

**CHAPTER - I**

**MAHARASHTRA IN THE BEGINNING**

**OF NINETEENTH CENTURY**

In the year 1818, the British defeated the last Peshwa ruler Bajirao II and thereby destroyed the Maratha power and subsequently they established their rule in Maharashtra. Later they subjugated the remaining parts of India and by the year 1857, they virtually became the masters of Indian Sub-continent. This advent of the British power in India was important not only from the political point of view. The most powerful and enduring effect of the British rule in India is the intellectual development of the people on an entirely new line, and the consequent changes in their political, social, religious and economic outlook.<sup>1</sup> It may be said without much exaggeration, that India passed from medieval to modern age in the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

In 1818, the English took over the reins of the governmental machinery from Bajirao the II.<sup>3</sup> In the beginning of the nineteenth century the political condition of Maharashtra was extremely propitious for its conquest by a well organised, united economically and militarily more advanced, foreign power. Unfortunately, for the Marathas, they lost nearly all of their wise and experienced leaders like Mahadaji Sindhia, Tukoji Holkar, and Nana Phadnis, the man who had kept the Maratha confederacy together for the 30 years, towards the close of the 18th century. Particularly after the death of Nana Phadnis in 1800, the Maratha

confederacy had become a broken reed. After him, there was no Maratha statesman worth the name who could save the Maratha confederacy from the crafty designs of the powerful English. What was worse, the Maratha chiefs were engaged in bitter fratricidal strife, blind to the real danger from the rapidly advancing foreigner. Yeshwant Rao Holkar on one side and Daulat Rao Sindhia and Peshwa Bajirao II on the other side were locked in mortal combat.<sup>4</sup> This miserable and chaotic condition still deteriorated in the regime of the last Peshwa ruler Bajirao II (1796-1818).

The age of Bajirao II, was an age of moral decline. It was an era of rank selfishness, narrow prejudices and colossal cowardice. It is useless to expect patriotic or noble conduct in the cause of their country from those selfish poltroons.<sup>5</sup> Peshwa Bajirao II himself was a man of very mean character and had no hold over his administration. His loose behaviour invited anarchy in Maharashtra.<sup>6</sup> Most of the historians expressed their firm opinion that he was not at all a capable ruler and lacked totally in all those abilities as a ruler. During his regime selfishness began to reign supreme in the Maratha society, luxury began to sap its vital ethical forces, selfish motives had superseded all other nobler instincts like national patriotism and unity, the character and civil and military ability of the leaders had been at its lowest ebb, every man in those degenerate times acted on the principle of "everyone for himself"

with the result that there was none of outstanding capacity to lead the Marathas in the battle field or unite them in a common endeavour against the foreign enemy.

This miserable and chaotic condition of Maharashtra created rather favourable situation for the British, who had by then considerably improved their position in India and who were waiting for an opportunity to interfere in the Maratha affairs and to overwhelm the Maratha confederacy, and they secured it when a clash developed between Peshwa Bajirao II and his Maratha nobles after the death of Nana Phadnis.

Under such precarious condition also Bajirao II showed no wisdom. On the contrary by his vindictive policy he not only lost sympathy of his sardars but also by his system of revenue farming made his subjects long for a change of Government even if it could not be other than that of the foreigners. Peace and stability and security were what the Maharashtra people now longed for, they had enough of wars, plunders, tortures and famines. Naturally, when Bajirao II finally tried to throw off the British tutelage, the Maratha sardars were not inclined to risk their all in a vain combat with the English with such a vacillating man as Bajirao II as their leader. As a result, Bajirao II was defeated by the Britisher in the year 1818 and the English stepped into his shoes as the suzerain of the confederacy and the Maratha Empire which his ancestors had done so much to create came to an inglorious end.<sup>7</sup>

This transfer of power is marked by social awakening among the Maratha people. After this, a generation of thinkers pondered over the plight of their people and tried to guide them in several walks of life.<sup>8</sup> The British rulers and administrators introduced and brought about a series of reforms in Maharashtra. A society which was drowned head-long in medieval ideas about the world was pulled out by the British. In other words, this period witnessed the transition from medieval to the modern age.

In fact, in Maharashtra this was not the first political change. Before the emergence of British power, Maharashtra was ruled by the Mughals and many other foreign aggressive rulers. Especially the Mughals ruled this region for nearly three hundred years. During this period, the Maharashtrian people suffered to a great extent. They experienced a very miserable life at that time. In spite of this, it is interesting to note that apart from a few families or individuals who were directly affected, the middle class or the masses took any serious views of these political upheavals. Their social life remained unchanged. Their social mind was never disturbed. There is no indication that there was any general outcry against the alien rulers as such, far less any idea of organized resistance against them. In brief prior to the establishment of British regime in Maharashtra, nearly for seven hundred years social set-up of Maharashtra remained static and stable. Moreover, seven hundred years of foreign rule had sapped the political

vitality of the Hindus and uprooted whatever national consciousness they ever possessed.<sup>9</sup>

But when the British rule was established in Maharashtra, due to English education and the flow of Western ideas, there emerged many waves of transformation at all levels, in the social life of Maharashtra. Before this a great and wondrous country of ours, was lying prostrate in chains, with a society that had become degenerate and stagnant and her economic wealth impoverished and exploited. On it fell the impact of the west, through the conduit of English education. The result was what has usually been termed as the Indian Renaissance. Perhaps its greatest gift was the growth of rationalism, which is to be equated with a spirit of inquiry and protest against religious and social evils, against blind faith in traditional authorities, dogmas, traditions, beliefs and customs. This tended to secure freedom of thought and mind and hence reform and progress in religious, social and political life.<sup>10</sup>

In this way, after the establishment of British rule in Maharashtra, due to its contact with western culture there emerged the first generation of reformers imbued in western thoughts and ideas. They cherished liberal views and supported the cause of sensible and practical reforms. New literary types, reform of the language, social reconstruction, political aspirations, religious movements and even changes in manners that originated in Maharashtra, speeded up the

the process of transformation, with the establishment of British rule and introduction of western education, a new age in the life of Maharashtra began. This new age is the age of renaissance in Maharashtra. In order to understand the nature and magnitude of the great transformation, it is essential to know the general condition of Maharashtra on the eve of the establishment of British rule.

#### Lack of Unity Among The Marathas :

A number of new noble Maratha families and chiefs emerged in Peshwa regime but there was no cohesion among them, especially in the latter half of the Peshwa regime. They were not loyal and faithful to their central authority, even to their state and society. On the contrary they remained busy in fighting against each other, plundering the territories, accumulating their own wealth and in gaining own prestige and power. Even at the very end of the eighteenth century, when the danger of British domination over India should have been patent to all, there was no cohesion among the Maratha chiefs, who fought with one another and could not take any concerted action against the British, even in the war, waged by them at the beginning of the 19th century, which sealed their fate. Not only this, but even the Rajputs, the Jats, the Shikhs and the Bengalis also maintained supreme indifference towards them. Especially the Bengalis and the Rajputs remembered the horrors of the raids by the Marathas and cherished intense hatred against them. Though the Marathas

in the later part of Peshwa regime, extended the boundaries of their state, still because of lack of unity and feeling of nationality, resulted in weakening the very foundation of Maratha state. So far as the common people were concerned, their vision seldom extended beyond the narrow horizon of their own petty state.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, at this critical period, Peshwa rulers were also not capable enough to control the situation.

It would be hardly any exaggeration to state that at the beginning of the 19th century majority of Maratha chiefs and even the Peshwa ruler made no efforts of uniting together the Maratha people for the protection of their state, when the danger of British domination over the Maratha state and over India should have been patent to all. As they did not possess a common goal and a sense of unity for achieving that goal, they lost their freedom.

#### Society and Social Life :

The social structure of Maharashtra in the beginning of the 19th century was the same as it was prevalent in India as a whole. The general framework of the Hindu society and religion which existed in A.D.1200 did not undergo any radical change during the six hundred years that followed. The Hindus at the beginning of the 19th century exhibited the same fundamental characteristics as in the 13th. A deep-rooted belief in a number of gods and goddesses, universal



practice of image worship, rigid castesystem with its attendant restrictions about touch, food and marriage, child marriage and the strict prohibition of remarriage of widows etc., indicate the rigidity of the society. So far as the common masses were concerned, religion meant only an unending series of rituals and ceremonies, performed in strict accordance with scriptural rules. Religion as a source of moral purity and spiritual force, exercised little influence over a large section of the common people.<sup>12</sup>

In general people used to believe that God has created society and it is unchangable, man cannot introduce any change in the structure of society at any level and if he makes such attempts, it will prove harmful for him. Knowledge although a powerful weapon useful for human progress, was unfortunately neglected totally by the people. On the contrary they developed tendency to adjust with the changing circumstances without any sign of protest or resistance. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the saints and prophets of Maharashtra also preached in the same manner. They believed in the doctrine of non-resistance and quiet resignation to the will of God.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the spirit of resistance was not at all nurtured in the society. On the contrary fatalism became the characteristic of the society. Though during the Maratha period, Chhatrapati Shivaji and other Maratha rulers proved successful in resisting the then Mughal rulers, still our basic social structure remained in fact. So far as the common masses were concerned, upto the

emergence of British regime, they remained under profound influence of blind beliefs, age-old traditions, values, rituals and superstitions which resulted in overall deterioration of the society. Long subjection to alien rule, lack of contact with the progressive forces of the world and a stereotyped system of education leading to knowledge which was based upon blind faith impervious to reason- all these told upon the mental and moral outlook of men and society.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, the Hindu society lacked internal cohesion on account of the numerous castes, which subdivided it. From the social point of view, this division resulted in generating a narrow exclusive spirit which proved fatal to patriotism or nationalism. Unfortunately, attempts were not made to bring all these groups and sub-groups together, and infuse among them sense of oneness. However, in the process of social integration of lower castes with the upper castes, the earliest efforts were made by Mukundraj and Dnyaneshwar who lived in the 12th and 13th centuries. Mukundraj, the oldest Marathi poet and was a Brahmin by caste, through his philosophical writings initiated a movement which aimed at influencing the lower and the middle castes of Hindu society.

Then the most significant figure was Dnyaneshwar, a Brahmin like Mukundraj and who wrote a commentary on the Bhagwatgita in Marathi which is known as the Dnyaneshwari. In expounding the Gita for the common man, he took as his principal theme bhakti or devotion to God and he is therefore, regarded as the founder of the Bhakti-cult. Then this Bhakti movement

which was initiated by the high caste Brahmins, soon passed into the hands of the plebeians like Namadeva the Shimpi, or Tukaram the Vani, who expressed religious and philosophical ideas through poetry which appealed to the emotions rather than the intellect, and which exercised great influence over the common people of Maharashtra. The Bhakti Saints tried to undermine the obstacles which stood between high and low castes and prevented the latter from gaining access to spiritual salvation. But although they advocated the novel doctrine of the spiritual equality of different castes, the Bhakti saints desisted from attacking secular distinctions of caste, partly in the interests of social harmony and partly out of indifference to the material world. In short by proclaiming the spiritual equality of high and low castes, the saints of Maharashtra were able to spread the values of Hinduism among the plebeian castes, and as a result of their proselytisation, different castes and classes were drawn close together in the pursuit of common spiritual and secular objectives.<sup>15</sup>

In this way, all these saints preached the principle of equality in the field of bhakti. They taught that God does not consider a man's caste and all worshippers are equally dear to him and yet they did practically nothing to enforce like the Protestants, this far-reaching principle. They were of a peacific turn of mind and did not love controversy or contest with anybody. In personal inward religion these saints were democratic enough but they were too much of the "mild

Hindu' to fight the battles of religious rights and privileges. They only preached good principles, pleaded pathetically for the outcastes but never "protested" like the European Reformers. They did not condemn sati, they shared the feeling of their countrymen about cows, Vedas, Puranas and personally they revered Brahmins. They accepted caste as an institution of the Hindu world and looked upon it as an inevitable part of the Hindu social organization. This movement was incapable, in its very nature, of raising man's capacity to think or to act in a real sense. Their noble protest against caste remained forever academic. Therefore, one has to be aware of the fact that though in 17th century Maratha Swarajya was established under the spirited leadership of the Great Shivaji, still there was no basic change in the social structure of the society.<sup>15</sup>

During the Peshwa regime also there was no sign of social change in the age-old structure of the society. On the contrary age-old traditions, prohibition of foreign travel, blind faith in traditional authorities, values, beliefs and customs etc. remained in fact. Though in the latter half of the Peshwa regime, the boundaries of the Maratha state were extended, enemies were demolished still the age-old traditional way of life remained undisturbed. Because of the influence of caste system and the varna model of Hindu structure, the Hindu society remained static. For centuries together society remained in the dark age. There was no progress or development. As a result, upto the

emergence of British power, though the people of Maharashtra, had experienced a number of political changes, still those political changes could not bring about any radical changes in the society.

In this way, the institutions and values of Maharashtra had conjured into existence a society whose stability was related to its overall structure, rather than to the position of a particular individual or a specific caste within it. As a result of such stability, the rise of a new ruling group did not bring about any radical changes in society, except possibly for the introduction of a tension between the new rulers and the wider community. The stability of Maharashtra was in fact reinforced by the clash of interests between caste and caste, and class and class and the consequent jockeying for positions of power and influence, contributed to, instead of undermining the overall condition of equipoise.<sup>17</sup>

In brief, upto the beginning of the 19th century, the Hindus exhibited the same fundamental characteristics as in the 13th century. A society, devoid of any element of change in it, has continued in its main structure, the same as it was ages ago. As a result, principle of stagnation was introduced in it. Because of the lack of contact with the progressive forces of the world, lack of rational outlook and scientific knowledge, the general framework of the Hindu society and religion did not undergo any radical changes.

Their medieval outlook and highly unsatisfactory social condition hampered their progress.

### Influence of Metaphysical Thinking :

Before the emergence of British power in Maharashtra though people were enjoying political freedom, still they were not free from the influence of metaphysical thinking. During this period exponents of orthodox Hinduism preached the people that the present life on the earth is just like a stop of our eternal journey towards Moksha.<sup>18</sup> Moksha means complete spiritual realisation, and which liberates the individual from trials and tribulations of the secular world. So to attain moksha, people instead of achieving materialistic progress and development, remained busy with number of meaningless rituals and empty forms of orthodox Hinduism. Even literature of this period represented the same attitude. The scholars of this period, in their writings gave more emphasis to metaphysical values than the materialistic values. They were always moral and devout, not having any social ideals. They were not thinking about actual life, human experiences and sufferings etc. for example in the middle of the 18th century, when the younger generation of the then Maharashtra, was totally massacred in the battle of Panipat (1761), that national calamity was <sup>not</sup> taken into account by any of the contemporary writers or poets. Even the great poet like Moropant also kept himself busy with Ramayam and Mahabharat. Thus, upto 19th century our society remained under

the influence of metaphysical thinking. This thinking continued from Kalhan upto the Maratha saints, prophets and writers. As a result, upto the emergence of British regime, materialistic thinking was not at all developed in Maharashtra. Therefore, progress and development of society at all levels was hampered. During the latter half of the Peshwa regime also, the priestly hold on the people was firm. On the one hand there was excessive ritualism and on the other hand there was the yoke of theological and scholastic learning which resulted in the overall deterioration of the society.

This was the general condition of the Maharashtra society, prior to the establishment of British rule in Maharashtra. Due to their medieval outlook and backward social organisation, their progress and development was hampered to great extent. There was no separation of religion and secular matters. The structure of society, social institutions and their environment in the 19th century Maharashtra were not favourable to the growth of critical faculty or thinking processes as a reason had no place in the medieval life.<sup>19</sup> They had not the social means, social organs or institutions which could have diffused knowledge in the masses, even if they had the desire to do so. Because of this medieval character of our society, even after the downfall of the Maratha rule and its replacement by the British power, our religious, social and other prejudices prevented many of our intellectual classes from receiving western education and bringing about any changes in our age old structure of the society.

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