Chapter 3: The Rise of the Marathas

Questions — Questions and Activities

Q1 Analyse how geography (particularly mountains and coastlines) guided Maratha military strategy and state formation.

SOLUTION

The Deccan plateau's mountainous terrain was central to Maratha military strategy from the very beginning. Chhatrapati Shivaji launched his campaigns by capturing forts in the Pune region, using them to control key routes and shelter his army. The mountains enabled guerrilla warfare — small, mobile groups using speed, surprise, and knowledge of terrain to defeat much larger armies. For example, Shivaji lured Afzal Khan into a meeting at the foot of Pratapgad fort amid thick forests, turning the terrain into a strategic advantage.

Forts were described as 'the core of the state' by Ramachandrapant Amatya, and indeed it was the network of well-defended mountain forts that allowed the Marathas to survive decades of Mughal siege. When Aurangzeb invaded and even captured Raigad, the Marathas simply continued their resistance from other fortresses scattered across the Deccan.

The coastline was equally decisive. As Shivaji's kingdom expanded to India's west coast, he founded a navy in 1657 to secure coastal resources and trade routes. This was revolutionary — neither the Bijapur Sultanate nor the Mughal Empire maintained a full-time naval force. The navy allowed the Marathas to challenge European powers who controlled sea trade and forced ships to buy naval passes (cartaz). Under Kanhoji Angre in the 18th century, clever use of coastal geography brought the Marathas naval victories despite having less advanced ships than the Europeans.

In summary, mountains gave the Marathas a base for guerrilla warfare and fort-centred defence, while the coastline gave them maritime reach and economic access — together shaping a distinctive strategy that enabled a small Deccan power to become the largest pan-Indian empire before the British.

Answer: The Deccan mountains enabled fort-based guerrilla warfare; the coastline drove Shivaji to found a navy. Together, terrain and coast made the Marathas masters of both land defence and sea trade.

Q2 The chapter states, "The British took India from the Marathas more than from the Mughals or any other power." What do you think this means? What evidence from the chapter supports this idea?

SOLUTION

The statement means that by the late 18th century, the Marathas — not the Mughals or any other Indian power — were the dominant political force across most of India, and it was primarily their power that the British had to break in order to gain control of the subcontinent.

The chapter offers several pieces of evidence for this claim. First, the Marathas had already ended effective Mughal power in north India: under Mahadji Shinde they recaptured Delhi in 1771, which remained under Maratha control for three decades. Second, in their northward expansion the Marathas had briefly controlled Lahore, Attock, and even Peshawar. Third, the British themselves recognised the Marathas as their 'chief rivals' in the latter half of the 18th century, fighting three Anglo-Maratha Wars between 1775 and 1818 before finally ending Maratha power. No other Indian power required three major wars to subdue.

Additionally, the 'Don't Miss Out' box mentions Nana Phadnavis organising the first pan-Indian anti-British alliance, uniting even old adversaries like Hyder Ali of Mysore and the Nizam of Hyderabad — a sign that the Marathas were the principal organisers of Indian resistance to British expansion.

Answer: By the late 18th century the Marathas controlled most of India, including Delhi; the British had to fight three Anglo-Maratha Wars (1775-1818) to end their power — more than any campaign needed against the Mughals.

Q3 Compare how Chhatrapati Shivaji and later Marathas treated religious places and people of different faiths. What evidence from the chapter shows their approach to religious diversity?

SOLUTION

Chhatrapati Shivaji was described as a devout Hindu who respected other religions while upholding his own. He rebuilt desecrated temples and promoted Sanskrit and Marathi literature and traditional arts. His seal carried a Sanskrit inscription, a deliberate departure from the Persian seals common at the time. When he sacked Surat, he was careful not to attack religious places and even spared the house of Mohandas Parekh, a charitable man — showing restraint towards individuals of other communities. While in the South, he forbade the

Dutch from trading slaves, demonstrating concern for all his subjects regardless of background.

The later Marathas broadly continued this tradition. The Bhonsles of Nagpur revived the worship of Jagannath at Puri, which had been interrupted during Mughal rule. Ahilyabai Holkar, the Holkar dynasty ruler, built and restored hundreds of temples, ghats, wells, and roads across India — from Kedarnath in the north to Rameswaram in the south. Most notably, she rebuilt the Kashi Vishwanath temple in Varanasi destroyed by Aurangzeb, and the Somnath temple in Gujarat destroyed by Mahmud of Ghazni.

The Thanjavur Marathas provide another example: they fostered a syncretic culture where Tamil, Telugu, and Marathi traditions interacted freely. Serfoji II established a medical centre using both Indian and Western medicine, showing openness to multiple knowledge traditions.

However, the chapter also notes a contrast: the Marathas' ten-year campaign in Bengal inflicted cruelty and devastation on common people, showing that as the empire decentralised, regional chiefs did not always uphold Shivaji's original values of restraint.

Answer: Shivaji respected religious diversity — he spared religious sites at Surat and forbade slave trade. Later Marathas revived Hindu worship at Puri, rebuilt Kashi Vishwanath and Somnath temples, and fostered syncretic cultures at Thanjavur, though the Bengal campaign showed lapses in these values.

Q4 The chapter describes how forts were 'the core of the state' for Marathas. Why were they so important? How did they help the Marathas survive against larger enemies?

SOLUTION

Forts were the foundation of Maratha military and political power for several reasons. Strategically, they controlled important routes through the Deccan's mountainous terrain, allowing the Marathas to monitor and restrict enemy movement. They also provided shelter to Maratha armies engaged in guerrilla warfare — small forces could withdraw to the forts after a raid, denying larger armies a decisive battle.

Ramachandrapant Amatya, Chhatrapati Shivaji's finance minister, explained in his Adnyapatra: 'Forts are the core of the state. In their absence, the land gets devastated in the face of an invasion. Therefore, all the former kings secured the

country by building forts.' He specifically credited forts with enabling the Maratha state to survive Aurangzeb's decades-long onslaught, during which even Bijapur and Golconda fell.

In practice, this proved accurate. When Aurangzeb invaded the Deccan and captured Raigad and executed Sambhaji, the Marathas did not collapse — they simply regrouped and continued their resistance from other forts. Chhatrapati Shivaji himself had begun his rise by capturing neglected and unoccupied forts in the Pune region and strengthening their defences. The Marathas controlled a considerable number of forts spread across the Deccan, making it impossible for any enemy to knock them out in a single campaign.

Additionally, coastal forts like Sindhudurg extended this network to the sea, giving the Maratha navy secure bases and making their maritime power equally hard to dislodge.

Answer: Forts controlled key mountain routes, sheltered guerrilla forces, and made the Maratha state nearly impossible to destroy in one campaign; even Aurangzeb's decades-long invasion failed to subdue the Marathas precisely because of the fort network.