



Original Article

The Institutional Structure of the Maratha Intelligence System: Post-Bahirji Naik Era, Cryptology, and Espionage Techniques

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the institutional structure, administrative evolution, and operational methodologies of the Maratha Empire's intelligence department (Her Khate) during the post-Bahirji Naik era (post-1680). While popular history extensively documents the legendary exploits of Bahirji Naik under Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, the subsequent institutionalization of the intelligence corps into a bureaucratic organ of the state remains under-researched. Utilizing contemporary Marathi documents, including the Adnyapatra, Sabhasad Bakhar, and factory records from European powers, this study reconstructs the operational framework of Maratha espionage. It specifically examines the hierarchy of the intelligence corps under the Peshwas, the deployment of tactical cryptology and coded hand signals (Mudra-Sanket), and the sophisticated information-gathering techniques that sustained Maratha geopolitical dominance throughout the eighteenth century.

Keywords: Maratha Intelligence System, Her Khate, Bahirji Naik, Maratha Espionage, Cryptology, Modi Script, Aksara-Viparyaya, Mudra-Sanket

Introduction: Evolution of the Her Khate (Intelligence Department)

In seventeenth and eighteenth-century warfare, tactical intelligence was the primary determinant of military success. The foundation of the Maratha intelligence system was laid by Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, who conceptualized the *Her Khate* not merely as a loose network of informants, but as a distinct, specialized department of the state [1].

Following the demise of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj and the legendary intelligence chief (Jaswada-Guna-Niyaka) Bahirji Naik in the 1680s, the Maratha state faced severe existential threats from the expansionist Mughal Empire. This crisis forced a shift from an individual-centric intelligence network to an institutionalized, bureaucratic system.

Under the governance of Chhatrapati Rajaram Maharaj, Regent Tarabai, and later the Peshwa administration at Pune, the intelligence apparatus was thoroughly reorganized to manage a subcontinent-wide empire [2]. The *Her Khate* evolved into a highly structured civil-military department that integrated diplomatic channels (*Vakil*), postal networks (*Dawk*), and deep-cover field operatives.

Institutional Hierarchy and Bureaucratic Organization

The post-Bahirji Naik era witnessed the codification of spy ranks, remuneration scales, and reporting lines. The chaotic field operations of the late seventeenth century were systematically streamlined into a structured hierarchy during the Peshwa period, as detailed in the *Peshwa Daftar* records [3].

The department operated under a strict operational split designed to prevent double-crosses and verify data integrity:

1. The Shahanaaj (Intelligence Director)

The entire network answered to a centralized officer known in the Peshwa records as the *Shahanaaj* or *Darogha-i-Chauki*. This officer sat at the capital (Raigad, Jinji, or Pune) and was responsible for directly briefing the sovereign, analyzing incoming reports, and allocating secret state funds (*Gupte-Kharach*) [4].

2. The Ranks of Operatives

Field personnel were broadly categorized based on their specific operational mandates [5]:

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- **The Hers (Core Spies):** These were long-term embedded agents working undercover in enemy territories (such as Delhi, Hyderabad, or British Bombay). They were further divided into *Antas-Her* (counter-intelligence within the Maratha administration) and *Bahya-Her* (foreign espionage).
- **The Jaswads (Scouts and Couriers):** Highly athletic messengers and short-range intelligence gatherers. They were responsible for the rapid physical transit of encrypted documents across thousands of miles. A subclass, the *Sthala-Her*, specialized entirely in mapping topography, identifying water sources, and spotting potential ambush zones ahead of the main army [6].

Information-Gathering Techniques and Cover Identities

The survival of an embedded spy depended entirely on the structural integrity of their cover story. The *Adnyapatra*—the classic Maratha treatise on statecraft authored by Ramchandra Pant Amatya—explicitly outlines the social groups from which spies should be recruited and the disguises they should adopt:

"The Hers should be appointed from among those who are sharp, intelligent, native to the land, and capable of blending into diverse societies. They must disguise themselves as ascetics, traders, physicians, and astrologers..." [7]

The Maratha intelligence system capitalized on the highly fluid social and religious landscape of eighteenth-century India by deploying specific deep-cover identities:

1. The Gosains and Bairagis (Wandering Monks)

Religious ascetics moved freely across warring kingdoms without exciting political suspicion. The *Her Khate* recruited and trained a large auxiliary force of *Gosains* and *Bairagis*. These operatives entered enemy cantonments under the guise of religious performance or pilgrimage, calculating troop numbers, identifying ammunition storage locations, and assessing the morale of enemy commanders [8].

2. The Saraf and Vaidya Networks (Merchants and Physicians)

Commercial intelligence was woven into political espionage. Maratha agents operated as currency changers (*Sarafs*) and grain merchants within Mughal camps. Because they managed supply logistics, they could accurately estimate the size of an enemy force simply by tracking daily grain consumption rates. Similarly, intelligence operatives trained as traditional physicians (*Vaidyas*) gained direct access to the private quarters of enemy nobles, gathering sensitive political intelligence during medical consultations [9].

Cryptology, the Modi Script, and Coded Signaling

As diplomatic and military communications expanded across the subcontinent, the security of written and oral data became paramount. The post-Bahirji era saw the systematization of cryptology within the Maratha state machinery.

1. The Modi Script as an Operational Cipher

The primary administrative tool of the Maratha state was the **Modi Script**—a cursive, rapid variant of Devanagari characterized by its continuous loops and lack of lifting the pen from the page. In foreign territories, the mere use of Modi acted as a natural linguistic barrier.

For highly sensitive communications, the *Rajbhavan* scribes utilized an encrypted layer called *Aksara-Viparyaya* (letter transposition codes). This system systematically swapped specific vowels and consonants according to a pre-arranged matrix known only to the sender and the *Shahanaj* [10]. If a courier was captured by British or Mughal forces, the document appeared to be a meaningless jumble of local administrative characters.

2. Mudra-Sanket: Coded Hand Signals and Gestures

In tactical environments—such as crowded marketplaces, courts, or under direct enemy observation—oral communication of intelligence carried an immediate risk of execution. To circumvent this, the *Her Khate* developed a sophisticated silent vocabulary known as **Mudra-Sanket** (coded hand signals and body gestures) [11].

These signals were highly structured and routinely taught to operatives. Through specific movements of the fingers, the positioning of a staff, or the specific way a turban was adjusted, an operative could silently transmit critical data to a handler across a room [12].

Counter-Intelligence and Data Verification Systems

A major vulnerability of any large-scale espionage system is the threat of double-agents and fabricated intelligence designed to mislead commanders. To mitigate this, the post-Bahirji Maratha intelligence system institutionalized a strict policy of **Triangulation and Separation** [8].

The *Shahanaj* never relied on a single report for strategic planning. The department routinely deployed three independent spies, unknown to one another, to cover the exact same target sector. The reports filed by these three separate sources were cross-referenced at the central secretariat in Pune.

If any agent's report showed significant deviations from the other two without a valid tactical explanation, that agent was placed under immediate surveillance by the internal *Antas-Her* network on suspicion of being turned by the enemy [11]. Furthermore, the financial records of the Peshwas indicate that spies were paid on a sliding scale based directly on the verifiable accuracy of the tactical intelligence they delivered, providing a strong material incentive for precision [3].

Case Studies: Tactical Espionage in Action

The effectiveness of this institutionalized structure is clearly visible in the major military campaigns of the eighteenth century.

1. **The Battle of Palkhed (1728)**

During the Palkhed campaign, Bajji Rao I was locked in a strategic contest against the Nizam-ul-Mulk of Hyderabad, widely considered one of the finest tacticians of the era. The Maratha *Her Khate* outperformed the Nizam's intelligence network at every turn. Embedded Maratha scouts provided real-time, daily updates on the precise movements of the Nizam's heavy artillery train. Armed with this exact data, Bajji Rao executed a series of rapid flanking maneuvers, drawing the Nizam into a waterless, broken terrain near Palkhed where his heavy weapons were useless, forcing his surrender [13].

2. **The Anglo-Maratha Conflicts: Countering the EIC**

During the late eighteenth century, the Maratha intelligence system faced the sophisticated political networks of the British East India Company. The Maratha *Vakils* stationed in British-controlled Bombay and Calcutta acted as legal diplomats while simultaneously managing deep espionage operations. The *Bombay Diary* records numerous complaints from British governors noting that secret council resolutions regarding troop deployments were routinely leaked to the Maratha court at Pune within forty-eight hours of being passed [14].

Comparative Analysis: Maratha Espionage vs. Contemporary Systems

To understand the distinct characteristics of the post-Bahirji Maratha intelligence system, it can be compared alongside the other major military networks of the eighteenth century:

System Element	Mughal Intelligence (Waqai-Navis)	British EIC Network	Maratha Her Khate (Post-1680)
Operational Philosophy	Highly centralized; focused on formal, written imperial reporting.	Commercially oriented; relied heavily on native political brokers and merchants.	Highly decentralized field mobility backed by rigid central data verification.
Linguistic Defense	Relied on standard court Persian and formal seals.	Utilized English-language encryption and localized ciphers.	Deployed the cursive Modi script, <i>Aksara-Viparyaya</i> codes, and silent hand signals.
Integration with Mobility	Slow; bound to the slow movement of massive imperial armies.	Medium; tied to maritime trade routes and coastal factory communications.	Extremely rapid; tightly integrated with light cavalry scouts (<i>Jaswads</i>).

While the Mughal system grew increasingly rigid and vulnerable to local corruption in the eighteenth century, the Maratha *Her Khate* maintained an agile, highly adaptable structure [11]. It successfully combined the speed of light cavalry scouts with the deniability of religious and commercial cover identities, creating an effective subcontinental intelligence network.

Conclusion: The Legacy of Institutional Espionage

The transition of the Maratha intelligence apparatus from the individual brilliance of Bahirji Naik into a highly institutionalized department of the state reflects the administrative maturity of the Maratha Empire. By creating an organized system with clear hierarchies, implementing strict data verification practices, and developing advanced tactical cryptology alongside silent signaling methods like *Mudra-Sanket*, the *Her Khate* became a cornerstone of Maratha sovereignty. This organized system allowed the empire to safely navigate complex internal security challenges and successfully counter the strategies of powerful regional and foreign adversaries. Ultimately, the survival and expansion of the Maratha state across the geopolitical landscape of eighteenth-century India stands as historical proof of the efficiency and sophistication of its intelligence department.

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Conflicts of interest

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