

India's Missed Opportunity: Bajirao and Chhatrapati

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The film Bajirao Mastani has brought attention to a critical phase in Indian history. The record — not so much the film script — is relatively clear and raises important issues that determined the course of governance in India in the 18th century and beyond.

First, the scene. The Mughal Empire has been tottering since Shah Jahan's time, for it had no vision for the country and people and was bankrupt. Shah Jahan and his son Aurangzeb complained they were not able to collect even one-tenth of the agricultural taxes they levied (50 per cent of the crop) on the population. As a result, they were unable to pay their officials. This meant that the Mughal elite had to be endlessly turned over as one set of officials and generals were given the jagirs-in-lieu-of-salaries of their predecessors (whose wealth was seized by the Emperor). The elite became carnivorous, rapacious and rebellious accelerating the dissolution of the state. Yet, the Mughal Empire had enough strength and need to indulge in a land grab and loot policy.

Second, the Deccan Sultanates were enormously rich because they had a tolerable taxation system which encouraged local agriculture and commerce. The Sultans ruled a Hindu population through a combined Hindu rural and urban elite and a Muslim armed force. This had established a general 'peace' between the Muslim rulers and the Hindu population. Usually, the Sultans paid annual tribute to Delhi. Aurangzeb's expeditions as Viceroy of the Deccan to the Sultanates were intended to collect delayed tribute under threat. Shah Jahan tried to safeguard the Deccan Sultanates from being annexed, much against Aurangzeb's wishes. However, Aurangzeb managed, in the name of financial need, to persuade Shah Jahan to annex Ahmednagar (1636). That left Bijapur (1686) and Golconda (1687) — which were annexed after Aurangzeb became Emperor in 1658.

Third, fast forward. The Mughal Emperors that succeeded Aurangzeb after his death in 1707 were puppets who needed Maratha support. On March 3, 1719, the Emperor granted to the Marathas the right to collect chauth (25 per cent of the state revenues) from the six Mughal Deccan subahs in addition to the sardeshmukhi rights (another 10 per cent). Maratha Swarajya (Kingdom) was acknowledged — the Marathas were no longer "black-faced bandits and rebels".

The recent Maratha acquisition of parts of Mughal territories in Khandesh, Berar, Gondwana, Hyderabad and the Karnatik were conceded to the Maratha kingdom. The Maratha Chhatrapati's mother, wife and brother and all other hostages in Delhi were returned to Poona. For all these, the Mughal court got in return nominal allegiance, the payment of 10 lakhs of rupees a year and 15,000 Maratha soldiers to protect the Emperor. The vassals had become protectors!

Fourth, the grand phase of the Mahratha Swarajya began with the accession of Bajirao to the position of Peshwa (the hereditary Brahmin minister of the Mahratha Chhatrapati). Bajirao, who succeeded his father Peshwa Balaji Vishwanth, was 19 years old but combined youthful energy, sagacity and strategic vision. He beat the Nizam-ul-Mulk, then Subedhar of the Mughal Deccan into submission and collected chauth and sardeshmukhi.

Fifth, Nadir Shah, the Persian Emperor, invaded India and sacked Delhi in 1739 and departed after massacring lakhs of innocent people, with an estimated loot worth 100 crores rupees, the Peacock throne and the Kohinoor diamond apart from tens of thousands of slave artisans and others. The Mughal myth was destroyed forever. The Maratha tribute was now a pension on which the Emperor's household depended.

Sixth, enter Mastani, first mentioned in 1730 in a description of the wedding of Bajirao's son, Nana Sahib. Bajirao was 30 and at the height of his power. He built the grand Shanivar Palace in Poona and added a wing named after Mastani. In 1734, they had a son, Shamsheer Bahadur. Mastani was herself a product of a Hindu-Muslim alliance. The Takikh-i-Muhammadshahi described her as "a Kanchani (dancing girl) skilled in riding and handling the sword and spear. She always accompanies Bajirao in his campaigns and rode stirrup-to-stirrup with him". Bajirao had begun to eat meat and drink wine. Poona Brahmin society was outraged; blamed Mastani's influence and refused to carry out the thread ceremony and wedding rites of Bajirao's two sons while he was present.

Seventh, the idea of eliminating Mastani was floated but instead, while Bajirao was away from Poona, Mastani was abducted and placed under confinement in 1739. The Chhatrapati objected vigorously to both her confinement and idea of her murder. He was of the view that Mastani was not to blame and the matter would be resolved only if Bajirao wished it. He would not tolerate any offense given to Bajirao and instructed that he should be "kept entirely pleased".

Such was Bajirao's importance! It was clear that Bajirao was dismayed and had lost all interest in official work. It was even mooted that sending Mastani to him was now the need of the Swarajya. Seventh, the end. Mastani was not released, Bajirao did not return to Poona even for his two sons' ceremonies and died at the age of 40 on April 28, 1740 — of a broken heart. Mastani on hearing the news also died — by suicide or of shock. She was buried in her jagir of Pabal outside Poona. By all accounts, she was a charming and harmless lady.

Eighth, the most important part of the Bajirao story is the refusal of the Chhatrapati to assume Imperial status in Delhi when he could have easily done so after Bajirao's splendid efforts. His policy line is stated baldly in 1739:

"God has helped Mohammad Shah regain the Imperial throne which he had lost and now that Nadir Shah has gone, the question arises what attitude the Marathas should adopt toward the Mughal Emperor."

In this respect, His Highness the Maharaja Chhatrapati wishes to impress upon you the following line of policy, viz, it should be our duty to resuscitate the falling Mughal Empire; that the Chhatrapati, as you are already aware, does not aspire to the Imperial position for himself; he considers it a higher merit to renovate an old dilapidated edifice than to build a new one. If we attempt the other course, it would involve us in enmity with all our neighbours, with the consequence that we should be exposed to unnecessary dangers and court a crop of trouble all round. Hence the wisest course for us under the circumstances would be to wholeheartedly support the present regime; secure only the administrative management for ourselves as the Amir-ul-Umra (Prime Minister) of the State: in that capacity we should collect the revenues of the country, out of which we should recover our expenses for our troops and pay the balance to the Imperial treasury. This is the general policy I have been asked by His Highness to impress on you for your guidance.”

We are not told what Bajirao thought of this policy of the Chhatrapati. Maybe if Bajirao had not died so early of a broken heart, matters would have been different for the Marathas and India. Empires have seen women close to the powerful play an active and critical role — Mastani was an innocent bystander, but one whose fate made, or unmade, history. With this policy, the most powerful of Hindu rulers abandoned the responsibility for governance and elected instead to be tax collectors of a defunct power. The ‘crop of troubles’ then descended regardless on the Marathas as well as on the entire Indian population. The ‘renovation’ of the Mughal Empire proved more costly than a new edifice and, in the end, all of it crumbled as it would have anyway.

Another 60 years of troubles had to pass before Clive and the East India Company, in the same position as Bajirao and the Chhatrapati, elected to handle the matter differently. Pax Britannica took the place of a Pax Marathica. Power, it is said, abhors a vacuum.

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