The Second Anglo-Maratha War came to an end by 1805 when Holkar was forced to sign the Treaty of Rajpura. It reduced the powers of three powerful Maratha Chiefs, Daulat Rao Shinde, Raghuji Bhosle and Yashwant Rao Holkar. Bajirao had already been reduced to impotency. The fate of the Marathas was thus sealed and the Third Anglo Maratha War which was fought in 1817-18 was only a flicker of a dying flame. Bajirao had realised his mistake too late. The English had divided the Marathas and defeated them one by one.

Lord Wellesley had planned the campaign in great detail and the plan was superbly executed by General Lake and General Wellington. The Marathas fought bravely in the battles of Asai and Gavilgad but lost. Holkar, a past master of guerilla warfare routed Colonel Manson and made General Lake to dance to his tune but as he was deserted by Shinde and Bhosle, he could not hold out long. The Battle of Deeg was well fought but again lost. The Jats were the only people who scored a victory against the English when they defied three assaults by General Lake. As a student of military history, one must study the causes of the defeat of the Marathas and the success of the British forces and draw useful lessons.

Principles of war which are true for all times must be tested against the Second Anglo Maratha War (Principles of War as recognised today are, Maintenance of aim, Concentration of force, Economy of force, Surprise and Deception, Admi
Causes of the Defeat of the Marathas

(a) The most important cause for the defeat of the Marathas was the lack of unity for which the Peshwa must be held responsible. Had he given justice to Holkar against the atrocities and high-handedness of Daulatrao Shinde, the battle of Wanowri would have been avoided and Wellesley would not have got a chance to make Bajirao II sign the Treaty of Bassein which was the direct cause of the Second Anglo Maratha War. The British took full advantage of the split between Bajirao and Holkar. General Wellesley entered Poona with his army. He managed to keep Holkar out of the war during 1803. Lord Wellesley now prepared the plan to destroy Daulatrao Shinde’s forces by a simultaneous attack in the Deccan and in North India. The Battles of Assi and Koel destroyed the power of Shinde. Baghuji Bhosle who was a reluctant ally met his fate at Asirgad and Gawilgad and now Lord Wellesley was free to deal with Holkar which was no simple task.

(b) The Maratha armies were indifferently trained and equipped. The battalions of Shinde trained by the Frenchmen gave a good account of themselves but the Commanders did not have their heart in the fight. The foreigners realised that the game was up and deserted like rats leaving a sinking ship. Daulatrao and Baghuji Bhosle proved very poor commanders. They never fought. The best Maratha General was
Yashwantrao Holkar. He personally lead his men and fought like a tiger. His tactics while pursuing Colonel Monson and harassing General Lake were superb. He had a band of brigand chiefs who were daredevils and fought hard.

(c) The Second Anglo Maratha War was a fight between two different modes of warfare. The British army was used to pitched battles in the plains which depended upon massive artillery support, swift cavalry for attacks and pursuit and dogged infantry with guts who fight shoulder to shoulder with their bayonets fixed. This required a very high standard of discipline and training. Panic if once allowed to spread can cause the best of soldiers to run. The Marathas in Shinde’s army were a mixture of well trained infantry and gunners and mobs of Pindharies and camp followers who were out to loot. They withstood sieges pretty well.

(d) The Maratha army lacked homogeneity. As India was not a nation, the soldiers were mercenaries, some were paid, some were never paid and most of the regulars were in arrears of pay. There were Frenchmen, Americans, Portuguese, Indian Christians, Pathans, Jats, Rohillas, Bundellas, Rajputs, Sikhs and Marathas who owed loyalties to their chiefs. They fought while the going was good and deserted or just went home when they had no prospects of loot. The Company’s army though it consisted of Europeans and Indians, it was well organised, well fed, well paid and well led.

(e) Administration plays a very important role in war-
fare. The Maratha armies lived on loot. There was no commissariat, no finances for the war supplies by the Government; only the forts provided firm bases and when Ahmednagar, Gawilgad, Deeg, Agra fell one by one, the Marathas lost their bases.

(f) Morale is a battle winning factor. It is maintained by faith in weapons, faith in leaders, faith in the cause and welfare of the soldier which includes regular pay, food, clothing and equipment, fairness and justice. The British Army in India was a well oiled machine which was run efficiently. On the contrary, the Maratha armies were a conglomerate of feudatory forces of different standards.

(g) There was a world of difference in the leadership of the opposing armies. The British officers in India were professional soldiers who were trained to lead and fight. Starting from the Commander-in-Chief General Lake and going down to young lieutenants and captains, they lead their men and fought with immense physical courage and bravery. On the Maratha side, Yashwantrao Holkar, Harnath Singh, Amar Singh, Ranjit Singh, Mir Khan were excellent soldiers and commanders. The French like Pohlman, Dudrenec, were time servers. Bishnappa, Manyabapu, Bapu Gokhale were good cavalrymen (on either side), but there was nobody to equal General Lake or General Wellesley who were giants. General Wellesley, Duke of Wellington later defeated Napoleon. Dawlatrao Shinde and Raghujir Bhosle were crooked politicians
and no soldiers.

The Second Anglo Maratha war was properly planned by Lord Wellesley, the Governor General. His grand strategy based on geographical knowledge, knowledge about the Marathas, weather conditions in choosing the campaigning seasons and most important of all his masterly handling of Maratha politics which can be summed up as Divide and Win led to the victory of the Company, laying the foundation of the British Empire. Although he was recalled, he had firmly laid the foundation of the empire.

Bajirao II, the Peshwa had no idea of forming a central plan. Bajirao I, Peshwa Madhavrao, Nanasaheb were soldiers and statesmen; Nana Phadnis was a statesman, Mahadaji Shinde, Madhavrao Holkar, Chimaji Apple were great fighters but to our misfortune, Bajirao II, Doulatrao Shinde, Raghuji Bhonsle, Sarjerao Ghatge were mean crooks, neither soldiers nor statesmen.

There are a few examples when General Lake used ruses like feigning a retreat with the cavalry drawing the enemy out, sending a small batch of horsemen as 'deserters' to gain tactical information, but he was at his best when he covered over 50 miles in 24 hours and attacked Holkar more than once but he met a match in Holkar who had his kingdom 'on the saddle'. Whether Monson was just stupid or was enticed by Holkar to leave the safety of the passes and stick his neck out 50 miles from nowhere is debatable but there is no doubt
that Holkar destroyed his force by appearing from out of the blue at the most unexpected places blocking the routes of withdrawal, making General Lake split his forces, laying a siege to Delhi while Lake was engaged elsewhere. The dogged Lake won by bulldog tenacity except at Bharatpur which was an example of inflexible mind. Lucky Lake did not know when he had lost.

The Maratha Cavalry and artillery have given a good account of themselves. The French trained infantry fought well but the rest of it was a rabble with a few exceptions. The Marathas based their defences on forts. What they lacked was offensive action. They waited for the enemy to come and attack. This is not applicable to the wars in the North. In the Deccan the Arabs fought very bravely at Ahmednagar, the infantry performed well on the battlefield of Assai but the cavalry showed no initiative while the British Cavalry saved the day.

In most of these battles one finds that a small force has defeated a force almost ten times its size. Allowing for some exaggeration, this is generally true. This is mainly due to the fact that for every fighting soldier there were ten camp followers, Pindharis, tradesmen, Banjars and men of fortune who collected together for loot.

The Maratha cause was severely damaged in the North due to the marauding habits of the Maratha armies who lived on the land. The locals were harassed and deprived of their
means of livelihood. There was no administration, no law and order, no security. No wonder they turned hostile when they saw the Marathas were loosing. The Sikhs in the Punjab did not support Holkar. The Jats felt let down by him; Rajputana and U.P. had become a vast battlefield. The famine in the Deccan had made life miserable for the wretched people. A marauding army was not welcome. The British army paid for what they obtained through the Banjars.