



Research Paper

Relation between Marathas and the Siddis of Janjira in the 17th century

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ABSTRACT

The early efforts to secure the freedom of the seas along the coastal extent of his Swarajya were done by Shivaji himself. As a part of his expansion policy, he was firm to spread his sway over the Konkan and enhance its resources. The need for building a navy for commercial as well as for the defense of coastal possessions became important only when he occupied the districts of Kalyan- Bhiwandi and made Konkan the centre of his power. The capture of the above two regions not only gave him a firm foothold in the Konkan coast but also provided him the needed inspiration to realize his ambition. The presence of the different naval powers like Siddis, Portuguese, English and the Marathas on the coast resulted in struggle and contest among them in order to dominate the waters of the Western coast. Of these the Siddis were the most formidable at this period and they had gained considerable accession at sea. The present paper is an attempt to explore the naval relationship between the Marathas and the Siddis during the 17th century.

KEY WORDS: Marathas, Shivaji, Siddis, Janjira, Konkan, Navy

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I. INTRODUCTION

The first naval powers with whom Shivaji came into skirmish on the Konkan coast were the Siddis of Janjira. Before analyzing the Maratha-Siddi relationship, it is important to know who these Siddis were and how did they established their authority on the said coast. Basically, they were an Islamised community hailing from Africa who shipped to India formerly as slaves during different periods of history. They were also known as Habshis since Abyssinia¹ was called in Arabic 'Al Habish'.² According to the scholars and reports, the Siddis were the descendants of Africans who were brought to India largely by the Arabs, Portuguese and the Dutch. They were enslaved and were taken to western Indian ports such as Bombay, Cutch, Kattiawar, Goa, Diu and Daman.³ Though they were bought as slaves or mercenary warriors, they rose to the rank of nobility and also held high position during the Bahmani kingdom and its successor states. Due to their virtuous familiarity with the sea they emerged as prominent and successful naval guardians of the north-western coast of India. They maintained a strong navy comprising of several warships like ghurabs and gallivats. Their power and influence was such that various ruling houses hired them at their services.⁴ In 1616 they became an important ally of Nizamshahi government who installed them as the captain of Janjira along with a jagir comprising of the localities of Danda-Rajapuri and adjoining areas. This was mainly done in acknowledgement of the amenities of the naval contingent maintained by them for the defence of commerce on the Western Coast and the transportation of Mecca pilgrims. The region Danda-Rajapuri was the control centre of the Siddi's naval contingent, comprising a fleet of forty to fifty ships with which they used to plunder the territories, acquired maintenance and preserved their lands.⁵

The island fortress of Janjira was the stronghold of the Siddis, located between Kolaba and Ratnagiri in Western Maharashtra and is about 70 kilometers south of Bombay. The word 'Janjira' is the Marathi corruption of the Arabic word 'Jazirah' meaning an island. The island was often called *Habsan*, a derivative of Persian and Urdu word for Habshi known as Abyssinian.⁶ This Island was the political base of the Siddis from where they extended their power and authority to other parts of the Indian Ocean. It was this fortress of Janjira which remained an eyesore and nuisance to the Marathas throughout the 17th and the 18th centuries.⁷ Besides Janjira, they also operated their piratical or mercantile ventures from Daman, which became another focal point of their

work. They were more or less independent, as they first declared themselves to be the naval commanders of the Bijapur Sultan and then later offered loyalty to Aurangzeb.⁸

The latter part of the seventeenth century was a period of instability and political disorder in the island of Janjira.⁹ Both Siddis and the Marathas continuously fought with each other in order to acquire the island. The Siddis created constant trouble for Shivaji, since they constantly plundered the Maratha territory, desecrated Hindu temples, and kidnapped their women. According to Ramchandra Amatya¹⁰, “further with a view to bring under his control this kingdom by his valour, he (Shivaji) thought of subduing first the adjoining enemy who was like a disease in the stomach. The Shyamalas (Siddis) were truly the cause of harm to the state. On account of the Shyamalas the success of chief enemy was at first great, nay during the adverse times the Shyamalas conquered several territories and forts. At first the late revered King checked the Shyamalas. On that occasion they were supported by the Tamras (Mughals) and therefore the Shyamalas remained as a power.¹¹ By comparing them to a disease, it can be seen that how troublesome the Siddis were to the Marathas.

The rivalry between the Marathas and the Europeans at sea led the Siddis took advantage of the situation to make their presence and increase their dominance in the region. Also their religious persecution was a main part of their tyranny which compelled Shivaji and later the Peshwas to rebuke them.¹² The conflict between the Siddis and Marathas existed before Shivaji began his conquest for the island fort of Janjira. After conquering regions like Kalyan, Bhiwandi, Mahuli, Panvel etc, Shivaji came into direct contact with the Siddis.¹³ As soon as he conquered Kalyan- Bhiwandi he commenced the work of constructing his naval fleet. He very well understood that only by controlling the waters of western coast and establishing his own navy, he can compete with his adversaries and can establish sovereignty over the sea. The primary motive in doing so was to resist his long term enemies the Siddi of Janjira who were like “rats in the house”.¹⁴ As per a Portuguese document, Shivaji built his first 20 armed ships with the help of artisans of Portuguese origin and stated that these ships were built to meet the danger posed by the Siddi of Janjira.¹⁵ The English Factory Records too gives information that Shivaji required the help of the English to capture the coastal stretch around Danda-Rajapuri from the Siddis. Initially the Marathas under the leadership of Raghunath Ballal Korde and Vyankoji Datto did manage to devastate and conquer the land of the Siddis. As a result of which the Siddis had to plead for peace and lost Danda Rajapuri in the bargain. Though, they wrested the region back from the Marathas early in 1671 and heightened the fortifications of the area in such a manner that all the approach routes to Danda-Rajapuri were brought under the range of Siddi guns and canons.

In the contest between Siddis and Shivaji, the former always managed to have allies and sympathizers like the Mughals, the English and the Portuguese on their side. Though these Europeans remained neutral towards the Marathas as well but after realizing their position and influence they secretly helped the Siddis of Janjira and some other feudal lords, in order to check the activities of Shivaji at sea. For instance, in 1667 Shivaji applied armed pressure on the Siddi in order to push the stronghold of Janjira on the brink of starvation. His strategy was to leave the Siddis with no other option but to submit Janjira to him. Because of such pressure, the Siddis requested the Portuguese to help them out in this difficult situation. It was believed that Shivaji could have succeeded in breaking the resistance of the Siddi but the timely military assistance of the Portuguese prevented the Siddis from falling down to the Maratha pressure. Because of the repeated pressure by the Marathas, the Siddis eventually became exhausted and their Admiral Fateh Khan decided to come to terms with Shivaji. As per Mughal chronicler Khafi Khan, their admiral almost decided to handover Janjira to Shivaji and settle down with a rich *Jagir* as compensation. Somehow, three of his lieutenants got to know about the plan and thus prevented Janjira from going into the hands of the Marathas. Seeing the opportunity, the Mughal intervened in order to keep an eye on the actions of Shivaji.¹⁶ Later, the Siddis changed their obeisance to the Mughals who in return gave them royal admiralty and a *mansab* of 900 in addition to a *jagir* fetching Rs. 3 lakhs per year. After this, the Siddis relished unlimited favours and support from the Mughals. For instance, because of the pressure from the Mughals at Surat, the English at Bombay allowed the Siddis to winter their ships and also offered complete safety from the Maratha vessels or any kind of sabotage by the Marathas. This shows that the Siddis were discouraged by the absolute control of the coast-line by Shivaji and therefore were dependent on the English for the protection of their fleet in the Konkan creeks. Here I would like to mention that the authorities at Bombay at times were hesitant to permit the Siddis to use their port because they did not want to upset the Marathas by openly siding with their enemies. But then when the Siddi joined the Mughal service it became difficult for the Company officials to keep the Siddi demands under check. The enmity between the two became more intensified mainly because of the direct participation of the Mughals. As per a letter written in December, 1672 “King Aurangzeb having sent a fleet of 30 sails of small frigates from Surat to assist the Siddi of Danda Rajapuri against him (Shivaji) by sea, which fleet hath done him much mischief, burning and destroying also about 50 of his vessels”.¹⁷ Even Khafi Khan mentions that “the (Mughal) fleet sailed down (from Surat, under the command of Khan Jehan) to Janjira. One night it attacked the vessels of Shivaji and captured them with two hundred men. One hundred Maratha sailors were killed by tying stones to their feet and throwing them into the sea. From that day the animosity between the Siddi and Shivaji grew more violent”.¹⁸

It is already been mentioned earlier that the Siddis were successful in gaining back Danda Rajapuri from the Marathas despite their continuous resistance. The loss of Danda-Rajapuri was a big impediment for Shivaji who had intends to dominate the Konkan coast and defeat the Siddis. It was the repeated failed attempts to take either Danda-Rajapuri or Janjira which led Shivaji to conquer and fortify the isolated island of Khanderi. The location of Khanderi was certainly strategic from the point of view of navy and also this island was abandoned and used only as a source of fuel (wood). Shivaji knew that by possessing this island he could keep an eye over the movement of ships to and from the British port of Bombay. Both the English and the Siddis joined hands in order to resist Shivaji in fortifying Khanderi. Despite of the joint effort, the alliance was unsuccessful because of the strong determination of Shivaji. The Siddi got so scared seeing the success of the Marathas that they seized another small island in the surrounding area called Underi. Unfortunately, Shivaji shortly passed away after the Khanderi-Underi event; otherwise he would have changed the position in favour of the Marathas.

The Marathas under the leadership of Shivaji did try to exercise full power and sovereignty over the Konkan by constructing their own navy. He understood that the Siddis were able to survive and grow only because they had the control of the impregnable fortress of Janjira. After realizing the significance of a strong naval fortress, Shivaji build number of sea forts for the naval bases, shelter and storage¹⁹ during his time to fight mainly with the Siddis of Janjira and also to protect his land and sea from the European powers on the western coast. Sabhasad, too, justifies Shivaji's decision of undertaking the construction of marine forts in the light of his constant pre-occupation against the Siddi of Janjira. Sabhasad writes, "Rajapuri was left (unconquered by Shivaji) in the sea and on that account the name of the Nizamshahi still continued there. As that place had to be conquered, the Raje built forts selecting (for their site) rocks at various places, as these commanded the sea and (these forts) would weaken the sea kings. Realizing this, he fortified some submarine rocks and constructed forts in the sea. Building such sea-forts or Janjiras and uniting ships with forts, the Raje saddled the sea."²⁰

II. CONCLUSION

Thus, it can be said that a kind of complex relationship existed between the Marathas and the Siddis during the 17th century which further got more intensified after Shivaji build his own navy. The main purpose for having their own navy was to destroy the Siddi power. On the land front, Shivaji was nearly successful in expelling the Siddi from the Konkan while on the sea the Maratha navy gave a tough time to the Siddi confining them to their fort at Janjira. Shivaji also decided to have a maritime fortress of his own which would serve as his naval headquarters. For this purpose, a survey was ordered to be made. The shores of Malwan were chosen as they reportedly possessed all the conveniences and requirements of naval strategy. Hence, the massive marine fortress of Sindhudurg on the shores of Malwan was erected. After receiving the royal patronage from the Mughals, the Siddis became more wicked and continued to harass the Maratha ships. They both reacted by plundering each other's territories which led the Siddis to often react by destroying the Konkan coast. Shivaji made vigorous attempts throughout his life to capture the fort of Janjira but to failure.

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