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9. Shivaji's Hindavi Swaraj: A Melting Pot of Cultural Influences

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Mahatma Gandhi once said, "we must respect other religions, as we respect our own. Mere tolerance is not enough". There have been times when this sentiment could not hold up against hatred and violence however there were other times too when this sentiment flowered against heavy odds. Seventeenth century Maratha region was one such period in the history of this great nation.

In 1630 when the Maratha noblewoman Jijabai brought forth the second of her two sons, little did she imagine that the boy would grow up to shatter forever the might of the Mughal empire. But the Deccan into which Shivaji arrived was a fascinating place. Until four years before his birth, for instance, the hero of the plateau was a Muslim warrior called Malik Ambar, whose career began in slavery in Africa, and culminated at the height of power and glory here in India. The local Sultan was the Nizam Shah of Ahmadnagar, whose ancestors were Bahmanis, but whose line welcomed brides of both African and Persian extraction. Shivaji's own grandfather, Maloji, was closely affiliated with both Malik Ambar and the Nizam Shahi dynasty, while his maternal family lent their men and resources to the imperial Mughals of Agra. The horizon was one of unending military drama, and when Shivaji was still a child, the last of the Nizam Shahs was incarcerated in a Mughal fortress, his ancestral dominions swallowed in bits and pieces by Emperor Shahjahan and his forces.

The Deccan was once home to great dynasties such as the Yadavas who fell before Alauddin Khilji in the fourteenth century, making way for what later became the Bahmani Sultanate. These early military encounters were times of massive cultural disruption, though soon enough the new kings settled down and reached an accommodation with subjects of the old. The Bahmanis and their heirs in Maharashtra, the Nizam Shahs, connected the Deccan to Islamic networks of international commerce, establishing also in the region a Persianised court culture. They married Maratha women, patronised the Marathi language, and were nourished by local traditions - there could be no other way, for the Muslim aristocracy in the urban centres was

handicapped without the cooperation of those who dominated the vast and diverse countryside. And so, wisely, they joined hands with older leaders of the land, and together birthed something new, enduring for centuries in splendour till the ambitions of a northern emperor reduced them to another tragic chapter.

But the Marathas too developed their identity in this age of Muslim power, embracing the best of Indo-Islamic tradition. Shivaji's father and uncle – Shahaji and Sharifji – were both, for instance, named after a Muslim saint called Shah Sharif. If one travels to Ellora, the ancestral seat of the Bhonsle clan, the *samadhis* of Shivaji's grandfather and others so resemble Islamic mausoleums that they have been mistaken for "tombs" like those of the Nizam Shahs and the legendary Malik Ambar.

The African general, in fact, when he established the city that became Aurangabad, even named its various quarters after Maratha commanders, paying homage to their loyalty. In costume, cuisine, and vocabulary too, the Sultans left their imprint, and many were the Maratha families that traced their glory to the service of these Muslim sovereigns. Together they made history – when in the previous century the Deccan's Sultans destroyed Vijayanagar, for example, fighting for the Muslim princes were thousands of Maratha warriors. In matters of faith also, meanwhile, there was conversation. Contemporaneous with the saint Tukaram was Muntoji, a scion of the Bahmani dynasty who equated the *bismillah* with the invocation of Rama, while Eknath featured in his works not only Brahmins and untouchables, but also Muslims and Africans.

Shivaji, however, was a man who designed a new conception of power. Where his father was acclaimed by a Sultan as 'the abode of intrepidity and grandeur', 'the pillar of the mighty state', and even 'my son', Shivaji saw in the decline of regional Muslim power an opportunity to consecrate a whole new order. Many were the Marathas who saw the choice as one between preserving regional Muslim potentates, or accepting the Mughal embrace. Shivaji, however, desired something different altogether, one in which Persian and Islamic influences were consciously discarded to celebrate a 'Maharashtra Dharma'. When once a Maratha grandee declined Shivaji's invitation to join forces, emphasising his loyalty to a Muslim superior, Shivaji reminded him that his course was not one of disloyalty – instead it was of a higher loyalty to their local deity in whose name they ought to create a 'Hindavi' kingdom. No longer was he

interested in accepting the supremacy of Persianised padshahs – not when he could become a Maratha padshah, and establish a kingdom of his own.

To be clear, this was not communalism where large numbers of people woke overnight to the realisation that they constituted “the Hindus”, seizing arms to destroy a blanket category called “the Muslims”. Shivaji’s work was, however, the crystallisation of a new ideology among the political elite of the land. Even as he employed Muslims and supported qazis to dispense justice, Shivaji actively searched for a new form of political expression rooted in Sanskritic tradition.

Genealogical claims linked him with the Rajputs in the north, and by the end of his life, Shivaji was writing letters not in Persian – the language of diplomacy at the time – but in Sanskrit. As the *Rajyavyavaharakosa* (an official dictionary) he commissioned declares, ‘overvalued Yavana [foreign] words’ were replaced with ‘educated speech’.

He had nothing against Muslims as a people, but he jettisoned older systems built on Islamic ideals and sought instead another on terms inspired by Indian high-tradition. While he allied with Sultans like the Qutb Shah of Golconda (whose ministers were Brahmins); when he challenged fellow Hindu Marathas (whose loyalties lay with Sultans); and even as he himself came, on one occasion, close to being absorbed into the Mughal court, Shivaji was creating a fresh self-image which the chronicle *Sabhasad bakhar* describes as *navi paddhati* or the new course. It was by no stretch nationalism defined in communal terms – it was very much a feudal order, derived, however, from Hindu roots.

The *Sivabharata*, a grand epic eulogizing the deeds of Shivaji, was composed in the Maratha king’s own lifetime, giving on the one hand a vision of his political philosophy, while also acknowledging long-standing links between Islamic and Hindu interests in actual transactions.

Shivaji was, according to his court poet, an incarnation of Vishnu, who ‘crushes unruly Muslims’. He protected Brahmins and cows, and ‘descended the earth to strike’ enemy Sultans. Islamic rule was a wicked force, manifest on earth ‘disguised as barbarians’ to conquer and command. ‘Foreign religions (mlechcha dharma)’ grew, complains the *Sivabharata*, and there was ‘great fear’ among the righteous and the just. ‘All these clans of Muslims are incarnations of demons,’ we read at one point, ‘risen up to flood the earth with their own religion.’ Shivaji, then,

is presented as the restorer of a classical idea of balance, the deliverer of a Sanskritic notion of justice.

But the heady picture here is a formal aspiration – in reality, even the Sivabharata recognises a more complex cultural universe. Like the Hindu god Karthikeya who was protected by the gods when he battled an asura, we have the poem present Malik Ambar, shielded by Shivaji's father and other lords in his war against the Mughals – Ambar, an African Muslim 'as brave as the sun', is likened to a Hindu god, while the mighty enemy to the north is cast as a demon. When Shivaji leaves the Nizam Shah's ranks, he is 'nostalgic' about their shared, intertwined past: as he accepts service with the Adil Shah of Bijapur, another of the Deccan's Sultans, that kingdom is likened to the land of 'Lord Rama himself'. The Nizam Shah, whose associate Shivaji's grandfather was is described as a dharmatma, to whom barbs against 'Turks' do not apply. And when Afzal Khan is despatched to destroy Shivaji, with him march Marathas – Jadhav, Bhonsle, Nalk, Ghorpude and more – while Shivaji, we know, held the loyalty of men like Siddi Ibrahim.

In theory, then, the Sivabharata visualised a 'Hindavi' kingdom built on a rejection of Islamic kingship, but even Shivaji's court poet could not ignore the reality of Muslim-Maratha associations in this turbulent period. There was ideology that was different from its predecessors', and then there was mixed reality – each fed off the other, and neither was absolute in its influence.

The Sivabharata, however, also had another significant role to play, one in which an emphasis on Sanskritic tradition was integral. Completed in time for the coronation ceremony that saw Shivaji transformed from warlord into consecrated king, a poem like this was essential to cementing his legitimacy as a sovereign. It was not, in itself, original – the emperors of Vijayanagar had applied the word 'Hindu' to define their self-image, even as, without irony, they did battle with other Hindu kings and employed Muslims by the thousands. A Telugu text, similarly, articulated before Shivaji a 'Hindu' ideology of statehood and kingship, comparing some Muslim kings with the devil while treating, ironically, the Mughals as blessed by the gods – Islamic texts too exaggerated themes such as 'the destruction of infidels', when reality was often vastly different.

A Melting Pot : Black and white were not the colours through which these voices perceived their world – there was an elite visualization of 'Turks' and there was another of

Hindus, but boundaries between the two were not entirely clear. Indeed, in a Sivabharata canto, among the lands Shivaji promises to conquer are not only those of 'evil Turks' but also the rulers of Madras and Kandahar; those in Kashmir and Kerala – and many other Hindu principalities who too, like Muslims, did not meet the standards of his Hindavi vision.

Shivaji, then, was a challenge to the establishment of his day, an establishment defined in terms that were Persianised and Islamic. And his was a challenge asserted in a consciously Hindu fashion. Was he creating a nationalist 'Hindu State' as his Hindavi kingdom is today sometimes defined, or was his world entirely syncretic, a melting pot of cultural influences?

The answer lies somewhere in the middle – where culture and the lives of the people were an ocean of shared experience, the politics of the elite could define itself in language that sought to establish competing narratives. Energised by both, the eclectic traditions of his land, and the righteous force of ideology, Shivaji established his Maratha swaraj.

The Deccan where he was born had seen Hindu princes absorb Muslim influence, and Muslim kings worship Hindu gods; it had seen Brahmins become Sultans, and a Muslim seek Brahminhood. Now, however, it opened a new chapter in the history of India, one in which this land became the scene of contested power, destined to go down also as the graveyard of the Mughals and their formidable empire. And the man who stood at the cusp of this great transformation was Shivaji the Maratha. Vishnu-incarnate in Sanskrit poetry, pragmatic warrior-king in reality.

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