

NOTE TO PRINCETON: This research essay got a 210/200. This grade also includes the presentation of this paper in front of the class. I was told by a Princeton Undergraduate Admission Officer that the combined grade is fine as long as I mention that it included the presentation.

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Causes of British Victory in the Anglo-Maratha Wars

Though the British took control of India through a long saga of wars, arguably the most crucial phase of the conquest was the series of Anglo-Maratha Wars. Credible evidence proves that the British won the Anglo-Maratha Wars due to minor strategic advantages, but mostly because of a favorable geopolitical situation and superior unity than the Marathas.

Around the time the British became a significant force in India, the Maratha Empire went through rapid change after the Third Battle of Panipat. Massive swaths of territory in northern India were lost by the Marathas to various princely states. Even in the northern areas they still controlled, there was significant instability. The most significant effect of Panipat was the loss of some of the Maratha Empire's greatest potential leaders such as Sadashiv Bhau Peshwa (Bunting and Kerrigan). In the same era, the British had expanded greatly. Furthermore, because the East India Company had been trading internationally since the 1600s, it consistently grew in wealth as “[i]ts business flooded England with affordable tea ... and richly rewarded its London investors” (Roos). Thus, the company soon defeated the Nawab of Bengal in the Battle of Buxar. Victory over Bengal was significant as there was no one left in the eastern part of India who could challenge them (Cartwright). Impressed by the victory, the British government also passed the India Act. This act “formally included the British government in ruling over the East India Company’s land holdings in India” (Roos). Therefore, even before any direct conflict, it was

clear that there was a decline in the power of the Maratha Empire and a great increase in the power of the British.

It is often believed that the British won India because of absolute superiority in military technology and strategy. However this narrative was crafted by the British, and a credible analysis of the war proves that “[w]hile the British undoubtedly won the war, it was ... by no means such an easy victory as conventional ... British historiography has made [people] believe for two centuries” (Mann). The reality of military technology and strategy in the war was a lot more nuanced. The British indeed had technological superiority in some realms. For example, British guns were of a much superior quality. This was due to many reasons. For instance, Maratha “gun barrels were not made with a standard diameter and round shot had to be hammered to fit them, a practice that both precluded accurate aim and rapidly spoiled the smoothness of the bore” (Pemble 380). On the other hand, Maratha artillery was superior to the British by a significant margin. For instance, in the Battle of Assaye, “[M]aratha volume and variety of firepower created virtual killing fields for the EIC armies” (Deshpande 329). Therefore, it is clear that no one side had any definite superiority in military technology. Furthermore, the nature of military strategies in the war was also complex. Though the Marathas had superior artillery, this cost them their agility on the battlefield (Pemble 390). Furthermore, due to Panipat, the Marathas had begun to recruit foreigners into the military. At one point the Maratha Infantry was so saturated with foreigners that it began to significantly demoralize the military (Pemble 392).

Soon after Panipat, the Maratha Empire descended into political turmoil, and the British seized this opportunity to strike. For about a decade after the Battle of Panipat, Madhav Rao Peshwa led the empire skillfully and “sent a large Maratha army into North India to ...

re-establish Maratha domination” (“Third Battle of Panipat”). After the death of Madhav Rao Peshwa, the empire suffered through fatal political disorder. In hopes of becoming the next Peshwa, Raghunath Rao assassinated the temporary successor of Madhav Rao. This led to him being exiled by the empire. Thirsty for power, he allied with the British through the Treaty of Surat. According to the treaty, the British would provide him with soldiers so that he could be the Peshwa in exchange for the territory of Vasai and money. Initially, the British suffered heavy losses against the Marathas. Eventually, the governor-general of India realized that it was impossible to defeat the Maratha Empire as a whole. Therefore, the British began concentrating all their military might against Mahadji Shinde. Due to no collaboration between the dynasties of the Maratha Empire, the British quickly defeated the Shindes. Furthermore, the British offered to return all their territories if the Shindes negotiated with the Peshwas on behalf of the British. Due to this, Mahadji Shinde crafted the Treaty of Salbai. According to the treaty, Salsette and Bharuch would be given to the British and the British would officially recognize Sawaii Madhav Rao as the new Peshwa (“Anglo-Maratha Wars”). Though this war ended in an overall Maratha victory, its significance to British victory is that it highlighted the deep cracks in the Maratha Empire. In fact, “the actions of almost all the Maratha chiefs seemed to be dictated more by personal and dynastic ambitions than by patriotism” (Nanda). In the coming years, Baji Rao II became the next Peshwa which resulted in more animosity between the dynasties. He used British support to defeat his rivals, the Holkars. After that, he attempted to defeat the British by himself, though he had no chance of success due to the other dynasties being defeated, and suffered his final defeat (“Anglo-Maratha Wars”). By analyzing these events, it is clear that the main reason the British won was due to immensely better unity than the Marathas. As John Pemble puts it: “United leadership gave the British a degree of strategic coordination that was

precluded on the Maratha side by political divisions If the Maratha defeat be considered a penalty, it was the penalty not of military mistakes, but of faction, jealousy and selfish opportunism” (Pemble, 404).

Though they are not as well known, the Anglo-Maratha Wars were responsible for the prosperous future of Britain.

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