The history of Maharashtra occupies a unique position in the history of India as a whole. During the 17th century, Maharashtra threw off foreign domination and established a national state. Maharashtra had to struggle hard for this newly born state against powerful enemy like Aurangzeb. But in this conflict, Maharashtra came out with flying colours. In the 18th century, Maharashtra crossed its traditional political boundaries and began to dominate 'Imperial Affairs' at Delhi. Upto the end of the 18th century, in general Marathas dominated the political affairs of India - from Mysore in the south to Cuttock in the east and Delhi in the north. English rightly thought Marathas as their 'one and only enemy' by the end of the 18th century. It must be remembered that Maratha's was the only power, out of many native powers of India, that fought successfully against the foreign Mughal empire and kept its hold upon Delhi affairs for a number of decades. Marathas, as a constituent part of Hindu society, are only a small fraction of that society. The question will arise that 'how is it that such a small fraction of the Hindu society was able to dominate the political affairs of India for a considerable time? What are the reasons?' The answer to question is that 'it is the political thought of...
Maharashtra which provided the necessary spirit of nationalism and power emanating from it, that has made Maharashtra (Marathas) to dominate the political history of India in the 17th and the 18th centuries.

In this thesis, I have tried my level best, from the published historical resources like "Marathyanchya Itihasachi Sadhane; (मराठीच्या इतिहासाची साधने); Peshwa Daptar, (पेशवे दापतर); Diaries, (दैर्घ्यन्यां) and other published material" the political thought in Maharashtra from 1600 to 1818. The political thought can be roughly divided into four periods - First, from the beginning to 1646; second, from 1646 to 1680; third from 1720 to 1752 and the last 1772 to 1818. It is to be noted that watertight division of this period is impossible, because one thought shades off into another.

In the first period the political thought is reflected in the writings of religious saints and the actual deeds of a few Maratha Sardars. The political thought is reflected in the politico-religious movements, which had its roots in the earlier period. The aim of the movement was obviously to throw off the political and religious domination of Muslims. For this purpose it was essential to rouse the self-respect of the individual Maharashtrian Hindu, to remove from his mind the inferiority complex created by foreign domination, for a period of three centuries; to bridge the gulf created by the caste system, at least in the political sphere and to
effect a cohesiveness of society by means of a spirit of nationalism. From Dnyaneshwar to Tukaram, every saint had advocated the principle of equality before God. In those days religious observance was not separated from God and thus the principle of equality permeated through the different layers of society. The advice of Ramdas that "All Marathas should be united" and that 'Maharashtra Dharma' should be established clearly reflects the spirit of nationalism. Just as the religious leaders or saints were preaching self-respect and unity, the Maharashtrian Sardars actually proved their capacity to rule, to govern and to become victorious on the battle-field. During this period many important Sardars like Jadhav, Nimbalkar, Bhosale etc. have shown their bravery on the battle-field. Shivaji had become a king-maker. Yet all these Sardars were nominally feudatory Sardars, owing allegiance to the Sultan of Bijapur. Shahaji was practically an independent king at Bangalore, as shown in the famous book 'Radhamadhav Vilas Champu'. The next step was to establish a completely independent state.

The emergence of Shivaji on the political horizon of Maharashtra is the next important landmark in the political thought of Maharashtra. The aim was to establish an independent kingdom of Maharashtra. The political thought during this period can be summed up in the following manner:
(a) to establish a national state of Maharashtra in which each Maharashtrian will feel that it is his own state,
(b) to establish a new state, having the basic principles of Hindu religion,
(c) The new state will be the abode Gods and Brahmins,
(d) Establishment of Maharashtra Dharma.
(e) Ideal of Hindvi Swarajya.

To achieve this aim, Shivaji adopted a pragmatic policy. In the beginning, he kept friendly relations with Aurangzeb and subdued Bajapur; when he became powerful enough, he defied the Mughals. Shivaji's visit to Agra, his fight flight from that place, his offensive policy against the Mughals culminated into his victory. Shivaji crowned himself as a 'Chhatrapati', According to ancient traditions he had performed 'Rajyabhishek' with all the proper ceremonies accompanying it. He struck coins, started a new 'shaka' (era) known as 'Rajyabhishek Shaka', introduced religious reforms - notable among it the re-conversion of Hindus who had under pressure adopted Muslim religion. He revived the old administrative pattern of 'Ashta-pradhans', decided to abolish Watan System.

When Shivaji heard the news that a large Mughal army is coming to the south to crush this newly born state, he adopted a wider policy governed by the political thought
"Deccan for Deccanis" For this purpose he visited Golkonda (Hyderabad) befriended the Muslim states of south. This policy served its purpose.

From the death of Shivaji to the death of Aurangzeb i.e. from 1680 to 1707 the political thought of Maharashtra is reflected in the continuous war of national freedom, by any means, guerrilla warfare etc. The very fact that leaderless Maharashtra was able to defeat an enemy like Aurangzeb and to regain its freedom from the clutches of the Mughals shows how powerful the political spirit was generated by the twin movements in Maharashtra - ideas expressed by politico-religious leaders and Shivaji's movement.

Ignominious departure of the Mughal army towards north from Maharashtra in 1707, opened a new page in the political thought of Maharashtra. Now there was no problem of achieving independence, because it was already achieved. There was no question of danger either from Bijapur or from Golkonds, because both had been extinguished by Aurangzeb twenty years ago. In 1707 there was no power in south which could check the rising Maratha power. The departure of the Mughal army from Maharashtra without even concluding any treaty, had demoralising effect upon the northern powers. In such a situation, the time was ripe for Marathas to adopt a bold and courageous policy of establishing Maratha Empire.

Shahu required a few years to establish himself. In 1719 there appears a new political thought which aimed at
bringing all the Maratha Sardars into a common quasi-federal constitution. The salient features of this new thought are (a) To accept the paramount power of the Delhi Emperor - who had lost all the real power of the state, Emperor's authority is to be utilised for establishing Maratha rule over other parts of India. (b) The central figure of Maratha Empire was to be Chhatrapati - all Sardars were to be loyal to him and not to the Emperor at Delhi. (c) The decisions of the central government were binding upon all the Sardars; the central government was to punish offending Sardars. (d) Collection of revenue, maintenance of peace and order in their respective territory, was left to the Sardars. (e) Raising of the necessary army was entrusted to the Sardars, with the prior consent or order from the central government. (f) Sardars were to submit yearly account to central government, pay the yearly tribute to the Chhatrapati failing which their saranjam (authority and territory) could be attached by the central government. (g) No Sardar was allowed to enter into treaty agreement with any foreign power. (h) Granting of titles was the prerogative of Chhatrapati only. No Sardar can receive clothes of honour, title from any foreign power without the consent of the central government. (i) To unite two Maratha states, i.e. Satara and Kolhapur into one. (j) To ensure the freedom of religion to Hindus in the neighbouring foreign powers like Portuguese; and if necessary to punish them.
the six Subas of Deccan was the first step in the direction of total hold of the Marathas upon the Mughal Emperor. The political constitutional structure erected by Balaji Vishwanath, paved the way to the rise of Peshwas and the rise of the Maratha power also. Bajirao I, Balaji Bajirao were able to hold Sardars under their control. Therefore, a strong central government was established at Poona. The next logical step was realised in 1752 when Mughal Emperor accepted the protection of the Marathas. Thus Marathas became the King-Makers of Delhi.

Nationalist Marathas of the 17th century have now become the Imperialist Marathas in the 18th century. Their political thought underwent a change accordingly. The spirit, the unity, and zeal which filled the hearts of Marathas in the 17th century under Shivaji, could not be found in the Marathas of the 18th century. The granting of great Sanad in 1752 created controversy: North Vs South. It is proved with facts that Jats, Rajputs and Mughal Sardars Vazir and occasionally Emperor himself - had formed a united front against the Marathas. It created a reaction amongst Marathas. The political thought which was essential at this juncture i.e. Indian nationalism against foreign aggression - either of Abdali or of any other power like English etc. had not emerged. Neither the Marathas nor any other power in north India had visualised Indian nationalism as such. The result was, that Marathas suffered a set-back on the battle-field of Panipat in 1761. However, Marathas were able
The quasi-federal constitution of Marathas which functioned effectively from 1720 to 1760, could not function in the same manner from 1761 onwards. There are many reasons for that. The first important reason is the eclipse of the central figure, i.e. Chhatrapait. Peshwas, from 1750 onwards have assumed the entire control of the Maratha Empire. The spirit of idealism, loyalty was lost from the hearts of the Maratha Sardars, and the void created therefrom was filled in by self-interest. Peshwas lost their hold upon the Sardars. Policy decisions passed from the hands of Peshwas to important Sardars like Holkar, Shinde, etc. It created a topsyturvy situation in the organisation, and relationship between Sardars and Peshwa, of the central government. Sardars now began to dictate terms upon the central government. Sardars have practically become independent. There was no central power worth the name, which could punish them.

The murder of Narayanrao and the Barbhai conspiracy, Raghoba's attempt to assume Peshwaship, and his attempts to seek the help from the English clearly denote the lack of nationalism and other spirit which dominated the Maratha mind in the 17th century. The only thought, which governed the mind of Marathas and men like Nana Phadnis, was to continue the state and to keep it in tact, as far as possible. Nana Phadnis wisely entered into alliances with Nizam and Haider in 1780 - a mutual defensive alliance against the English. But all the fruitlessness of this alliance failed to realise...
the shrewdness of the British policy of 'Non-intervention'. As soon as Lord Cornwallis declared this policy, Marathas and Nizam joined hands with British against Tipoo. Marathas and Nizam fought against each other at Kharda in 1795 without any gain for both the parties. This brought the end of the quasi-federal constitution of the Marathas.

The last years of the Maratha Empire, i.e. 1800 to 1818 are full of plots and counter-plots - clearly denoting the want of any political thought as such. It can be said that Bajirao II realised that he had lost his independence, but it was too late and of no use. The central government at Poona and gradually all the important Sardars were subdued by the British power. The conflict between the Marathas and the English was a conflict of two societies - Medieval society built upon the feudatory system and the modern industrial society - based upon the new relationship. What was essential particularly after 1752, was a new constitution based upon new thoughts, having the intention of building a new Indian society. The Maratha quasi-federal constitution failed to develop itself after 1752. The weakness of the constitution lies in its unworkability. The other important factor was the lack of dynamic spirit in the political thought. The political thought after 1752 had become stagnant. This is the main reason for the downfall of the Maratha Empire.