



Why Did the First Anglo-Maratha War Begin?

Description

The late 18th century marked a tumultuous period in [Indian history](#), characterized by the decline of established indigenous powers and the relentless ascent of the British East India Company. The Maratha Confederacy, once a formidable force that challenged Mughal supremacy, found itself grappling with internal dissensions at a time when external threats were becoming increasingly sophisticated and aggressive. It was in this complex landscape that the seeds of the First Anglo-Maratha War were sown, a conflict that would test the Maratha strength and reveal the strategic ambitions of the British.

This period is critical for understanding the mechanics of British expansion beyond trade into direct political and military intervention. The British, operating from their presidencies, frequently exploited existing fault lines within Indian polities. The Marathas, despite their reputation, were not immune to this vulnerability. Their intricate power structure, with the Peshwa at its head and powerful sardars like the Scindias, Holkars, Gaekwads, and Bhonsles, often led to factional struggles. These internal rifts ultimately provided fertile ground for British interference, pulling them into the heart of Maratha affairs.

Maratha Succession Crisis and Internal Divisions

The Maratha Confederacy, a powerful and decentralized empire, faced a significant leadership vacuum and severe internal strife following the death of Peshwa Madhav Rao I in 1772. Madhav Rao I was a capable ruler who had largely restored Maratha prestige after the devastating Third Battle of Panipat. His premature death at a young age plunged the confederacy into a succession crisis.

His successor was his younger brother, Narayan Rao. However, Narayan Rao's reign was short-lived and tragic. In 1773, he was assassinated, an event for which his uncle, Raghunath Rao (often referred to as Raghoba), was widely suspected and implicated. Raghunath Rao, being the uncle of the deceased Peshwa and a claimant to the Peshwa-ship himself, quickly ascended to the position.

Raghunath Rao's claim was, however, challenged by a powerful faction of Maratha chiefs and administrators known as the 'Barbhais' or the Twelve Brothers. This regency council was led by the astute minister Nana Fadnavis and the formidable military leader Mahadji Scindia. Their opposition

to Raghunath Rao was multifaceted, stemming from his alleged involvement in Narayan Rao's murder and their desire to maintain control over the central administration. The Barbhais put forward a legitimate heir: Madhav Rao II, Narayan Rao's posthumous son, who was born shortly after his father's death. This meant that Raghunath Rao was effectively viewed as a usurper by a powerful section of the Maratha establishment.

The legitimacy of Madhav Rao II's claim, supported by the Barbhais, directly threatened Raghunath Rao's position. Faced with significant internal opposition and fearing for his authority, Raghunath Rao found himself in a precarious situation. He needed external support to secure his claim against the unified front of the Barbhais. This desperation became a critical factor in inviting foreign intervention, a miscalculation that would ultimately have profound consequences for the Maratha state.

The Treaty of Surat (1775): A Direct British Intervention

In his desperate bid to retain power as the Peshwa, Raghunath Rao, having alienated many powerful Maratha chiefs, turned to the British for military assistance. His appeal was directed towards the British authorities at Bombay. The Bombay Council, under the leadership of its President, seemed eager to seize an opportunity for territorial gains and increased influence in western India.

The result of these negotiations was the Treaty of Surat, signed in March 1775. Under the terms of this agreement, Raghunath Rao promised to cede the strategic territories of Salsette and Bassein to the British East India Company. In return, the British agreed to provide him with military support, including a contingent of 2,500 men, to help him reclaim or solidify his position as the Peshwa at Poona. They also pledged to cover the expenses of this military operation.

From the perspective of the Bombay Council, this alliance was highly opportunistic. Acquiring Salsette and Bassein was a long-held ambition, as these territories offered significant strategic advantages, including control over valuable ports and trade routes along the Konkan coast. This point needs attention: the British were not merely responding to a plea; they were actively seeking expansion opportunities. They saw Raghunath Rao's vulnerability as a chance to achieve their territorial and commercial objectives under the guise of supporting a legitimate claimant. The treaty thus formalized British intervention into the internal affairs of the Maratha Confederacy, setting the stage for direct conflict.

Calcutta Council's Response and the Treaty of Purandar (1776)

The actions of the Bombay Council in concluding the Treaty of Surat with Raghunath Rao did not go unchallenged within the British administrative structure in India. At this stage, one issue becomes clear: the central authority of the British East India Company was vested in the Governor-General and Council in Calcutta. This body, headed by Warren Hastings, possessed overriding authority over the other presidencies, including Bombay, especially concerning matters of war and peace.

The Calcutta Council strongly disapproved of the Treaty of Surat. Their objections were based on several grounds. Firstly, the Bombay Council had acted independently, without seeking the approval or sanction of Calcutta. This was a direct challenge to the central authority established by the Regulating

Act of 1773. Secondly, the Calcutta Council viewed the treaty as an expensive and potentially risky entanglement in a complex internal Maratha dispute, one that could lead to a prolonged and costly war. They also doubted the military efficacy of supporting Raghunath Rao, who had already demonstrated limited popular support among the Marathas.

To rectify what they saw as an unauthorized and ill-conceived move, the Calcutta Council dispatched Colonel Upton to Poona. His mission was to negotiate directly with the Barbhai government, bypassing the Bombay Council's arrangement with Raghunath Rao. The negotiations culminated in the Treaty of Purandar, signed in March 1776.

Under the terms of the Treaty of Purandar, the Calcutta Council effectively nullified the Treaty of Surat. It stipulated that the British would cease to support Raghunath Rao and would offer him a pension instead. In return, the British were permitted to retain Salsette, a valuable island near Bombay, but Bassein was to be restored to the Marathas. Crucially, the treaty recognized Madhav Rao II as the legitimate Peshwa, thereby aligning British policy with the dominant Maratha faction. This agreement reflected Calcutta's attempt to restore diplomatic decorum and avoid a full-scale war, while still securing some territorial gains.

The Treaty of Salbai (1782): Conclusion of the First War

Despite the Treaty of Purandar, which aimed to disengage the British from direct support of Raghunath Rao, the conflict continued sporadically for several years. The British found themselves drawn back into hostilities due to persistent Maratha refusal to fully comply with all aspects of the Purandar agreement, particularly regarding Raghunath Rao's pension, and renewed interference by the Bombay Council which still harboured ambitions in the region. Notable military engagements, such as the Battle of Wadgaon in 1779, where a British force was decisively defeated, further complicated the situation and pushed for a more comprehensive settlement.

By 1782, both sides had compelling reasons to seek an end to the protracted and costly conflict. For the British, the war in India was an unwelcome drain on resources, especially given their involvement in the American War of Independence and ongoing conflicts with Mysore under Hyder Ali. A multi-front war was unsustainable. The Maratha Confederacy, too, was weary. While they had largely held their own, the constant internal tensions and the economic burden of war strained their resources.

The negotiations for a lasting peace were skillfully mediated by Mahadji Scindia, one of the most powerful and pragmatic Maratha chiefs. He played a crucial role in bringing the various Maratha factions to an agreement and in interacting with the British. The result was the Treaty of Salbai, signed in May 1782 by Warren Hastings on behalf of the British and Mahadji Scindia on behalf of the Maratha Confederacy.

The Treaty of Salbai brought a formal end to the First Anglo-Maratha War. Its key provisions were:

- **End of Hostilities:** The treaty established a twenty-year period of peace between the British East India Company and the Maratha Confederacy. This allowed both sides a crucial respite to focus on other matters.
- **Territorial Adjustments:** The British retained control over Salsette, an island close to Bombay that they had gained earlier. However, they agreed to return Bassein and all other territories

conquered during the war to the Marathas.

- **Raghunath Rao's Fate:** Raghunath Rao was granted a generous pension by the British and was required to retire from political life. He was to live peacefully at Kopargaon. This removed the primary catalyst for British intervention in Maratha internal affairs.
- **Peshwa Recognition:** The British officially recognized Madhav Rao II as the legitimate Peshwa of the Maratha Confederacy.
- **Mutual Restitution:** All other conquered territories were to be returned to their pre-war owners.
- **Mysore:** The Marathas recognized the British right to control their claims over Mysore and promised not to support Tipu Sultan against the British.

The Treaty of Salbai was a significant diplomatic achievement. It did not result in a clear victory for either side but established a balance of power for two decades. For the British, it consolidated their hold on Salsette and provided a period of peace to focus on Mysore. For the Marathas, it preserved their independence and the integrity of their confederacy for a substantial period, though it also confirmed British capacity for intervention.

The Treaty of Bassein (1802) and British Dominance

While the Treaty of Salbai concluded the First Anglo-Maratha War in 1782, it did not permanently resolve the underlying power struggle or prevent future British expansion. The Maratha Confederacy, despite the peace, continued to be plagued by internal feuds among its most powerful sardars—the Scindias, Holkars, Bhonsles, and the Gaekwads. These rivalries, often erupting into open warfare, critically weakened the central authority of the Peshwa and the overall cohesion of the Confederacy.

The death of Nana Fadnavis in 1800 removed a strong unifying force within the Maratha leadership. His demise led to an intensification of the power struggles, particularly between Daulat Rao Scindia and Jaswant Rao Holkar. The reigning Peshwa, Bajji Rao II, who succeeded Madhav Rao II, proved to be an indecisive and weak ruler, unable to control his powerful subordinates. His attempts to play off one chief against another often backfired, further destabilizing the situation.

In 1802, the rivalry between Scindia and Holkar escalated into a major conflict. Holkar's forces defeated Scindia and the Peshwa's combined armies at Poona. Bajji Rao II, feeling cornered and fearing for his life and position, fled to Bassein, seeking refuge and protection from the British. This desperation provided the British with the ultimate opportunity to establish their paramountcy over the Maratha heartland. Now this becomes important.

In December 1802, Bajji Rao II signed the Treaty of Bassein with the British East India Company. This treaty was a landmark event that fundamentally altered the balance of power in India and paved the way for British dominance. Its key provisions included:

- **Subsidiary Alliance:** Bajji Rao II formally accepted the Subsidiary Alliance system, becoming a British protégé. This meant he had to disband his own army and accept a permanent British subsidiary force stationed within his territory (at Poona) for his protection.
- **Cession of Territory:** To pay for the maintenance of this British force, the Peshwa ceded territories worth 26 lakh rupees annually to the Company.
- **Foreign Relations:** The Peshwa surrendered control over his foreign relations. He agreed not to enter into any alliance or engage in war with other powers without prior consultation and consent.

of the British government.

- **Arbitration:** The Peshwa agreed to refer all disputes with the Nizam of Hyderabad and the Gaekwad of Baroda to the British for arbitration.
- **Renunciation of Claims:** He renounced his claims on the city of Surat and other British territories.

The Treaty of Bassein marked the effective end of Maratha independence. While the First Anglo-Maratha War concluded with a stalemate in Salbai, the Treaty of Bassein twenty years later was a clear victory for British strategic ambitions. It positioned a British force at the very heart of the Maratha Confederacy, gave them control over the Peshwa's foreign policy, and ensured a continuous revenue stream. This treaty was a critical step towards the establishment of British supremacy in India, triggering the Second Anglo-Maratha War as other Maratha chiefs resisted this erosion of their autonomy.

UPSC Perspective

Prelims focus

For the Prelims examination, a precise recall of facts is essential. Questions often test direct knowledge of treaties, their dates, key signatories, and major territorial changes. Understanding the sequence of events and the specific roles of individuals is crucial for success.

- **Key treaties and dates:** Treaty of Surat (1775), Treaty of Purandar (1776), Treaty of Salbai (1782), Treaty of Bassein (1802).
- **Signatories:** Raghunath Rao with Bombay Council (Surat); Calcutta Council (Colonel Upton) with Maratha Regency (Purandar); Warren Hastings and Mahadji Scindia (Salbai); Baji Rao II and British (Bassein).
- **Territorial changes:** Salsette and Bassein promised to British (Surat); Salsette retained, Bassein restored (Purandar); Salsette to British, Bassein restored, other conquests returned (Salbai); Cession of territory for subsidiary force (Bassein).

Mains focus

The Mains examination requires a deeper analytical understanding of the historical processes, causes, and consequences. It assesses a candidate's ability to interpret events within a broader historical context and evaluate their long-term impact.

- **Analysis of the causes of the war:** Examine the intertwining factors of Maratha internal succession disputes, British opportunism, and the strategic objectives of the British East India Company.
- **Role of Maratha internal conflicts:** Analyze how the power struggles between Raghunath Rao and the Barbhais, and later between various Maratha sardars, provided fertile ground for British intervention and eventual dominance.
- **Strategic importance of the treaties:** Evaluate how each treaty, from Surat to Bassein, incrementally contributed to the British ascendancy, even if not immediately apparent in treaties like Salbai.

- **Contribution to the expansion of British paramountcy:** Discuss how the First Anglo-Maratha War, despite its inconclusive military outcome, set precedents for British interference and ultimately paved the way for mechanisms like the Subsidiary Alliance to secure dominance without direct conquest every time.
- **Mechanisms like the Subsidiary Alliance:** Critically analyze how the Subsidiary Alliance, finally accepted by the Peshwa in Bassein, effectively stripped Indian rulers of their sovereignty and integrated their states into the British imperial system.

Common Student Confusion

Students often face difficulties in distinguishing between the various treaties involved in the Anglo-Maratha Wars, understanding the specific roles of different British authorities, and contextualizing later treaties.

- **Confusing the various treaties (Surat, Purandar, Salbai, Bassein) regarding their specific terms and chronology.**
 - **Misunderstanding:** Students might mix up which treaty promised what territory or who signed which agreement. They may also struggle with the precise sequence of these events.
 - **Correction:** Remember the sequence: Surat (1775, Raghunath Rao seeks help, offers Salsette/Bassein to Bombay), then Purandar (1776, Calcutta disapproves, nullifies Surat, keeps Salsette, recognizes Madhav Rao II), then Salbai (1782, ends the First War, Salsette to British, Bassein to Marathas, Raghunath Rao pensioned), and finally Bassein (1802, Peshwa Baji Rao II accepts Subsidiary Alliance after flight from Poona). Each treaty represents a distinct stage in British-Maratha relations.
- **Misunderstanding the distinct roles of the Bombay Council and Calcutta Council in the initial phase of the conflict.**
 - **Misunderstanding:** Students sometimes fail to grasp that there were internal conflicts within the British administration, believing the Company acted as a single, unified entity.
 - **Correction:** The Bombay Council acted on its own initiative in signing the Treaty of Surat, driven by local territorial ambitions. The Calcutta Council, led by the Governor-General, held superior authority and intervened to override Bombay's actions, seeking a more cautious and centrally approved policy, leading to the Treaty of Purandar. This demonstrates the evolving central control of the British East India Company, particularly after the Regulating Act of 1773.
- **Struggling to place the Treaty of Bassein, which occurred after the First Anglo-Maratha War, within the broader context of British-Maratha relations and the eventual establishment of British dominance.**
 - **Misunderstanding:** The Treaty of Bassein happened 20 years after the First Anglo-Maratha War ended, leading students to sometimes detach it from the narrative of British expansion against the Marathas.

- **Correction:** While Bassein did not end the First War, it is critically important for understanding the ultimate British victory over the Marathas. It represents the culmination of British strategic efforts to divide and conquer, exploiting persistent Maratha internal weaknesses. By accepting the Subsidiary Alliance, Peshwa Baji Rao II effectively surrendered Maratha sovereignty, setting the stage for the Second and Third Anglo-Maratha Wars which saw the complete subjugation of the Confederacy. It was a diplomatic triumph for the British that secured their paramountcy.

Short Revision Points

- Primary cause: British interference in Maratha succession dispute between Raghunath Rao and Madhav Rao II.
- Treaty of Surat (1775): Raghunath Rao allied with Bombay Council, promising Bassein and Salsette.
- Treaty of Purandar (1776): Signed by Calcutta Council, rejecting Surat, recognizing Madhav Rao II.
- Treaty of Salbai (1782): Ended the war, signed by Warren Hastings and Mahadji Scindia; Salsette to British; Bassein restored; Raghunath Rao pensioned.
- Treaty of Bassein (1802): Baji Rao II accepted Subsidiary Alliance; a critical step towards British supremacy in India.

FAQs

1. What was the primary cause of the First Anglo-Maratha War?

The primary cause was British intervention in the Maratha succession dispute between Raghunath Rao and the legitimate heir, Madhav Rao II, following the assassination of Peshwa Narayan Rao.

2. Which two British councils were involved in the early treaties of the war?

The Bombay Council signed the Treaty of Surat, and the Calcutta Council (under Warren Hastings) later intervened, sending Colonel Upton to sign the Treaty of Purandar.

3. What were the key provisions of the Treaty of Salbai?

The Treaty of Salbai ended the First Anglo-Maratha War, granting Salsette to the British, restoring Bassein to the Marathas, pensioning Raghunath Rao, and establishing a twenty-year peace.