A NOTE ON THE PANIPAT DISASTER

BY V. RAGHAVENDRA RAO, M.A., B.T.

(Department of History)

That the Peshwa Balaji Baji Rao was culpably indifferent to the north, that he was at that time engaged in marriage negotiations and other similar charges seem to do injustice to the great Peshwa who was responsible for the expansion of the Maratha power to the furthest limits from Attock to Rameswaram.

In fact, the Peshwa intended to go north. He was actually near Sironj in Malwa when he heard the news of the Panipat defeat. On the contrary he was requested by his brother Raghoba not to risk another expedition in the north since his constitution had been greatly impaired by old age and sickness (Purandhare Daftar, Pt. 1, p. 300 and Peshwa’s Daftar, I, pp. 10, 37). Yet he was the moving spirit in the Udgir Campaign. The Bhao was found consulting the Peshwa in the minutest details for guidance and orders. Raghoba also ever and anon sought for the lead and advice of the Peshwa. For nearly two decades Balaji Baji Rao had been leading a strenuous life, moving about inspecting his far-flung Empire. Indeed he was confident that the affairs of the north were in the best and safest of hands. There were found the impetuous Bhao, Sindhia, Holkar, Bundela and the Jats to fight for the cause of Maharashtra Dharma. Instead of indifference, the Peshwa was anxious for news from the Bhao, of further action by him. But the letters were all cut off or intercepted.

The state of the Deccan also forbade the Peshwa from giving his full undivided attention to the north. There was that irrepressible and ever elusive Nizam, who while speaking honeyed words to the Peshwa to carry out the terms of the Treaty of Udgir, was secretly negotiating with his brothers to maintain the prestige of the Mussalman by allying with his brothers against the Marathas (Pesh. D., 25, lettr. 283). He was evading the terms of the Treaty by raising flimsy objections. So Raghoba Dada was ordered, just one month after the Treaty, to be on his guard against sudden attack by the Nizam (Pesh. D., 25, lettr. 293 of Feb. 1760).

While Raghoba was encamped at Bijapur, the Nizam was levying contributions from the Peshwa’s domains (Pesh. D., 25–304). Salabat Jung was threatening the southern frontiers of the Marathas. Yet the latter were pitiably poor in funds for their urgent needs (Pesh. D., 25–304). “Kill or be killed” (mārave na marāve) was the tone of news received from the outpost.
Raghoba’s letter to his brother not to endanger his outworn constitution also gives another reason for the Peshwa not moving out of Maharashstra. He says: “All Deccan is awaiting to shake off our domination. Daily skirmishing is taking place. Our enemies are anxious for our defeat at the hands of the Abdali. The Siddis, the Nizam, the Mysorean and a host of others are eager for our downfall. Nizam Ali will unite all against us. He must be curbed first” (Pur. D., Pt. I, p. 301). Soon after the Nizam and Salabat Jung joined their forces to attack Raghoba. Thus the Nizam distracted the attention and divided the forces of the Peshwa in a critical period of his life and in the history of his nation.

Nor was Sadhāshiva Rao Bhao less qualified for a generalissimo. The son of the fearless Chimnaji Appa, he had been in the trenches for nearly fourteen years, whereas Dādā had only ten years of experience in the battlefield. The latest victory at Udgir was largely due to Bhao. No doubt, it was a blunder to dig himself in at Panipat, thus making a departure from the traditional, Ganim war. But Bhao did not forget the shock tactics of his nation. For this he had despatched Govind Pant and Malharji Holkar. Unfortunately the slowness of these two great warriors, who did not obey, implicitly the direction of the Bhao, ultimately ended in disaster, by giving time and space for the enemies to gather supplies and encircle the Marathas. If there had been sincere co-operation among the Maratha officers, history would have had a different tale to write.

The share of Govind Pant Bundela for this disaster was already discussed elsewhere (Proceedings of the All-India Oriental Conference, 1935). Now Malhar Rao Holkar’s contribution remains to be noticed. On hearing of the news of the arrival of Abdali, Jankoji Sindhia begged Holkar for immediate help, as early as November 1759. Instead of responding, Malhari Rao wasted his time in petty conquests. Then he received an order direct from the Peshwa to obey at once. Even this was disregarded by him (Rajwade Iti. Pr., p. 60).

Raghoba urged that if Sindhia and Holkar could only unite their forces, they would be irresistible in the whole of Hindustan. But that exactly was the trouble: the two would not co-operate (Rajwade, p. 60).

The only exonerating condition in their case was that both Holkar and Bundela were past 64 years; so they were unable to move about quickly. But their disloyalty and mutual hatred ultimately ruined the Maratha Empire.