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Marathas, Rajputs, and Afghans in Mid-Eighteenth-Century India: *Bhausahebanchi Bakhar* and the Articulation of Cultural Difference in Pre-Colonial India

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Marathas, Rajputs, and Afghans in Mid-Eighteenth-Century India: *Bhausahebanchi Bakhar* and the Articulation of Cultural Difference in Pre-Colonial India

Anirudh Deshpande

Abstract

It is generally believed that modern social and cultural identities were created in India by the politics of British colonialism. Both modernist and post-modernist scholars tend to believe that the arrival of colonialism in India was a decisive turning point in the recreation of Indian communities, as we know them today. The concepts of nation, community, and caste are therefore linked with the exigencies of British colonialism in India. Further, post-colonial politics in India has strengthened modern communal and caste identities manifold since the colonial period and this has predictably fractured the re-construction of Indian history. This continuous political fracturing of the Indian past confronts the historian with new problems. This paper examines the pre-history of modern community consciousness in eighteenth-century India with reference to the Maratha experiences vis-à-vis other south Asian communities. This paper is an attempt to answer an important question posed to the historian by the postmodern critique of his discipline: *Was the past a different place where things were done differently by people incomprehensible to the historian?* At stake here are concepts like 'medieval', 'early modern', 'communal', 'modern', and 'post-modern' which colour our reading of Indian history. This paper is based on a close reading of an important Marathi source normally used by military historians to describe the greatly politicized Third Battle of Panipat (1761). The paper examines the northward Maratha military movement in the eighteenth-century as a cultural journey undertaken by a group of Marathi speaking warriors, trying to carve out a political future outside their homeland referred to by their documents as the *desh*. This account of that journey demonstrates

that the Marathas were conscious of the cultural attributes of their battlefield enemies and, in fact, reified these attributes in their written memory of the past to overcome their self-perceived cultural weaknesses. This Maratha ability to differentiate well defined group attributes on the basis of a comparative reading of history, qualifies the generally held modern description of Indians as a people without a sense of history. This also qualifies the assertion that the past was necessarily a different place where things were done differently. Having said this, the paper also reveals that the articulation of cultural identities in an important eighteenth-century Marathi historical text defies a communal interpretation of Indian history despite temptations to the contrary.

Introduction

पानीपत हे नाव कानी आले किंवा त्याची आठवण झाली की मनाची चमत्कारिक स्तिथी होते. दु:ख व अभिमान दोन्हीही जागृत होतात.

पानीपतची बखर

The name and memory of Panipat fills our heart with romance. Grief and pride both are aroused.

Panipatchi Bakhar

It has been asserted that the *historicization* of the modern Indian imagination and the consequent politicization of Indian social identities was produced and developed in India during the nineteenth-century by British colonialism.[1] Nation and community came to play the most important role in the growth of modern consciousness among Indians during the colonial period and the process of creating the 'other' with the help of modern education and myths was central to this. Hence, most of the nationalist and religious literature produced in India during the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries was constructed with a knowledge produced by an epistemology underlined by colonial ideology. It was pointed out by Romila Thapar several years ago, that the past developed largely as a prejudice which colonized the mind of the colonial subjects in India due to the impact of colonial historiography.[2] For a long time a number of Left leaning secular-nationalist historians responded to this colonial-communal prejudice by painting Indian history in secular tones. For instance, in such histories, which still dominate the majority of Indian school textbooks, the Mughal Emperor Akbar becomes secular whereas Aurangzeb is demonized as a religious bigot. On the other hand the same histories could easily portray Rana Pratap and Shivaji as heroic popular rulers. It has never been easy for post-colonial historians to write a history

[1]Michael Gottlob (ed.), *Historical Thinking in South Asia: A Handbook of Sources from Colonial Times to the Present* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), Introduction.
[2]Romila Thapar, *The Past and Prejudice* (New Delhi: National Book Trust of India, 1993).

of the pre-colonial. A recent reappraisal of medieval Indian history underlines the importance of researching history dispassionately and warns us against reading our medieval past as a secular-communal binary.[3] Other works have concentrated on the development of caste as a 'bounded and exclusive' category in colonial India which emerged as a consequence of upwardly mobile peasant and military groups seeking new identities in the colonial context.[4] It is also well known that Indians were deeply conscious of cultural and religious differences between co-existing and interactive communities in pre-colonial India and, therefore, the claim that these differences were produced by British colonial policies and justified by colonially derived knowledge, does not stand up to historical scrutiny.[5] There is no doubt that colonialism produced an orientalist understanding of Indian history but does this mean that no knowledge of the pre-colonial societies is possible outside the colonial-oriental episteme? In fact scholars critical of Brahmanism and communalism, following DD Kosambi's observation that the Brahmanical ideology assisted the colonial domination of Indian society, assert the role of Indian elites in the production of colonial ideology and knowledge about India since the days of Warren Hastings in the late eighteenth-century.[6] In sum the *historicization* of the Indian imagination produced during the colonial period was a long drawn and complicated process, not devoid of Indian content. The knowledge of community, caste, and nation in India was ultimately imagined and created in a colonial context which affected almost all aspects of Indian life in the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries. The vernacular historical texts produced in pre-colonial and colonial India present to us a variegated past of a highly plural society, despite the recognized role of ideology in their continuous production and reproduction.[7] In this

[3]Raziuddin Aquil, *In the Name of Allah: Understanding Islam and Indian History* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2009).

[4]Prachi Deshpande, 'Caste as Maratha: Social Categories, Colonial Policy and Identity in Early Twentieth - Century Maharashtra', *IESHR*, 41/1 (2004), pp.7-32.

[5]See Gijs Kruitzer, '*Xenophobia*' in *Seventeenth Century India* (Leiden University Press, 2009), [Low resolution acrobat PDF document accessed and downloaded on 12/12/2009] for a recent reappraisal of these issues.

[6]Braj Ranjan Mani, *Debrahmanising History – Dominance and resistance in Indian Society* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2005).

[7]This is asserted by a collection of well researched essays edited by Raziuddin Aquil and Partha Chatterjee called *History in the Vernacular* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2008).

connection the main source chosen to write this paper stands out as a remarkable text, virtually free of nationalist and communal bias. On the basis of such texts, and a critical reading of similar texts, I believe it is still possible to recover an academically legitimate past for India, and thereby make the subject of history possible; despite the contention that the past, beyond the historian's reach, was a different place where things were done differently.

Bhausahebanchi Bakhar

It is well known that the Marathi word *bakhar* is a metathesis of the Arabic word *khabar* which means news. The *bakhars* are unique to the writing and simultaneous happening of Maratha history from the latter half of the seventeenth-century. Along with official Marathi documents archived in the *Peshwa Daftar* in Pune, the *bakhars* are usually considered as the indispensable primary sources of Maratha history. The *bakhars* comprise an archive of Marathi historical narratives and can be described as specific local vernacular ways of knowing the past. More than two hundred *bakhars* have survived the vagaries of history and most of them were edited and printed by the modern scholars of Maratha history in the nineteenth-century. Hence we can assume that the production and re-production of *bakhars* in the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries was never free from the ideological leanings of their modern editors. Therefore any reading of the *bakhars* should automatically involve a study of their modern editors and original compilers, but doing this is beyond the scope of this paper. Despite the problems usually associated with editing and re-editing of *texts*, the *bakhar* reveals to its reader the rewarding possibilities of historical re-construction.

The *Bhausahebanchi Bakhar*, ie, the *bakhar* of Sadashiva Rao '*Bhau*', the cousin of *Peshwa Balaji Baji Rao 'Nana Saheb'* and *de-facto* commander of the Maratha army at Panipat in 1761; is a developed and more detailed version of an earlier text called *Bhausahebanchi Kaifiyat*. The *Bhau Bakhar*, translated by Ian Raeside in 1984, is around hundred pages long in English. This paper is based on a side by side careful reading of the English translation and the currently available Marathi versions of the

source.[8] In addition, it is informed by another important source for the Third Battle of Panipat called *Panipatchi Bakhar* authored by Raghunath Yadav and edited by Herwadkar.[9] The *Bhau Bakhar* belongs to the context created by the imperial project of Maratha power in the eighteenth-century (1730-1800), and was written in north India by someone familiar with north Indian conditions, not long after 1761. In contrast the *Panipatchi Bakhar* was written in Maharashtra and has a greater Brahmanical content. Towards the middle of the eighteenth-century, the Marathas projected their military power and political rule into large parts of north India, ie *Hindustan*. In Maratha historiography this period marks an epoch different from the *swarajya* of Shivaji which refers to the emergence of a Maratha kingdom stretching south from the river Narmada to the Krishna in the seventeenth-century. The creation of a Marathi speaking *desh*, and a well formed Maratha identity, under Shivaji and his Maratha *successors* in the seventeenth-century forms the background against which the texts on Panipat were written. During the Mughal period Marathi speaking people traveled to the north regularly for pilgrimages and trade related reasons in large numbers; Hindustan already had an established place in the Marathi historical consciousness which developed prior to the Panipat campaign. Nonetheless the forceful Maratha movement into Hindustan in the eighteenth-century seems to have reconfigured the importance of Hindustan in Maratha history and its writing in ways which appear unprecedented. The reasons for this are given below.

By the middle of the eighteenth-century the medieval Maratha war bands had metamorphosed into quasi modern armies equipped with a variety of modern firearms and fortified with infantry and artillery units trained by European mercenaries. Increasing revenues and plunder, following the disintegration of the Mughal Empire, through the extraction of *chauth* and *sardeshmukhi* meant that the Maratha armies of the eighteenth-century were also larger, compared with the Maratha guerilla bands of the seventeenth-

[8]Ian Raeside (Tr.), *The Decade of Panipat (1751-61): Marathi Historical Papers and Chronicles* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1984); R. V. Herwadkar (ed.), *Bhausahebanchi Bakhar* (Pune: Venus Prakashan, 1990); R. V. Herwadkar (ed.), *Bhausahebanchi Kaifiyat* (Pune: Venus Prakashan, 1990).
[9]*Panipatchi Bakhar* (Pune: Venus Prakashan, 1997).

century. Controlled and led by the various Maratha *sardars* these armies began to campaign increasingly in north India following the example set by Baji Rao I from the 1730s onwards. The Marathas also established permanent garrisons in many parts of the north and indulged in continuous skirmishing with the Jats, Rohillas, Rajputs, and Afghans but not with the Sikhs. The Maratha campaigns north of the Chambal river and their growing diplomatic relations with the powers in Hindustan gave them ample opportunities and reasons to observe and study the social customs and military culture of their adversaries. These observations and the Maratha experiences outside their *desh* were expressed in the texts which the Maratha diplomats, soldiers, and writers wrote during this period. It is reasonable to assume that sometimes these experiences, as they were recounted in the Marathi narratives of the eighteenth-century, were based on historical events, and otherwise on community specific myths cultivated by the Maratha leadership to develop social and military cohesion in an alien land. Narratives about specific individuals, like Shuja-ud-Daulah's well known physical prowess, extant as contemporary legends, also found their way into the *bakhars* written in the eighteenth-century. Among the Marathas were experienced and respected men, like Naro Shankar for instance, familiar with the north Indian conditions, and their authority was usually called upon in conversations to support or refute arguments. At times the advice of such men was heeded and disaster averted in the short term. Many myths present in the Marathi sources like the Bhau *Bakhar* were ultimately reproduced in the British accounts of Indian history written later and some even went on to underline the myths associated with the 'martial races' theory in the second half of the nineteenth-century.

Maratha and Rajput

This section presents a few examples from the *Bhau Bakhar* to demonstrate the points made above with respect to the Maratha-Rajput military interaction in the eighteenth-century. The group of Indian warriors whom the Marathas fought prior to their direct confrontation with the Afghans led by Ahmad Shah Durrani [called Abdul Ali and *Giljiya*, a corruption of Gilzai, in the sources]

comprised of the Rajput clans. Right from the seventeenth-century, the Marathas developed a high opinion of Rajput valor because of the great amount of fighting these *kshatriya* Rajputs from Rajputana did in the service of the Mughals in the Deccan. The Marathas had not forgotten the defeat suffered by Shivaji at the hands of the Mirza Jai Singh at Purandhar in 1665. Thus, the impression of Rajputs generated by the *Bhau Bakhar* was, therefore, not entirely new. In the eighteenth-century the Marathas were increasingly called upon by the rival Rajput clans in Rajasthan to intercede in their affairs as mercenaries. The eighteenth-century, as Prachi Deshpande has reminded us, was a period in which a Maratha *kshatriya* identity, based on professional soldiering as distinct from the agricultural occupations of the majority of Kunbi peasants in Maharashtra, was being forged by the leading Maratha clans. This process had begun with Shivaji's claim to *kshatriya* ancestory in the seventeenth-century. Shivaji was advised by Ramdas Samartha to bring the Marathi people together and spread an ideal *Maharashtradharma* far and wide:

मराठी तितुका मिल्वावा, महाराष्ट्र धर्म वाढवावा[10]

For the upwardly mobile Marathas, this *dharma* meant *kshatriya dharma* which increased in importance as the social and political distance between the professional Maratha soldiers and their agricultural background grew wider. Since the Rajputs were considered the foremost martial community among the Hindus, their reflections on the Marathas played an important role in the Maratha perceptions of ideal valor.

In 1754, the Maratha Sardar Jayaji Shinde was summoned by Ram Singh of Marwar to help him against his brother Vijay Singh. Shinde marched into Marwar with the intention of restoring Ram Singh to the throne of Nagaur, in return for a substantial sum of promised tribute and plunder at the cost of Vijay Singh. Upon hearing that a strong Maratha army was advancing upon Nagaur, Vijay Singh approached the battlefield at the head of a large and well equipped army to settle scores with the enemy. The Marathas, intending to besiege the town, did

[10]For details see Prachi Deshpande, *Creative Pasts: Historical Memory and Identity in Western India, 1700-1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

not expect combat at such an early stage. Vijay Singh's determination, the strength of his army, and the reputation of the Rajputs seems to have demoralized the Marathas who were left with the choice of either joining battle or retreating from the field. Retreat would have meant loss of face and money both; an option which was ruled out by the Maratha commander. The *Bhau Bakhar* recounts the event in the following words:

> They were Rathod Rajputs, strong and fierce, and they thought nothing of the Marathas' power. Hearing of this Jayaji Shinde summoned all the noblemen and said, 'The Marwadis are mighty Rajputs and very bold, and the fierceness of their valor is such that when you cut of their heads the trunk still dances. Once by their courage they loosed the turban of Durani Giljiya, Emperor of Kandhar, and cut the crupper of his horse; and still in token of this the Giljiyas go turbanless and their horses without cruppers. And they have much artillery. But on our side are only the raw spirits of our soldiers, their weapons of steel, and once they break if you tie them to a tree they will pull it out by the roots to flee.' [11]

Despite the ferocity of the Rajputs the battle was won by the Marathas at great cost because of the 'virtues of King Shahu', as they said. Indeed the intensity of the battle enhanced the Maratha respect for the Rajputs:

> Such slaughter was there, yet the Marathas must feel that blessed were the Rajput mothers that bore such children….Those Marwadis whose wounds were in front, their women saluted them and praised them; and those whose wounds were on their backs were abandoned by their wives. In the land of Marwar this is the custom. To receive a wound upon the front is good, but otherwise the woman should not look upon the face of her man. How may the deeds of men be

[11] *Bhau Bakhar* (1984), p.7; (1990), p.13.
[12] Ibid., (1984), p.8; (1990), pp.16-17.

> recommended in a place where the hearts of women are of such a kind.[12]

One Maratha *sardar* who seemed to have been affected to a greater degree by the Rajputs was Dattaji Shinde, the younger brother of Jayaji. His wife Bhagirathi Bai knew this quite well and admonished him when he refused to understand the consequences of Ahmad Shah's invasion in 1759. As the Afghan entered the Punjab, putting to flight the garrisons of Sabaji Shinde, the forces of Shuja-ud-Daulah and Najib Khan Rohilla joined hands in Rohilkhand awaiting his arrival in the rear of Dattaji's army. With each day the possibility of the main body of the Maratha army under Dattaji's command in the Antarved near Shukratal (the northern part of the Ganga-Jamuna doab) being attacked from the west by the rapidly advancing Afghan columns grew stronger. Faced with this difficult predicament, Dattaji's wife told him that a retreat from the area around Delhi was in the larger interests of the Marathas. In this context the author of the *Bhau Bakhar*, probably a Maharshtrian with a fair amount of knowledge about the geo-strategic conditions in north India, put the following words in Bhagirathi Bai's mouth:

> …the wife of Dattaji Shinde, in a private place abandoning all deference said to him 'Forty thousand men of the army of Abdul Ali Durrani have crossed the river at Attock and entered the region of Lahore. Of our own army some are scattered, some which were in Punjab we know not what has become of them, but you know this news most certainly. Thus the net is spread upon all four sides. But you have become besotted with riches and valour and *emulation*, and we and our wives and children must be caught by the Durrani and die or else become slaves in the houses of the enemy.'[13]

Not very long after this, and just before Dattaji Shinde got himself killed in the Battle of Burari (January, 1760), Bhagirathi Bai and Naro Shankar, a wise and learned man, opposed Dattaji on the issue of

[13]Ibid., (1984), p.38; (1990), p. 84.

custom. Facing imminent defeat and decimation, a demoralized Dattaji gave the following Rajput like directions to Naro Shankar, Govindpant Bundele, and his nephew Jankoji Shinde:

> We know full well that the end of our life's span has come. To what end should the women and children live? Some must live and keep this world and some must die and lose it. We should slaughter the women and children and then hobble our elephants and die fighting. Defeat is worse than death. Having suffered defeat how can we show our faces to Nanasaheb and Bhausaheb? Now I have decided to die and cannot think of anything else.[14]

Naro Shankar had seen the rise of Maratha power by military means entirely different from the Rajput methods of warfare and his reply to Dattaji's suicidal approach to war is interesting:

> Do as you have spoken but do not have the women and children killed. Such a deed was done once or twice by the kings of the Shaka people and in Hindustan the rajas of Bundi and Kota who are Hada Rajputs might do such things. But for Marathas the bonds of family affection are never broken and such things cannot be done. It would be best if you send them on their way, but if not we will send away our own families.

Maratha and Afghan

While the cultural differences between the Marathas and Rajputs are underlined clearly by the author of the *Bhau Bakhar* the text also refers to the code of Hindustan and the Mughal way of warfare with the intention of highlighting the differences between the military culture of the Marathas and north Indians. However, the characteristics of the Afghans are noted specially to drive home the point about their military efficiency. The point about the Afghans being disciplined

[14]Ibid., (1984), p.45; (1990), pp. 97-98.

warriors is made in the following, rather exaggerated, description of Ahmad Shah's sacking of Ballabhgarh. Further, we must not miss the memory of Nadir Shah's occupation of Delhi and his infamous *qatl-e-aam* [general massacre] of Delhi's inhabitants in 1739 resonating in the following description offered by our source:

> The Giljiyas had great discipline. They slew ten thousand in the city. There was uproar everywhere and the city was destroyed. There was greater destruction even than before when Nadirshah came. Then Abdul Ali Durrani came to the Juma Masjid and began his prayers according to his religion when petitioners came to him saying, 'There is fighting in the city and many Durranis have been slain.' At that time Najibkhan Rohila and Samaidkhan Katalbaj were with him, and Abdul Ali, looking upon their faces, half drew a scimitar that he wore and placed it by him and immediately the cry went up, 'Slay!'. Then there was such a slaughter that there was no thought just to kill men! Men, women, children, donkeys, dogs, and cows all at hand were killed. And so the massacre continued for one and half hours. Then Abdul Ali completed his worship and put back into its sheath the sword that he had drawn, and as he sheathed it the cry was sounded, 'Cease!' The Giljiyas discipline is strict. As soon as the order is given they must desist, even though the knife is at the throat. In an hour and half eighteen thousand men were murdered.[15]

At another place the organized killing of Marathas fleeing the battlefield by the Afghans is recounted in detail. This time the context is the failed attempt by a Maratha detachment to prevent the Durranis from crossing the Jamuna near Panipat to join the Rohilla and Awadhi forces stationed in the Doab in 1759. As Ahmad Shah retreated towards the river on his way to a rendezvous with Najibkhan in Miranpur, the Marathas thought that the Durrani army was shying away from battle. The Durranis, having sent their baggage train across the Jamuna near

[15] Ibid., (1984), p.19; (1990), pp. 39-40.

Panipat, assembled a 'light force of twenty five thousand men' with chosen artillery comprising a few hundred *shaturnals* and camel mounted rockets as a rearguard near the river. This rearguard met the Maratha advance guard led by the cavalry, intent on inflicting a serious defeat on Ahmad Shah, on the marshy right bank of the Jamuna. The strength of the rearguard surprised the Marathas who were pulverized by the mobile Afghan artillery neatly camouflaged by the bushy terrain. Soon the ill-organized and over confident Marathas, ignorant of the topography where the battle occurred, broke and started running back towards the main army led by Dattaji Shinde:

> So the flight began, whereupon the Giljiyas pursued them and started to lop off the heads of the Maratha men like a farmer reaps the ears of millet with his sickle. The Giljiyas were beside themselves, making three parts of each body. One in front would strike off the head, another would come behind collecting them on the end of a spear and then would present them before the commander. They would receive a prize of five rupees per head and then one of them would cut off the nose. In this way dishonoring the body in three ways they took off the heads of two and a half thousand good men.[16]

These heads were then assembled in a huge mound like 'dry cow dung cakes' on a platform. At other places, following memories of well known Timurid practices, the source refers to the Durranis making huge mounds of such heads. The fact that this was an effective way of terrorizing and demoralizing the enemy is attested to by the *Bhau Bakhar*. A day after the above mentioned battle, when Dattaji Shinde picked up enough courage to visit the abandoned camp of Ahmad Shah, tears came into Dattaji's eyes when he saw the stack of two and a half thousand heads. The gory sight also provoked a great deal of mourning in the army. In contrast to the Afghan practice, the Marathas don't seem to have offered cash incentives for bringing in enemy heads.

Experienced Maratha warriors who had fought the Nizam and Afghans knew the military difference between the two. On the other

[16] Ibid., (1984), p.43; (1990), pp. 39-40.

hand the new ones who had come from the Deccan with Bhau, and had fought the Mughal style armies of the Nizam paid a dear price for their ignorance and overconfidence. Before the campaign of 1760, Bhau had never been to Hindustan, and only had the victory over the Nizam in the battle of Udgir (1760) to his credit. The description of a military engagement in which twelve-hundred Maratha scouts lost their lives because of their ignorance of the Afghan way of warfare preceding the Third Battle of Panipat makes all this clear. This incident, which seems to have started the demoralization of the Maratha high command, happened when Ahmad Shah crossed the Jamuna near Panipat and blocked Bhau's retreat to Delhi from Kunjpura:

> Afterwards Baji Hari and Bhagvantrao Kadam and Yesaji Bhoite who was with Shinde were sent out with five or six thousand men as a scouting party. They departed and halted at a place where the Durrani army was five kos away. They too had never seen the enemy's face and without any order they threw down their saddle-cloths and sat smoking their hubble-bubbles. Some began to graze their horses in the fields of millet. Some went to sleep. Seeing all this Yesaji Bhoite said to them, 'You are come as scouts and the Giljiya is five kos away from here. Having heard this do you sit here calmly? These are not Moguls from the Desh! The Durrani raids are sudden. Do not be careless.' Then they all shrugged off his words and striking hand one with another made jokes against him saying. 'The troops of Shinde and Holkar have taken fright. Whatever things they say are spoken out of cowardice.' Then hearing this Yesaji Bhoite kept silent and sent one of his good men in a tree as a look-out and himself mounted his horse and stood to. Then all at once the look-out began to cry out from the tree, 'A crowd of horsemen is coming two kos away from here. I can see their dust.' The moment that he said this, the Shinde soldiers, being experienced, hastily mounted their horses and once again they advised the others that they should quickly mount up. And again they mocked them, biding their time and remaining as they were.

> Then they saw the dust, and Yesaji Bhoite abandoned that place and began to flee in the direction of the main army. Then all at once the cavalry force itself was seen and in great confusion they went to find their horses. Then he alone was mounted who was alert and whose horse was near. The rest were not allowed to reach their horses before the Giljiyas were amongst them, and they had taken an oath that they would cut off and take the head of any man that they could seize. So as the soldiers under Baji Hari began to flee at full gallop towards the army, the Giljiyas mingled with them and came on until they could see the main standard of the camp. When they saw the standard the Durranis turned back. At that time the heads of twelve hundred men of the scouting party were lopped off and taken. When this news was known in the army their hearts sank and Bhausaheb's resolution to go to Delhi was ended.[17]

Concluding remarks

Maratha history and the 1761 Panipat battle play an important role in the nationalist, communal, and 'revisionist' interpretations of pre-colonial Indian history. Randolf Cooper, for instance, makes light of the military differences between the Marathas and Afghans in his revisionist thesis. According to him the Marathas, who had modernized their method of warfare under Baji Rao I, starved themselves into weakness, illness, and defeat at Panipat.[18] This goes against the views of scholars like Jos Gommans, who have explained the Maratha defeat at Panipat with reference to the technological and methodical superiority of the Afghans. This paper suggests that the Maratha defeats in 1760 and 1761 cannot be adequately explained in the revisionist framework accepted by Cooper. In the eighteenth-century, the Maratha military confronted a variety of enemies and was influenced by them. The Marathas also observed the efficacy of the European trained Indian battalions which began to play an important role in the wars of the eighteenth-century

[17]Ibid., (1984), p.47; (1990), pp. 159-60.
[18]For details see Randolf G. S. Cooper, *The Anglo-Maratha Campaigns and the Contest for India: The Struggle for Control of the South Asian Military Economy* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

from the 1740s onwards. The admiration the Marathas developed for the French trained 'guard' battalions of Ibrahim Khan *Gardi* is recorded in the sources. After the Battle of Udgir (1760), Ibrahim Khan, till then in the service of the Nizam, joined the Marathas and fought well at Panipat. Several of his relatives were killed in the battle and he was wounded seriously. Captured by the Afghans his wounds were poisoned and he died a few days later. For a long time the expansion of Maratha power into north India in the eighteenth-century has been understood in the simplistic Hindu-Muslim binary, which characterizes the Indian imagination of the medieval period in general. The matter of social identity, in fact, was rather problematic in medieval India and cannot adequately be explained in contemporary communal terms. The celebration of anniversaries and iconography connected with the Maratha 'sacrifice' at Panipat in 1761 reinforce popular views of that battle and strengthen Hindu nationalism to the detriment of secular values in Indian society. *These views conveniently ignore the fact that moments before the battle commenced Ahmad Shah's envoy approached the Marathas in the hope of resolving the issue with a treaty. This envoy was turned back.* In Pune's *Shanivarwada* a plaque on the ruins of Bhau's living quarter, attracting the attention of hundreds of tourists every day proclaims Sadashiva Rao Bhau a martyr in the national cause! Had commanders like Dattaji Shinde, who had converted completely to the Rajput notion of *kshatriyadharma*, or Sadashiva Rao Bhau, who was confident of winning set piece modern battles, listened to wise council, India would have had only two battles of Panipat. Hopefully this paper has offered a corrective to the nationalist, communal, and revisionist views of Maratha military culture in the eighteenth-century by presenting a fresh and critical reading of the chief Marathi source for the Maratha campaigns in north India of the concerned period.

This paper does not deny the role of religion in Indian history, in search of a secular utopia in the past, but it claims that the past can be recovered by the modern historian in terms which necessarily need not be either communal or secular. If the past was communal, Ibrahim Khan, also a Durrani, would have defected to the Afghans, and ascetic *Gossain* warriors would not have fought alongside the Rohilla and Awadh forces. My argument follows the observation that religious 'identities played some role in determining the nature of solidarities and networks, but were by no means the sole factor to be taken into consideration' in

medieval India.[19] During the eighteenth-century the Brahman Peshwa and the Maratha *Sardars* increasingly projected Maratha power into north India despite their differences. Military prowess was a route to upward social mobility and the gaining of *kshatriya* status for many 'Maratha' clans. In this process the Maratha army and way of warfare witnessed several changes, while a large number of Marathas became affected by the military virtues of their adversaries. But to assume that this was the only process which influenced the Marathas would be wrong because among the Marathas were men like Naro Shankar and women like Bhagirathi Bai, who openly expressed their unhappiness to affected leaders like Dattaji Shinde in the words quoted above. Among the Maratha ranks there was no dearth of experienced men and women who were conscious of the cultural and organizational differences between the Marathas, Rajputs, and Afghans. Our interesting and multilayered source, which somehow seems unaffected by the politics of nationalism, tells us that such men and women knew that the code of Hindustan was different from the Maratha way of conducting the business of everyday life and warfare, and the rise of the Marathas was predicated upon this difference. The rise and fall of Maratha power (1650-1818) clearly reveals the limitations of cultural and military *emulation*.

[19]Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Career and Legend of Vasco Da Gama*, (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press , 1998), p. 109.