



KANHOJI ANGRE: NAVIGATING LEADERSHIP THROUGH TRADITION, ADAPTATION AND MARITIME MASTERY

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

The article analyses Kanhoji Angre's maritime leadership during the period when western India experienced political and economic changes. The study challenges colonial portrayals that depict Angre as a pirate by showing his authentic authority as an indigenous maritime leader who governed naval operations and coastal areas while managing trade routes. The article uses both vernacular and European documents to show how Angre's leadership operated within the power dynamics and maritime connections of the Deccan and Indian Ocean region. The article advances social science research on power dynamics and sovereignty issues by showing how indigenous people controlled maritime activities in early- modern societies that existed outside European influence.

Keywords: *Kanhoji Angre, European Presence, Maritime leadership, Indian Ocean*

Introduction

Leadership in times of conflict and transformation often excels conventional paradigms, emerging as a dynamic interplay of tradition, innovation and resilience. Kanhoji Angre, the powerful Maratha naval commander of the 18th century is the case in point of such leadership who imaginatively sailed through the tough waters of colonial encroachment and indigenous resistance. Angre, who was also called the *Samudratla Shivaji* i.e., "Shivaji of the Sea," has left a very powerful legacy not only through his skill in Sea battles but also through his leadership style which combined astutely the factors of wisdom coming through heredity, learning from the experience and being strategically flexible. The Konkan coast serves as the setting for European maritime powers who competed to establish their control over the region, as a result of which, Angre developed his leadership skills through geopolitical conflicts and cultural resistance. His transformation from a regional naval officer to the creator of the Maratha naval might demonstrates how he obtained his professional development through both conventional and contemporary training methods. The study investigates Angre's triumph through his leadership development methods which helped him achieve success and maintain his power. The article studies Kanhoji Angre's leadership through multiple dimensions that include his family background, cultural values and maritime knowledge, which shaped his abilities to protect India's western coast. The study reveals how his strategies affected various aspects of his work while showing how adaptive leadership remains valuable during times of changing situations.

Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative historical methodology based on critical analysis of primary and secondary sources. It investigates traditional Indian maritime leadership and coastal defence systems through the examination of vernacular Marathi texts, Persian historical accounts and European archival documents. These sources are read comparatively to identify convergences, silences and biases, allowing for a contextualised understanding of maritime authority within regional political and social frameworks.

Discussion

Crossroads of Power: The 17th-18th Century Konkan and the Rise of European and Indigenous Forces

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries marked a period of profound transformation for the Konkan coast as it became a battleground between competing maritime powers. The Konkan served as a crucial trade route which connected the Arabian Sea with the Western Ghats because of its strategic location between these two geographic features. The political landscape of the western coast of India, prior to the Portuguese establishment was characterized by an atmosphere of chaos and uncertainty which local and regional rulers used to control their territories. (Nairne:1988) The Arabs maintained complete control over the essential

trade routes which linked Eastern and Western regions, thereby establishing their trade superiority during multiple centuries. The Bahmani Sultanate and its successor states attempted to control these vital water routes but their political power lost strength after the empire experienced its decline. The situation developed into a condition which allowed outside forces to interfere with the Mughals, under Akbar, eyeing the lucrative coastline. The Mughal Empire made significant strides in the Deccan, pushing its frontier to the region of Ahmadnagar, though it was yet to fully conquer the western coastline.

By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the western coast of India had become a battleground for multiple competing powers both indigenous and foreign. The Mughals, Marathas and Deccan Sultanates fought for control of the region while European powers especially the Portuguese, Dutch and English began their territorial claims. European naval forces introduced new technological advancements in naval warfare through their deployment of ships with artillery. (Deshpande:1922) The European maritime control system attained a new level of power through these new inventions which enabled them to dominate the ocean waters while extending their territorial control throughout the Indian Ocean region.

During the seventeenth century European presence along western coastlines experienced rapid growth which encountered opposition from local communities. The Siddis emerged as one of the main indigenous maritime forces that controlled this intricate international conflict. The Siddis established themselves as a dominant regional power through their strong naval capabilities which enabled them to command extensive maritime territories. (Purohit:2021) Their naval expertise, however, was not enough to fend off the growing power of the Portuguese, Dutch and English, each vying for control over the lucrative trade routes and the vital coastal territories. The Portuguese established permanent settlements along the western Indian coast which enabled them to control important coastal areas including Bassein, Chaul and Goa. The locations functioned as their main military bases which they used to construct protected settlements and create essential commercial pathways. (Mathew:2017) Goa became the main hub of the Portuguese administration in the east, the functioning of the system of *cartazes* happened there. All the merchants trading on the western coast visited Goa to buy *cartazes* for their ships while those navigating along the coast could the passes at any nearby Portuguese port. (Fernandes:1981)

Meanwhile, the Dutch established their presence in Vengurla after they took control of the area to expand their trade and maritime interests. Vengurla served as a strategic location since it allowed direct access to Goa along with a watchtower (*uitKijkpost*) that used to keep watch over Portuguese activities at Goa. The Dutch fleet used this location as their base to conduct yearly blockades of Goa which lasted from 1636 until 1644, mainly to keep the Portuguese out of the Portuguese-Dutch war in Malacca and Ceylon. According to Wouter Schouten,

“Wingurla, better than other towns and places, is known to the Dutch, but lies a little north of Goa, on the sea, serves as good refreshing place for us, is used during these wars against the Portuguese, every year during the monsoon, with a sizeable number of warships, in front of or around Goa to prevent the Portuguese navigation besides to oppress the Portuguese in the sea”.

The English too established a fortified trading post at Bombay which became their main base to control British power throughout India. On the other side, the Siddis established themselves as a powerful regional force through their control over Janjira which contained an island fortress that protected their territory. The Siddis used their stronghold to control the surrounding seas which they used to fight both European and local powers who wanted to control important Sea trade routes. Their naval power included multiple warships whereas their ability to fight guerrilla battles made them the dominant force in Western Konkan coastal areas. Hence, the Adilshahi and Mughal rulers hired them because of their powerful influence. (Bhattacharya:2017) Each of these groups contributed to the complex web of competing interests and territorial ambitions that defined the coastal geopolitics of the time. These European powers, driven by both maritime expertise and political ambition, strategically embedded themselves within the local power structures. In their unrelenting quest for supremacy, the Europeans attempted to weaken their adversaries, both European and native, by forming alliances with local rulers, influencing native politics and by maintaining military superiority at sea. Intense rivalry and conflict resulted from European maritime strategies competitive nature and their capacity to exert political influence among local elites. This ultimately led to a more globalised contest for control of the Western Coast.

The Genesis of Maratha Naval Power

The inception of Maratha navy created a crucial turning point in India's maritime history, as it demonstrated the emergence of an indigenous naval force which could now contest European supremacy over Indian waters. Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj's visionary leadership led the Marathas to understand that they needed to control the seas for protecting their trade routes and coastal territories from any foreign attacks. According to Sabhasad, one of the primary motivations behind Shivaji Maharaj's efforts to establish the Maratha Navy was his determination to challenge the Siddis of Janjira, a formidable naval power on the western coast. However, the struggle for supremacy at sea extended far beyond a mere conflict with the Siddis. His foremost aim was to retrieve coastal lands which foreign powers had seized and to block European nations from establishing their maritime and trade power in India.

In contrast to many contemporary rulers of his times, Shivaji understood the oceans strategic significance as a theatre of power and a vital component in defending the Maratha state's sovereignty. Shivaji distinguished himself with his aggressive attitude to marine defence during a period when other rulers, such as the Mughals and the Adil Shahis, mostly overlooked the necessity of a naval force. (Sharma:1934) These leaders, who mostly concentrated on inland areas, lacked the infrastructure and vision necessary to combat European forces maritime superiority. Because of this, Portuguese, Dutch and English naval forces were able to take advantage of their ports and coastal areas. In reaction to this lack of power, Shivaji launched naval campaigns to

defend Indian coastal trade routes and establish Maratha dominance at sea. Shivaji's naval strategies against foreign dominance established a maritime heritage of strength for the Maratha kingdom. The Maratha tradition continued through leaders such as Kanhoji Angre who expanded their naval fleet while establishing control over the Konkan coastline. The Marathas established an Indian naval strength which could challenge European control by transforming the western coast into an indigenous military base. The Indian Ocean maritime power dynamics underwent permanent change because of Shivaji's maritime vision and the subsequent development of the Maratha navy.

Forging Leadership: Pathways to Maritime Mastery

Kanhoji Angre built his exceptional maritime career through the combination of traditional knowledge, practical experience, mentor guidance and adaptable learning. His family's maritime heritage and his cultural and ethical beliefs provided him a strong foundation to develop as a leader. He developed his tactical skills through direct training in naval operations together with his education of European operational techniques. Local experts and other Maratha leaders helped him to expand his knowledge through his collaborative work with them. His reputation as a strong naval commander came from his ability to create new strategies that dealt with different threats and operational changes. The discussion that follows explores these important aspects of leadership growth and preparation and shows how they shaped Kanhoji Angre's legacy.

i. Traditional Learning

Family Legacy and the transmission of Maritime skills and Values

Kanhoji Angre's rise as a renowned naval commander was deeply rooted in his family's seafaring legacy. Born into the *Sankpal* family (Sen:1973) later known as Angre, he inherited a wealth of maritime knowledge and traditions. His father Tukoji served in Shivaji Maharaj's Navy and obtained the rank of *Sarnaubat* which he held at the important military base Suvarnadurg. The coastal defence system and navigation techniques which Kanhoji learned through his family heritage enabled him to acquire comprehensive knowledge about the region's maritime political affairs. Kanhoji started learning about Maratha naval operations since his young days, enabling him to develop combat and logistical skills through real-world experience. The transmission of maritime skills within his family ensured that he was well-versed in both physical and tactical demands of commanding a fleet. The hereditary foundation of this knowledge allowed him to assess the battle competences of his opponents as well. This process also helped him navigate the treacherous waters of the western coast, ultimately allowing him to dominate the stretch from Bombay to Malvan. (Foster:1924)

Influence of Cultural, Religious and Ethical teachings

The Maratha community cultural and religious values brought about a major influence on Kanhoji Angre to shape his leadership style and personal principles. The temples and coastal traditions of the Konkan region created a deep sense of responsibility together with strength of character for the people who lived there. Kanhoji executed his actions according to Maratha principles of *Swaraj* which defined the independence of native people and his commitment to defend the coast against foreign threats. His capacity to merge strategic expertise with his ethical duty to protect trade pathways and coastal communities demonstrated his commitment to Maratha moral ideals. (Malgaonkar:1959) The Maratha naval code which Shivaji developed through his vision of an Indigenous naval force maintained military discipline and required sailors to demonstrate both bravery and team spirit. The educational environment which Kanhoji experienced during his early years brought him both naval combat skills and a strong dedication to serve his country. The teachings he received enabled him to become a military leader who used traditional knowledge together with modern combat methods, in order to succeed during the challenging times. Kanhoji's later decision to shift his headquarters to Kulaba in 1695 further demonstrated the strategic foresight and cultural wisdom inherited from his lineage. The ancestral learning combined with his cultural values and practical governance skills allowed him to establish watchful control over essential sea trade routes and coastal ports.

ii. Experiential Learning

Expertise through Action

After the untimely demise of Siddhoji Gujjar, Kanhoji Angre ascended to the prestigious position of *Sarkhel* i.e., Maratha admiral in 1698, granting him legitimate authority over the seas. Amidst the political turbulence following the death of Rajaram in 1700, Kanhoji first pledged his loyalty to Queen Regent Tarabai. (Malgaonkar:1959) However, the release of Shahu from Mughal captivity divided the Maratha nobility, forcing Kanhoji to navigate this internal conflict. Persuaded by Balaji Vishwanath, Kanhoji eventually aligned with Shahu in 1713 through a treaty that secured him strategic forts from Khanderi to Vijaydurg, territories yielding significant revenue and reaffirmed his title as *Sarkhel*. (Maloni:2006) This alliance solidified Kanhoji's dominance, allowing him to shift his headquarters to Vijaydurg and extend his authority along the Konkan coast from Bombay to Goa. (Nairne:1988) He used his strategic skills to establish naval bases and build sea forts which enhanced Maratha naval power against European and Siddi forces. His maritime skills and political knowledge enabled him to control Maratha sovereignty over Konkan waters while transforming the region's maritime operations.

iii. Mentorship and Networking

Guidance and Alliances: Building a support network

The growing maritime strength of Kanhoji Angre as a successful naval commander resulted from his personal abilities and from the dedicated assistance which various groups provided him. The Maratha state, under monarchs like Rajaram and Shahu, endowed him with the authority of *Sarkhel*, granting him dominion over the vast Konkan coastline. (Dhabu:1939) His dedication

to Tarabai during challenging periods established him as a trustworthy protector of Maratha rule, while his subsequent partnership with Shahu through Balaji Vishwanath's diplomatic skills further solidified his influence and power. (Sen:1958)

Kanhoji Angre achieved success as a powerful naval commander through the continuous backing of his talented crew members who came from various coastal Indigenous communities. The Kharvas and Kolis established themselves as the main strength of his naval force since they possessed exceptional sailing skills while Kolis brought their deep understanding of coastal areas. (Sen:1958) The Gabits and Konkani Marathas who mastered both fishing and navigation skills helped to strengthen the operational capabilities of the fleet. The Sutars who were skilled Hindu craftsmen from the area received the task of building ships while Dutch shipwrights and mercenary gunners worked as foreign experts bringing new maritime technologies and weapons. The structure of Kanhoji's fleet was organized in a detailed manner which included Mai Naik and Dariya Sarang as commanders who led vital missions. The hierarchy of Kanhoji's fleet was meticulously organized, with commanders like Mai Naik and Dariya Sarang leading key expeditions. The *Subha Armar* administration system maintained coastal defence operations to combat piracy and support maritime commerce activities. The Dutch and Portuguese shipbuilders together with other foreign gunners also worked for him, hence growing his naval power through their delivery of modern ship designs and weapons systems. The combination of traditional maritime knowledge with practical skills and technical development created the essential elements which strengthened Kanhoji's naval power.

iv. Adaptive Leadership

Facing Colonial navies with Innovations

Kanhoji Angre's leadership led Maratha naval power reached its zenith, transforming Indian Ocean maritime control during the 17th and 18th centuries. The Marathas under Shivaji and later Kanhoji not only defended their territory against European colonial powers but also took control of essential maritime routes which European nations had previously controlled. The Marathas issued their own passes through *dastak* and *kaul* which served as their direct challenge against European countries that claimed maritime rights to exclusive control. The Marathas had to buy their passes from Europeans at first but they eventually understood that they need to assert their dominance over the seas. (Biddulph:1992) Kanhoji's practice of conducting ship captures without his official permits functioned as a direct threat against European naval operations and at the same time demonstrated his increasing military strength and political authority. The Marathas ability to force European powers into accepting their sovereignty over the seas was largely due to Kanhoji's naval expertise and his strategic control of important coastal defence installations. This situation demonstrates European power limitations in the area where indigenous maritime authorities such as Kanhoji used their coastal knowledge and established naval forces to contest foreign interests. The Marathas used the *dastak* system, both as a trade control method for their imperial claims and also as an indigenous resistance symbol. The Marathas developed their maritime superiority through this strategy which ultimately resulted in their direct confrontation with European powers. They strategically used their naval abilities to fight European expansions. Kanhoji's opposition to European forces demonstrates his leadership abilities and shows how native Indian Ocean communities fought against foreign rule.

Under Kanhoji Angre and his predecessors, the Maratha maritime expansion created major challenges for European powers who operated in the Indian Ocean. The Marathas established their naval power to control maritime trade routes which compelled European to change their regional strategies. As a consequence, the European powers established multiple offensive and defensive alliances with each other and local forces such as the Siddis who had naval strength for fighting against the Maratha threat. (Ahluwalia:1984) These alliances demonstrate the intricate power relationships which existed during colonial times in this region. The European powers maintained their dominance through superior naval power and their economic strength. Sensing the threat of Maratha domination, they became anxious that how could a local power control essential maritime area of the Konkan coast. The European powers maintained their advanced technological and military resources in various areas except for local naval combat, which created an advantage for the Marathas through their understanding of the coast and weather conditions. European powers established alliances with the Siddis of Janjira, which showed that colonial politics operated in a fluid manner because temporary strategic interests were more important than maintaining long-term alliances. The Siddis, who controlled the fortified island of Janjira off the Konkan coast, were not merely local rulers but also a formidable naval force in their own right. By allying with the Siddis, the Europeans sought to contain Maratha expansion in the region, recognizing that the combined naval force of the Siddis and European powers could potentially curb the Marathas' growing influence. However, these alliances were often unstable as the interests of the European powers were not always aligned and regional powers like the Marathas were adept at exploiting these divisions. The Marathas themselves, by securing their own passes and engaging in naval confrontations with European ships, were able to further destabilize the European dominance over the seas, demonstrating the challenges these powers faced in asserting control over the region. The strategic shifts, therefore, not only illustrate the volatility of the period but also the Marathas ability to exploit rivalries between European colonial powers, using these divisions to their advantage.

Impact of Leadership Development

The Angres established their authority over maritime territories through their various efforts which included their naval base development and ship construction and military planning. The establishment of naval supremacy through their military operations enabled them to block European powers from expanding their control over their territories which included the Portuguese and Dutch and English. The Marathas established themselves as a powerful naval force for Indian Ocean operations through their development of warships and coastal forts and their support of shipbuilding activities. The Marathas established

their docks at Kalyan-Bhiwandi and Agashi since these coastal sites provided access to high-quality teak wood which served as a vital resource for their shipbuilding activities. The Marathas established their shipbuilding operations through this strategic resource management which enabled them to build strong vessels while developing their naval power. The design of vessels like the *Ghurabs* and *Gallivats*, known for their resilience and combat effectiveness, demonstrated the Marathas ability to adapt and innovate. (Apte:1973) The ships were created to survive attacks while their main purpose was to cause maximum damage to enemy forces. The Marathas used military planning to create their ships which included *machuva*, *shibar* and *mahagir* for fighting battles and conducting trade operations. (Mathew:1995) The Marathas used these ships not only for their naval defence operations but also as the main support for regional trade activities which strengthened the Marathas maritime control of the sea. The Maratha naval operations succeeded because local communities who specialized in fishing and seafaring participated in the mission. They were highly depended on these communities as these groups had complete understanding of coastal areas and wind patterns and celestial navigation techniques. The Marathas changed their military tactics through their combination of traditional weapons usage which included swords and bows and arrows and spears with their adoption of firearms.(Apte:1958) The indigenous people used traditional weapons for their battles because these weapons represented their native fighting traditions, but their adoption of gunpowder weapons marked a fundamental change in their naval capabilities which enabled them to compete with European powers in their aquatic territories. The Maratha constructed an extensive system of forts throughout the Konkan coast which formed a central part of their overall battle plan to establish and maintain control over maritime territories. The Maratha established these forts as markers of their political power which enabled them to dominate crucial sea routes while safeguarding their coastal defence operations. (Ajnyapatra) The strategic placement of these forts near important ports, tidal mouths and dockyards reveals the Marathas acute awareness of the coastal geography and its military significance. These fortifications were not mere defensive structures; they functioned as key nodes in the Maratha maritime system, enabling the rulers to control vital trade routes, protect their naval fleets and prevent foreign incursions.

Key Research Findings

- The study shows that Kanhoji Angre controlled the western Indian coast through indigenous maritime leadership that had historical foundations instead of operating as temporary pirate activities. The study shows that Kanhoji Angre controlled the western Indian coast through indigenous maritime leadership that had historical foundations instead of operating as temporary pirate activities. The findings demonstrate that Angre maintained continuous control over shipping routes because he used his naval strength and coastal defense systems and his control of passing ship regulations to create an effective maritime governance system.
- The research further finds that indigenous maritime leadership in early modern western India existed within the regional political economies which supported state formation processes. Angre's naval authority operated through its connections to Maratha political goals and revenue collection and the defense of coastal trade routes which showed that maritime power operated as a territorial extension rather than as an independent or secondary function.
- Another key finding is that European trading companies operating in the Konkan region had to establish trade agreements with local maritime authorities during the eighteenth century. European powers controlled the oceans but their maritime activities depended on local power systems which showed that Indian Ocean maritime interactions still had non-European control.
- The research establishes that maritime leadership functioned as a contingent practice which depended on both relational ties and three specific factors: geographical conditions, naval technological developments, and regional alliances. This research challenges conventional European maritime superiority narratives by emphasizing indigenous maritime command practices, which provide a deeper understanding of power dynamics and sovereignty and leadership systems in early modern South Asia.

Conclusion

Kanhoji Angre's leadership together with the Maratha navy's complete control of the seas created a significant turning point which transformed the development of maritime power in the Indian Ocean area while demonstrating how indigenous people fought against colonial expansion. His leadership used a complex combination of traditional knowledge which he acquired through his life experiences and his military innovations to strengthen Maratha control while breaking the Portuguese Dutch and English naval trade monopolies.

Through the consolidation of a vigorous naval infrastructure and the assertion of control over maritime trade routes via instruments like the *dastak*, Angre demonstrated the capacity of an indigenous power to challenge and negotiate with technologically advanced European navies on its terms. The system developed by Angre, which combined coastal defence networks with local shipbuilding facilities and utilized expert knowledge from Koli, Kharva, and Gabit communities, demonstrates how decentralized expertise enabled the maintenance of naval power. His fortifications at key nodes like Vijaydurg and Suvarnadurg served as more than defensive structures because they functioned as strategic outposts which displayed Maratha control over the maritime domain. The maritime bastions enabled Maratha forces to establish their control over essential trading routes which protected their economic interests and political power during times of strong international rivalry. Kanhoji Angre showed his flexible and practical method of naval development through his ability to combine European naval design and weapon systems with traditional Maratha Sea battle methods. His guerrilla tactics which he developed through his deep understanding of the Konkan coast enabled him to counteract the technological advantages held by European naval forces. Angre established

himself as a military leader because his ability to adapt together with his political alliances in the Maratha system and his international diplomatic efforts.

The leadership of Angre extends its impact to marine warfare which extends beyond Maratha maritime control. His leadership methods demonstrate that organizations need to develop their leaders through various methods which combine established teaching methods with new approaches to solve different types of problems. The ascent of Angre demonstrates how local powers can challenge imperial networks, which creates a different historical account of colonial domination. His legacy includes two components which show his naval opposition to foreign powers and his creation of an indigenous sovereignty model that would enable indigenous nations to engage with international powers. Hence, Kanhoji Angre's contribution extends beyond his lifetime because it continues to shape Indian Ocean naval and political history until today. His leadership abilities to handle power dynamics and technological advancements and global political situations demonstrate his capacity to create successful and plan for future challenges and work together with others. Angre's life achievements demonstrate how native people can develop new technologies that transform worldwide power relations while he provides essential understanding about how people fight against oppression and control their own affairs and make decisions in a world that constantly transforms.

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