



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

“Shivaji’s Maritime Siege: The Tactical Battle For Khanderi Against English And Siddis”

Dr Dolly Purohit
Postdoctoral Fellow
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New-Delhi

Abstract: This paper examines the strategic occupation of Khanderi Island by Shivaji Maharaj in 1679, highlighting the methods employed to secure the island amidst fierce maritime competition. By the 1660s, Shivaji had already established a formidable navy, transforming the regions of Kalyan and Bhiwandi into key dockyards, thereby securing a stronghold on the Konkan coast. These developments were crucial in realizing his vision of sovereignty over the sea. As Shivaji sought to consolidate his military and political control over the western coast, he encountered entrenched maritime powers, including the Siddis, Portuguese, English and Marathas, all vying for dominance. Among these, the Siddis, operating from the island fortress of Janjira, emerged as Shivaji’s most persistent adversaries, holding significant sway over the Indian Ocean. This study delves into the dynamics of Shivaji’s naval campaign against the Siddis, emphasizing the significance of Khanderi Island as a strategic outpost and exploring the broader implications of his maritime ambitions on regional power struggles in the 17th century.

Keywords: Khanderi, Maritime warfare, Coastal dominance, Shivaji’s military tactics, Siddis

Scholarship on early modern Indian Ocean maritime history has long privileged European naval technology, institutional organization and commercial expansion, often presenting indigenous polities as reactive or strategically limited performers. Studies of the Marathas have similarly emphasized territorial expansion and land-based warfare while naval initiatives are frequently treated as secondary or defensive responses to European pressure.¹ Within this framework, the Siddis have largely been portrayed as Mughal auxiliaries or European collaborators rather than as autonomous maritime powers with their own strategic interests.² Hence, this paper intervenes in this historiography by foregrounding Chattrapati Shivaji’s occupation of Khanderi as a consciously planned assertion of maritime sovereignty, aimed at reshaping coastal power relations near Bombay and Janjira. By reading Marathi *bakhar* narratives alongside English factory records and correspondence, the study demonstrates that the struggle over Khanderi was not a marginal episode but a critical moment in which indigenous naval strategy challenged European and Siddi dominance in the western Indian Ocean.³

Maratha Naval Ambitions

Shivaji Maharaj's ascent to prominence in the 17th century was not only limited to land-based victories but his aspirations also extended to the Sea, where he aimed to establish his sovereignty and oppose the dominant naval powers. Building a powerful naval fleet was one of his main objectives which started in the 1660s when the regions like Kalyan and Bhiwandi were converted into essential dockyards. These areas formed the groundwork for Shivaji's marine ambition in addition to offering a vital foothold on the Konkan coast. However, already established maritime powers like the Siddis, the Portuguese and the English, who all had a stake in dominating the western coast, fiercely opposed his ambition for naval supremacy.⁴ Among all these powers, the Siddis proved to be a great obstacle for Shivaji's ambitions. The Siddis, who were situated on the island of Janjira, had built up such a powerful navy that their influence extended over the entire Indian Ocean. As a result, the Marathas were constantly annoyed by their activities, since they considered Janjira to be an obstacle in their way of expansion.⁵

Khanderi and the Assertion of Maritime Sovereignty

Maritime sovereignty, in this context, refers not merely to territorial control but to the authority over coastal waters, ports and the movement of commercial and military vessels. The decision to fortify Khanderi must therefore be read as a calculated maritime policy rather than a defensive response to immediate threats. Shivaji's capture of Khanderi Island in 1679 was a turning point in the struggle for control of the sea, as it was quite clear that he now wanted to rule the sea and challenge the Siddis and European supremacy. Hence, the present study proposes that Shivaji's military move of taking and building the fort on Khanderi Island in 1679 was a victory for the Marathas over the other powers. Besides, the study posits that Shivaji's defense was just a cover for the purpose of a major military strategy which aimed at redressing the power of those maritime competitors, especially considering the strategic importance of Khanderi being so close to Bombay and Janjira. Furthermore, it suggests that the conflict over Khanderi highlights the intricate interplay between military force and diplomacy, as evidenced by the subsequent negotiations with the English and the ongoing contest for coastal control. By examining this naval campaign, the research seeks to explore how Shivaji's maritime ambitions contributed to the broader power dynamics in the western Indian Ocean during the late 17th century.

Throughout his life, Shivaji harboured the ambition of capturing the island fortress of Janjira from the Siddis yet this goal eluded him despite his persistent efforts. The continuous raids by the Siddis, combined with the unrest caused by the English presence in Bombay, exacerbated his frustration. As a consequence, he sought to establish a naval base in proximity to both Janjira and Bombay to counter these threats. Shivaji, after failing to capture Janjira, directed his next move towards Khanderi Island, which was near the south entrance of the Bombay port. The decision to occupy Khanderi was very strategic and deliberate. The island was located right on heavily travelled maritime route making it strategically important in terms of seafaring matters. It was desolate and mostly used for collecting firewood, thus opening up a unique opportunity for him. He recognized that by securing Khanderi, he could closely monitor the movements of ships, especially those of the Siddis, who took refuge in Mazagaon during the monsoon season and at the same time oversee the activities of his adversaries around the British-controlled port of Bombay. Moreover, his inability to capture Janjira likely fuelled his decision to occupy and fortify this otherwise desolate island, which spanned an area of less than two square miles.

Siddis and the contest for littoral Power

The Siddis, having established themselves as a leading maritime force on the western coast, especially through their possession of the impregnable island stronghold of Janjira, were involved in the dispute concerning Khanderi Island. Their power as naval commanders during the Mughal rule allowed them to dominate the coastal waters but Shivaji's ambition to build his own armada posed a direct challenge to their hegemony. The Siddis emerge here not as passive Mughal auxiliaries but as autonomous maritime actors whose naval authority shaped political and commercial life along the Konkan coast. The rivalry between

the Marathas and the Siddis had intensified over time, as Shivaji sought to undermine their dominance and carve out Maratha naval supremacy. Their allegiance to the Mughal Empire not only protected their fortress but also represented the Mughals in the region's naval affairs. Moreover, the English too considered the Siddis as their main supporters against Marathas spreading power and therefore, they established an alliance that was based on opportunity and need. Thus, the Siddis involvement in the Khanderi battle was influenced by a complex interaction of land ambitions, politics and an intent to keep their sea control.

European Intervention and Naval Confrontation

Shivaji's choice to take control of the deserted island of Khanderi, and to build a fort there was not a hasty decision but rather a shrewd military tactic. Nevertheless, this was not his first attempt to set up a base there. In 1672, Shivaji had started the process of building a fort on the island but a united fleet of English and Siddi forces very quickly came to the scene, thereby forcing the Marathas to stop their action. Consequently, Shivaji's commanders, Daulat Khan and Mai Nayak, had to give up the attempt.⁶ Shivaji, undeterred by the defeat, refreshed his aspirations after a few years and this time, he took great care in collecting soldiers and resources, attacking first from Chaul. The Portuguese captain of the Chaul fort, Francisco de Saldanha, quickly informed the English about Shivaji's fortification works on the islands of Undry-Candry.⁷ The English were alarmed upon the prospect and they immediately notified the Siddis insisting that there should be no building activities allowed at their border, especially since this was a direct threat to their control over Bombay. The Portuguese were also in favour of Shivaji's plans being obstructed, as the existence of a Maratha stronghold on Khanderi would be a great drawback to their own ambitions of maintaining the sovereignty. Thus, Shivaji's fortifications was not only about securing military hold but also came to be a contentious area for the powers of the region whose conflicting interests huddled around the mutual apprehension of the island being occupied by him. The English stated,

*"We have received certain intelligence...that Shivaji Raja intends to fortify the Island of Hendry Kendry lying at the mouth of this bay and always supposed to belong to us, and we humbly perceive it little policy to suffer so potent and voracious a prince to possess himself of so considerable a post without disputing his little thereunto. His designs herein cannot be otherwise than to have check on the whole trade of this Island and adjacent parts by keeping there always a fleet of small brigantines to cruise up and down."*⁸

The English strongly held the view that Khanderi Island was a possession of the King of England and thus any military action or even occupation without the King's permission would be seen as a breach of diplomatic relations. The aspect of territorial claim was not the only thing that occupied the minds of the English; they were also afraid that the taking over of the island by Shivaji would endanger their own ships to a great extent and also that it would greatly interfere with the dominance they were trying to establish in the region. The English, who were resolved to thwart Shivaji's efforts by any means possible, decided to stop the movement of soldiers and supplies to Khanderi and even if it was necessary, they would use military force. In their communication, they declared,

*"It is absolutely necessary to hinder them in every possible way from transporting men and materials to the said island, as they currently possess only one or two small boats".*⁹

Even the Deputy Governor of Bombay reached out directly to Mai Nayak Bhandari, one of the admirals of Shivaji and urged him to stop all the building-up activities on the island right away. Mai Nayak, in reply, sent a very polite message to the Deputy Governor, stating that he was not the one to stop the activities without the direct orders from his head.¹⁰ Although polite, his message implied Marathas determination to support Shivaji's visions. This daring move of Shivaji surely amplified the hostility between Marathas and English. It was for the first time that these two forces were in a direct path of collision, with Khanderi Island being the focal point of an imminent sea war. Shivaji's strategy was not merely a demonstration of military power but a definite indication to the English that the Marathas were determined to make their mark in the sea around Bombay, a mark that the English could not overlook without jeopardizing their own power along the western shore. The English Factors points out,

“soe that we are now forced to take the matter into our further consideration, and to give them such directions as may wholly discourage him (Shivaji) from having any further thoughts of seating himself there, since it would prove of soe dangerous and pernicious a consequence, and would soe highly concern the credit of the nation, and utterly impede and ruin the trade of the islands. Therefore wee do determine to give our orders to the Deputy Governor and Councill that if they find that no faire means will take place with them, but they rather persist in their obstinacy, at that Dowlet Ckaune (Daulat Khan) shall appear there with the Rajahs fleet to protect and countenance their proceedings and will not be prevailed amicably to be gone and recall those settled on the island, that then they fit out the Revenge and Hunter Friggatts to joyne with that vessells they have, and can conveniently man, and repell them with force as an open and public enemy.”¹¹

The first major confrontation between the Marathas and the English took place on the 19th of September and it ended with the Marathas tactical victory. An unplanned attack directed by English Lieutenant Thorpe ended up being disastrous as he along with two others, John Bradbury and Henry Welsh was defeated and executed.¹² The English forces faced heavy losses with numerous soldiers getting injured and few others taken as prisoners. Although this first battle was not a victory of the scale, it still struck all the English forces and delivered the feedback they had not expected i.e., the Marathas were tougher than their expectations. The Marathas, who had been encouraged by this triumph, started a second attack with full force by sending their fleet consisting of more than sixty ships under the leadership of Daulat Khan. The Maratha fleet launched a quick attack on the smaller English squadron and as a result of their successful operation, captured the English ship named Dowe. The Marathas, with slight and at the same time symbolic victory, reconstructed their Khanderi Island fortifications with more vigour and perseverance. At the same time, Shivaji was looking for a way to escalate the war by giving orders for an invasion of Bombay via Kalyan and Thana. But the Portuguese interfering put a halt to these plans and the Marathas could not go any further. The Marathas, however, did not lose their morale and continued with tactical plans that were still concentrated on Khanderi. On the other hand, the British realizing the seriousness of the matter increased their naval power by acquiring more ships, among which were *ghurabs*¹³ from Mr. Gape and Popjee Naik. Captain Keigwin was promoted to admiral of the English squadron, plus their troops now consisted of 200 men on a strong collection of ships: one frigate named Revenge, two *ghurabs*, three *shibars* and two *machhuas*. Even though the Maratha fleet could not match the English technology, the latter still got trapped into the former's astute strategies. The Marathas took full advantage of their light yet fast boats by using them to get into very narrow creeks in a flash, thus making the bigger and slower English ships miss them.

Although the English had better firepower, they still had a hard time gaining the upper hand even when supported by the Siddis. The extensive war was taking its toll on them and they were losing their position. The increasing costs and low morale forced the English to give up their efforts, which was a significant withdrawal in the face of the Marathas determination. The English retreat not only showed the tactical genius of Shivaji's army but also signalled a change in the sea battle for control of the western coast that was going on at that time. The chain of events exhibited a fundamental change in the power structure. The Marathas, previously considered weak, revealed their advanced naval skills and created good tactics that pointed to their future growth in the area's maritime dealings. The English, who were suffering from the war's financial pressure and their inability to get rid of the Marathas had no choice but to bear the cost of their mistake while the Marathas consolidated their position even more forcefully. An earlier letter of consultation dated 25th October, 1679 also brings out the same feelings when it stated that,

“we have taken the matter into our serious consideration of men wee have already lost in this dispute able long to oppose him least we should imprudently bring ourselves into soe weake a condition as not to depend Bombay itself if he (Shivaji) should be exasperated to draw downe his army that way”¹⁴

Instead of banding together against a common enemy, the English and the Siddis were rather engulfed in a strong feeling of distrust thus making any planned military action fruitless. This lack of trust made it impossible for them to even consider the idea of working together, which caused their combined power to

be dramatically unsuccessful. Nevertheless, the Siddis still stood by their position of strength and refused to admit that they were beaten. They took control of the nearby island of Underi and even went over to attacking the Maratha troops at Thal. The English, despite being hesitant to confront the matter directly, supported the Siddis in their capturing of Underi. They indicated their indirect endorsement of the Siddi move through a letter to London where they mentioned, "*The Siddi Admiral of the King of India's fleet has taken and fortified another small island,*" signalling their tacit approval of the Siddi advance. The Portuguese, who were very much interested in keeping a power equilibrium in the region, congratulated the Siddis for taking Underi. The Portuguese India Viceroy not only acknowledged their triumph but also promised more support, which would include supplying artillery from nearby fort Chaul.

The partnership of the Portuguese, English and Siddis evolved through a smart move, that is, to side with the weakest one in order to limit the power of the strongest enemy. Their united aim was to drive the Marathas out of Khanderi, thus, eliminating the threat that Shivaji would pose to their sea trade routes along the western coast. Nevertheless, the English, who were getting a lot of backing and supplies from their European partners, were getting more and more exhausted by the prolonged war. The English, despite all the backup and planning, eventually had to pull out from the fight because of the enormous war expenses and the nonaccomplishment of any significant gains. Their efforts being useless along with the heavy burden on their resources drove them to try for a peaceful solution. They consented to discuss the terms with the Marathas in 1680 which meant practically the end of their participation in the Khanderi clash. The withdrawal, though supported by the Siddis and the Portuguese, was indicative of the tactical genius of Shivaji's troops and the incapacity of the English and their partners to face the increasing Maratha strength. The pact of peace was a significant turning point, emphasizing the Marathas tenacity and the power they had over the sea, which their opponents reviled.

A series of diplomatic negotiations unfolded between Shivaji and the English following the conflict, with both sides determined to reach a mutually beneficial agreement.¹⁵ The Maratha delegation was formed by Shivaji's diplomat Annaji Datto together with the Subhedar of Chaul while the English side was represented by officers from the Deputy Governor of Bombay and a reliable local consultant, Ram Shenvi. The resultant treaty reflected a delicate balance of concessions and victories. Not only did Shivaji manage to keep the control of Khanderi Island, but he also got the right to strengthen the fortifications which led to his further strengthening of the region's strategy. He, however, agreed to comply with some of the English demands including the release of cannons, boats and the prisoners taken during the war. Moreover, Shivaji gave the promise that trading would be permitted without restrictions for the English traders in the Maratha domains which would guarantee their commercial interest. On the other hand, the English accepted an important condition that they would not provide the Siddis in Bombay with refuge or any military supplies thus depriving Shivaji's naval opponents of one of their main sources of support. It was a momentous victory for the Marathas in the diplomatic arena as it not only diminished the Siddi power but also restricted their supply of essential resources. Therefore, in 1679, Shivaji gained a decisive naval victory through winning and strengthening of Khanderi Island. Though the Siddis and the English put up a strong resistance but eventually their combined forces could not overpower the agility and tactical supremacy of the Maratha navy. Khanderi, though taken at the end of Shivaji's rule, became an important strategic asset. Not only did it reinforce the Maratha navy's control over the sea but also it was a big advantage in the struggle for supremacy at sea in the years to come. This fortification was the start of a new era in Maratha maritime history, as Shivaji's dream of ruling the seas was fulfilled and the rise of Maratha naval power in the following decades was already foreshadowed.

Conclusion

The occupation and fortification of Khanderi Island, which was a turning point in the evolution of Maratha maritime strategy and the power struggle in the western coast of India in general. Instead of being a defensive or reactive action, the intervention of Shivaji at Khanderi was an intentional and open claim of maritime sovereignty aimed at the disruption of the old power alignment, mostly composed of the Siddis and European trading companies. The establishment of a fortified naval outpost at a major maritime crossroads between Bombay and Janjira where Shivaji was able to do so, effectively and rightfully challenged the existing claims over the coastal territory, sea routes and access to trade. The conflict over Khanderi reveals the limits of European naval dominance in the late seventeenth-century Indian Ocean. Even though the English had better guns and the support of other naval powers, they still could not stand against the Maratha navy with its agility, local knowledge and tactical flexibility. This long conflict not only showed the weaknesses of the European navies in fighting at the coast but also revealed that the colonies lived by the sword and the shifting alliances and fragile diplomacy. So, it was the eventual English retreat and the following negotiations that again pointed out the power of Shivaji's strategy of combining military pressure with diplomatic engagement. The Siddis also played an important role in this respect as their resistance showed the complication of indigenous maritime politics, which cannot be reduced to mere European-Indian opposition. The Siddis participation in Khanderi is evidence of regional powers ability to manoeuvre through their overlapping loyalties to the Mughal Empire and European trade companies while still asserting their own control over the sea. The inability of the English, Siddis and Portuguese to sustain a unified front ultimately worked to Shivaji's advantage, enabling the Marathas to consolidate their position on the Konkan coast.

Khanderi thus gained a significance that was more than just the military value it provided. It represented the dominance of Marathas over the seaside and also laid the ground for the growth of Maratha Sea power in the years to come. This research brings to the fore the strategic vision of Marathas and their maritime practices and thus debunks the Eurocentric narratives that depict non-European powers as inactive or incapable of mastering the technology in the course of early modern naval history. The Khanderi episode illustrates that the contest over the sea power in the western Indian Ocean was not only influenced by the Europeans but also local initiatives, tactical innovations and political negotiations thus requiring a re-evaluation of the concepts of sovereignty, power and agency in the early modern Indian Ocean history.

Acknowledgement

I gratefully acknowledge the support of ICSSR Postdoctoral Fellowship, during which the article was written.

References

- ¹ K.N. Chaudhuri. (1985). *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750*, Cambridge University Press; Ashin Das Gupta.(2004). *India and the Indian Ocean World: Trade and Politics*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
- ² Omar H. Ali. (2004). *African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean World*, Routledge, New York; Kenneth X. Robbins and John McLeod. (1996). "The African Diaspora in India," *African Studies Review* 39, no. 3.
- ³ Stewart Gordon. (1993). *The Marathas 1600–1818*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; Sanjay Subrahmanyam. (2005). *Explorations in Connected History: From the Tagus to the Ganges*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
- ⁴ Dolly Purohit. (2021). "Contest for Naval Sovereignty on the Western Coast: a Study of the Maratha Navy in the 17th and the 18th century", Vol.27, No. 2, *Summerhill, IAS Review*, p.27.
- ⁵ P. L. Saswadkar. (1976). "The Siddi's Tyranny Over the Hindus in 18th Century Konkan", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 37, p.224.
- ⁶ J.N. Sarkar. (1973). *Shivaji and His Times*, Orient Longman, New Delhi.
- ⁷ *Assentos do Conselho do Estado*. (1957). Document 133, dated 16th September 1679, Vol.V, 1696-1750, Bastora Tipografia Rangel, Goa.
- ⁸ *English Records on Shivaji (1659-1682)*, (ed.) B.G. Paranjape.(1931). *Shiva Charitra Karyalaya*, Poona, Vol. II, p.198.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p.199.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, letter no. 369.
- ¹¹ *Factory Records Surat*, Vol. 4, p.69-71 377, consultation on Swally Marine, 15th Sept.
- ¹² B. K. Apte, "Capture of Kennery (or Khanderi) Island by Shivaji", *Bulletin of the Deccan College Post Graduate and Research Institute*, Vol. 4,p.84.
- ¹³ Maratha Warship.
- ¹⁴ *Factory Records Surat*, Vol.4, p.82-84.
- ¹⁵ *Factory Records Bombay*, Vol-2,1679-80.