



## Book Review

Anirudh Deshpande & Muphid Mujawar. (2021). *The Rise and Fall of a Brown Water Navy: Sarkhel Kanhoji Angre and Maratha Seapower on the Arabian Sea in the 17th and 18th Centuries*. New Delhi: Aakar Books. Pp. 160. Price: \$ 13.40. ISBN-10: 9350027364. (Softcover).

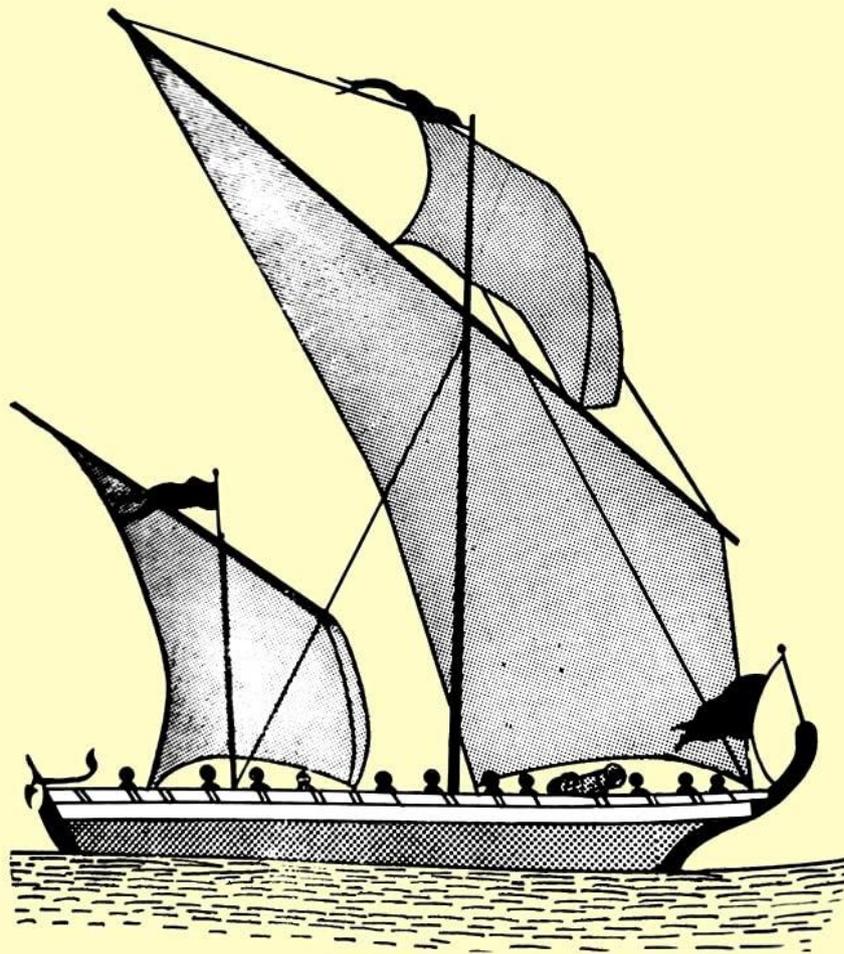
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Anirudh Deshpande and Muphid Mujawar's compact tour-de-force, *The Rise and Fall of a Brown Water Navy*, presents an erudite examination of the Maratha navy and its eminent leader, Sarkhel Kanhoji Angre, set against the backdrop of South Asia's early modern period. By meticulously scrutinising a diverse array of primary and secondary sources, the authors furnish an intricate representation of the "Brown Water Navy's" political and economic ramifications within the Arabian Sea region. The noteworthy work, unveils previously unexplored dimensions of Indian maritime heritage concerning naval power, sovereignty, and security. The book audaciously challenges Eurocentric perspectives on naval history and illuminates the vital role those indigenous naval traditions played in sculpting South Asia's maritime narrative. The following paragraphs present a chapter-wise deconstruction of this scholarly endeavour.

The inaugural chapter furnishes a concise historical contextualization of the Arabian Sea region, encompassing the ascent of the Mughal Empire in India and the advent of European colonial entities like the Portuguese and British in the area. Subsequently, the authors probe the economic catalysts propelling sea-power development in the Arabian Sea, accentuating the pivotal role of trade and commerce in fashioning political and military stratagems. The notion of mercantilism emerges as central to the chapter, with the authors elucidating its fundamental principles and objectives. They delineate how mercantilism, typified by an emphasis on exportation and wealth accumulation through trade, engendered an intricate nexus of economic and political associations between European powers and Asian empires, such as the Marathas. A salient motif in the opening chapter is the emphasis on the criticality of naval power in safeguarding trade routes and exerting military influence. The authors explicate the strategic benefits of naval power, encompassing its capacity to dominate key ports and harbours, shield merchant vessels, and initiate assaults against adversary forces. The authors also offer a comprehensive overview of the naval technologies and tactics employed during this era, delineating the ship classifications utilised by European and Asian powers and the armaments and strategies adopted in naval combat. The next chapter titled *The Making of a Brown Water Maratha Navy* chronicles the Maratha Navy's genesis and expansion under Shivaji and his successors, concentrating on Kanhoji Angre's role. The chapter delves into the navy's organisational architecture, the enlistment and instruction of sailors and officers, and the allocation of specialised vessels for distinct purposes.

# The Rise and Fall of a Brown Water Navy

Sarkhel Kanhoji Angre and  
Maratha Seapower on the Arabian Sea  
in the 17th and 18th Centuries



Anirudh Deshpande  
Muphid Mujawar

Image 13.1: Image Source: Anirudh Deshpande and Muphid Mujawar

The book's most noteworthy attribute is its scrupulous attention to detail. The authors painstakingly reconstruct the Maratha navy's history, tracing its metamorphosis from a humble coastal defence force into a formidable naval juggernaut that contested British and Portuguese hegemony in the region. Throughout the narrative, the authors explore the intricate interplay between maritime trade, commerce, military strategy, and political power, illuminating the multifaceted factors that shaped the region's naval prowess. Central to the narrative of this commendable study is the enigmatic figure of Kanhoji Angre, the legendary Maratha admiral who played a crucial role in sculpting South Asia's maritime trajectory. The authors meticulously examine Angre's life and career, crafting a riveting depiction of a multifarious individual who personified the dynamic and often tumultuous history of the region. From his formative years as a coastal captain to his later tenure as a formidable naval commander, Angre adeptly navigated an intricate labyrinth of alliances, rivalries, and power struggles that determined the fate of the Maratha navy and the Arabian Sea region as a whole.

In the book's third chapter, aptly titled *Kanhoji Angre*, the authors provide an exhaustive biographical account of this fabled naval commander, chronicling his ascendancy to power and his military and diplomatic achievements. Angre's success in thwarting European naval forces and his capacity to forge alliances with other regional entities are meticulously detailed. The chapter also offers insights into the Sarkhel's personal life and enduring legacy. The subsequent chapter, *The Military and Diplomatic Acumen of Kanhoji*, delves further into Angre's strategic and tactical prowess, emphasising his employment of guerrilla tactics and his adeptness at harnessing diplomacy and negotiation to attain his objectives. The chapter recounts several of Angre's most renowned victories, including his triumphant defence of the Maratha port of Kolaba against a British siege. The authors' sustained focus on the Maratha navy and Kanhoji Angre furnishes an invaluable perspective on the political, economic, and military history of the often-neglected Konkan coast. Through a rigorous examination of available sources, the authors present a nuanced and intricate portrayal of the brown water navy and its significance in the Arabian Sea region.

Chapter five, *Dastak and Sovereignty*, elucidates the concept of *dastak* as a system of passes that granted merchants permission to engage in trade within specific ports. The authors expound on how Angre and other naval commanders wielded this system of passes to exert control over trade in the Arabian Sea region. Additionally, they outline how *dastak* functioned as an instrument of diplomacy and sovereignty and examine the conflicts that ensued when European powers endeavoured to bypass or circumvent the system. A salient contribution of the book lies in its exploration of the multifaceted interactions between maritime trade and commerce, military strategy, and political power, underlining the ways these factors influenced the development of naval strength in the region. The authors also shed light on the role of *dastak* and sovereignty in the conflicts involving the Marathas, the British, and the Portuguese, adding a critical dimension to our understanding of the region's history and its position within global affairs. Transcending its focus on the Maratha navy and Kanhoji Angre, the book offers a wider perspective on the political and economic milieu of the early modern period in South Asia. The authors scrutinise the intricate interactions among the Marathas, the British, and the Portuguese, charting the mutable power dynamics that moulded the region's history. Specifically, they emphasise the manner in which conflicts over

maritime trade and commerce were deeply interwoven with matters of sovereignty and diplomacy, shedding light on the multifaceted interplay between economic, political, and military forces in the region. The authors' writing is characterised by a lucidity and finesse that render their analysis accessible to scholars and general readers alike. The prose is both engaging and insightful, immersing the reader in the complex and multifarious realm of the Maratha navy and its historical backdrop. The book's meticulous attention to detail and its discerning perspective on the interplay between maritime power, sovereignty, and diplomacy substantiate its value as a contribution to the fields of South Asian history and maritime studies.

Cumulatively, the book furnishes a comprehensive and detailed examination of the Maratha navy and the life and career of Kanhoji Angre. The authors vividly resurrect the enthralling history of seapower in the Arabian Sea region, delving into the organisational structures, tactics, and technologies employed by naval commanders during this era. This work is indispensable for those intrigued by the history of naval warfare or the role of trade and commerce in shaping political and military strategy. In summation, *The Rise and Fall of a Brown Water Navy* is an arresting and thought-provoking opus that defies conventional perspectives on naval history and enriches the fields of South Asian history and maritime studies. The book's emphasis on indigenous naval traditions and its discerning outlook on the interplay between maritime power, sovereignty, and diplomacy proffer invaluable insights for scholars and policymakers alike, culminating in an indelible literary experience.

### Interview

*What inspired you both to write this book? What was your intended primary audience with what likely takeaways compared to available literature on the subject?*

As far as the indigenous Indian naval traditions are concerned not much historical work is available. Global naval history for a long time remained, and continues to remain, Eurocentric and our aim in this book is to delve into local history to challenge this Eurocentrism. Historians learn a lot from local histories which usually escape the grand narratives which inform the reading public in general. European navies triumphed in the ultimate analysis during the medieval and early modern periods but not before struggling against their local enemies. This contest is quite interesting from a variety of perspectives. The brown water navies

based on the coastal forts used numerous local resources and geographical features to their advantage. This is historically relevant.

*How does your study of the Maratha navy and Kanhoji Angre fit into the existing scholarship on this topic? What new insights or perspectives does your book offer that differ from previous works especially on Sea Power in Arabian Sea and its connection with maritime commerce and connectivity?*

Our study of the Maratha Navy and the personality of Kanhoji Angre and later his successors, especially his son Tulaji Angre who remained defiant of English and Peshwa authority till the end, highlights the political, economic and military history of the Konkan coast, an area with which non-Marathi speaking people of India are unfamiliar. Our book

should be seen in the perspectives which guide what Ginzburg calls micro history. It is based on a rigorous examination of the available sources. The book also underlines the fact that the Peshwa played a crucial role in decimating Angre power on the Konkan Coast. Nationalist historians who eulogise the Peshwai are not expected to focus on the power struggle which ensued between the Peshwa and the Angres in the first half of the 18th Century.

*What do you think were some of the most important factors that contributed to the success of Kanhoji Angre as a naval leader, and to the strength of the brown water navy during his time? How does that fit into lessons from the decline of the brown water navy in the early 18th century? Any contemporary applications that can be drawn for maritime strategy?*

Brown water navies can survive only with the support of a major land power. As long as Kanhoji Angre was alive he used sea power to exercise sovereignty over a large coastal tract adjoining the west Indian coast of the Arabian Sea. In early modern India this was a rare achievement. He worsted the Sidis many times and became a thorn in the side of the English based in Bombay and Surat. The turmoil in the Maratha polity following Shivaji's death in 1680 was utilized by Kanhoji to develop a virtually sovereign domain on the Konkan. Angre was a daring and astute naval and land commander. His relation to the Maratha Navy is the same as the relation which binds the Maratha Swarajya and Shivaji. Our book points out why and how the personality of Angre rose to prominence in Indian history due to the peculiar political circumstances of the time. Shivaji's

kingdom was in doldrums. The Peshwai was yet to be fully established and the English and Portuguese were not the masters of the coastal waters in the early decades of the 18th Century. This condition was exploited quite well by Kanhoji Angre, an experienced naval captain and prescient strategist.

*The book discusses the role of dastak and sovereignty in the conflicts between the Marathas, the British, and the Portuguese. How do you think the legacy of Kanhoji Angre and the brown water navy continues to shape the history and culture of the region today?*

The memory of Kanhoji Angre survives among the Marathas who know about him. In the recent past his exploits have been celebrated by history enthusiasts and also on social media. He has emerged as an inspiring historical figure especially among that section of the public which challenges the hegemony of the Peshwai in Marathi historical narratives. Whether all this is of some military or strategic value today is difficult to say because no brown water navy today, if such navies do exist, can survive an onslaught from air launched by ships of a blue water navy. Historically and technologically the days of brown water navies are over.

*Apart from the primary focus on Kanhoji Angre and his Brown Water Navy, what are some fresh insights unearthed by you in the emergence of Indian maritime heritage in terms of naval power, sovereignty, and security? What are some of the key areas of research and inquiry that you think scholars should further focus on, in order to further deepen our understanding of the maritime history of South Asia?*

Since 1992 I have written several research papers on the naval history of the Konkan Coast in an attempt to challenge the Eurocentrism inherent in the works of Western military and naval historians like Parker (Deshpande 1992). The point I have tried to make is that during the late medieval and early modern period of Asian history the victory of the Europeans was in no case guaranteed. Imagine a scenario in which the Peshwa would extend full support to Tulaji Angre. The English, in that case, would have found things very difficult indeed in Western India. Further, we know that Tipu Sultan had a plan of developing a powerful navy.

His land defeat ensured that the plan did not fructify. History is an open-ended subject and that is why it is so interesting. Further, there are many areas on which historians can focus as far as coastal histories are concerned, recruitment, victualling, technology, armaments, local religious traditions and superstitions. The brown water navies followed syncretic traditions of beliefs and respect. They were not animated by the binaries foisted upon history by nationalism, especially religious nationalism. The modern Indian armed forces can learn a lot from all this.

## References

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