

Sowing the Seeds of *Swarajya*

Vanangpal Naik Nimbalkar, the *jagirdar* of Phaltan, situated about a hundred kilometres south of Pune, was a soldier of fortune. With his band of troops, Vanangpal, also known as Vyangojirao, had fought on the side of Nizam Shah and Adil Shah, as well as the *Mughals*, at different times, solely depending on who was offering him the highest price. He was a furious fighter and had the courage of a tiger. He feared no one.

Vyangojirao ensured that only those who were brave like him and worthy of fighting by his side were enlisted in his troops. Amongst such *bargirs* (mercenary warriors) in his forces were two brothers in their late teens, Maloji Bhonsale and Vithoji Bhonsale. They were from Verul, where they had their ancestral land.

During the monsoon season, no battle missions were undertaken, unless unavoidable, since the troops had to go back to their lands and till the soil. And the Bhonsale brothers were no exception. One such monsoon, they proceeded to Verul after fulfilling their last undertaking with Vyangojirao.

Goddess Bestows Grace

After reaching their hometown, the brothers started the work of preparing the fields for sowing before the rains came. One day, Vithoji went back home early evening, and Maloji, after completing the day's last task, was returning at twilight by a shortcut through the forest. Suddenly, he saw an apparition and almost fainted.

The apparition said to him, “I am *Devi Parvati*. Do not be afraid. I am here to give you good tidings. In your *vansh*, there will be born an incarnation of Lord *Shiva*, who will resurrect the *Hindu* faith that has been crushed by the aliens over the past two hundred and seventy-five years.

“Nearby, you will find a large anthill guarded by a big cobra. The snake will not harm you. Dig up the ground under the anthill, and you will come upon a treasure that will set up your clan for this forthcoming event. Use the treasure astutely and in the service of the Lord, and your future *vanshaj* will have guaranteed success in this divine mission. Heed the advice of Sheshaji Naik Punde from Srigonda, and deploy the treasure as he advises.” Saying this, She raised Her right hand in blessing and gradually faded away.

After Maloji narrated the details of the event to his younger brother the next morning, Vithoji, with a befuddled look on his face, said, “*Dada*, you will not believe this, but I had a strange dream last night. In my dream, too, *Devi Bhavani* appeared! She told me that I was to go with you, carrying a treasure to Srigonda. I could not understand the dream and dismissed it. But now that you tell me what happened to you last evening, I am convinced that this is no dream and what you had was no hallucination either. Let us go immediately to the place where you had the vision and search for the anthill.”

The brothers grabbed their pickaxes and spades, and rushed to the spot. It did not take them long to find the anthill. The massive cobra guarding it, slowly slithered away on seeing the two brothers. Digging up the anthill, they unearthed three metal trunks full of gold coins. They quickly carried the trunks home in their bullock cart and hid them there. The next day, they took off with the treasure for Srigonda, and on reaching there, asked around for Sheshaji Naik.

Kaka Leads the Way

Maloji and Vithoji managed to locate Sheshaji and apprised him of their vision. Sheshaji revealed that he too had a vision in which *Devi Bhavani* had appeared and told him to help the two brothers from Verul, who would be bringing a treasure for safekeeping with him. He had been ordered to guide them as to the appropriate deployment of the wealth. On hearing this, the brothers informed him that they had brought the treasure along with them and asked for further guidance.

The brothers stayed at Srigonda for the next few days, during which time Sheshaji understood their full background. “Maloji, the treasure that you two

have found is worth a king's fortune. You must now stop being mere bargirs and grow into *shiledars*. This means that you must now have your own horse-mounted troops, for which you will need to supply them with arms, and your own horses and *pagas*.

"With this, many peasants will come and join up under your command. Start with fifty horses, and rapidly build up to at least a thousand. Only when you grow to that size and have a loyal band of troops under you will the *sultan's durbar* take any notice of you. There is enough money here to support such a detachment of soldiers for over two decades if required! The Devi has made sure of your success."

"We will proceed to Verul and start the mission of building the pagas and the armoury," replied Maloji. "A lot of work has to be done: Horses have to be bought, syces have to be employed, and weaponry has to be purchased. Our own residence needs to be renovated and expanded. Please give us your blessings and a promise that you will keep our wealth safely and guide us always. After all, Devi Bhavani has ordered this, isn't it?" requested Maloji.

Bhonsale Brothers Become Invaluable

The brothers returned to Verul and set about the business of refurbishing their lives. They set about the task of building the armoury and their small cavalry squadron of fifty horses. Their home, too, was expanded, and the Bhonsale household started to live in a large *wada*. Additional household personnel, which included private guards for added security, were employed on a permanent basis. All in all, the Devi had significantly elevated the clan's standard of living.

Maloji and Vithoji made themselves available to Vanangpal as shiledars with a force of their own. It wasn't long before they were noticed by the loftiest general of Nizam Shah, Lakhuji Jadhavrao. The brothers, on Vanangpal's recommendation, were accepted by Lakhuji as his shiledars too and were engaged by him in many military missions with his forces. Vanangpal became so fond of Maloji that he proposed the match with his sister Deepabai for Maloji, and the wedding took place with great fanfare. Deepabai became Umabai after her marriage, and soon, the matriarch of the Bhonsale household. She was later addressed as Maibai. Vithoji also married and had five children.

Maloji and Umabai, however, had no progeny for many years after their marriage. On Vanangpal's advice, they offered obeisance at the *dargah* of a

revered *Sufi Musalman pir*, Shah Sharif, and pleaded for an offspring. A son was born to Umabai and was promptly named Shahji, out of respect for the pir, amidst some mild opposition from family members for choosing a Musalman name. Within another couple of years, another son was born to her, and once again, named after the pir as Sharifji. Maloji's family was now complete. In his military assignments under Lakhujji, he began to earn himself quite a reputation as a brave, upper-echelon shiledar.

Slave Turns Wazir

Meanwhile, the Mughal emperor Jalaluddin Mohammad Akbar's efforts to extend his kingdom led to the Mughals entering the Dakkan, with Burhanpur becoming the first Mughal *subedari* in this region. Next, Akbar set his eyes on Nizam Shah's *saltanat*.

However, a brave and astute *Nizam Shahi* general named Malik Ambar, originally an Abyssinian slave, made his mark just then. He roamed the highways, waylaying and punishing highway robbers into submission, who eventually became his followers. He also regrouped under him the defeated and scattered Nizam Shahi forces, building his total force to seven thousand men rapidly. He then made a new capital at Junnar since both Ahmednagar and Daulatabad had been lost to the Mughals. Junnar became the vantage point where Ambar installed the young grandson of Burhan II Nizam Shah, Shah Ali, whom he christened Murtuza II, on the throne.

Fortunately for the Nizam Shahi and Malik Ambar, Akbar died soon after, allowing the rebel, Akbar's eldest son, Salim, to ascend the throne as Emperor Jehangir. It took him a few years to settle in and bring all the opposing factions under his control. This period provided much-needed respite for the Nizam Shahi to rebuild itself, with Malik Ambar as the *Wazir-e-Azam*.

Families Foster Bad Blood

During the fifteen years that Ambar took to recapture nearly all the territory which had been lost to the Mughals, the seeds for a family feud between the Jadhavrao and Bhonsale families were sown. On the occasion of *Holi*, the traditional Hindu festival of colours, Lakhujji had invited all his associates and shiledars to his house to celebrate the festival. Maloji, being an up-and-coming shiledar, was obviously one of the invitees, along with his six-year-old son,

Shahji. Amongst the few kids present in the courtyard of Lakhuji's wada was his daughter, Jijabai, a year or so younger than Shahji.

Seeing Shahji and Jijabai engaged in spraying each other with coloured water, Lakhuji joyously remarked: "What a fine pair they make, don't they?"

Maloji, sensing an opportunity to create a lasting bond with the lofty Jadhavrao clan, immediately drew the attention of the other guests assembled there by saying: "Gentlemen, you all heard *Sardar Sahab's* offer of the betrothal of his daughter Jijabai to my son Shahji. I am honoured and accept the offer with all humility."

Lakhuji was a bit perplexed and taken aback initially. However, he decided not to treat the remark too seriously and, keeping up the light spirit of the occasion, guffawed: "Yes, yes. Why not, why not!"

When Lakhuji described the day's proceedings to his wife, Mhalsabai, that evening, she was furious; she did not think that the Bhonsale family was anywhere near in stature to their family. Lakhuji then had to go back on his word when Maloji brought up the subject of progressing matters further. Maloji saw Lakhuji's refusal of the betrothal as a lack of honour.

One thing led to another, and the animosity between the two families brewed over the next four years and came to a head even as Maloji and Vithoji continued to grow the forces under their command from fifty mounted soldiers to a thousand.

Nizam Shah Intercedes

Seeing that things were getting out of hand, the wise Malik Ambar decided that the time had come to try and bring an end to the hostility once and for all. He raised the matter with Murtuza II, who found the perfect solution for it in consultation with the *Wazir-e-Azam*. He offered direct employment to Maloji and appointed him as a *Panch Hazari Sardar*. This meant that, as and when summoned, Maloji would now have to join forces with the Nizam's army, along with five thousand soldiers. Additionally, Maloji would have the privilege of getting a commensurate *jagir* allotted to be able to support the upkeep of his troops. The jagir comprised the contiguous Pune and Supe *parganas*. Also, Maloji was made the commandant of the fort of Shivneri and the fortress of Chakan, both not too far from Pune.

"Today, we bestow on you, Maloji, the title of '*Raja*,' along with these commands. This title shall be held by the head of your family, hereditarily, for

posterity. We are sure that your loyalty to the Nizam Shahi will be unshakeable, regardless of the circumstances you may face. I pronounce you to be an irreplaceable asset of the saltanat, Maloji *Raje*,” declared the Nizam.

“And now, Lakhuji Raje, may I request you to please consider the match between your daughter and Maloji Raje’s son with condescension, if not honour, as one amongst equals?”

Lakhuji was speechless and bowed to confirm his acceptance. He was left with no choice. The sultan had effectively ordered the reconciliation.

The wedding of the two children was performed with a lot of pomp and celebrations once Shahji attained the age of ten (considered the appropriate age for marriages in those days). The deed was done, and the feud ended in the public view. Inwardly, Lakhuji’s ego had taken a beating, and he kept seething with frustration. Thus began a family feud which would have an important bearing on shaping the course of events.

Feud Climaxes

Over the years, Maloji and Vithoji continued to loyally serve the Nizam Shahi till, eventually, their lives came to an end.

But unfortunately, the feud between the Jadhavraos and the Bhonsales did not; it continued to simmer.

It came to a head one day when, after the Nizam’s durbar had dispersed for the day, an elephant suddenly went into *masth*. Lakhuji’s oldest son, Dattaji, pulled out his sword to subdue the elephant and charged it. Vithoji’s oldest son, Sambhaji, and Shahji tried to stop him, but Dattaji had already lopped off the elephant’s trunk, rendering it powerless. Shahji, in a fit of anger, turned on Dattaji, his own brother-in-law, and struck him dead!

Lakhuji, who had already left for his residence, was quickly informed by a messenger about the incident, and he returned to the scene of action. Seeing his son dead, he attacked Shahji, severely injuring him, and then faced Sambhaji, killing him instantly. One Jadhavrao and one Bhonsale lay dead, and another Bhonsale was severely injured. There was chaos all around, and everyone was trying to restrain both parties without much success. Nizam Shah heard the brouhaha and came rushing out to pacify the two families; he made sure that no further unnecessary carnage was committed.

Following this event, and harbouring a conviction that Shahji’s rising popularity at the Nizam’s durbar was a threat to his security, Lakhuji Jadhavrao

left the saltanat and took up employment with the Mughals. The Mughals were thrilled to receive him and gave him the stature of a *Barah Hazari Sardar*. His long-standing colleague, friend, and fellow sardar, Babaji Kate, along with a few other *Marathas*, defected to the Mughals along with him. However, Babaji Kate's son, Vithoji, who had become a close confidant of Shahji, stayed back with Shahji in the Nizam Shahi.

Shahji's good fortune continued. A son was born to him and Jijabai soon thereafter. The child was believed to be Shahji's cousin Sambhaji reborn and consequently named thus. Soon after, Shahji was promoted to the position of *sarlashkar* of the Nizam's army.

Shahji Puts Mughals to Shame

By now, Malik Ambar had consolidated the Nizam Shahi, and the Mughal attempts from Burhanpur were rendered ineffective. Nevertheless, Jehangir decided to send a major force under his younger son, Shahbuddin Muhammad 'Khurram,' to level the Nizam Shahi once and for all. The Mughals, this time, had decided that rather than trying to tackle each of the three *Bahamani* kingdoms left in the Dakkan separately, it would be smarter to set the *Dakkanis* against one another. They made a deal with Ibrahim Adil Shah: If he helped them finish Nizam Shah's kingdom, they would leave his territory alone. Besides, they would divide Nizam Shah's captured territory between them equally. The foolish Ibrahim got sucked into this Mughal cunning.

A major battle took place about ten kilometres outside Ahmednagar, near Bhatavdi. The Mughals were 120,000 strong and were supported by 80,000 *Adil Shahi* troops under the seasoned general Ranadulla Khan and his second-in-command, Murar Jagdev. The Nizam's forces were a meagre 20,000, with Shahji in command of the infantry and Malik Ambar, now ageing, as the Wazir-e-Azam and their strategic advisor based in Ahmednagar.

In the first few hard-fought engagements between the two sides, Sharifji (Shahji's brother) and the great warrior Vyangoji Naik Nimbalkar lost their lives. It did not take Shahji long to figure out that this would be a senseless massacre of the Nizam's soldiers if he engaged with the enemy any more. So he decided to deploy what was called *ganimi kava*.

Malik Ambar said to Shahji: "Shahjiu, this is going to be the final test for our forces. The enemy has two *lakh* men, ten times our forces. Each of our men will have to account for ten enemy soldiers! How do we motivate them?"

“Ambarjiu *Chacha*, if we fight, we will be annihilated, and if we back off, we will send a signal of weakness to both the enemy as well as our own troops. The partnership of Dilli and Bijapur will hound us till we are finished. We have to think through this one very, very carefully. We must find a way whereby *samp bhi mare, aur lathi bhi na toote* [literally: the snake should be killed without breaking the stick; figuratively: have one’s cake and eat it too].”

The Mughal and Adil Shahi forces were encamped along the river Mehkar, awaiting the resumption of action after the initial engagement. The river had been dammed near that very spot for irrigation and water storage. Their camp was downriver from the reservoir formed by the small dam.

Shahji explained his plan: “I think we may have one possible move. It involves a lot of organisation and bullwork. The task will have to be carried out clandestinely in the middle of the night, and enough labour should be deployed secretly to finish the job in a couple of hours — three hours at most. The monsoons have been good this time, and the Mehkar river is in spate. The enemy is camped right behind the dam. We must breach the dam. The entire area will get inundated and will cause severe destruction to the enemy’s men and animals.

“My spies have been in communication with Daulatyar, a Maratha by birth, who has risen from being Ibrahim Adil Shah’s favourite personal slave to an important member of his inner coterie and now goes by the name of Khawas Khan. Murar Jagdev *Pandit* is his confidant and right-hand man. These two, born Hindus, have a great influence on Ranadulla Khan, and all three are completely trusted by Adil Shah.

“These three key courtiers of Adil Shah are against any collaboration with the *Dilliwalas*. They believe that we Dakkanis should hang together against the Mughals. Their hearts are not in this confrontation against us, and they are in a mood to soft-pedal. They feel we are capable of dealing with the Mughals and sustaining the Nizam Shahi. With their help, this will be even easier. I propose that in the interest of building a strong bond with these key *Bijapuris*, we give them enough advance notice to clear out their troops from the danger area, without telling them the specifics of our plan.”

Everyone present praised the farsightedness of Shahji, and the plan was set in motion. Shahji’s personal messenger went incognito into the Adil Shahi camp with Shahji’s message that they should move their camp to another area upstream since an attack was being planned from the downstream side.

By evening, under some pretext, the Adil Shahi forces moved camp as they were told. In the dead of night, the dam was breached, and the entire Mughal encampment was washed away in the ensuing flood. The Adil Shahi forces did not suffer any damage. After making a valiant attempt to save some of the Mughal troops who were camped closest to them, they could only watch these troops and their cannons, horses, elephants, camels, and tents all getting inundated and swept away. By the time the sun came up, it was all over!

Shahji's ploy had worked to the finest detail. Khawas Khan, Ranadulla Khan, and Murar Pandit lived to carry tales of the devastation back to Ibrahim Adil Shah. Clearly, Shahji's stature had zoomed up — both in the Nizam Shahi as well as in the Adil Shahi. Malik Ambar was all over himself in getting Murtuza II to decorate Shahji in the durbar. He was declared the biggest star of the kingdom and was now made the *sarsenapati* as well as senior advisor, second only to Malik Ambar.

The Tide Turns

Following the rout at Bhatavdi and the failure of the Mughal mission, Jehangir severely reprimanded his son Khurram, who feared for his life and came to, of all people, Malik Ambar for refuge. Malik Ambar, in turn, deputed Shahji to protect Khurram. This help would pay rich dividends later since Malik Ambar had anticipated that this prince would one day become the emperor of Dilli. For eight months, Shahji took care of Khurram and kept him incognito at Bhimgad, a fort near Shivneri. Finally, Jehangir softened up and Khurram was able to mend fences with his father. He left for Dilli, where, before long, he mounted the throne as *Badshah* Shah Jahan.

For the next two years, there were no serious attempts by the Mughals, and the relationship with the Adil Shahi durbar too turned cordial. Mustafa Khan, the Wazir-e-Azam at Bijapur, was beginning to lose his grip on his position, whereas Khawas Khan was getting stronger.

At the Nizam Shahi, suddenly, the inevitable happened: Malik Ambar passed away at the ripe old age of eighty. Murtuza II promoted Ambar's son, titled '*Fateh Khan*,' as the Wazir-e-Azam, and Shahji's ambitions received a big setback. He had visualised himself being promoted to this position, but religious considerations had taken precedence over competence.

Fateh Khan's credentials were suspect, and his nature, vengeful. He did not have his father's courage or savvy. Shahji's relationship with Fateh Khan was

indifferent at best and antagonistic at worst. Fateh Khan had cunningly turned four out of Vithoji's seven surviving sons against Shahji and had pushed two of these four to leave the Nizam Shahi and join the Mughals. This made the Bhonsale family a weaker adversary for him in the Nizam Shahi durbar. Shahji was being courted by the Adil Shahi generals, Ranadulla Khan and Murar Jagdev, to join up with Adil Shah, who, they said, was awaiting him with great eagerness. Feeling he had no other option, Shahji took the fateful decision to leave Nizam Shah for Adil Shah.

Jijabai Becomes Pregnant

When Shahji took the decision to leave the Nizam Shahi and join the Bijapur durbar, his wife Jijabai, mother Umabai, son Sambhaji, and Vithoji Kaka's other three sons were all residing at the Bhonsale family's wada in Verul. Jijabai was a couple of months pregnant, and the situation became altogether too precarious. Leaving her at Verul under his cousins' care seemed a bit risky. Verul was close to Fateh Khan's seat at Daulatabad and the Mughal seat at Khadki, and he did not quite have the requisite faith in his cousins, since two of their brothers were already serving with the Mughals and another two had become adversaries in the court. He would have to leave Jijabai in a place where she would be safe and stable. He anticipated a life of wandering for the next few months at least and could not subject her to a nomadic existence in her delicate condition. Both the Nizam Shahi (Fateh Khan's men) and the Mughals would be after him, and all of his family, particularly Jijabai, would be under threat.

Shahji's relative, Vijayrao Sidhoji Vishwasrao, was appointed by Nizam Shah as the *killedar* of Shivneri Fort near Junnar. Everyone was unanimous that Jijabai should stay at Shivneri Fort under the direct protection and responsibility of the Vishwasrao family. Vijayrao was a powerful and self-confident warrior and would not let any harm come to her. Shahji left his mother, Maibai, to look after Jijabai during this period.

To help look after the personal affairs of his immediate family, Shahji appointed a few of his closest confidants — Sono *Pant* Vishwanath Dabir, Naro Pant Trimal Bawrikar Muzumdar, Shyamraj Pant Ranjekar, Raghunathballal Korde Sabnis, and Gomaji Naik Pansambal — to be with the family at Shivneri. This reinforced Vijayrao's strength dramatically as all the men were ferociously loyal to Shahji. Satisfied with all the arrangements at Shivneri, Shahji left for Bijapur.