never attempted a sea-voyage again.

From a classified list of Shivaji's naval armament given by one of the Maratha chronicle writers named Chitrugupta, it would appear that he had about 640 vessels of war. Of these about 30 were of the largest size known on the western coast of India², about 300 of an intermediate size, and the rest smaller craft of various classes. The English merchants made lists of Shivaji's fleets on different occasions. From one record it appears that on one occasion when Shivaji's fleets sailed to Karwar, there were 85 one-masted vessels, of from 30 to 150 tons, and three others of a larger size. On another occasion when the East India Company was allied with the Janjira chief it is recorded that Shivaji's admiral suddenly swooped down upon Bombay and appeared in the Back Bay waters on the west side of the town with a squadron of 160 war-ships.

Although this naval squadron had been brought into existence for the express purpose of challenging and defeating the maritime power of the Abyssinian chiefs of Janjira, no detailed account of these operations has come down to us. The principal object – the conquest of Janjira – was almost achieved. But the Janjira chief renounced his allegiance to Bijapur and by placing himself under the protection of the Moguls was able to save his stronghold from falling into the hands of Shivaji. Convinced that the Abyssinian Janjira was beyond his reach, Shivaji decided to build a rival *janjira* or maritime fortress of his own. For this purpose a survey was ordered

2. These were called *Guradbās*. The records of the British East India Company mention them under this name as also the anglicised abbreviated form, '*grabs*'; other names mentioned are *shebars*, *pals*, *machawas* *mahagiris*, *jugs*, etc. Vide Bombay Gazetteer XIII, 345-49.

to be made, with the result that the shores of Malwan were reported to possess all the conveniences and requirements of naval Strategy. Besides the necessity of a maritime fortress to remain a standing menace to Janjira, it was also thought desirable to have a southerly naval base to overawe the Portuguese and the chief of Sawantwadi, who maintained a small coasting fleet of his own and was a terror to smaller mercantile craft.

The work was immediately taken in hand. Soundings were made in the waters of Malwan, the duty being entrusted to hereditary boatmen, fishers who knew the condition of the harbour and its topographical features very intimately by reason of life-long experience in those waters. These experts having submitted their report received handsome rewards from Shivaji. Many of them were appointed captains of Shivaji's warvessels and a village was bestowed upon them in hereditary vatan or proprietary right. The ground being thus broken, building operations were taken in hand, with the customary auspicious ceremonies, including an elaborate ceremony to propitiate the god of the sea. An army of about 3000 masons, smiths and other artisans were soon at work upon the erection of the new sea-fort. It is said that 200 candies worth of iron alone were required for the tools and instruments of the masons and other mechanics. The foundations were made of hewn blocks of stones soldered with lead. The naval squadron hovered round while the building operations were proceeding, ready for battle in case of armed opposition, while on the shore a force of 5000 Mavalis was mounted on guard against a surprise attack on the landward side. Fortunately for Shivaji, the work proceeded without let or hindrance. The Portuguese were already bound by an alliance and dared not break it. The Sawants had been reduced to allegiance under Shivaji and were not likely to embark upon a new war. The sole source of anxiety was the confederate naval forces of the Moguls and the Janjira chiefs. But happily for the present hostilities with these were suspended.

In the beginning of these building operations, Shivaji superintended the work in person, and it is even said that he laboured with his own hands in the erection of the fort. He had at any rate formed the entire plan and devised his own methods for laying deep the foundations under the sea-water. When the foundations were completed and only the super-structure remained to be constructed, Shivaji returned to Raigad, having entrusted the duty of supervision to Govind Vishwanath Prabhu Subhedar. The entire fortification took three years for its completion. When all was ready Shivaji came down from the fort of Panhala to Malwan travelling by the ghat of Bavada, with great pomp and ceremony, for the express purpose of inspecting the newly constructed fortifications. Shivaji made his state entry into the fort under religious auspices, the ceremony being accompanied among other things by a salvo of guns from every ship in the harbour, the customary feasting of

Brahmans and the distribution of sweets. In accordance with Hindu custom the master masons and architects were presented with robes of honour and armlets of gold. A corps of skilled artisans kindly lent by the Portuguese government at Goa were thanked for their zeal and the captain of the band honoured with suitable rewards for his services. Govind Vishwanath Prabhu's services were acknowledged with similar presents, with a crest of pearls and an embroidered head-dress, and also a sword, as a mark of special distinction.

The new fort was christened Sindhudurg, or the Fortress of the Sea. It is traditionally estimated that its erection and equipment cost a crore of pagodas. A garrison of three thousand Mavalis under the command of a Mamlatdar was stationed in it the bravest of the Mavalis being given dignities of naik (commander) sirnaik (chief commander) or *tatsirnobat* (chief commander of the ramparts). A parapet called the *Darya Buruz* (Sea Tower) was raised to keep the waves from dashing on the battlements.³ It is said that similar sea-forts were erected by Shivaji in other places, such as Anjenweli, Ratnagiri, Padmadurg, Sarjakote, Gahandurg, Khakeri and Rajkote.

Unfortunately the object for which this fort had been erected at such a cost was scarcely realized. The Abyssinians continued to make depredations upon Shivaji's possessions in the immediate vicinity of the island of Bombay, and it seemed they were abetted in these invasions by the authorities of the British East India Company upon that island. Upon this Shivaji planned the conquest of the rocky islets of Kkanderi and Underi⁴ opposite Bombay and indeed only twelve miles from that town. These events will be described in their proper place, in Chapter 28.

3. Certain foot-prints discovered in the fort of Sindhudurg were devoutly believed to be those of Shivaji and a dome was raised thereupon by the pious residents of the place. An image of Shivaji was installed and became the object of certain acts of daily worship. The Kolhapur durbar has granted a fixed allowance for this 'puja'.

4. Kennerey and Hennerey in Grant Duff.

Foot-Note to page 161:- The term *Darya Sagar* of the bakhars is a corrupt form of *Daryasarang*, meaning Captain of the Sea, from the Persian *Darya* meaning the sea, a word also current in the Indian vernaculars. Similarly the name *Mainaik*, which is fairly common among *Bhandaris* and fisher folk of the Bombay coast, is a hybrid term from the Arabic *Maa*, water and the Sanskrit *nayak*, leader and means water-lord or leader. Sabhasad speaks of the *Daryasarang* as a Mahomedan and of *Mainaik* as a Hindu of the *Bhandari* caste. Prof. Sarkar quotes a Bombay letter of 21st November 1670 to show that the *praenomen* of the *Darya Sarang* was "*Ventgee*," and seems to infer that he was a Hindu. But as a matter of fact: Mahomedans of the Bombay and Guzrat coasts often have their names with the honorific suffix "ji" or "gee," which can scarcely be distinguished from Hindu names.

Shivaji's untimely death prevented him from maturing his far-seeing plans for the establishment of a naval ascendancy strong enough to strike terror into the hearts of all the sea-faring nations whose ships were chiefly to be seen in the crowded ports on the coast of Western India. Chief among these were the Abyssinians, the Portuguese, the English, the Moguls and the Moors. His desire now evidently was to capture the commerce of these nations, or to bring it entirely under his control. His far-reaching aims were not understood after his death by any of his successors, and the empire of the sea and the naval instrument for wielding it were both given up, uncontested and unchallenged.
