The Maratha Empire, founded by Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj in the 17th century, emerged as a powerful force in India, significantly reshaping the subcontinent’s

political landscape. Following Shivaji's death in 1680, his son Sambhaji Maharaj ascended the throne. Sambhaji inherited his father's legacy but faced relentless opposition from the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, who sought to crush the Marathas. Despite his valor, Sambhaji was captured by the Mughals in 1689 and brutally executed. His death was a severe blow to the Marathas, but it also ignited a wave of patriotic resistance. Under the leadership of Rajaram Maharaj, Shivaji's younger son, and later his widow, Tarabai, the Marathas waged a fierce guerrilla war, which came to be known as the Maratha War of Independence. Tarabai's resilience and strategic prowess enabled the Marathas to continue fighting against the Mughals, keeping the dream of a sovereign Maratha state alive.

During the early 18th century, the Marathas expanded their influence under the leadership of the Peshwas, who became the de facto rulers of the empire. The Peshwa era marked a period of significant growth and consolidation for the Marathas. Balaji Vishwanath, the first Peshwa, laid the foundation for administrative reforms and military reorganization. His son, Baji Rao I, who served as Peshwa from 1720 to 1740, played a key role in transforming the Marathas into a dominant power. Baji Rao I was a brilliant military strategist known for his swift cavalry movements and unconventional warfare tactics. His campaigns expanded the Maratha influence into Malwa, Gujarat, Bundelkhand, and parts of Central India. His famous military expeditions, including the Battle of Palkhed (1728) against the Nizam of Hyderabad, showcased his tactical brilliance and solidified Maratha supremacy.

The Maratha Empire reached its zenith under Peshwa Balaji Baji Rao, also known as Nana Saheb. During his reign, the Marathas extended their influence across northern and southern India, becoming the dominant power in the region. The Marathas played a crucial role in containing Nadir Shah's invasion of Delhi in 1739 and later challenged Ahmad Shah Abdali during the Third Battle of Panipat in 1761. Despite their eventual defeat at Panipat, the Marathas remained a formidable force. The battle was a tragic setback, resulting in the loss of thousands of Maratha warriors. However, the defeat did not diminish their power entirely. The Marathas regrouped under Madhav Rao I, whose leadership brought stability and revival to the empire.

The Maratha administration was remarkably efficient and decentralized, which enabled them to govern vast territories effectively. The Ashta Pradhan Mandal (Council of Eight Ministers), introduced by Shivaji, was retained during the Peshwa era but was further expanded to include regional and administrative heads. The Peshwa served as the Prime Minister, overseeing the administration and leading military campaigns. The Senapati (Commander-in-Chief) managed the military, while the Amatya handled finance and taxation. The Marathas implemented a revenue collection system known as Chauth and Sardeshmukhi. Chauth was a 25% tax levied on territories under Maratha protection, while Sardeshmukhi was an additional 10% levy, serving as a tribute to the Maratha rulers.

The Maratha military was one of the most formidable forces of the time. Known for their swift cavalry, they employed hit-and-run tactics and conducted deep raids into enemy territories. Their cavalry units, known as Bargirs and Siladars, were highly mobile and could cover vast distances in short spans, making them effective in surprise attacks. The Marathas also maintained a standing infantry and a growing artillery force. During the Peshwa era, they adopted European-style artillery, hiring French and Portuguese mercenaries to modernize their army. Their ability to adapt and innovate in warfare allowed them to challenge larger and better-equipped armies, including those of the Mughals, Nizams, and the British.

The Maratha Navy, established by Chhatrapati Shivaji, played a crucial role in defending the western coastline. The naval fleet, led by commanders like Kanhoji Angre, became a significant force in the Arabian Sea. The Maratha Navy successfully disrupted European colonial trade routes, particularly targeting Portuguese and British ships. Kanhoji Angre's naval dominance forced the British and the Portuguese to enter into treaties with the Marathas. The Marathas also constructed several coastal forts, including Sindhudurg, Vijaydurg, and Kolaba, to strengthen their naval defense.

Culturally, the Maratha Empire played a vital role in promoting regional languages, literature, and architecture. During the Peshwa era, Marathi literature and poetry flourished. Scholars and poets composed works celebrating Maratha valor and history. The Marathas also made significant contributions to temple architecture, restoring and building temples that were destroyed or desecrated during earlier invasions. The construction of Shaniwar Wada in Pune, the Peshwa’s residence, is a testament to their architectural excellence.

The Maratha Empire's influence extended beyond Maharashtra, shaping the politics of North and South India. Their conquests brought large parts of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Karnataka under Maratha control. They established regional governors, known as Sardars, who managed local administration. The Holkars of Indore, Scindias of Gwalior, Gaekwads of Baroda, and Bhonsales of Nagpur became powerful Maratha dynasties, governing different regions.

Despite their dominance, the Maratha Empire began to decline in the early 19th century, primarily due to internal conflicts and the rising power of the British East India Company. The Anglo-Maratha Wars (1775–1818) weakened the Marathas significantly. The First Anglo-Maratha War (1775–1782) ended with the Treaty of Salbai, which temporarily preserved Maratha sovereignty. However, the Second Anglo-Maratha War (1803–1805) saw the British gaining control over key Maratha territories. The Third Anglo-Maratha War (1817–1818) marked the final blow, leading to the defeat of the Peshwa Bajirao II. The British annexed most of the Maratha territories, effectively ending the empire.

Although the Maratha Empire formally ended in 1818, its legacy continued to inspire future generations