

Maratha Administration and Judicial and Social Structure

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Abstract

The Maratha Empire, which rose to prominence in the 17th and 18th centuries under the visionary leadership of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, represents one of the most dynamic and well-structured administrative systems in Indian history. Rooted in traditional Indian governance yet shaped by innovation and practicality, the Maratha administration successfully combined centralized authority with local decentralization. This paper examines the political, military, fiscal, judicial, and social dimensions of the Maratha administrative system, focusing on its evolution during and after Shivaji's reign. Central to the Maratha polity was the *Ashta Pradhan* (Council of Eight Ministers), an efficient ministerial body that ensured accountability and specialization in governance. The study highlights the pivotal role of the Peshwa, who later emerged as the de facto ruler of the empire, extending Maratha influence across India. The paper also explores the Maratha military organization, particularly Shivaji's pioneering use of guerrilla warfare, fortified strongholds, and naval power, which enabled the empire to resist Mughal and European domination. The Maratha revenue system, based on land taxes, trade duties, and levies like *Chauth* and *Sardeshmukhi*, provided a strong economic foundation for military expansion and administrative sustainability. Additionally, the Maratha judicial system and social policies reflected a balance between tradition and adaptability. Overall, the Maratha administration stands as a testament to effective governance rooted in strategic innovation, decentralization, and socio-political integration, which played a crucial role in shaping the later course of Indian polity.

Key words- Maratha Empire, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, Ashta Pradhan, Peshwa system, Decentralized administration, Guerrilla warfare, Revenue system, Chauth and Sardeshmukhi, Naval power, Judicial administration, Social structure, Indian political history, Administrative reforms

The Maratha Empire, one of the most prominent forces in Indian history, reached its peak during the 17th and 18th centuries. Established primarily in Maharashtra, the Maratha administration system was a blend of traditional Indian governance practices and innovative approaches suited to the needs of a dynamic, decentralized empire. Under the leadership of figures like Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, the Maratha administration developed a structure that allowed them to challenge the mighty Mughal Empire and later, European colonial powers.

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The Maratha administration is often recognized for its effective decentralization, military organization, and socio-political reforms. This article provides a detailed examination of the administrative setup of the Maratha Empire, including its political structure, military organization, taxation system, and social policies, focusing particularly on its most renowned phase under Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj.

Political Structure and Governance:

The political system of the Maratha Empire was hierarchical, but it maintained an important feature of decentralization. The Empire was divided into numerous administrative units known as **Sarkars** (provinces) and **Parganas** (districts), and each had a degree of autonomy under local chiefs known as **Patils**, **Deshmukhs**, and **Jagirdars**.

1. **Chhatrapati (King):** The head of the state was the **Chhatrapati**, the ruler of the Maratha Empire. Shivaji Maharaj, the founder of the Maratha dynasty, established a highly centralized form of governance while maintaining a decentralized operational system. The Chhatrapati was seen as the spiritual and political leader, though their power was often mediated by councilors and ministers.
2. **Ashta Pradhan (Council of Ministers):** One of Shivaji Maharaj's key contributions to Maratha administration was the establishment of the **Ashta Pradhan**, or **Council of Eight Ministers**, each overseeing a different aspect of the empire's administration. This council was designed to ensure that the governance was run efficiently and without the concentration of too much power in the hands of one individual. The positions in the Ashta Pradhan included:
 - **Peshwa** (Prime Minister): The most powerful minister who dealt with administration and the military.
 - **Dabir** (Foreign Minister): Responsible for diplomatic relations.
 - **Mochangad** (Finance Minister): In charge of state revenues and expenditures.
 - **Nyayadhish** (Justice Minister): Overseeing legal matters and courts.
 - **Senapati** (Commander-in-Chief): In charge of the army.
 - **Mantri** (Advisor): Providing strategic advice to the king.
 - **Pandit Rao** (Religious Minister): Handling matters related to religion and temples.
 - **Sumant** (Secretary): Responsible for records and correspondence.
3. **Peshwa System:** The **Peshwa** held a central role in the administration. The position gained prominence during the reign of Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj, and later, it became the de facto ruler of the Maratha Empire. **Balaji Vishwanath** and **Baji Rao I** were among the notable Peshwas who consolidated Maratha power across India, extending the empire's influence far beyond Maharashtra. The Peshwa was often the leader of the military and handled the day-to-day operations of the empire.

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4. **Provinces and Districts:** The empire was divided into several **Sarkars** (provinces) under the control of local **Subahdars** or **Sardars** (military governors), who had both administrative and military responsibilities. These subahdars were usually appointed by the Chhatrapati or the Peshwa. Below them were the **Parganas** (districts), managed by **Patils** or **Deshmukhs** who were responsible for local administration, taxation, and law enforcement.
5. **Chauth and Sardeshmukhi:** The Marathas imposed the **Chauth** (a tax of one-fourth) and **Sardeshmukhi** (a 10% tax) on areas outside their direct control. These taxes were levied on territories in the Deccan and other parts of India, especially the regions under Mughal control. The Chauth was a form of protection money that allowed Maratha officials to intervene militarily if necessary. The system proved economically advantageous for the Marathas and allowed them to maintain a strong military presence in the region.

Military Organization:

The Maratha military was one of the most formidable forces of the time, renowned for its guerrilla tactics, swift movements, and the decentralized nature of its command structure.

1. **Maratha Cavalry:** The backbone of the Maratha army was its **cavalry**, consisting of well-trained horsemen. The Maratha cavalry was renowned for its speed and ability to perform quick raids, a strategy that proved highly effective in warfare. Cavalry units were organized into **Swarm** (mounted units), which would attack enemy positions swiftly, often before the enemy could organize an effective defense.
2. **Chhatrapati Shivaji's Innovations:**
 - **Naval Power:** Shivaji Maharaj recognized the importance of naval power and established a strong fleet on the Western coast, creating a force that could defend the empire's shores and challenge Portuguese and Mughal naval superiority.
 - **Fortifications:** Shivaji also built numerous forts in the Western Ghats and along the coastline. These forts, such as **Sinhagad**, **Raigad**, and **Sindhudurg**, provided strategic defense points and were integral to the Maratha military system.
3. **Guerrilla Warfare:** Shivaji's military innovations included the use of **guerrilla tactics** (small, mobile, and irregular military actions) which were particularly effective in the rugged terrain of Maharashtra. These tactics, which involved ambushes, surprise attacks, and hit-and-run raids, were instrumental in the Marathas' ability to outmaneuver and defeat more numerically superior enemies, particularly the Mughals.
4. **Peshwa's Military Leadership:** Under the leadership of the Peshwas, especially **Baji Rao I**, the Maratha military expanded its operations far beyond Maharashtra, reaching as far as the Ganges, Delhi, and Rajasthan. The Peshwa's military campaigns significantly weakened the Mughal Empire, with Maratha forces playing a pivotal role in the **Third Battle of Panipat (1761)**.

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Revenue and Taxation System:

The Maratha Empire's revenue system was structured to meet the demands of a decentralized military state, with a heavy reliance on agrarian output.

1. **Land Revenue:** The main source of income for the Maratha state came from land revenue. **Zamindars** (landlords) and local chiefs were responsible for collecting taxes from peasants. The tax system was based on a share of agricultural produce. The standard tax rate varied but was generally fixed around one-fourth of the produce.
2. **Customs and Trade Tax:** The Marathas imposed taxes on goods traded within their empire, and customs duties were levied on goods passing through Maratha-controlled territories. This created a significant revenue stream, as trade flourished under the Marathas, especially in regions like Surat, where the empire had strong trade connections with Europe and the Middle East.
3. **Chauth and Sardeshmukhi:** As mentioned earlier, **Chauth** was one of the most significant sources of revenue. By claiming a fourth of the revenue from non-Maratha controlled areas (such as under the Mughals), the Marathas ensured a flow of resources from their raiding activities and as protection money.

Judicial and Legal System in the Maratha Administration

The judicial system of the Maratha Empire reflected a blend of **traditional Hindu jurisprudence**, **customary village law**, and **administrative pragmatism**. Under **Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj**, justice was viewed as a key pillar of governance — a means of ensuring social harmony, administrative discipline, and moral legitimacy. The Marathas developed a **multi-tiered judicial structure** that functioned at both the central and local levels, allowing efficient resolution of disputes while maintaining fairness and accountability.

1. Central Judicial Authority

At the apex of the judicial system stood the **Chhatrapati**, who was considered the ultimate source of justice. He exercised both **executive and judicial powers**, acting as the final court of appeal. Shivaji Maharaj was known for his personal attention to matters of justice and for ensuring that no one, regardless of social status, was beyond the reach of the law. He emphasized that *"Swarajya should be based on justice, not fear,"* making impartiality a cornerstone of Maratha governance.

2. Role of the Nyayadhish (Chief Justice)

The **Nyayadhish**, one of the eight ministers of the *Ashta Pradhan*, was in charge of administering justice throughout the empire. This position carried immense responsibility and prestige.

- The Nyayadhish presided over **civil and criminal cases**, ensured that verdicts conformed to *Dharma Shastra* principles, and supervised the local courts.
- In the absence of the Chhatrapati, the Nyayadhish acted as the highest judicial authority.

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- The office was independent of the military and revenue departments to maintain judicial impartiality.

3. Provincial and Local Courts

At the **provincial (Sarkar)** and **district (Pargana)** levels, judicial matters were handled by **local officers** such as **Deshmukhs, Deshpandes, Patils, and Kulkarnis**.

- **Village Panchayats** played a central role in rural justice, resolving everyday disputes related to property, land boundaries, debt, and family matters.
- At the **district level, Subahdars and Karkuns** handled more complex cases, particularly those involving land revenue or administrative corruption.
- This decentralized structure ensured that justice was **accessible** to common people and **adapted** to local customs and traditions.

4. Legal Sources and Principles

The **legal framework** of the Maratha state drew upon several sources:

- **Hindu Law (Dharma Shastras)** such as *Manusmriti* and *Yajnavalkya Smriti* governed civil law, inheritance, marriage, and caste regulations.
- **Customary Law:** Local customs and traditions were recognized and respected, especially in agrarian and community disputes.
- **Royal Decrees (Farmans and Sanads):** The Chhatrapati or the Peshwa could issue royal orders that functioned as legal precedents.
- **Islamic Law:** In regions acquired from the Mughals, some Islamic legal practices continued, showing administrative flexibility.

5. Criminal and Civil Justice

The Maratha legal system differentiated between **civil (vyavahar)** and **criminal (aparadh)** cases.

- **Civil cases** involved property disputes, trade contracts, inheritance, and family matters.
- **Criminal cases** included theft, robbery, treason, murder, and bribery.

Punishments were generally **proportional and corrective** rather than excessively harsh. They included fines, confiscation of property, imprisonment, or social ostracism. Severe crimes such as treason or rebellion could result in capital punishment, but these were rare and often required royal sanction.

6. Appeal and Enforcement

Appeals from lower courts could be taken to higher authorities, culminating in the **Chhatrapati's court**. The **Peshwa**, particularly during the 18th century, also became a key figure in legal administration, reviewing major cases and issuing legal reforms.

Enforcement of justice relied on local officials and the community's moral pressure. The Marathas

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valued **rehabilitation and restitution** over mere punishment, reflecting the ethical teachings of *Dharma* and the practical wisdom of governance.

7. Corruption Control and Judicial Ethics

Shivaji Maharaj introduced measures to curb corruption and favoritism in the judiciary. Judges and local officials found guilty of accepting bribes or rendering biased judgments were severely punished. This emphasis on **judicial integrity** fostered public confidence in the administration.

8. Evolution under the Peshwas

During the Peshwa period, especially under **Balaji Vishwanath** and **Baji Rao I**, the judicial system became more **institutionalized**.

- The Peshwa's court at Pune acted as a **central appellate body**.
- Codification of procedures and appointment of trained scribes and record keepers improved judicial efficiency.
- The Peshwas also introduced reforms to reduce delays and prevent misuse of judicial authority.

9. Significance of the Maratha Judicial System

The Maratha legal system was notable for its **blend of central oversight and local autonomy**, its **ethical foundation in Hindu jurisprudence**, and its **flexibility** in dealing with multi-cultural regions. It ensured law and order across a vast and diverse empire while maintaining accessibility and fairness for the common populace.

Social Structure and Administration under the Maratha Administration

The social structure of the **Maratha Empire** reflected the diversity and dynamism of early modern Indian society, blending traditional Hindu hierarchies with pragmatic administrative inclusiveness. Under **Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj**, the Maratha state sought to maintain social order, promote justice, and ensure administrative efficiency, while encouraging merit and loyalty over rigid social divisions. The Marathas built a social and political system that not only upheld traditional values but also adapted them to the demands of a rapidly expanding empire.

1. Social Hierarchy and Composition

The Maratha social structure was predominantly based on the **Hindu varna system**, but it was more **flexible and merit-based** compared to earlier dynasties.

- **Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras** formed the core of the varna hierarchy, though distinctions were often blurred in practice.
- The **Marathas** themselves belonged primarily to the **Kshatriya** or warrior class, known for their martial spirit and agrarian roots. However, Shivaji's policies ensured that positions in the administration and military were not confined strictly to hereditary classes.

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- The **Kunbis**, a peasant-warrior caste, played a key role in Maratha society and army. Many of Shivaji's loyal commanders and administrators came from these agrarian backgrounds, reflecting his meritocratic approach.
- **Brahmins** were highly respected and served in administrative, judicial, and religious roles, especially in positions like *Peshwa*, *Nyayadhish*, and *Pandit Rao*.

This social flexibility allowed the Maratha state to integrate diverse communities and build a strong sense of unity and identity across Maharashtra and beyond.

2. Caste and Mobility

While caste distinctions remained significant, the **Maratha administration** displayed **social mobility** uncommon for its time.

- Talented individuals from lower or intermediate castes could rise through military service or administrative competence.
- The promotion of **Balaji Vishwanath**, a Chitpavan Brahmin, to the position of **Peshwa** under Shahu Maharaj, illustrates how merit and loyalty could transcend birth-based status.
- The administration also recognized and respected local elites, including **Deshmukhs**, **Patils**, and **Jagirdars**, ensuring continuity and cooperation with regional power structures.

Shivaji Maharaj discouraged caste-based discrimination in the military and administration, promoting unity under the banner of *Swarajya* (self-rule).

3. Role of Religion and Religious Tolerance

Religion played a central role in Maratha society, but Shivaji's governance was marked by **religious tolerance and inclusivity**.

- Although a devout Hindu and follower of *Bhakti* traditions, Shivaji respected other faiths and safeguarded their places of worship.
- Muslim officers and soldiers were also employed in the Maratha army and administration.
- The *Pandit Rao*, one of the Ashta Pradhan ministers, oversaw religious affairs, temple management, and charity (dharma karya), ensuring that state resources supported both religious and welfare activities.

This inclusive policy helped maintain internal harmony and strengthened the Maratha state's legitimacy across diverse populations.

4. Women in Maratha Society

The status of women in Maratha society was relatively progressive for its time.

- **Jijabai**, the mother of Shivaji, served as a guiding moral and political influence, shaping his vision of governance and ethics.

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- Royal women, such as **Tarabai**, played critical roles in politics, administration, and warfare. Tarabai's leadership during the Maratha resistance against the Mughals after Shahu's imprisonment is a remarkable example of female agency in Indian history.
- Women of noble or warrior families could own property, issue land grants, and act as regents, especially in the absence of male rulers.
- Socially, widows and common women had fewer rights, but reforms under Shivaji encouraged protection against exploitation and the preservation of family honor and social order.

5. Village Administration and Social Order

The **village** was the fundamental unit of Maratha social and administrative organization. Each village functioned as a **self-governing unit**, balancing social order and local governance.

Key functionaries included:

- **Patil** – Village headman responsible for revenue collection, law and order, and communication with higher officials.
- **Kulkarni** – The village record-keeper and accountant who maintained land and tax records.
- **Deshmukh and Deshpande** – Higher local officers who supervised multiple villages or a *pargana*.

The **Panchayat** (village council) handled community disputes, social welfare, and moral discipline. This local governance ensured administrative stability and social cohesion even in remote areas.

6. Social Welfare and Economic Order

The Maratha rulers promoted **social welfare and economic prosperity** as part of their vision of *Swarajya*.

- Land reforms and irrigation improvements aimed to support agrarian communities.
- Local fairs, temple festivals, and religious charities were encouraged to sustain cultural life and social unity.
- Trade, crafts, and artisanal groups were supported, reflecting the Maratha commitment to balancing social and economic functions.

7. Integration of Regional and Caste Groups

As the Maratha Empire expanded under the Peshwas, it incorporated diverse **linguistic, ethnic, and caste groups** from across India.

- Non-Maratha nobles and local chieftains were granted autonomy in exchange for loyalty and revenue.
- The *Chauth* and *Sardeshmukhi* systems not only brought wealth but also integrated distant regions into the Maratha administrative and social framework.

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- This multi-regional composition of the Maratha polity contributed to its adaptability and resilience.

8. Social Ideals and Philosophy

The Maratha social philosophy was deeply influenced by the **Bhakti movement**, emphasizing devotion, equality, and service to society. Saints like **Tukaram, Ramdas, and Namdev** shaped the moral fabric of Maratha society by promoting simplicity, piety, and collective responsibility. Shivaji's policies echoed these ideals, aiming for a just and inclusive social order grounded in *Dharma* and patriotism.

Conclusion:

The Maratha Empire's administration was a unique blend of centralized control under the Chhatrapati and decentralized governance through local lords and military officers. The administrative systems developed by Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, such as the Ashta Pradhan, laid the groundwork for the Maratha Empire's ability to expand rapidly, challenge the Mughal Empire, and later hold off the advances of the British East India Company. Despite internal challenges and external pressures, the Maratha administration's flexibility, military strength, and fiscal policies ensured their prominence in Indian history.

In essence, the Maratha Empire represents a significant chapter in the history of Indian governance, combining traditional Indian methods with strategic innovations to create a dynamic and resilient system of administration.

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